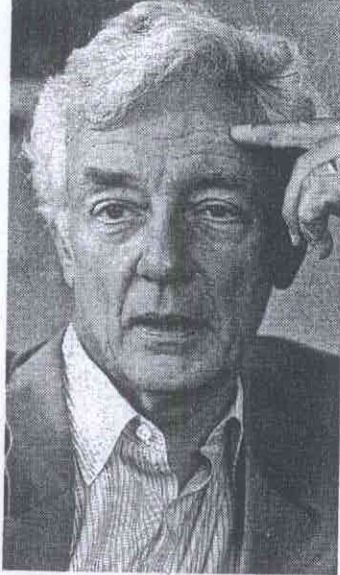


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STYLE SECTION



Richard Reeves studied reams of material for his JFK book.

A quest to catch JFK at center of the storm

By Fen Montaigne
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Three years of enthrallment with the myth and three decades of debunking and analyzing it — that is America's relationship with John Fitzgerald Kennedy. We still are fascinated by the margins of his presidency, by all that was extraneous: the scores of women he bedded, the touch football, the fairy-tale wife and children.

His murder, the 30th anniversary of which is tomorrow, remains a cottage industry, thanks to conspiracy theorists who have done no better job of proving their case than have those who believe in UFOs.

All of these diversions obscure the essential truth about JFK and his 1,000 days in office: No postwar American president faced more crises and dealt with more upheaval than John Kennedy. The showdown with the Soviets

over Berlin, America's slide into Vietnam, the flowering of the civil rights movement, the Cuban missile crisis — this, and not Jackie or Marilyn Monroe, defined the Kennedy presidency.

Richard Reeves, one of America's premier political journalists, set out seven years ago to answer a basic question: What was it like at the center of this storm? Seeking to strip away the myths and do away with the tidiness of hindsight, Reeves wanted to capture the view from inside the White House as this 43-year-old millionaire playboy and consummate politician grappled with his new role as the most powerful man in the world.

Reeves' goal in his new book, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, was to See **RICHARD REEVES** on F6

■ Richard Reeves' "President Kennedy" is reviewed in View, K1.

RICHARD REEVES from F1 describe the view from a spot that Kennedy himself talked about during the Cuban missile crisis. The President quoted a poem by a Spanish bullfighter:

*Bullfight critics row on row
Crowd the enormous plaza de toros
But only one is there who knows
And he is the one who fights the bull.*

What emerges is a picture of disorder and improvisation. Saddled with bad information from the CIA, the Defense Department and numerous other quarters, Kennedy was making it up as he went along.

"I was genuinely shocked ... at how things seemed to be spinning out of control, though somehow Kennedy did manage to keep them under control," Reeves, 56, said in a telephone interview from his home in Los Angeles. "It was the same with Kennedy as it is with everyone else: We're all doing the best we can to make it through the day."

Reeves, who once worked for the New York Herald Tribune and the New York Times and now writes a syndicated column and teaches political science at the University of California at Los Angeles, had long wanted to write a book that captured what the presidency looked like from the inside. From 1984 to 1986, while living in Paris, he wrote a novel in which a U.S. president tells his story in a diary. But Reeves concluded that the novel didn't work and abandoned the project. It was then that his thoughts began to focus on Kennedy, in large part because the young president was in office during such historic times.

Reading some of the major works on the Kennedy administration — including inside accounts by adviser Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and speechwriter Theodore Sorensen — Reeves sensed that they didn't capture the chaos of governing.

"They were good books, but I think they totally distorted what it was like inside the White House," said Reeves, the son of a Hudson County, N.J., judge and politician. "All these books make it look tidy and orderly, like there was a plan. I determined that that was untrue and that for all practical purposes presidents are

winging it."

Reeves, who has written eight books, figured that he could complete the Kennedy project in two years. It took him six.

He did hundreds of interviews and plowed through reams of material, from National Archives documents to oral-history projects to the raw notes of Time magazine correspondents. Kennedy surreptitiously re-recorded far more meetings and phone conversations than people realize, and Reeves draws extensively on those transcripts.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D., Mass.) declined to be interviewed for the book about his brother. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis also refused to talk to Reeves, though she did confirm some facts about her husband through her secretary. "I had no sense of being helped or hindered" by the Kennedy family, Reeves said.

The author, who voted for Richard Nixon over Kennedy in 1960, said the more he learned about Kennedy, the more he empathized with him.

"At first, I was stunned at how much went on, how much happens at the same time," said Reeves. "It was just unbelievable. I thought that this was a really tough job, and there was not a lot of help there. Some of the meetings, the search for consensus, was really just Kennedy seeking a kind of comfort. He knew what he had to do and what he was going to do. He wanted some support."

Through his research, Reeves — who never met Kennedy — came to appreciate both the man's enormous charisma and his "casual cruelty." Men and women alike fell in love with the politician, who could also display what Reeves calls an "18th-century" disdain for his underlings.

"I didn't see any passion and very little compassion in Kennedy," said Reeves.

Regarding Kennedy's much touted sex life, it plays a relatively minor role in the book — "about in proportion to its importance" in Kennedy's governing, Reeves figured. For President Kennedy, a tryst was about as easy to arrange as a tennis game — and about as significant, according to Reeves.

In the book, Reeves cited examples of Kennedy's sexual escapades when

it reflected how he treated those around him. The President's one-night rendezvous on Lake Como with a famous, though unnamed, European beauty in 1963 is included because Kennedy used Secretary of State Dean Rusk to help secure the villa. Reeves interviewed Rusk three decades after the fact and found him still shamed by the incident.

In Reeves' view, Kennedy grew quickly in the job, and thank God for it. In April 1961, just four months in office, the young president — spurred on by insanely optimistic assessments by the CIA and the military — approved the invasion by Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs. Three days later, with the invasion an unmitigated disaster, Kennedy woke up in the White House in tears.

Two months after that, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev demolished Kennedy at the Vienna summit. And two months later, in August 1961, Khrushchev was so convinced that he was dealing with a weak, indecisive American president that he threatened to drive the allies out of West Berlin. Kennedy realized that what the Soviet leader really wanted was to stanch the flow of East Germans fleeing to the West. So the American president worked out a tacit agreement with Khrushchev: The Soviets erected the Berlin Wall and made no more noise about the allied presence in West Berlin.

"I think he was great in Berlin," Reeves said in the interview. "If anyone knew what he was really doing, he would have been impeached. But he figured out what the other fellow's problem was."

The same was true with the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, when Kennedy gave Khrushchev — who also was under pressure from hard-line generals — room to maneuver. A more reckless American president might have taken steps that would have led to nuclear war with the Soviets.

The other great crises of Kennedy's administration, civil rights and Vietnam, were reduced — as was everything with Kennedy — to pure politics. "He handled Vietnam and civil rights in an odd way," said Reeves. "He saw civil rights as a foreign problem that made America look bad abroad. And he saw Vietnam as a domestic problem, with the survival of the Democratic Party and Kennedy himself depending on the outcome."

So, though he had no "passion" for civil rights, Kennedy finally spoke out forcefully for blacks when street violence and resistance from Southern governors reached intolerable levels. As for Vietnam, domestic Cold

War politics forced the President to send 17,000 troops to that country. Kennedy feared that it was a quagmire and talked of pulling out, but Reeves is not at all sure that Kennedy, had he lived, would have been able to extricate the United States.

As Reeves has traveled the country in recent weeks on a book tour, he has encountered undiminished interest in John Kennedy.

"Part of it, I think, is that Kennedy was president at a time of great change and prosperity and excitement and he was associated with that," said Reeves. "My reading of the kids I talk to is that they're down now about what they see as a lack of opportunity, a lack of change. They look around and say, 'Where is our Kennedy?' What they know about Kennedy often is absurd, a TV mini-series view of things. But they know it was a good time under Kennedy. They figure that other generations have gotten theirs. Why aren't they?"

Reeves, who has covered politics and presidents for a quarter-century, was asked how he would have reacted if he had covered JFK. Would he have succumbed to the President's charms?

"I'm sure I would have," said Reeves. "Everything I found out indicated he was pure magic."