

David S. Broder

Post 11/17/93

Consummate Politician

Thirty years after his death, John F. Kennedy has left the realm of mythology and become a figure in history. It's a good thing for him—and for his country.

For the dwindling band of journalists who covered President Kennedy, it is hard to accept that his brief tenure is as distant from the Clinton presidency as Lincoln's was from Cleveland's. President Clinton has played tricks on the national consciousness by presenting himself as Kennedy's heir, exploiting the now-famous handshake picture of a high school version of himself and the smiling architect of the New Frontier. But they are creatures of different times—and very different men.

The mythologized Kennedy was the architect of a political and generational revolution, dazzling in his intellect and personality, bold in breaking from the weary policies of the past. Had he not been murdered, the myth goes, he would have spared the young people of America the agony of Vietnam, supplied them with a thriving economy and a sense of public service and inspired them to break the bonds of racism that had marred the nation's past.

Like all enduring myths, this one is rooted in elements that were genuinely present in the man who inspired the fable. But taken together, the mythic elements do not come close to defining the Kennedy of history. A closer approximation can be gained from many of the books on Kennedy that have appeared in the past decade, most recently and notably "President Kennedy: Profile of Power," by veteran journalist Richard Reeves.

The Kennedy who emerges from Reeves's detailed reconstruction of his White House years is a capable but seriously flawed politician and person, often uncertain and overly cautious, occasionally heedless of personal and national risk, but also a president capable of taking on challenges and not infrequently meeting them with gumption and grace.

Reeves's own two-paragraph summation is phrased this way:

"The man at the center was a gifted professional politician reacting to events he often neither foresaw nor understood, handling some well, others badly, but always with plausible explanations. He was intelligent, detached, curious, candid if not always honest, and he was carelessly and dangerously disorganized. He was also very impatient, addicted to excitement, living his life as if it were a race against boredom. He was a man of soaring charm who believed that one-on-one he would always prevail—a notion that betrayed him when he first confronted the premier of the Soviet Union.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

“Perhaps if Americans can accept that historical reality about their favorite modern president, we could learn to appreciate that same quality in our current generation of leaders.”

“Kennedy was decisive, though he never made a decision until he had to, and then invariably he chose the most moderate of available options. His most consistent mistake in governing, as opposed to politics, was thinking that power could be hoarded for use at the right moment—but moments and conditions defied reason. He had little ideology beyond anti-communism and faith in active, pragmatic government. And he had less emotion. What he had was an attitude, a way of taking on the world, substituting intelligence for ideas or idealism, questions for answers. What convictions he did have on nuclear proliferation or civil rights or the use of military power, he was often willing to suspend, particularly if that avoided confrontation with Congress or the risk of being called soft. If some would call that cynicism, he would see it as irony. ‘Life is unfair,’ he said, in the way the French said, *‘C’est la vie.’* Irony was as close as he came to a view of life; things are never what they seem.”

Those who prefer to keep an image of Kennedy as a mythological figure will be distressed by

this portrayal, as they have been by other historians’ efforts to de-mythologize the man who inspired such loyalty, affection and admiration in them. But Kennedy never sought adulation; as Mary McGrory noted at the time, his instinctive response to the rapture of his audiences was to extend his arm forward with the hand upraised, as if to hold them at some distance.

For a country that now loves to despise politicians as much as it once loved John Kennedy, it is a hard thing to be told that he was nothing if not a politician. But it is the truth. Political calculus was Kennedy’s great skill—and delight. Perhaps if Americans can accept that historical reality about their favorite modern president, we could learn to appreciate that same quality in our current generation of leaders.

To portray Kennedy as a politician need not be a way of denigrating him; it can be a way of elevating the profession he was proud to call his own.

In any event, we show his memory greater respect by confronting him as he was, not as we would wish him to have been.