

JFK created himself in his own image, researcher says

By John Hellmann
(Columbia University Press, \$29.50)

of JFK

By Jeff Turrentine

In the 1960 presidential election, voters elected Democrat John F. Kennedy over his Republican rival, Richard Nixon, by only the slimmest of margins. We sometimes forget today that half the nation didn't vote for him. Modern presidential historians typically rank him as slightly above average: by no means one of our most accomplished commanders in chief. And in the decades since his assassination sent America into shock, the taboo against speaking ill of Kennedy has gradually been lifted — so much so that a book such as journalist Seymour Hersh's *The Dark Side of Camelot*, a once-unthinkable reappraisal of JFK as a crude, office-abusing Lothario, is greeted today with relish by the media and the public alike.

Yet ask any American over the age of 40 to name the most influential president of his or her lifetime, and the chances are still good that they'll name John Kennedy. It's almost instinctive. We invoke his name the same way we invoke Elvis Presley's or Marilyn Monroe's when asked to name an influential pop star or movie star. Every cultural realm has its own iconic representative, and Kennedy — even a revised and damaged Kennedy — is still our leader. As the 350,000-copy first printing of Mr. Hersh's book confirms, we may think far less of JFK, but we still can't get him out of our minds.

Another new book on Kennedy, John Hellmann's *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK*, attempts to explain our peculiar relationship with the 35th president. In an era that allows for the supplanting of reality by so-called "virtual" imitations thereof, Mr. Hellmann, a professor of English at Ohio State University at Lima, gives us a kind of virtual biography: a study not of Kennedy's life and actions, but of his image and lingering impact in our collective psyche. Readers looking for salacious accounts of JFK's sexual misdeeds, or even readers looking for an unsalacious history of his administration and its policies, might be baffled by Mr. Hellmann's project, which utilizes the language and methodology of academic literary criticism to explore different versions of Kennedy that have been transmitted



John F. Kennedy Library

IMPRINTING. John F. Kennedy devoured British adventure stories and war histories as a sickly and frequently bedridden youth, and incorporated the heroes later into his public persona.

throughout the culture.

In constructing his thesis of Kennedy-as-text, Mr. Hellmann notes that his subject was at all times absorbing a wide variety of texts himself, ranging from British adventure stories and war histories (as a sick, often bedridden young boy) to Ernest Hemingway's novels, popular magazines of the 1950s such as *Life* and Hollywood movies starring charismatic leading men such as Jimmy Stewart and Cary Grant. From all of these, Mr. Hellmann argues, Kennedy crafted a master text that he successfully projected as a public persona: a heroic warrior who could lead men in battle, respond to crisis with stoic "grace under pressure," appeal to and unify the masses, and — to boot — seduce both men and women with a combination of seeming moral uprightness and, paradoxically, devilish sex appeal.

HELLMANN



It was a magic formula. With the help of his father, whose political and entertainment connections were invaluable, and of various others in the culture-making business (including writer John Hersey, whose early magazine profile cemented his image as a war hero), JFK rose quickly through the political ranks to become the youngest president in the nation's history. Along the way, he had helped himself by regularly contributing his

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own texts — the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Profiles in Courage*, his engaging performance during the 1960 debates with Nixon, his famously eloquent inauguration speech — all of which fortified the projected master text of sure-footed, sexy leadership.

In another kind of biography, the death of the subject would mark the end of the story: But in Mr. Hellmann's free-floating study, the assassination of JFK serves only to transfigure the image of the president into something approaching a religious icon. In the second half of his book, Mr. Hellmann investigates that juncture of the erotic and neurotic over which Kennedy continues to preside even after his death. Jungian archetype theory and the notion of Kennedy as a "dream lover" — a phantasmal sexual figure based on an idealized version of a real-life person — figure into his thesis, as do the conspiracy-theory extravaganzas of filmmaker Oliver Stone and the dark corollary icon of Lee Harvey Oswald in Don DeLillo's novel *Libra*.

What does Mr. Hellmann's book teach us? Something that we as citizens of a more cynical media-saturated "virtual" age have probably already intuited: JFK calculatedly created his own popular image, one that didn't necessarily jibe with who he really was. But Mr. Hellmann also teaches us something much less obvious: that we were and continue to be complicit players — conspirators, if you will — in an elaborate psychodrama that nakedly reveals our national desires and vulnerabilities, concentrating them in the image of a single man whose life and death go deeper than history to a far more mysterious realm of human understanding.

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