

WHY Camelot and Kennedy ENDURE ON TV

Amid the flood of JFK programs, a noted biographer reminds us why the mystique has overcome the sometimes painful truth

BY RICHARD REEVES

Visitors to the newly expanded John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston end their tour with a shock. After seeing the boyhood and Oval Office memorabilia of the 35th President, they step through a door into—nothing. Just a glass room, empty except for an American flag. That is architect I.M. Pei's way of representing the great mystery of my generation: what might have been if JFK had not been murdered in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

We are fascinated by the young king struck down before his time. The assassination made John Kennedy more than a politician. "Camelot," his myth, was never mentioned in the press before his death. It was a creation of his widow after the funeral, which could be the greatest tele-

vision event of all time. The man and the medium, Kennedy and television, seem to have a life of their own—witness the continuing, unending flood of TV specials.

To some, the man was a mediocre politician pushed ahead by a crooked father, a rich boy who happened to be good-looking. To others, he was a caring idealist, a man capable of creating a Peace Corps and of saving the world in the great Cuban missile-rattling. Whatever one thinks of the politician, Kennedy lives on, too, as a soaring cultural figure. He was an artist of life who changed the way people think about and see things around them. His images, self-created, self-polished, exploded into the consciousness of Americans and millions of others around the globe.

At home, Kennedy burst on the scene

BARRACLOUGH-CAREY PUBL. LTD.

at a time of tremendous social and technological change. Americans (at least white Americans) were suddenly the richest people on earth—and black Americans wanted their share, too, going to the streets to try to get it. New technologies

were catapulting most of us into new styles of living. Suburbs. Interstate highways. Jet planes. Lasers. Xerox. Tape recording. Transistors. Air conditioning. Television.

It was a new world and the new, improved Americans needed role models. Then along came Kennedy, a young man of 43, representing the generation of 16 million men (and a few women) who had fought in World War II. The beautiful wife of the new President, Jacqueline Kennedy, was 31 years old in 1961, the Princess Diana of the time. They were a young couple, with young children. They were rich and educated.

Watching and copying the Kennedys were part of Americans' efforts at self-improvement. Jack Kennedy did not wear hats—and soon no men did. He wore his hair long, and that became the style. He wore two-button suits of European cut while the rest of us were tubular in three-button models.

He was self-created, understanding that wanting the job was the most important qualification for becoming President. He destroyed old political systems and rules, and we learned to do the same in our own lives. Most of all, he did not wait his turn. Now no one does.

Kennedy made us all feel young—and look young. When we looked into the new national mirror, television, we no longer saw Dwight Eisenhower, an old

JFK AS ABUSED CHILD?

When Nigel Hamilton's *JFK: Reckless Youth* was published a year ago, Sen. Edward Kennedy and three of his sisters denounced it in *The New York Times*: "It is preposterous to call any of us 'abused' children." ABC is

courting more controversy with a two-part adaptation Nov. 21 and 23 (9-11 P.M./ET)—the days surrounding the 30th anniversary of JFK's death.

The TV-movie portrays young Jack's (Patrick Dempsey) sexual compulsiveness as the result of difficult relationships with his parents. "The contradiction between his prudish, overreligious mother and his father, who was a fascist and a sexual threat, shaped JFK," Hamilton argues. "I wrote the book because no one else had shown how Kennedy's early life shaped him as a leader."

The timing "might seem a little callous," concedes director Harry Winer. "But Kennedy has already been demythologized by publicity about his women. We tried to make him someone we can understand rather than adulate or condemn."

"Our story is not about Camelot," executive producer Judith A. Polone agrees. "Everybody knows what Kennedy did, but nobody knows why."

As for the Kennedys, Winer says, "My hope is that they could see a certain humanity to the piece that would surprise and even please them."

"Not," he amends, "that we're seeking their approval."
—Rick Schindler



Patrick Dempsey as Jack Kennedy in "Reckless Youth."

GREGORY HESLER/ABC

man from another century. We saw Jack and Jackie, Caroline and John Jr. In the rest of the world, too, people saw a different America. When President Kennedy stepped off Air Force One in Paris in 1961, one honor guard reportedly said: "*Mon Dieu*. He really is an all-American boy."

Then the man found his medium. In fact, he created his medium, inventing the live television news conference, using the more docile White House press corps as a supporting cast. "Well," he told his friend Ben Bradlee of *Newsweek* after one performance, "I always said that when we don't have to go through you bastards, we can really get our story over to the American people."

Bradlee and other print types hated it, at first. In 1961, the White House Correspondents Association voted against accepting TV reporters as members, deciding that they were not true journalists. But Kennedy prevailed. He was the main attraction when the half-hour nightly network news debuted in September of 1963.

He appeared with Walter Cronkite the first night on CBS, then with Chet Huntley and David Brinkley on NBC.

Then he was gone—and those scenes will be on TV forever, too. The shared experience of the assassination and funeral marked and bonded two or three generations of Americans. "We'll never laugh again," said a *Washington Star* reporter named Mary McGrory.

"No," answered a young White House aide named Daniel Patrick Moynihan. "We'll laugh, but we'll never be young again." John F. Kennedy, though, will be forever young. On television. New generations may see him differently, as a mythical figure linked to conspiracy and sex, living in an electronic mist with figures like Marilyn Monroe and James Dean. That seems crazy to me, but this is America, redefined by each generation, and now each seems fascinated by its own Kennedy. ■

Richard Reeves is the author of "President Kennedy: Profile of Power," published in October by Simon & Schuster.

DRY THOSE RUM DRINKS!



C.J. Wray Dry Rum. Nothing dryer, nothing better.

FREE RECIPE BOOKLET. For deliciously different drink and dessert recipes, write to:
C. J. Wray Recipes, P.O. Box 203, Dept. T, Springfield, NJ 07081-0203. Please allow 4 weeks for delivery.
© 1993 C. J. Wray Dry Rum, 40% Alc/Vol (80 Proof), Imported By Carriage House Imports Ltd., Springfield, N.J.