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## BOOKS

# Kennedy in power: Restless, relentless

### PRESIDENT KENNEDY

#### Profile of Power

By Richard Reeves

Simon & Schuster. 798 pp. \$30

Reviewed by Judy Bass

**J**ohn F. Kennedy, Richard Reeves tells us, "was an artist who painted with other people's lives."

In *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, Reeves paints his own breathtakingly compelling portrait of a man who "squeezed people like tubes of paint, gently or brutally, and the people around him — family, writers, drivers, ladies-in-waiting — were the indentured inhabitants serving his needs and desires."

Not a very enthusiastic appraisal of Camelot's martyred sovereign, is it? Actually, Reeves' stated purpose is neither to rhapsodize about nor to vilify Kennedy, but instead to straightforwardly portray his actions "at crucial points of his three years in power [1961-63]."

Scholarly in execution and generally detached in tone, the volume relies upon dozens of formerly classified documents, as well as interviews with top Kennedy administration insiders, to give us a backstage look at JFK's handling of landmark events such as the Bay of Pigs debacle, Vietnam, the Cuban missile crisis, and the civil rights struggle led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Reeves, a contributor to the *New Yorker* whose other books include *The Reagan Detour* and *A Ford, Not a Lincoln*, defines Kennedy as "a managerial politician" with pragmatic

national priorities, rather than a visionary statesman known for a thoughtfully honed ideology. Moreover, the author comments at the outset that his viewpoint differs notably from the opinions expressed in two "essential" books by a pair of eminent Kennedy associates: *A Thousand Days*, by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and *Kennedy*, by Theodore Sorensen. Both were published in 1965, just two years after the President's assassination.

According to Reeves, Schlesinger and Sorensen believe that Kennedy

See **JFK** on K4

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JFK from K1  
committed blunders early in his term, diligently learned from them, and subsequently matured as a leader. Reeves, however, disputes such conclusions: "The Kennedy I found certainly did not know what he was doing at the beginning, and in some ways never changed at all, particularly in a certain love for chaos, the kind that kept other men off-balance."

Readers eager for torrid new revelations about Kennedy's private life will be disappointed. Reeves does allude to JFK's chronic, reckless philandering, especially his alleged trysts with Judith Campbell Exner, the reputed mistress of Mafia boss Sam Giancana. Of greater relevance, however, are Reeves' observations on the President's habitual use of medications such as cortisone, which he took for an adrenal gland condition called Addison's Disease, plus the frequent amphetamine and novocaine injections that he received to bolster his energy level and mitigate his agonizing back pain.

"In a lifetime of medical torment," Reeves explains, "Kennedy was more promiscuous with physicians and drugs than he was with women." It is impossible to ascertain exactly to what degree Kennedy's behavior and judgment may have been altered by medications, yet Reeves hints with good reason at their potentially significant long-term impact.

"Cortisone can cause "an enhanced sense of confidence and personal power," the author tells us. The amphetamine mixtures administered to Kennedy by Dr. Max Jacobson also had "dangerous" side-effects, Reeves says. When Robert Kennedy warned his brother about Jacobson's treatments, JFK cavalierly replied that he didn't care because they worked.

Throughout the book, Reeves masterfully establishes an electrifying sense of immediacy by re-creating Kennedy's behind-the-scenes meetings with key staff members and dignitaries. Although the detail-laden narrative proceeds slowly, there are numerous moments of suspense, poignancy and drama.

Take, for example, the riveting section concerning the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. As tensions between America and the Soviet Union escalated, inexorably forcing both countries to the brink of a nuclear holocaust, Kennedy conferred repeatedly with his advisers to weigh all options. Jarred by the horrific absurdity of the whole situation, he declared: "It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to decide to bring an end to civilization."

Kennedy was determined to thwart



Associated Press

**Back pain forced John F. Kennedy to rely on crutches in 1961. Author Richard Reeves raises concerns about the impact of the President's use of amphetamine and novocaine injections to boost his energy and ease his pain.**

the global spread of communism. This objective became the dominant motif of his administration and the bedrock of our foreign policy, particularly in hotspots such as Vietnam and Berlin. Setting official goals was easy, yet bringing them to fruition abroad irked Kennedy to no end whenever the bombastic Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, was involved.

Their 1961 summit meeting in Vienna degenerated into a fiasco, with Khrushchev hectoring the American president, verbally "tying him in knots," as Reeves puts it. "He savaged me," Kennedy ruefully told a reporter soon afterward. For the first time in his young presidency, JFK realized that his glib, ingratiating charm couldn't always be counted on to beguile flinty adversaries such as the Soviet leader. It turned out to be a lesson well-learned, for Kennedy displayed laudable firmness toward Khrushchev when the Cuban missile crisis erupted 16 months later.

Domestically, Kennedy sometimes allowed political considerations to supersede moral imperatives, Reeves

points out. Even after violent racial clashes in Mississippi and Alabama, Kennedy refrained from taking a stand on civil rights, supposedly because he feared that his backing of the cause could derail his 1964 reelection bid. "To govern is to choose," Kennedy said on various occasions, and, in 1963, he finally heeded that dictum by advocating civil rights legislation during a televised speech.

Problems that the public never detected smoldered ominously within the Kennedy White House. A blunt memo written to the President by national security adviser McGeorge Bundy in 1961 chastised Kennedy for his extreme restlessness, a trait that irritated his subordinates: "What follows represents, I think, a fair consensus of what a good many people would tell you. . . . We can't get you to sit still." Elsewhere in the book, Reeves validates Bundy's criticism. The author says that JFK was "addicted to excitement, living his life as if it were a race against boredom."

Reeves' book would have benefited from more of these analytical asides. Reeves deftly presents a staggering amount of factual material, though he seldom pauses at length to put events into perspective for us. Regrettably, the volume's ending seems anticlimactic because Reeves doesn't take stock of Kennedy's place in history or provide a succinct wrap-up of his presidential triumphs and failures.

Unlike *The Last Brother*, a widely disparaged book about Massachusetts Sen. Edward M. Kennedy by Joe McGinniss, *President Kennedy* is scrupulously documented. Ninety pages of detailed footnotes flesh out the text; some of those footnotes are several paragraphs long. "In the instances where someone's thoughts are mentioned," writes Reeves, "it is because they told me what they had been thinking, or they told someone else at the time, or they recorded their thinking in journals or memoranda."

Reeves received limited assistance from Kennedy family members. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis answered fact-checking questions only. President Kennedy's brother-in-law Stephen Smith was interviewed by Reeves twice. Senator Kennedy declined three times to be interviewed.

Perhaps this book is best categorized as a cogent meditation on what it means to be a modern-day president of the United States. Faced with awesome responsibilities, which included guiding America through a nuclear-age Cold War, Kennedy's "most important role was to keep the faith and keep the faith going," Reeves contends.

In that sense, Kennedy succeeded.