

They Just Don't Get Him

Three decades after J.F.K.'s death, Generation X ponders his mystique

By RICHARD REEVES

SHE WAS THREE YEARS OLD ON NOV. 22, 1963. "I knew it was the most important thing ever," she said to me, recalling the day John F. Kennedy died. "My mother was crying. I had never seen an adult cry." Now a graduate student in government at the University of Texas, she said she often thinks about that day 30 years ago. When I asked her what she thinks about Kennedy now, she said she doesn't really know much about him. Yet she shares with other young people a sense of loss and anger about something they never got to know.

The post-baby boomers, who were born after the 1960 presidential campaign, seem to have no clear picture of the man or his times. Camelot, the myth created by his wife and court after the assassination, means almost nothing to them. The political revisionism that followed, portraying Kennedy as a self-serving cold warrior, means little more to them because they know almost nothing of the history that was being so energetically revised.

The newest Kennedy myth is even further from reality than the first two. Devastated baby boomers and conspiracy peddlers seem to have put young Americans in a mysterious, alluring haze. The question I heard most often at universities was this: "What was it that J. Edgar Hoover had on Kennedy, so that he could never be fired at the FBI?"

When the editors of the *Harvard Crimson* asked me that question, I answered, "In 1960 J. Edgar Hoover was the most admired man in the U.S. He saved us from John Dillinger and Hitler, and now he was rounding up the dirty commies. Kennedy didn't even get 50% of the vote. He would have been nuts to fire Hoover."

The silence that followed was either polite or because they thought I came from another planet. Which of course I did.

In America, a nation that believes it transcends history, each generation can be a world of its own. We each have our own vision of Kennedy. The World War II veterans who were Kennedy's contemporaries. Me, who was in college when he was



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elected. Bill Clinton and the other baby boomers, who were in high school. The kids at Harvard and the University of Texas.

A baby boomer who teaches political science at the Austin campus said in a seminar that she felt she knew almost everything about Kennedy, from the big mistakes in governing to the big womanizing—a word that bespeaks evil to generations sensitive to feminism. And yet when she hears the name or thinks about the man, "I just melt."

That was a brave thing to say in a roomful of presidential scholars. But other men and women in the room nodded, a bit rueful. Many Americans feel that way, I believe, because Kennedy passed the great test of democratic leadership: he brought out the best in most of his people most of the time.

Whatever one thinks of the political record or the political man, John Kennedy was a surpassing cultural figure—an artist, like Picasso, who changed the way people looked at things. Kennedy painted with

words and images and other people's lives, squeezing people and perceptions like tubes of paint, gently or brutally, changing millions of lives. He focused Americans in the directions that truly mattered—toward active citizenship, toward the joy of life itself.

The most important thing about Kennedy was not any great political decision, though he made some, but his own political ambition. He did not wait his turn. He directly challenged the political system he wanted to control, understanding that the most important qualification for the most powerful job in the world was wanting it. After him, no one else wanted to wait either—neither young Negroes in Nashville, Tennessee, nor young charmers in Arkansas—and few institutions were rigid enough or flexible enough to survive. When he was asked early in 1960 why he thought he should be President, he answered, "I look around me at the others in the race, and I say to myself, 'Well, if they think they can do it, why not me? Why not me? That's the answer. And I think it's enough.'"

*Political journalist Richard Reeves recently took part in seminars at several universities in connection with the publication of his book, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*.*

For those who lived during his times, Kennedy seemed to be the beginning of the new, though perhaps he was just the end of the old. The U.S. was beginning to burst its seams economically, technologically, culturally. When Kennedy took office, the American economy was growing at a little more than 2% a year. By the end of 1963, the growth rate was nearly 6%.

He came to office in the days of carbon paper, mimeograph machines and flashbulbs. Three years later, jet airliners, interstate highways, direct long-distance telephone dialing, and Polaroid cameras were speeding up people and life. New things and words were appearing almost every day: ZIP codes, Weight Watchers, Valium, transistors, computers, lasers, the Pill, LSD.

In 1963 *Lawrence of Arabia* won the Academy Award as best film, but another nominated picture seemed to move America more, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, about race and justice and hope in the South. The music of young Americans was changing from perky love songs to stuff of a different romance. *If I Had a Hammer* and *Blowin' in the Wind* were melodic calls for justice and freedom all over this world.

America was rich, and its wealth was shared by many millions. A lot of this was new, and people did not quite know what to do with it or how to act. But the Kennedys would show them! The young and restless rich, well educated and well mannered, gaily presiding over the White House, the world really. Watching the Kennedys was educational, teaching that most American endeavors: self-improvement.

That was the way we were. But why do our children and their children care about all this? The extraordinary thing is not what each of us remembers or believes, but that everyone remembers or cares at all.

"We know all the bad stuff," said one of the Harvard twentysomethings with typical anger. "But Kennedy represents good things that we never got to share. It doesn't seem fair that there was optimism then. He symbolizes idealism and service, an era when people could do things. When things got done."

"Look at MTV and this election," he said. "The slogans they used were Kennedy: 'ROCK THE VOTE!' 'CHOOSE OR LOSE!' We want our Kennedy too." ■



SHAPOTSKY/GETTY

THE PRESIDENCY

by Hugh Sides

A Sly and Wry Humor

AFTER 30 YEARS THE LITERATURE OF JOHN KENNEDY IS DOMINATED BY tortured accounts of assassination conspiracies and an insatiable sexual appetite. Some of these stories may be true. But often lost in this clamor is a calm and just view of the man, flawed, wondering, trying. Above all else there was his humor, the trait that helped lift him on the way up and gave him special luster when he got to the top.

"I don't have any money on me, can you pay?" he asked me one campaign day in 1960 after offering lunch at a Milwaukee counter. O.K., I paid. "Leave a tip," he instructed, grin showing. Ten percent plunked down. Kennedy counted every coin with his forefinger. "Pretty chintzy," he said. "Leave some more." The grin grew, and he was up and on his way to Omaha, trailing a low chuckle.

Once when he was courting delegates in a scruffy hotel, the prospects were lined up and run through his suite. He stuck his head out of a door during a pause. "Just like a whorehouse," he called. "They bring them into the front parlor, send them into the bedroom with me, and they go out the back door. Satisfied, I hope."

After he won the presidency, he calmed down—sort of. He rarely roared with mirth but had a low, dry chuckle and a broad grin. His humor was sly and wry and almost never deserted him, no matter how grave the issue. Talking about the threat of nuclear war and his deep doubts about military technology, he once summed up his notion of the first nuclear exchange: "The Soviets will shoot off their missiles and hit Moscow, and we will respond and take out Miami or Atlanta."

After Bobby had been proclaimed by the media as the second most powerful man in the free world, J.F.K. took a phone call at his desk, listened, muffled the receiver and told a guest, "I am talking to the second most powerful man in the free world. Do you want to tell him anything?" More conversation, and Kennedy broke into laughter. "Bobby wants to know who No. 1 is."

All of us were aware of Kennedy's fascination with women, but when sex surfaced, it seemed more naughty than sinister. One holiday night in Palm Beach he put in a midnight call to a journalist, urged him to rush down to Worth Avenue the next day and do an article on an unknown fashion designer named Lilly Pulitzer, who had come up with a colorful gown for casual wear. "They're tearing them off the rack, they tell me," said Kennedy. "Off the women too."

One sardonic Kennedy scene still intrigues. After the summit meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in 1961, the weary President with an aching back had a few friends in for dinner in the old mansion where he stayed in Palm Beach. Frank Sinatra crooned from records in the background. There were daiquiris and pompano and deep talk about the Soviet menace. Kennedy weighed the Soviet leaders and their diplomats, then suddenly said, "You know that they have an atomic bomb in the attic of the Soviet Union embassy up on 16th Street? If war comes, they are going to trigger it and take out Washington." He had a kind of half-grin on his face. His guests looked incredulous. "That's what they tell me," insisted Kennedy. "The bomb was assembled from parts brought in in the diplomatic pouches. This thing goes up, and we all go." He never stopped grinning. I had always intended to ask him, You were kidding, right? But a lot of other things got in the way, and then came Dallas. ■



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