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PUNDIT WATCH Susan Douglas

Back to the Future

At the end of November, when Charles Krauthammer was calling for the elimination of welfare for mothers with babies, Nina Totenberg was advocating the nationwide erection of orphanages, and all the pundits were casting Al Gore's performance against Ross Perot (which included that ridiculous photo of Smoot and Hawley) as a "knock-out punch," it was a relief to escape back to a previous era. Not that any of us did this voluntarily: Everywhere we turned, we were inundated by assassination anniversary tributes. Since we currently have a President who idolizes John Kennedy and mimics him in more ways than one, we might do well to consider what reside these ceaseless tributes leave behind.

From CBS's shameless piece of hagiography titled, simply enough, *Jack*, to the NBC News "minute-by-minute reconstruction of what happened thirty years ago," all topped off by the sexually steamy yet violin-laden tear-jerker *JFK: Reckless Youth*, recreations of Kennedy's nobility in life and martyrdom in death have reverberated with endless op-ed pieces about why Americans remain in love with this President and fascinated by his gruesome death. These analyses are highly condescending, suggesting that—unlike sophisticated journalists—the public is overly credulous about JFK and conspiracy theories, unable to accept "the truth." So let's turn the tables and see what the anniversary onslaught says not about us, but about the media.

All this Jack-o-mania is more than wistful nostalgia. Despite the blather about Kennedy being a symbol, a legend, a myth, he has become, sadly, something even more important in America: a commodity, an image that helps sell cars and deliver audiences and ratings points. But that's not all these Kennedy retrospectives sell. With their highly selective, syrup-coated versions of the past, they promote an increasingly conservative political status quo in the present.

How does this happen? First, they urge viewers to misidentify what's important about history and to focus on the most distorting and trivial aspects of our past. I happen to think, for example, that Kennedy's obsession with assassinating Fidel Castro, and the way that obsession granted even more power to an already bloated and lethal CIA (documented in

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detail by Max Holland and David Corn in *The Nation*), is considerably more important than who JFK slept with when he was in his twenties.

What TV elevates as truly revealing—and shocking—are a politician's personal peccadilloes, thereby erasing a broader political history that continues to corrupt our foreign policy. There is a direct line from Kennedy to the CIA's latest exploits in Haiti, but no pundit, and no docudrama, makes that connection. The last spoken line in *JFK: Reckless Youth*, uttered after Joe Sr. groused about how much Jack's first congressional victory cost him, is: "The kid could've been elected for two cents—he's that good."

Such sappy and preposterous lines neutralize how much Joe Sr. really spent in 1960—and not all legitimately, either—because the kid couldn't have been elected for two cents then. It cost a lot more.

The assassination exposés caution viewers to defer to only the most "official" accounts of why and how the President was killed. The media stampede to embrace Gerald Posner's new book, *Case Closed*, which argues that the Warren Commission's conclusions were correct, is particularly disconcerting. Now, Posner may be absolutely right; it's not his findings I necessarily argue with. It's the way he and his book were used, especially by the CBS special *Who Killed JFK: The Final Chapter?*, that is chilling.

Here, every single witness, skeptic, and dissenter from the lone-gunman theory was set up as an unreliable, highly inventive kook—in part because the person was lower middle class, not really a professional or an expert. Funny how this reinforced the arrogant dismissal of working

people during the NAFTA debate as witnesses in their own behalf. As regards the past, and the present, only white-collar experts have access to the facts.

To prove that Posner and the Warren Commission were the only credible sources, CBS indulged in a grotesque, frame-by-frame repetition of the Zapruder film's capture of the moment when Kennedy's head was blown open, to confirm that all shots came from behind. This sickening objectification of Kennedy, transforming him into a crash-test dummy for expert scrutiny, speaks volumes about the media's obsession with violent images, their sadistic voyeurism, and the way they use razzle-dazzle media gadgetry to get us to focus on the small frame instead of the big picture.

The media consensus about why Americans cling to conspiracy theories was summarized by Krauthammer. "Psychologically," people simply can't grant "a single nut" like Oswald the ability to kill somebody of Kennedy's stature; the historical scales just don't match, and people can't stand this asymmetry.

I don't know where you've been, Charles, but some people, "psychologically" speaking, of course, have trouble believing the Government about anything, having lived through some rather stupefying deceptions and Government conspiracies themselves over the past thirty years.

But I think the most insidious effect of all the Jack-o-mania is how it equates inspiring public oratory with political reality, as if the two are identical. Kennedy knew that his speeches, recorded forever on film, were crucial to how his Presidency would be remembered. Boy, was he right. It takes hard work, when listening to his stirring speech about the immorality of segregation, to remember that he dragged his heels on civil rights. What he actually did drops from view, as if his rhetoric were the reality.

This lesson has hardly been lost on Bill Clinton, whose gripping health-care speech masked his sellout to the insurance companies, and whose widely hailed "family-values" speech in Memphis has gotten much more coverage than his complicity in a retrograde crime bill that promises to send more young black men to the slaughterhouse. The same media that loved JFK have, post-NAFTA, swooned over Clinton and will continue, with the help of such mediated history, to celebrate and reward shiny Presidential imagery over more tawdry political substance. ■