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State of JFK's Health Was the Real Coverup Story

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THE JOURNAL of the American Medical Association has a presidential-class scoop in this week's issue — only 32 years too late.

"Closing the Case in JAMA on the John F. Kennedy Autopsy" is the title, and it reveals that despite all the family and medical denials during his lifetime and later, Kennedy did indeed have Addison's disease — a once-terminal failure of the adrenal glands.

And that wasn't the half of it. The 35th president had a range of maladies, known and unknown, that kept him in a sickbed, boy and man, for months and years at a time. His back problems and mysterious fevers were congenital, not football injuries or war injuries or malaria, as the cover stories went in those days.

He also had a very uncertain stomach that restricted him to a bland diet all his life, some deafness in his right ear, and a baffling range of allergies that sometimes laid him out. He was a promiscuous user of medications, including corticosteroids to replace the normal output of adrenal glands, amphetamines and Demerol for pain.

I've spent the better part of the last five years researching and writing a biography of President Kennedy, and it certainly seems to me that it was his health, and not his sexual adventurism, that was the great covered-up story of the Kennedy years. He was a rather gallant liar about his health, learning as a boy bedridden with scarlet fever that when people say, "How do you feel?" they are not interested in either the truth or the whole story.

So, all his life, Kennedy said "Fine" — particularly after he

got into politics in 1946, a skinny, sickly kid with the perpetual tan that makes some Addisonians look terrific most of the time. That was one of the times he said it was malaria — from the Pacific during the war.

"That young American friend of yours, he hasn't got a year to live," Sir Daniel Davis, a prominent British physician, told Pamela Churchill, Winston's daughter-in-law, after she brought a very sick Congressman Kennedy to the London Clinic on Sept. 21, 1947. It was

Addison's disease, he said.

In fact, the doctor was wrong, not about the disease but about its effect. Corticosteroid treatments developed in 1939 could keep Addisonians alive indefinitely. In 1960, during his campaign for president, Kennedy lied about the disease to the point of telling an old friend, "No one who has the real Addison's disease should run for the presidency, but I do not have it."

The truth came out in public only once, when Kennedy made medical history, becoming the first known Addisonian to survive systemic traumatic surgery. But no one noticed.

On Oct. 21, 1954, Senator Kennedy went into a New York hospital for two spinal fusion operations in a desperate attempt to relieve his almost constant back pain. "I'd rather be dead than spend the rest of my life on these goddamned crutches," he told one of his doctors. That was a real possibility, and he received the last rites of the Roman Catholic Church on the operating table.

The operation was de-

scribed in the November 1955 issue of one of JAMA's sister magazines, the American Medical Association Archives of Surgery, under the headline, "Management of Adrenocortical Insufficiency During Surgery." The patient was described only as "a man 37 years of age" — and his survival was seen as practically a miracle.

The 37-year-old man was easily identified as Senator John F. Kennedy. But no one from the press nor any of his political opponents seemed to figure it out. That was something of a miracle, too, because there were break-ins at the offices of at least three of Kennedy's many doctors over the years. Nothing was found in the doctors' records, though, because Kennedy insisted his records be in code.

Could he have been elected

if people knew these things in 1960? Probably not. Did it matter when he was president? Probably, but not because of the illnesses or the pain. Each of the medications and drugs he was taking in large doses had a cargo of side effects, from fatigue and depression to increased sexual drive and the paranoia linked to amphetamines.

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