BY JOHN LEO

The weathering of Camelot

Trying to write a fresh book on a stale subject like the Kennedy presidency is certainly a high-wire act. All sorts of historians, acolytes and debunkers have been pounding around on this well-worn turf for 30 years. What else is there to say?

Well, for one thing, what the White House years looked like through the eyes of its primary occupant, Jack Kennedy. Using that angle of attack, Richard Reeves's well-researched book, *President Kennedy,* is a remarkable achievement.

As portrayed by Reeves, Kennedy was a man of decent instincts; he was a cold warrior, preoccupied with foreign affairs and the Soviet threat—particularly in Berlin—and devoted to working the grain of America's obsession with communism.

Arthur Schlesinger once called the Kennedy regime a "fluid presidency." In Reeves's account, that fluidity and lack of organization look almost slapdash. He was a quick study, a very bright and impatient man with a very short attention span. He hated meetings, preferring hallway conversations and phone calls. Sometimes briefings amounted to whispered words on the way in the door. He was contemptuous of the State Department and the rest of the executive bureaucracy and cut most lines of command.

This helped produce a highly personalized presidency, heavily dependent on one man's style and charm. Kennedy was browbeaten and shocked by Khrushchev at the Vienna summit. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan said it was the first time Kennedy had met a man impervious to his charm.

UPI/BETTMANN

Presidential cool. *Unswayed by sentiment*

Kennedy had no use for the dons of American liberalism—the "honkers," he called them. He had to be "tough," because soft Democrats always seemed to lose elections. Besides, Kennedy avoided honking himself. He was a cool and detached man, saved from coldness only by self-deprecating humor and a movie-star charisma that warmed others no matter what he said or did. The Kennedy style was, as Reeves says, "cool objectivity, pure information-gathering, dispassionate analysis, a decision-making mechanism unswayed by sentiment, unmoved by subjective and moral argument."

Affair of the head. The refusal to make a moral argument makes the civil rights section of Reeves's book excruciating to read. Time and again, Harris Wofford and others pushed him to back the Freedom Riders and demonstrators, but Kennedy said no. Blacks would have to wait until public opinion formed behind them. Though no bigot, he viewed the Freedom Rides primarily as irritating distractions from cold-war business and as something the Communists could use to embarrass the United States.

Four times Kennedy struck the name of Sammy Davis Jr. from an invitation list, because he thought a photo of a black man at the White House with a white wife would have been a political disaster. At one point in the book, he tells the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. that two of King's aides are high officials of the Communist Party. King says dryly of one: "I don't know how he's got time to do all that—he's got two jobs with me."

Press fawning over Kennedy was excessive, even by the lax standards of the day. Chalk much of this up to the bedazzlement of the Washington press corps. Reporters tend to be ironic, detached outsiders, like Kennedy, and many thought they saw a kindred spirit, raised to the level of American royalty. Many fought to bask in Kennedy's sunshine, doing small favors, letting him know what was coming up about him in their magazines and papers. Their bosses liked the arrangement, too. Reeves tells the story of Hugh Sidey of *Time,* writing about Kennedy's speed-reading ability. Sidey called an institute where Kennedy had started but not finished a speed-reading course, and was told that the president could read about 700 to 800 words a minute. Kennedy didn't like the number. "How about 1200?" Sidey asked. OK, Kennedy said, and that became the standard statistic on Kennedy's allegedly phenomenal reading abilities.

One story that the press managed to miss, although it was virtually dumped in their laps by Lyndon Johnson's people at the 1960 Democratic convention, was that Jack Kennedy was virtually a cripple. He had serious spinal problems, Addison's disease, recurrent infections, persistent venereal disease and fierce fevers. He took medicine daily, sometimes hourly, consuming large quantities of cortisone, Novocain and amphetamines. Four times in his life he received the last rites of the Catholic Church. Despite all the photographs of touch football and "vigah," he lived with intense pain and very low energy all his adult days.

The wonder of it was that such a sickly, detached and cautious president, filled with old cold-war ideas and only tepidly promoting change, should have released such energy among the young. But he did. When blacks in the South began pushing hard for change, Kennedy asked a black politician where they were getting such ideas. "From you," the politician said. When Robert Kennedy told the Freedom Riders to stop and asked for a cooling-off period, Reeves writes, the protesters "were not listening to Robert Kennedy's words. They thought they had heard John Kennedy's music." The music was his legacy, even though he was probably only half aware of playing it. ■

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

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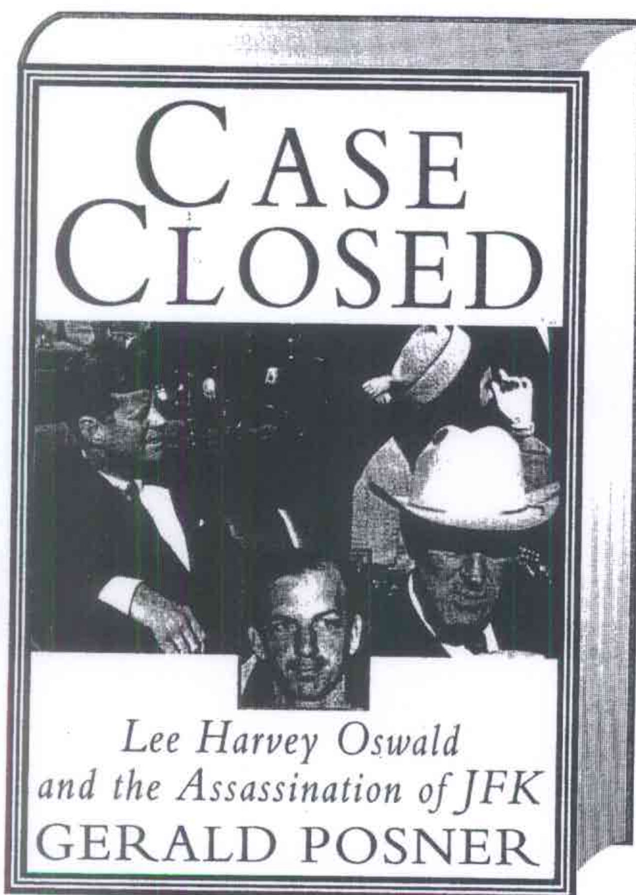

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