

Endless chase to reinvent Kennedy in a modern era

By Marianne Means

As we approach the 30th anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination, we are inundated once again with television specials, books and magazine articles purporting to cast new light on his celebrated life and premature death.

They will never get it right.

But they will never stop trying. There's gold in all that historical revisionism. It sells.

Even President Clinton got into the act, trying to co-opt the Kennedy legacy by claiming that he is standing where Kennedy would have stood if faced with one of today's major policy issues, the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Speaking at the dedication of the new John F. Kennedy Library Museum the other day, Clinton said, "I believe if President Kennedy were still representing that (Cambridge) seat in Congress, he would endorse it (the NAFTA)."

It was not the first time Clinton had tried to wrap himself in the JFK mantle, but it was the first time he was so presumptuous as to claim he knew how Kennedy might have felt were he alive.

Clinton did have some philosophical basis for his assumption. Kennedy was indeed in tune with the internationalist, free-trade concept behind NAFTA and

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Associated Press

John Fitzgerald Kennedy: He remains one of the nation's most admired presidents.

opposed to the protectionism and isolationism that characterize the thinking of its opponents.

But he lived in a different era when our international responsibilities seemed clear, employment opportunities were expanding and our economic dominance of the western world was unchallenged. Who is to say that given today's vastly changed, financially pinched circumstances Kennedy's views would have remained constant?

This business of reinventing Kennedy for modern purposes is one that anyone can play, and lots of people with less understanding than Clinton about his presidency do.

As the Hearst White House correspondent during the Kennedy administration, I sometimes barely recognize the pragmatic politician I remember in the stuff now written and broadcast about him.

For that half of the population born after his death, he is a distant, undefined figure, to be deified or demonized.

The basic problem with re-creating the past is that it is past. The puzzles and pressures of the 1960s that shaped Kennedy's life and thinking bear little resemblance to the social and economic challenges and op-

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portunities that confront us today.

Such practical difficulties do not stop the gold rush. Television is airing more than a dozen Kennedy-related specials of varying interest and quality before the 30th anniversary of his death on Monday.

Several new books are in the stores, including a valuable and straightforward assessment of Kennedy administration decision-making by Richard Reeves. There is a large complement of Kennedy anniversary magazine articles.

Through the decades, Kennedy has remained one of the nation's most admired presidents. Public curiosity about him is insatiable. Whenever interest shows signs of flagging, his relatives, including several politicians with ambitions of their own, fan the flames again.

For our national sanity, perhaps we simply need to think there once was a president we actually liked.

Kennedy's assassination immediately transformed him into a mythical figure whose fate, career and glamorous lifestyle became fascinating fodder for the ages.

The image of his youthful vigor is frozen in time for us, although he was in fact, as Reeves documents, never very healthy during the White House years.

Kennedy is remembered as a popular president. Yet he was elected by a margin of only half a percentage point, his approval ratings were about 58 percent shortly before he died and Sen. Barry Goldwater was given a good chance of beating him for reelection.

He is remembered as a president of great achievement. Yet his legislative record was thin and he dragged his feet about challenging racial segregation for fear of offending the South. He did not go to hear Martin Luther King speak during the 1963 March on Washington, although he could hear King's voice over loudspeakers from the nearby mall through his office door, open to the warm August sunshine.

He is remembered as the activist leader of the last federal administration that functioned successfully. This view is heavily



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Remembering Kennedy: His death immediately transformed him into a mythical figure whose fate, career and glamorous lifestyle became fascinating fodder for the ages.

colored by the fact that he benefited from an approving public attitude toward government that has steadily eroded. Voters were not as cynical about their public servants then as they are now.

If alive, he would be 76 this year and no doubt as wrinkled and cranky as those who knew him.

A small band of White House correspondents who followed him to Dallas and looked upon the empty blood-splattered convertible outside Parkland Hospital that awful day will hold a reunion on Monday. We will try to recall correctly how he was and what happened, but we'll probably get it wrong, too.

JFK, 30 YEARS

Crises would have doomed the glamour of Camelot

By Joan Beck

All those 30-year-old photos, published once again in remembrance of Nov. 22, show a never-aging John F. Kennedy, his handsome charisma preserved forever in the golden amber of nostalgia.

But Kennedy would have been 76 today had that day in Dallas gone as the White House had planned. What would he have looked like? What would have happened to him in the last 30 years? Would he be a respected elder statesman now or a Gerald Ford, pushed aside by events? Would he still be able to mesmerize the young or charm the media into selective, protective reporting?

At 76, JFK would probably look quite like his youngest brother Ted. He had been taking steroids since his early days in Congress to control Addison's disease — a secret kept from the public with announcements that his near-fatal bouts of illness were recurrent malaria. The drug, which improved his fragile health, filled out his face and changed his appearance and the mark of the medication would continue for all the subsequent years he would need it.

But even his infectious charm and self-deprecating humor, however likable they made him, wouldn't have been enough to mitigate the corrosive toll that Vietnam would have taken of his presidency.

Even though his father was too incapacitated by a

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stroke to mastermind his campaign for reelection, it's likely JFK would have won a second term in 1964. The Kennedy wealth was still there for the using. So was the rest of the political apparatus that pushed Jack into the White House by a plurality of only 150,000 popular votes out of a total of almost 70 million cast in 1960.

But a second term would have spelled the end of any lingering romantic notions about Camelot. There was every public indication that Kennedy supported the repeated escalations of military activities in Vietnam, as consistent with his famous inaugural message. As American casualties and defeats mounted and the realities of the draft hit home with young people and their families, Kennedy would almost certainly have become the target of the rebellious hatreds that drove Lyndon Johnson from office.

It's also likely that more of the media would have managed to shake free of the Kennedy charm and camaraderie and give the American public a more objective look at the 35th president.

It's hard to believe that all of the Washington press corps would have continued to cover up Kennedy's flagrant sexual activities, in and out of the White House, long-term arrangements and quickies, with stars and starlets and women whose names he didn't even try to remember, with the relative of a close friend and the mistress of a Mafia capo.

Surely, as Vietnam began to erode the Kennedy mystique, the Washington media would have done more reporting on the dirty tricks JFK's administration was playing, or ineptly trying to play, on Fidel Castro, in Vietnam, with the FBI and the CIA.

The youngest man ever elected president, Kennedy would have been only 52 years old when he left office after a full second term. Securely wealthy, he would have had his choice of subsequent careers — if he managed to escape the bitter blame for Vietnam.

Perhaps Kennedy would have become a professor of history at Harvard, a job that could have been set up to allow the former president ample time for politicking, sailing and other pursuits. History, not politics, was Jack's first love and it took the death of his oldest brother and the pressuring expectations of his father to push him into running for public office and developing his aptitude and subsequent love for political life.

Kennedy almost certainly would have written several books on political history had he lived another three decades. The two books he wrote early in his career — with substantial and controversial help from others — were inordinately successful and taught him the lesson his father pointed out that a well-received book can do a lot to enhance a reputation.

Books by former presidents usually earn their authors enormous advances, although they usually don't become profitable for their publishers. But JFK had learned from

his father how to use money and clout to push a book on to best-seller lists and hawk it to literary prize committees.

Would Jacqueline have stayed in the marriage, especially if the extent of her husband's philandering had become public knowledge? Perhaps not. Her father, Black Jack Bouvier, was a notorious womanizer and she seemed to consider male extra-marital affairs to be expected.

But Kennedy publicly embarrassed his wife many times with his sexual conquests and the marriage reportedly had come close to breaking when he tarried on a yacht in the Mediterranean with a beautiful blonde instead of coming home when his wife gave birth to a stillborn daughter. Jacqueline must have known that many women felt sorry for her. She must have become aware of feminist views about exploiting women. If she had been assured of ample financial means — either in a divorce settlement or remarriage — she might well have left Jack to his mistresses.

History would have been far different if Kennedy had lived. Lyndon Johnson, with his ruthless ambition, would never have become president. Robert Kennedy would not have run for president in 1968, assuming Vietnam had created an anti-Kennedy national mood, and would not have been killed in that Los Angeles hotel kitchen. Ted Kennedy would not have felt the devastating burden of being the sole surviving Kennedy son and all of us could have been spared 30 years of unrelenting conspiracy theorizing about what really happened in Dallas.