

J.F.K.: THE MAN AND THE MYTH

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Otherwise Kennedy's rebuttal was generally well received. But by declaring that the Presidency demanded "the strength and health and vigor of young men," Kennedy inadvertently dragged in the "health issue." Lyndon Johnson's supporters leaped to the conclusion that J.F.K. was making a not-so-subtle allusion to L.B.J.'s 1955 heart attack.

John B. Connally, a Fort Worth lawyer who was Citizens-for-Johnson director, called in the press and charged that Senator Kennedy secretly suffered from Addison's Disease, an incurable but now controllable deficiency of adrenal secretions.

India Edwards, another top Johnsruffie (and former Democratic National Committee Vice Chairman), observed that Kennedy was the only man "offering himself for President who has been absent eight months in one year because of illness." This was a reference to Senator Kennedy's 1954 illness when he underwent surgery for a spinal disc condition.

Mrs. Edwards informed newsmen that she had been told by physicians in "close touch" with the Laley Clinic in Boston that Senator Kennedy was completely dependent on cortisone.

"Doctors have told me that he would not be alive today were it not for cortisone. It is no disgrace to have Addison's Disease. He has it now."

"She said that she did not consider the disease to be a 'serious defect' in a Presidential candidate 'if it can be controlled.'"

"But I object to his verbal muscle-flexing with regard to his youth," she added, "as if he had better health than anyone else."

Connally said he would be "delighted" to enter Johnson in a comparison of medical records with any of those seeking the Presidential nomination, adding he would like to see Kennedy undergo an examination by Johnson's own physician.

The discussion of his brother's health by the Johnson camp was bitterly assailed by Robert F. Kennedy. "These are desperation tactics employed by those who are trying

"Connally became the New Frontier's first Secretary of the Navy. He resigned to enter the 1962 race for Governor of Texas.

unsuccessfully to stop my brother's nomination. These charges show how really desperate they are."

Actually, rumors about Senator Kennedy's health had been circulating for years. On June 14, 1959, Fletcher Knebel reported in the *Der Mothers Register* that a "whispering campaign aimed at discrediting Senator Kennedy as a Presidential candidate has gained increasing momentum in recent weeks. The whisperers have been stating as a fact that Kennedy has Addison's Disease. So virulent is the power of gossip that even Governor Edmund G. [Pat] Brown of California was impelled to ask Kennedy personally about it. In an interview Kennedy said there is no basis to the rumor. He said he has tried in vain to learn the source."

The public record on Kennedy's health is incomplete and contradictory; and the statements which have been made appear to have evaded rather than clarified the legitimate questions which are of public concern.

For example, *Time* magazine has stated bluntly that Kennedy had Addison's Disease in 1954. Yet, on July 4, 1960, replying to the Edwards-Connally allegations, Robert F. Kennedy declared, "The Senator does not now nor has he ever had an ailment described classically as Addison's Disease, which is a tubercular destruction of the adrenal gland. Any statement to the contrary is malicious and false. It has been explained on numerous occasions and there is a full exposition on the matter in James MacGregor Burns' book, *John Kennedy: A Political Profile*."

The Burns biography says this, however: "While Senator Kennedy's adrenal insufficiency might well be diagnosed by some doctors as a mild case of Addison's Disease, it was not diagnosed as the classic type of Addison's Disease, which is due to tuberculosis. Other conditions, often not known, can cause inadequate functioning of the adrenal glands. As in Kennedy's case this can be fully controlled by medication taken by the mouth and requires a routine endocrinologic checkup as part of regular physical examinations once or twice a year."

The *New York Times* of July 5, 1960, quoted Kennedy's chief assistant, Theodore Sorensen, as saying, "He is not on cortisone." Asked what other drugs, if any, the Senator might be using, Sorensen replied: "I don't know that he is on anything—any more than you and I are on."

Time, in its July 18, 1960, issue, quoted Kennedy, himself, as saying he had taken regular doses of cortisone from 1947 to 1951 and again from 1955 to 1958 to combat what he called a "partial adrenal insufficiency." He said he still took oral doses of corticosteroids (cortisone-type medication) "frequently, when I have worked hard."

If raising the health issue by Johnson's supporters was "outrageous and irresponsible," as Bobby Kennedy had stated on July 4, the medical bulletin released by Kennedy headquarters later that evening was, at best, vague and unresponsive. Signed by Dr. Travell and another New York physician, the bulletin said in part:

"Your fine record of accomplishment during the primary campaigns for the Presidential nomination speaks for itself. . . . Your superb physical condition under severe stress indicates that you are able to hold any office to which you aspire."

A supporter of Senator Symington asked the *New York Herald Tribune's* David Wise, "Is that a medical report or a nomination speech?"

The Kennedy doctors' statement continued: "With respect to your old problem of adrenal insufficiency as late as December 1958 when you had a general checkup with a specific test of adrenal function, the result shows that your adrenal glands do function."

Here, the Senator's problem was referred to as an "old problem." Yet, it was reported that he had been under treatment just one month earlier. Also to have said that the Senator's adrenal glands "do function" may have been

* On June 22, 1961, following an attack of virus after the Vienna summit meeting, President Kennedy authorized his physician, Dr. Jaeset Travell, to meet the press.

COMMENT: Dr. Travell, are any corticosteroids being used in treatment of the President at this time?

DR. TRAVELL: Yes. . . . I would like to say that the doses that are given from time to time are minimum.

COMMENT: Corticosteroids are used for what, in the President's case?

DR. TRAVELL: Mild adrenal insufficiency. There has never been any other statement on that matter.

To some correspondents the statement sounded like there might have been more to say on the matter than had been said. Still unanswered was a question concerning possible side-effects from the President's use of corticosteroids.

misleading. If a man has had a coronary attack, his heart continues "to function." The question really involves the seriousness of the impairment and its present or future effect. Moreover, a "general checkup" in December 1958 (a year and a half earlier) does not stand up against the statement by James MacGregor Burns that Kennedy "requires a routine endocrinologic checkup as a part of regular physical examinations once or twice a year."

The health issue was to be brought out again in the closing days of the Presidential campaign. On November 5, 1960, Republican Congressman Walter H. Judd demanded that Candidate Kennedy follow Candidate Nixon's lead in making full disclosure of his "true physical condition."

"Unless this is done," said Judd, himself a former medical missionary, "I can only conclude that a cover-up job is being done to hide the drugging and consequent side effects frequently associated with long-standing Addison's Disease."

According to Judd, "It is well known that adrenal insufficiency requires an artificial supply, affecting a patient's physical and mental health, and that medication for Addison's Disease can have all sorts of side effects which I, for one, would consider dangerous beyond calculation in a President of the United States."

"For one thing, I would like a flat answer to rumors in medical circles that Case Number Three in the American Medical Association's Archives of Surgery, Volume 71, relates to Senator Kennedy. If so, this represents information which Senator Kennedy is duty-bound to make freely available to the consideration of every voter. This can be done if the Senator will simply release his doctors from their patient-doctor secrecy bond."

Case Number Three related to a young man who had suffered for many years from Addison's Disease, and who also suffered from a back injury which caused much pain and required surgical correction and relief.

Judd termed the July 4 Kennedy doctors' report "nothing less than shocking," adding: "Any layman, let alone a doctor, can read it and see the political nature of the omissions. Doctors know that Addison's Disease tends to create the adrenal insufficiencies that are disturbing to physical and mental health. If drugs of the large dosage indicated were required some years ago, it is not unreason-

able to suppose that even more massive and more critical dosages are required today. This is the sort of fact voters are entitled to have, and to have now."

Judd noted that in the 1956 campaign, Candidate Eisenhower had instructed his doctors to release an "extremely comprehensive" medical report a week before the election.

However, full disclosure of John F. Kennedy's physical condition and the course of medical treatment he has taken, and is taking, has never been made. The matter is considered not fit for public discussion, and the White House resents any questions on the subject.

The pre-Convention flurry of medical exchanges demonstrated that most of the anti-Kennedy activity progressively centered around Lyndon Johnson. In large measure, this was due to the belief that Senator Symington had been abandoned by his most illustrious advocate, Harry S Truman, and that Lyndon was now the former President's favorite.