

# Did he accomplish anything that's

## TED SORENSEN

**A**nother JFK commemoration? This country observes the birth and death dates of almost no other president. Why Kennedy?

Because most Americans, even those too young to remember, regard his White House years as a special time in our nation's history, a time of pride in our strengths and excitement in our opportunities, a time when we were led – not polled or pandered to – by a president who appealed to the best instincts of the American people – to their hopes, not their fears, to their innate sense of generosity and responsibility instead of narrow self-interest.

*What about all these books deprecating Kennedy's presidency?*

Every year a new author, selecting those facts that support his theme, sets out to prove – often from the far left or right – that JFK was too rigid or flexible, too reckless or cautious, too restrained by illness or unrestrained in his personal life, to be an effective president. Such attacks are not surprising. Excessive adulation inevitably invites unfounded denigration. A critic with unlimited hindsight is inevitably smarter than a chief executive with necessarily limited information and choices. Sleaze inevitably sells more than

substance. But Americans are wise enough not to believe all they read. A thousand cuts from a thousand books have not succeeded in destroying Kennedy's hold on America's heart.

*Are you denying any failings in Kennedy's private life?*

I am emphasizing the successes in his public life. The man I saw every day, who genuinely loved his wife and children, committed his enormous energies to the causes about which he cared deeply – a job-filled economy, a race-blind society, a safer world community. Speculation about his personal conduct, like speculation about the personal conduct of most presidents, from Lincoln to FDR, mattered far less than the performance of his official duties.

*But did he accomplish anything that's relevant today?*

Had he lived and served another five years, I believe this would be a different world. Sadly, much of his legacy was swept away by time and successors, including the Alliance for Progress for Latin America, the War on Poverty, the special attention to retarded children and depressed communities.

But our nation still pursues the trails he blazed on civil rights, nuclear arms limitations, the exploration of space, the expansion of trade, the conservation of resources. The Peace Corps, public television and new na-

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tional parks and wilderness areas are still here.

The religious barriers to the White House are still down. His stirring speeches and standards of excellence are still invoked by politicians in every party and in countless countries. Many of those attracted to public service by his example and exhortation are still there. And, incidentally, because he peacefully resolved the nation's only potential nuclear confrontation at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, we're all still here.

*So Kennedy's Camelot wasn't a myth?*

Kennedy had no magic touch. He unwisely bought into an ill-conceived plan for the Bay of Pigs, unduly alarmed citizens about the usefulness of bomb shelters, failed to obtain passage of Medicare and was

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## relevant today?

slow to grasp the reality of the situation in Vietnam. He learned from his mistakes - ignoring the repeated recommendation, for example, to send combat divisions and bombers to Vietnam.

Some of his appointments proved disappointments, but essentially he welded together a talented, dedicated group, unmarred by corruption or turf wars. But none of us, including the president, was either saint or superman, and JFK, who disdained myth and fakery, would have been aghast (but amused) at the idolatry that followed his death.

*But you're not any more objective about Kennedy than his critics, are you?*

No, I am not. The man with whom I worked so closely for 11 years, with whom I traveled to all 50 states and abroad, with whom I attended ball games and conventions and state dinners, with whom I swapped jokes and confidences, worked, planned, worried, laughed, won and lost, the man who could banter with my little sons and visit me when I was sick and defend me when I was maligned - about that man I cannot pretend impartiality.

With his remarkable ability to look with wry detachment at his own faults and foibles, he would have wanted me to depict his record accurately, and I have always tried to do so. But I do not deny that he was not



only my friend, leader and president, he was also my hero. He always will be.

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# Why do Americans love those

## ROBERT HEALY

**B**efore each Nov. 22, the day John F. Kennedy was killed in Dallas, the conspiracy people come forward.

This year's top number is the widow of Lee Harvey Oswald, Marina Porter, and her theory, she said, is "right under your nose. Jim Garrison smelled it." She was talking about the former New Orleans district attorney, the central figure of Oliver Stone's film "JFK." Garrison attempted to prove a CIA conspiracy in the 1969 trial of Clay Shaw, who was portrayed as a CIA contractor.

Porter had few details except to say that Oswald was set up and we should disregard those conspiracy people who have said that Oswald was the tool of the Soviet KGB or that Fidel Castro hired Oswald to kill Kennedy. Porter would have us believe that she believes what Stone portrayed in the film.

Let us begin by saying that a lot of money has been tied to the industry of massaging the American psyche on the conspiracy theories. Shortly after the Warren Commission report was made public in 1964, the theories began. One of the first was from Mark Lane, who wrote a book and was a big number on the college speaking circuit for years. He became almost a cult figure, and like most cult figures, a lot of money was attached to his enterprise.

Oswald was the perfect conspiracy figure. He defected to the Soviet Union after serving as a Marine radar operator at a U-2 spy plane base in Japan. He had identified himself as a Marxist in the Marine Corps.

He quit the Soviet Union after more than two years, but the KGB considered him well below the standards of a CIA counteragent; the KGB considered Oswald a flake, unstable, and though they debriefed him, his information was not the sophisticated information of a spy. When the Soviets denied him citizenship, Oswald attempted suicide.

When he returned to the United States with his new bride, he fooled around with both pro- and anti-Cas-

tro movements in New Orleans. He also made trips to Mexico, where he went to the Cuban Embassy to get a visa and made a similar request at the Soviet Embassy but was unsuccessful.

Then he came back to Texas and killed the president.

The conspiracy was fed by this pathological figure, who told a Dallas police captain the night he was captured, "Everybody will know who I am now."

William Manchester in "The Death of a President," wrote of Os-

wald, "His ghost put on a vulgar performance, mugging, upstaging and hogging the limelight with, regrettably, the cooperation of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy. That was unavoidable. Under the terms of its mandate, the commission had no choice. Yet the Warren Report might be subtitled 'the Life of Lee Harvey Oswald.' It is largely a biography of him, and he would have gloated over it; the index lists nearly four times as many references to him as to Kennedy and Johnson combined."

## conspiracy theories on JFK?

And we are still talking about Oswald on television and film. But now we are not saying he was the killer but rather the victim. Who put him up to it? A recent CBS poll indicated that nine out of 10 Americans believe he was not alone in carrying out the assassination.

Remember, Oswald killed a Dallas police officer shortly after he killed Kennedy. Earlier, he attempted to kill the right-wing Maj. Gen. Edwin Walker. He was a killer. His wife has now changed her story about him and his guns.

Walter Cronkite did an examination of the scientific evidence of the assassination on PBS a couple of years ago and came up with the conclusion that Oswald acted alone. In the book "Case Closed," Gerald Posner settles key issues about the single-assassin theory and concludes: "Oswald was the only assassin at Dealey Plaza on Nov. 22, 1963. To say otherwise, in the light of overwhelming evidence, is to absolve the man with blood on his hands and mock the president he killed." The PBS show "Frontline" aired a powerful piece on Oswald and drew the

same conclusion.

But the nation is still left with the Stone film based on the story of a less-than-credible figure. The film had everything filmmakers look for: sex, violence, power, beautiful people, the Mafia, conspiracy.

All it lacked was the truth of the Posner book and the documentaries, but the American people believed it.

*Robert Healy is the former executive editor and Washington bureau chief of The Boston Globe.*