

# Madonna, Cindy and George 9-14-95

By HOLMAN JENKINS

Once upon a time, U.S. presidents were crusty old men who earned their spurs in one walk of life or another, climbed the greasy poll, built great coalitions out of competing interests. Then President John F. Kennedy inaugurated the era of the chief executive-as-celebrity, somebody almost as good to be photographed with as David Letterman or Charo. John Jr., perhaps sensing that his own presidential hopes depend on it, now seems to want to show that politics can be purely a matter of celebrity. Hence, his new political magazine, *George*.

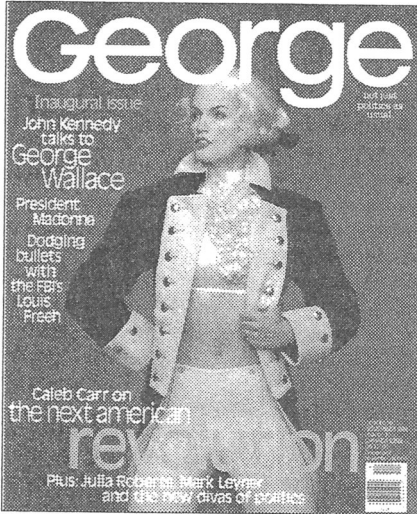
Even the elder Kennedy would not, to the naked eye, have seemed much qualified to be president by the standard of mere accomplishment. He did win a Pulitzer Prize for "Profiles In Courage," but the book's true author is still a matter of speculation. His naval career consisted of, most famously, getting his PT boat cut in half by a Japanese destroyer—a personal Dunkirk that, by dint of the flacks that surrounded him, was magically converted into a searing personal triumph.

He went on to a career in Congress that was distinguished mainly by its lack of distinction. The salient event that won him the Democratic presidential nomination was the vacillation of Adlai Stevenson. And in his razor-thin victory over Richard Nixon, Kennedy's decisive advantage (aside from possible ballot stuffing in Texas and Chicago) was that he looked good on television.

Of course, the country can survive a lot, including a president who is more style than substance. Politics being nine-tenths theater, style can even be a good thing when put in the service of substance. The elder Kennedy understood that the two

were different, however. (As do historians, who've been quietly dismantling his reputation despite the Camelot head wind.)

Judging by *George*, John Jr. doesn't know—or want to believe—there is a difference. If his magazine is saying anything, it's saying to people whose interest is really style that you can clothe yourself



in an illusion of substance, and thereby become even more stylish.

As a marketing concept, *George* seems somewhat paradoxical: People who care about Madonna aren't interested in her thoughts about the presidency; people who care about the presidency aren't interested in Madonna. One is left with the conclusion that the only market for an article about Madonna's thoughts on the presidency is Madonna.

In other words, *George* is a vanity-press vehicle for celebrities who want to see themselves repackaged as intellectuals. This is a heck of a conjuring trick, of

course, but you have to wonder how many noncelebrities are going to shell out to see it repeated bimonthly.

One thing is sure; they won't be paying for the articles. *George* belongs to that class of magazines, like *Vogue* and *GQ*, where the editorial content is an afterthought. Indeed Mr. Kennedy takes it one step beyond. Editorial content is merely a bone he throws to his celebrity subjects, to make them feel better about themselves. Cindy Crawford shows her navel on the cover, and inside she's treated as someone whose opinions are important.

President Kennedy was adept at co-opting intellectuals with a taste of the meretricious glitz of Camelot. John-John has reversed the formula: He's luring showbiz types onto his personal career bandwagon by offering them the lipgloss of substance. You can't argue with 175 pages of ads, but whether the momentum is sustainable once the novelty wears off is an open question.

If *George* survives, it will survive because it does what *Vogue*, *Cosmo* and a bunch of others do—give us lots of pictures of beautiful people in beautiful clothes. In an unforgiving marketplace, marginal advantages and disadvantages matter. Mr. Kennedy's name is a marginal advantage. The fact that Cindy Crawford is talking about politics instead of sex has to be rated a disadvantage.

Rest assured, though, that Mr. Kennedy's future campaign biographies will never fail to list among his achievements "editor of a political magazine"—just as an earlier John F. Kennedy presented himself as a "Pulitzer prize-winning author."

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1255