

JFK: The man vs.

30 years later, the public embraces conspiracy theories and tunes in on all the latest gossip about his sex life.

Why? His time in office offers a far better story.

Thirty years after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, many Americans seem persuaded that he was a sex maniac chasing Marilyn Monroe around the Oval Office. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, in net stockings and high heels, was watching from the Rose Garden. Across the street from the White House, conspirators on a park bench were plotting his death to keep up the sales of helicopters for use in Vietnam.

That is the story of JFK as told in a thousand books and close to a hundred films, but it



By Patricia Williams
By Richard Reeves, author of *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*.

is not the real story. The real story is better. The 35th president was at the center of the action during the years the world held its breath. The United States and the Soviet Union

threatened each other with nuclear weapons, and Negroes (the acceptable term then) threatened civil war at home if they did not get the same rights as other Americans.

This is what really happened between the election of JFK on Nov. 8, 1960, and his assassination on Nov. 22, 1963:

► His first official act was the reappointment of Hoover, then the most admired man in America. He put together what amounted to a bipartisan administration with Republicans as secretaries of Treasury and Defense, national security adviser and director of central intelligence.

► With the CIA collecting briefing papers after meetings with him, Kennedy presided over a disastrous U.S.-backed exile invasion of Cuba at a

place called the Bay of Pigs. He refused to use U.S. troops or planes to save the 1,500 invaders and almost everyone was captured or killed.

► Never a strong civil rights supporter, he learned of Negro freedom riders testing new laws prohibiting racial discrimination in interstate travel only when they were attacked in Alabama. His first reaction was telling his civil rights assistant, "Get your goddamned friends off those buses."

► Embarrassed and frightened by Soviet space successes, he pledged that an American would be on the moon before 1970 — and created a program to make that happen.

► Believing he would always prevail one-on-one, JFK met with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at Vienna. Immune to Kennedy's charm, the Russian out-talked and out-maneuvered him. Kennedy responded with a massive military buildup and determination to prove his toughness by prevailing in Vietnam.

► He secretly encouraged the Soviets to solve their problems with refugees fleeing communist rule by putting up a wall in Berlin. It worked — the chances of nuclear war in Europe declined gradually during his 1,039 days.

► He cut income tax rates as the growth rate of the U.S. economy rose from 2.5% to more than 6%.

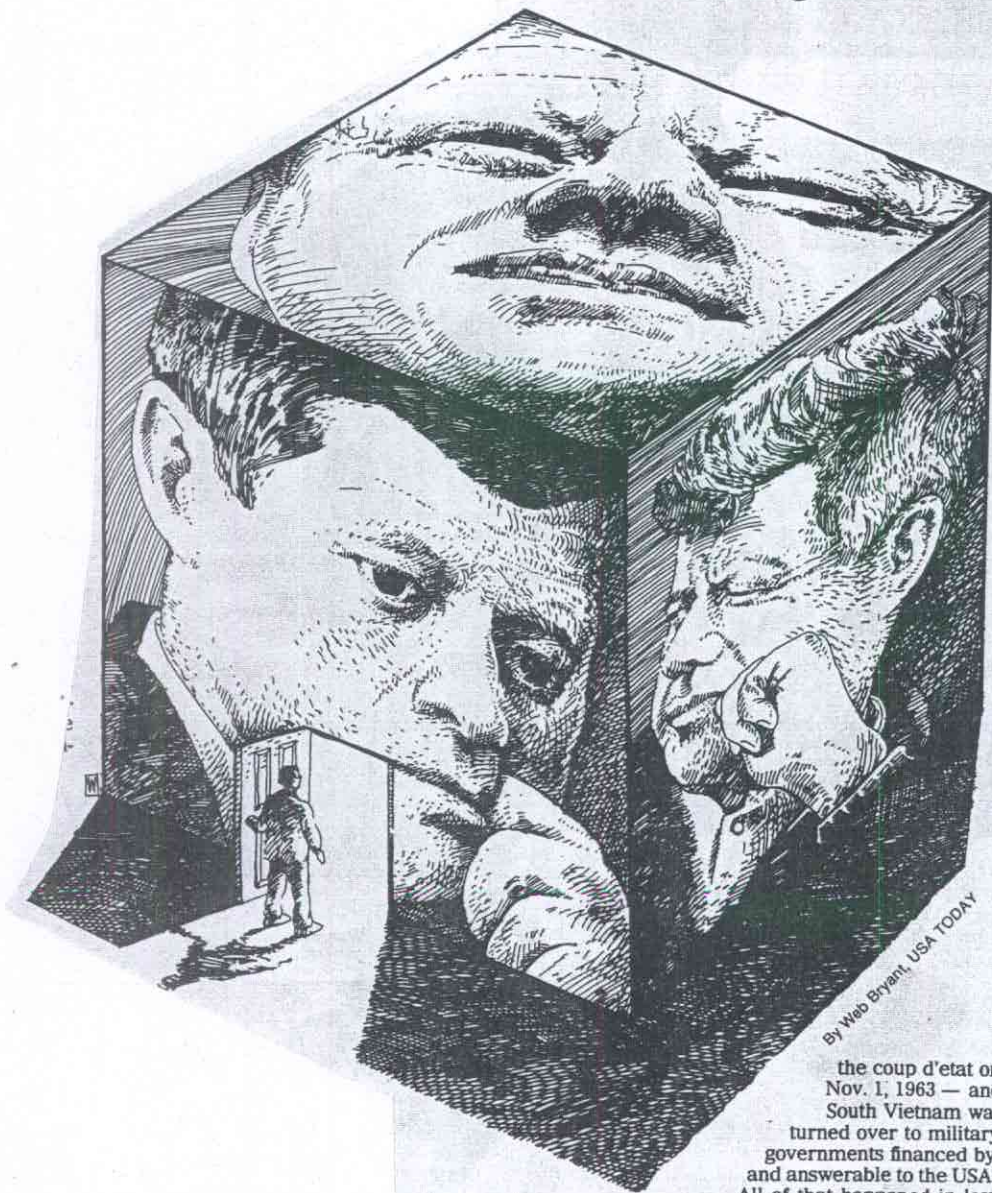
► He used federal marshals to force the integration of the universities of Alabama and Mississippi — risking his reelection, he thought.

► When Khrushchev put missiles in Cuba threatening the USA in the way U.S. forces surrounded the Soviet Union, JFK hung tough. U.S. ships and airplanes blockaded the island, threatening Khrushchev until

the Russian backed down and took out his weapons.

► Within 48 hours, on June 10-11, 1963, JFK gave the speech of his life, laying out proposals to end the Cold War, sent the national guard to confront Gov. George Wallace at the University of Alabama, learned that the first monk had burned himself to death in Saigon and went on national television to declare that he considered civil rights a moral issue — and said for the first time that the federal government would stand with the black minority against the

the myth



white majority.

► He negotiated the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with Khrushchev, the world's first nuclear arms agreement.

► During the great March on Washington for civil rights, he signed off on the overthrow of the U.S.-backed government of South Vietnam. President Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated in

the coup d'etat on Nov. 1, 1963 — and South Vietnam was turned over to military governments financed by and answerable to the USA.

All of that happened in less than three years — and so did the founding of the Peace Corps and the inspiring of millions of Americans ready and willing to ask not what their country could do for them but what they could do for their country.

That is the real story of John F. Kennedy — and it is better than the fiction.

OPINIONLINE

What people are saying about the 30th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination

Kennedy: Above all, a politician

DAVID BRODER, syndicated columnist: "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. . . . For a country which 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. . . . We show his memory greater respect by confronting him as he was, not as we would wish him to have been."

DEBORAH MATSIS, Gannett News Service columnist: "I don't merely remember. I remember everything about it. Every detail. It seems, of the day John F. Kennedy died. Minutia. Trivia. Like tones of voices and facial expressions, where so-and-so was standing when the news came, and how the air felt. It's as if those pieces of time froze and fossilized. Three decades hence, the memory is perfectly preserved. . . . We have survived, more or less. Some, more easily than others. We got better. And worse. We finally got some things right. And fouled others up. Good. Bad. So-so. Change, change. All has changed. Except the famous old question, still waiting to be answered. The question — refreshed. What do we do now?"

ROCKLAND (N.Y.) JOURNAL-NEWS in an editorial: "For all the revisionist history about JFK, the man and the president, for all the light of reality that continues to detail ever more brightly this most human of men, the fact is the Kennedy time was a brief moment in Camelot and it continues to inspire as well as haunt us. . . . His vision that this nation ought not to sit on its laurels and to enjoy the status

quo, but to be a leader in the world, to share our technology and bounty and to better conditions at home for those many minorities and others long disenfranchised did not die in Texas. . . . The personal weaknesses of JFK or Robert Kennedy or Ted Kennedy or the various Kennedy clan members should not be at issue in the 30-year retrospective of the late president. His legacy is what counts most."

ELLEN GOODMAN, syndicated columnist: "Those of us raised in the amniotic fluid of the 1950s had been sheltered from the knowledge of how vulnerable a country, a leader — a person — is to chance, madness, bullets. . . . It is no accident that we still commemorate JFK's death and not his birthday. After all, it wasn't this complex and charming, youthful and flawed man, but his assassination, that exploded the safety of our American shelter. . . . The generation that had been shocked by JFK's death, was horrified and numbed by the deaths of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. We were hardened on the way from Dallas to Watergate to Iran-contra. Conspiracies became easier to believe and government harder to believe and Oliver Stone's JFK too easy to believe. . . . We are forced to accept chaos as easily as conspiracy now. We understand that madness is as much a threat as any rational plot."



GOODMAN

RON JAVERS, Syracuse University journalism teacher, writing in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*: "That was Kennedy's secret. He wasn't giving anything away, he was asking for something. He wasn't promising. He was challenging. He wasn't saying that anybody was entitled to anything. Only that everything was out there and that if we were brave enough and strong enough and tenacious enough, we might have it. And if we were wise enough and compassionate enough, we might willingly share it."

ERIC ZORN, columnist, *Chicago Tribune*: "On the last landmark anniversary (of JFK's death), the 25th, most Americans, statistically, were old enough to have a story to tell about Nov. 22, 1963. On this landmark anniversary, they aren't. . . . More than half the population now has no real memory of that day. The question 'Where were you. . . ?' has gone from interesting conversational gambit in the 1960s



By Ed Stein, Rocky Mountain News, Newspaper Enterprise Assn. and '70s to cliché in the '80s to sign of dreary, self-indulgent middle age in the '90s. . . . Ouch. Our vital anecdotes became irrelevant nostalgia and no one told us. From now on, we will trot them out only at the risk of sounding like tiresome relics."

MICHAEL OLESKER, columnist, *The Sun*, Baltimore: "The man we thought we knew back then turned out to be somebody else, but we remember how it was in our own hearts when we heard the terrible news, and this is the thing that still stirs us each Nov. 22. Kennedy was the last filing an entire generation had with grand illusions. In him, we saw the face we wanted to see in our own mirrors."

TOM WICKER, writing in *The New York Times*: "The overall record of his presidency, though in many respects admirable, hardly accounts for Kennedy's high standing three decades later — a standing all the more unlikely because the years since his death have seen continuing assaults on his personal and political reputations. . . . How has John F. Kennedy, while not exactly a candidate for Mount Rushmore, prevailed over predictable eclipse? The most important reason, undoubtedly, is the almost mythic manner of his death."

MICHAEL BESCHLOSS, author, in *Newsweek*: "The effect (of hiding information during investigations after JFK's death) was to purchase short-term political calm at the price of 30 years of doubt, not only about John Kennedy's murder but about the integrity and ultimate purposes of American government. . . . Thirty years later, if we can write any moral out of John Kennedy's murder, it is that, in the long reach of American history, the rewards of full disclosure tower over its immediate perils."