

Nov 21 9/18/91

Why Camelot Lives

JFK's Image and the Kennedys' Troubles

By Haynes Johnson

THE OLD myth dies hard, if it dies at all. It sprang to life that day in Dallas 28 years ago and no matter what has happened since—scandals, real or manufactured, revelations, proven or unproven, historiography, adoring or revisionist—it appears to have as strong a hold on the American public as ever. Its endurance is the most remarkable aspect of this truly remarkable story.

I refer, of course, to the Kennedy Mystique. By all logic, it should long since have started to decline. By any fair reckoning, it deserves to; the Mystique was inflated at best, the vaunted charisma overstated, the romantic Camelot analogy absurd. Yet the Mystique endures despite one unpleasant story after another about the Kennedys and their clan. Some of the names associated with those stories are now synonymous with tragedy: Teddy and Chappaquiddick. Others strike at John F. Kennedy's character in ways that should affect his myth: Jack and Mafia dons and mistresses, presidentially sanctioned CIA plots to kill Castro, the sad end of the lonely, tormented and vulnerable Marilyn Monroe. Still others, in endless procession, form a continuing real-life soap opera: accidents and alcoholism.

See MYSTIQUE, C4, Col. 1

Haynes Johnson is a Washington Post reporter and columnist. His latest book is "Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years."

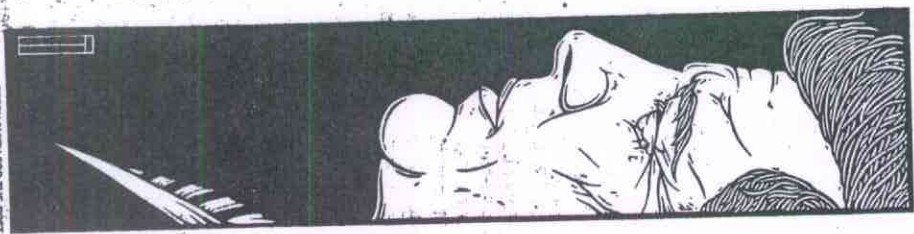


ILLUSTRATION BY THE POST

MYSTIQUE, From C1

drugs and deaths, suicides and smashed lives, women can even this scandal-saturated, and, I'm afraid, scandal-seeking, society take without shouting, Enough!

Much, much more, the evidence strongly suggests. Perhaps the latest scandal, the disturbing William Kennedy Smith rape case, will finally sunder the Mystique, but I doubt it.

Revelations notwithstanding, public opinion on John F. Kennedy has been uniformly consistent and supportive. His is still the face most Americans want to see added on Mount Rushmore, an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll of last March 29 tells us. He is the president most Americans regard as greatest, and by substantial margins, a Gallup Poll a month earlier reports. In this sample, JFK outranks second-place Lincoln in American affections by 4 percentage points. More than twice as many place him among the pantheon of great presidents as put third-place Franklin D. Roosevelt there.

Other presidents rise and fall in the fickle public assessments, Kennedy remains constant. Even the professional historians, who never put him at the top in ranking presidents from great to failure, consistently place JFK in the upper range of better than average presidents.

Part of the explanation for this disconnect between Kennedy scandal and Kennedy legend is obvious. His assassination, the seminal event of the Media Age, is the moment that those who lived through it will never forget. It changed America in ways still difficult to understand, and in ways more complex than merely a loss of innocence, a promise brutally destroyed, a belief that such things could not happen in America. But in no small part the Mystique was also a deliberate concoction that fit the public's need to create a myth out of the senseless death of so young and attractive a leader.

For this we can thank Jacqueline Kennedy and the late Theodore H. White. Two weeks after the assassination, Life

magazine carried White's exclusive account of Jacqueline Kennedy's tearful memories of Washington as Camelot and her husband as Arthur. White quoted her:

"At night, before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records, and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record. The lines he loved to hear were: *Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.*"

As White wrote, she wanted to make sure the analogy was clearly understood: "There'll be great presidents again—and the Johnsons are wonderful, they've been wonderful to me—but there'll never be another Camelot again."

She knew exactly what she was seeking to convey, and so did White, her collaborator in this creation of the myth. Out of the mundane problems of contemporary America, and indeed as we now know problems in her own marriage, she shrewdly borrowed lines from the sentimental closing song of a hit Broadway musical of the period, "Camelot," to evoke the legendary court of Arthur. It is a lovely, enduring fairy tale and the source of the notion of chivalry.

Chivalrous knights and ladies fair aside, 19th-century scholar Thomas Bulfinch wryly notes that even in the Age of Arthur "a knightly castle was often a terror to the surrounding country" and that "hosts of idle retainers were ever at hand to enforce their lord's behests, regardless of law and justice; and that the rights of the unarmed multitude were of no account."

So much for Camelot. And so much, too, one would think all these years later, for Kennedy as Arthur and Washington as Camelot. Yet the mystery over that Mystique remains.

Here I should confess that I am not dissatisfied in this matter: I find it almost impossible to sort out my tangle of feelings about the Kennedy. I reported on, the Kennedy I came to admire and the Kennedy I have been increasingly troubled by as more and more revelations come to light.

I was disposed to dislike Kennedy when, as a young reporter just come to Washington in 1957, I first met him. Everything I knew about him put me off: the robber-baron-type father, the supposedly ruthless younger



TERRY SMITH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

brother who came to prominence during the fearful Joe McCarthy days of communist witchhunts and character assassinations, the suffocating sense of family dynasty, the play-boy image, the big money, the sycophants who already were starting to swarm about him, drawn by the promise of his future fame and power. Besides, I was a tough young reporter. No rich young politician with a carton full of press clippings was going to find an easy mark in me.

In that fall of 1957, I was assigned to a hearing on Capitol Hill by my paper, The Washington Evening Star. I was musing about the contradictions between the stated simplicity of our democratic process and the obvious need for opulent trappings among the people we entrust to power, when the door behind the senators' dias swung open. In strode John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

He was tall, slim, deeply suntanned. He had a shock of reddish-brown hair that, to an already balding reporter, was a matter of envy and somewhat startling in its luxuriance. A broad smile crossed his face. He moved quickly, with an easy grace, straight toward the press table and directly at me. His blue eyes were sparkling as if he and I shared a secret joke. He held out his hand and said, in a broad Boston accent, "How are you?" He pumped my hand vigorously as if genuinely delighted at meeting an old friend, all the while smiling that mischievous smile.

We had never met. He knew it, and what's more, he knew that I knew it.

"You son of a bitch," I said to myself. "You've got me."

Kennedy was the most seductive person I've ever met. He exuded a sense of vibrant life and humor that seemed naturally to bubble up out of him.

In saying that, I do not wish to contribute to the legend nor add more polish to the marble. His record in the brief 1,000 days that he occupied the White House was certainly mixed, though I, like so many, shared a common feeling that his presidency had great potential and left us with a tantalizing sense of what might have been. I'm not alone in that belief or in the later letdown as the more unsavory aspects of the Kennedy years became known.

Ben Bradlee, executive editor of The Washington Post and author of "Conversations With Kennedy," for instance, was both close personal friend and confidante of Kennedy in those years. His reassessment of the Mystique from the vantage point of three decades later is both painful and reflective of the personal reexamination of many others.

"He was promising, certainly, God, he was promising," Bradlee says now. "Those of us who knew him then, or at least speaking for myself, always thought of him as Kennedy on the come. A thousand days is not a helluva a long time to be president; not even three years. He had a capacity, as the French say, to *emballer le pays*—to gather up, or sweep up, the country. He did that and he made the entire country feel proud of itself."

The disillusionment for Bradlee came with Judith Campbell Exner's memoirs alleging her simultaneous affair with Kennedy and Sam Giancana, the mobster involved in the United States plot to assassinate Cuba's Fidel Castro. Bradlee kept records of Kennedy's private White House phone numbers, which changed every week or so and gave the caller direct access to Kennedy through his personal secretary, Evelyn Lincoln. Bradlee checked those numbers against the numbers reported by Exner. They matched—exactly.

"I just didn't want to believe it," Bradlee says, "but it was there. For a president of the United States to be involved with a mistress of a Mafia don is just not acceptable. I have to think that if that kind of knowledge had come out, then he would have been impeached . . . I just feel so sabotaged. What's the word? Cheated? Betrayed? Yes, betrayed."

So here we are, 28 years later in the summer of 1991, still trying to come to grips with that Mystique and still surrounded by more

sound and fury over the Kennedy name, record and reputation—and all in advance of the Willy Smith trial, now postponed to January, that will focus even more attention on the old story and legacy. Two new scholarly books are instructive. One, Thomas Reeves's "A Question of Character," highly critical of Kennedy's personal morality and less impressive, is a current best-seller. Another that deserves to be, Michael R. Beschloss's "The Crisis Years," is more careful and convincing.

I like Beschloss's appraisal. To Beschloss, Kennedy was a serious, hard-working president with a superb talent for "intense crisis management," yet at the same time given to taking unnecessary risks that "aroused the Western world to an hour of imminent danger that did not exist."

More provocative, and telling, is Beschloss's assessment of the private Kennedy lifestyle:

"Kennedy considered his public performance and his private behavior to be two areas of his life that had no serious connection. He conducted the former with a consistent sense of responsibility, the latter with the fatalism that [close friend Lem] Billings noted, living 'for the moment, treating each day as if it were his last, demanding of life constant intensity, adventure, and pleasure.' Of his relations with women, the president is said to have told an intimate, 'They can't touch me while I'm alive. After I'm dead, who cares?' . . .

"But once he moved into the White House, the stakes were no longer one senator's career but the entire world. By pursuing women whose full background he evidently could not know, Kennedy caused his presidency to be a potential hostage to any resourceful group in American society that might have wished to bring him down—the Teamsters, the Mafia, the Radical Right—and every hostile intelligence service in the world."

Reckless behavior indeed, and surely in time this will work against the Mystique. Or will it?

Prince Hal, the whoring young wastrel, became a great king, if we are to believe Shakespeare. John Kennedy, the reckless young womanizer, became a great president with even greater promise to come, if we are to believe the legions of Kennedy admirers who continue to cling to the Mystique. For the rest of us, it's time to bury the myth and see him for what he was—not a fairy tale, but a gifted, tough politician of promise and all too human flaws.