

All the presidents

After the sex scandals and the conspiracy theories, BRIAN DOOLEY is relieved to read three surprisingly rational studies of John F Kennedy

With Nigel Hamilton's JFK, Volume One: Reckless Youth (Century £20), we have at last a dispassionate and rational biography of John F Kennedy. After the sex-scandal efforts of the 1970s and 1980s, a more realistic picture of JFK is beginning to emerge. Hamilton hopes his study is "both scholarly and fresh", devoid of the flagrant bias that spoils most research on the Kennedys, and Reckless Youth is remarkable for its clinical analysis of an emotional subject.

Despite a faltering start (when he suggests Rose Kennedy flew to Washington to bury her assassinated son "with thoughts only of what she would wear at the funeral and bringing extra black stockings for her daughters"), Hamilton soon reveals the teenage JFK as a thoroughly normal schoolboy — lazy, spotty and delighting in dirty jokes.

Serious ill-health was a problem throughout Kennedy's (hardly reckless) youth, and at times Hamilton's study reads like a long series of medical bulletins. JFK's long and regular correspondence with his

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friend Lem Billings also provides an excellent history of Kennedy's development from sickly child to war hero. Hamilton draws heavily on the Billings letters, which show the young Kennedy as a cheeky and likeable kid, uncomplaining about his illnesses, cheerfully mischievous at school and genuinely witty.

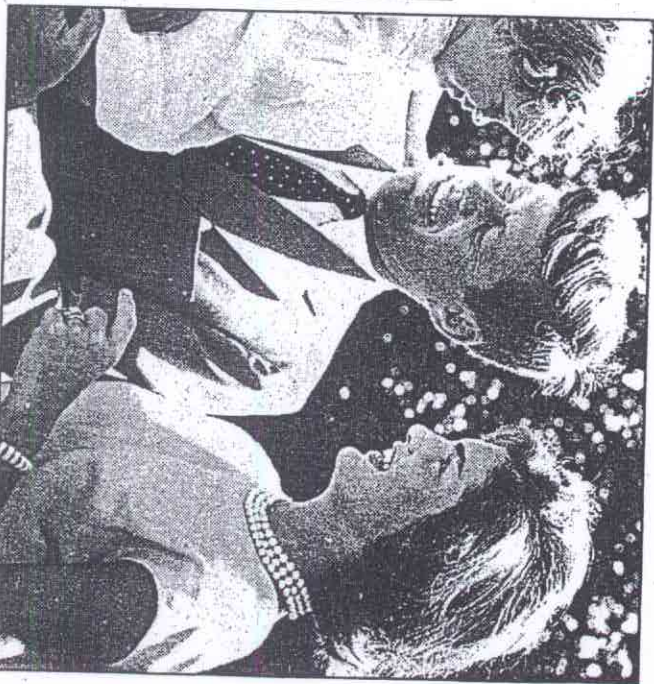
The most impressive section deals with Kennedy's war years. Originally thought too sick for navy combat, he joined the dangerous PT crews operating on lightweight boats in the Pacific, who were poorly equipped and under-trained. JFK's part in the Solomon Islands conflict appears like a scene from *Carry on Sailor*. Known as "crash Kennedy" for his disastrous navigation, he was part of a crack PT team which regularly lost torpedoes, shot at US ships, and attacked Allied aircraft. One night, after posting an almost-blind man as look-out, Kennedy's flimsy boat was rammed by a huge Japanese destroyer. Two of his crew of 13 were killed, but Kennedy led the survivors to safety on a desert island. As Hamilton shows, this was no fake rescue hyped for political currency in later years. Kennedy's efforts in saving the lives of his crew were genuinely heroic, and the incident was the first real indication that JFK possessed extraordinary qualities. Irritatingly, though, Hamilton indulges in psychoanalytical explana-

tions for JFK's personal and political development. At school, for instance, JFK's "disgust at women who wore heavy perfume... spoke volumes. His mother's coldness and preoccupation with jewellery, clothes and grooming gave him a lifelong aversion to such sexless artifice, as he buried his fractured psyche in a lifetime of fruitless womanising, of continual, purgative sexual conquest that would relieve his libido yet never bring him contentment."

Similarly, when the first signs of JFK's political philosophy begin to emerge during his election to Congress in 1946, they are inevitably accredited to his disturbed childhood. His anti-communism, believe it or not, was rooted in his relationship with his "tyrannical, Stalin-esque figure of a father". Desperately short of evidence for this, Hamilton is reduced to pointing out that "Kennedy [Snr] and Stalin even shared the same first name."

Paperback psychology is no substitute for hard political analysis, but it does not ultimately spoil Hamilton's commendable achievement in producing a clear and unemotional biography.

Surprisingly sensible, too, is Martin Smith's JFK: The Second Plot (Mantstream £14.99). This is by far the best conspiracy book to appear to date. Like Hamilton, Smith



Family values: Jack, Jackie and baby Caroline

is not susceptible to some of the prejudices of former assassination buffs. After a competent and incisive account of the main research done on the Dallas murder, Smith offers credible evidence that the CIA agent Oswald was set up by US intelligence to take the responsibility for the hit.

More barny are the shady pictures of bushes and windows, in which photo experts claim to see outlines of possible assassins, including one of what appears to be a smugged toffee, but which in fact features the notorious "badgerman".

It's back down the time tunnel, though, for Robin Cross's JFK: A Hidden Life (Bloomsbury £17.99), which appears to be still stuck in the

Manichean 1960s. The jacket blurb urges that, nearly 30 years after Kennedy's death, "it is time once more to celebrate rather than denigrate the man, as though they were the only choices open to the reader."

A largely uncritical study of Kennedy's life (although it does mention his extramarital affairs), the book shows Kennedy at his photogenic and manipulative best, playing with children, relaxing on his yacht, throwing a baseball — the master of the photo-opportunity.

The glossy text is as stark as the black and white prints, and concludes: "Myths can cut both ways, allowing some to see Kennedy as a hero still, others as a villain." There is no room for grey.