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OPINIONS

JFK myth lives because it's based on nation's

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WASHINGTON

Twenty-five years ago, I was putting the finishing touches on a 2,000-word analysis, to run that weekend in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, when the bulletin came

over the wire that the president had been shot in Dallas. The piece was about Barry Goldwater and his movement, which I was arguing, contra the conventional wisdom, would roll over Nelson Rockefeller in the primaries, and stood an outside chance of defeating JFK. Kennedy's political star was in eclipse that Friday afternoon, as Victor Lasky's scathing profile, "JFK: The Man & The Myth" soared toward the top of the charts.

When Oswald's bullets struck the Dallas motorcade, however, JFK, the man, became, in 96 hours, JFK, the myth. As the nation sat riveted before a hundred million television sets, to watch the youngest man elected president eulogized, memor-

ialized and buried, John F. Kennedy entered America's Pantheon, to inhabit a permanent place in the hearts of his countrymen.

With charm, grace and wit, JFK, was a leader made for the age of television; indeed, the very first. Two decades before the Gipper, JFK, in carriage and bearing, was a "natural" as chief of state. Yet, no president could match the mythic dimensions of the JFK who lives in memory; and, once we move past the magnetic persona, what was there to the Kennedy legacy?

Within weeks of his brilliant inaugural, JFK botched the Bay of Pigs invasion, one of the great debacles in U.S. history. Following his failure of nerve, Kennedy was treated contemptuously by Khrushchev at the Vienna summit. Nikita Khrushchev then defiantly erected the Berlin Wall in August, and trashed the U.S.-Soviet moratorium on nuclear tests, with a series of blats culminating with a 58-megaton shot at Novaya Zemlya.

Sensing the young president could be bullied, Khrushchev made the politically fatal blunder of putting missiles in Cuba. His hand forced, JFK ordered a naval quarantine, and removal of all missiles and bombers, and Khrushchev backed

down, and withdrew. Later, we would learn JFK had given Moscow a secret pledge not to invade Cuba, and had secretly agreed to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey.

In his style of leadership, Kennedy was a rhetorical president, given to histrionics, with little follow-through. He bravely announced a hemispheric Alliance for Progress, and then watched the little giveaway program peter out, with inconsequential result. He called up the reserves in the Berlin Crisis, and dismissed them quickly a year later. He flew to Miami to pledge to the Cuban patriots in the Orange Bowl that the battle flag of the Bay of Pigs brigade would fly again over a free Havana; then, forgot about it. He was America's leading hawk on Vietnam, articulating the "domino theory" and sending the Green Berets, but when the crunch came in Laos, he sent out that venerable undertaker of nations, Averell Harriman, to cobble together an absurd coalition regime that left General Giap in control of the Ho Chi Minh trail. Harriman's agreement guaranteed the Vietnam War.

In his anti-communism, in his conviction that America's security could be insured only by a defense second-to-none, in his idea of cutting taxes, even in the tech

of a deficit, to "get America moving," JFK anticipated Ronald Reagan. But, though his grasp of the world was sound, his accomplishments were few, first among which was building the 1,000 bombers and 1,000 missiles, upon which U.S. strategic defense hung for decades. Like Ronald Reagan, however, JFK was an inspirational leader, who understood the uses of rhetoric and symbols, and he set America's course for the moon.

Yet, by his death, Lasky's book was near No. 1 and a popular placard that read "Less Profile, More Courage!" was a jeer and a mockery of the title of JFK's own Pulitzer Prize-winning book.

On civil rights, JFK was on the right side, but he was a profile in timidity, leading only when forced to lead by the courts, by the civil rights movement, or by events like Dixie's defiance at Ole Miss. Lyndon Johnson, not JFK, was the great civil rights president of the 20th century.

As we now know, our 35th president made Gary Hart look like a Carthusian monk; he was a compulsive womanizer, bedding Hollywood actresses like Marilyn Monroe and Mafia molls such as Judith Exner. The cultivated image of JFK, family man, "our first Catholic president," was a bigger consumer fraud than Jim and

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collective unreality

Tammy Bakker's PTL. Truly JFK was the Elmer Gantry of American politics.

Morality aside, JFK's personal behavior betrayed a near suicidal recklessness. Had one of his seraglio of bimbos gone public as Jessica Hahn did, had just one of his press collaborators broken ranks and told the truth, JFK's presidency would have been blown as high as Hart's campaign; JFK would have become a national joke.

In recent years, a severe light has been thrown onto the dark side of Camelot: the womanizing and pot smoking by the president, the wiretaps on Martin Luther King, the vendetta against Jimmy Hoffa, the harassment of the steel executives; on Operation Mongoose to murder Fidel Castro, and on the Kennedy crowd's sordid role in the overthrow and assassination of South Vietnamese President Diem.

None of this, however, is likely to destroy the myth of JFK, because the myth has only a casual link to reality. The myth is really a creation of our collective imaginations, and it will remain green in memory because we Americans won't give it up. Because it recalls for us a day when all the world was young, a wonderful time that never was.