
Journal

FRANK RICH

The Jackie Mystery

In my own informal poll, everyone old enough to remember her husband's Presidency had the same response to the death of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, conveyed in almost identical words: "I never expected to be as upset as I was." And my own was no different: After the announcement was dropped midway into another numbing 11:00 broadcast of crime-sotted local news, my tears caught me by surprise.

A week later I'm still puzzling over my reaction, and I feel that in this, too, I'm far from alone. Though the grief feels deep, its object remains a mystery.

In the flood of coverage of Mrs. Onassis, four words were called upon again and again to define her, as if they were a mantra: grace, dignity, style, class. They were repeated so often that eventually every man-on-Fifth-Avenue interviewed on television mechanically gave the same response: "I admired Jackie because of her dignity and grace."

Is that the whole story? These adjectives, correct but unrevealing, only reaffirm the public image of the most famous woman of our time. Yet a search for other insights during the media's four-day orgy of Kennedyana yielded few clues into the person who caused such widespread, heartfelt sadness. Could this be one outpouring of grief that says more about the mourners than the mourned?

Certainly the testimony of close Jackie observers added little to the rigid official portrait. Peggy Noonan squeezed both "dignified" and "dignity" into the first paragraph of her anecdotal Time magazine essay;

A good cry, but for whom?

pages later, the zoologically minded Hugh Sidey likened Jackie to both a butterfly and a thoroughbred. The reminiscences retailed by celebrities had a tinge of self-promotion. Wrote Ruth Praver Jhabvala in The New Yorker: "I just finished my most recent manuscript, and she knew that I was going on a trip, and she called me to say, 'Can I have it before you go?' I'd like to think that she had it with her — the most precious part of me — by her at the end."

Perhaps Myra MacPherson of The Washington Post was right: "Jackie's many close friends are not among those quoted and appearing on television." Or did Mrs. Onassis keep even her close friends at a distance? And if she did successfully preserve her privacy, why did we still respond so powerfully to the death of a stranger, however graceful or dignified?

By the end of the weekend, historical and sociological theories were abounding. Maybe Mrs. Onassis's death marked the final, absolute end of the Kennedy era — and never mind that its demise had previously been sighted at Chappaquiddick a quarter-century ago.

Or maybe she was a feminine archetype. Given the outwardly tranquil adulthoods of Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg and John Kennedy Jr., some made the case that Mrs. Onas-

sis was the ideal mother. Or, as a single, working Mom, was she an early model of the modern American woman — as Betty Friedan proclaimed, "a closet feminist"? Or, conversely, was she the last gilded American princess, frozen in time in that bloodied pink suit? So great was the zeal of the press and public alike to erect a Saint Jackie O to bear the startling emotional weight of her death that even the seamier details of both her marriages, long a national obsession, were abruptly stricken from the record.

One woman I know, baffled by her own grief for a phantom First Lady, had her own intriguing theory. She wondered if Jackie in death had become the ideal psychoanalyst: a neutral figure on whom any American could therapeutically project anything whatsoever.

If that's the case, then perhaps the reverential grief for Mrs. Onassis gave expression to an unacknowledged national yearning — even a ravenous need — for a higher common purpose during this bitterly partisan time. Because every Jackie mourner, finally, agrees on one point: she represented something larger and better than most of us.

But if so, what exactly was it? That mystery follows her to the grave. What does seem clear is that her death brought Americans together as nothing else has lately, resurrecting a shared memory of the national idealism thought to have been buried forever in the cynical decades since Dallas. Against all expectations, a weekend of mourning became a shining moment, once again too brief. □

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