

Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of how the potent, alluring image of John Kennedy was constructed. The essay begins with an examination of how, even before reaching the White House, Kennedy was able to develop a multi-faceted image as a man of letters (with the publication of *Why England Slept* and *Profiles in Courage*), military hero (through his service in the Navy during the Second World War), precocious politician, erotic symbol and symbol of the family. The importance of image to the outcome of the 1960 presidential campaign, particularly in terms of the television debates with Richard Nixon, is assessed. Kennedy's presidency is examined for the way it reinforced ideas about him that had come to the fore before he became chief executive: his use of the White House to showcase the arts, thereby strengthening his image as a man of letters and cultural refinement; the enhancing of his war-hero status with the release of the Hollywood film *PT-109*; the continued eroticization of his image through his public links with Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly and Anita Ekberg; and the prominence of his wife, siblings, children and parents in reinforcing the image of JFK as a symbol of the family. The impact of the assassination is considered for the way it created the Camelot mythology that came to adorn Kennedy's posthumous reputation. How Kennedy's image was sustained from the time of the assassination to recent years – through film, music, architecture and the visual image – will also be examined.

By the 1980s and 1990s various writers were beginning to attack the rose-tinted view of John F. Kennedy that had prevailed since his assassination in 1963. Garry Wills, Thomas Paterson, Thomas Reeves and Seymour Hersh were amongst those who castigated Kennedy for his character (or lack of it), his aggressive foreign policy and the elephantine pace at which he had promoted civil-rights reform. As historians cast an increasingly sceptical eye over JFK, the American people – by contrast – continued to regard the slain president with admiration. In a 1983 poll, they judged Kennedy to have been the greatest of all presidents since and including Franklin Roosevelt (the leader who is regarded by most historians as the one indisputably great president of the past century). Subsequent public

opinion polls have revealed the reverence most Americans continue to feel for JFK.¹

The chasm which has emerged between how Kennedy is viewed by historians on the one hand and by the American people on the other raises the issue of how to account for this disparity. The most plausible explanation is the power of the Kennedy image – its enduring capacity to seduce and inspire the American people. As it is essential to any explanation of the gap between scholarly and public perceptions of Kennedy, the question of his image is then an intrinsically important one; and yet scholarly treatments of the subject have been few and far between. Thomas Brown's *JFK: History of an Image* (1988) focused on Kennedy historiography as it had developed since the assassination. *The Kennedy Obsession* (1997), a study by English professor John Hellman, used mostly literary sources to chart the development of JFK's image, whilst in 2003 art historian David Lubin provided a lively analysis of iconic photographs of JFK in *Shooting Kennedy*. Some useful work has been done, therefore, but essentially the issue of the Kennedy image remains a historiographical gap that needs plugging, especially when one considers the plethora of scholarship that has been produced on other aspects of the Kennedy record, such as his foreign policy; and that conviction represents the rationale behind this article.²

This article will examine the *process* by which Kennedy came to develop such a potent image, even before he became president, and it will consider how that image developed during his time in the White House. It will assess the impact of the assassination on JFK's reputation. This article will also consider the extent to which the image of Kennedy corresponded to the reality of his life and political career, and the question of whether his preoccupation with image was a major shortcoming. Finally, this article will frame an answer to the question of how one accounts for the extraordinary appeal of John Kennedy.

In his early twenties a key component of the Kennedy image was established, and that was the idea that he was a cultured man, a man of letters. Finishing up his undergraduate degree at Harvard in 1940, he decided to write his dissertation on the British appeasement of Hitler. With his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, Roosevelt's ambassador to Britain

¹ Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston, 1982); *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–1963*, ed. Thomas G. Paterson (New York, 1989); Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (Rocklin, Calif., 1992 paperback edn.) [hereafter Reeves, *A Question of Character*]; Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston, 1997); Lydia Saad, 'Kennedy Still Highest-Rated Modern President, Nixon Lowest', Gallup (6 Dec. 2010) [accessed on 29 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/145064/kennedy-highest-rated-modern-president-nixon-lowest.aspx>>].

² See Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image* (Bloomington, 1988); John Hellman, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York, 1997); David M. Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (Berkeley, 2003). See also Jon Roper, *The American Presidents: Heroic Leadership from Kennedy to Clinton* (Edinburgh, 2000), for how JFK's heroic image created a standard his successors struggled to match.

at that time, he knew he would have access to helpful primary-source materials. The thesis was well received at Harvard. With the help of family friend and *New York Times* journalist Arthur Krock, JFK secured an agent and then a willing publisher, and his father persuaded media mogul Henry R. Luce to write the foreword. At the age of twenty-three, therefore, Kennedy's first book, *Why England Slept*, was published. His study highlighted the importance of military preparedness for democracies when dealing with aggressive dictators. It was a critique of British foreign policy, but also a warning to an America that remained on the sidelines of the Second World War.³

The book was energetically promoted. It received favourable reviews from the *Boston Herald*, *New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. Initial sales were robust, though the rumour persists that this was due in part to Joseph Kennedy surreptitiously buying more than 30,000 copies of the book and storing them in his Hyannis Port home. Nevertheless by spring 1941 the book had sold 80,000 copies in America and Britain. *Why England Slept* represented the first milestone on the road to the presidency for Kennedy, for it would ultimately help create the idea that this was no ordinary politician but one who was committed to a life of the mind.⁴

That reputation was enlarged sixteen years later when as a United States senator Kennedy published his second book, *Profiles in Courage*, which examined the roles played by a number of American politicians, from John Quincy Adams to Robert Taft, whom Kennedy felt had shown commendable courage and independence in taking a stand against their own party or region. Though columnist Drew Pearson and others queried whether Kennedy was chiefly responsible for writing the book, the overall effect of *Profiles in Courage* was to bolster Kennedy's reputation as a man of letters. A national bestseller, it elicited praise from the reviewers. 'It is refreshing and enlightening', the *New York Times* declared, 'to have a first-rate politician write a thoughtful and persuasive book about political integrity.' JFK went on to win a Pulitzer Prize for *Profiles in Courage*.⁵

The second element of the Kennedy image to be established was the notion that he was a military hero. Enlisting in the Navy during the Second World War, he was made skipper of a motor torpedo boat, *PT-109*. In the early hours of 2 August 1943 a Japanese destroyer rammed Kennedy's boat. Thereafter, he worked courageously to assist his crew. He swam for hours towing a crewman; he also swam several miles with a pistol and lantern in an attempt to find and get help from

³ Nigel Hamilton, *JFK: Reckless Youth* (New York, 1992 paperback edn.) [hereafter Hamilton, *JFK*], pp. 268–338 passim; oral history of Henry R. Luce, pp. 1–3, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts; John F. Kennedy, *Why England Slept*, 2nd edn. (New York, 1961).

⁴ Reeves, *A Question of Character*, p. 50.

⁵ John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York, 1956); Reeves, *A Question of Character*, p. 128.

another PT boat. For his valiant efforts to save his crew, JFK received the Navy and Marine Corps medal.⁶

Kennedy's exploits in the Pacific became a major news story. '[Joe] Kennedy's son saves 10 in Pacific', proclaimed the *Boston Globe*, whilst the *New York Times* reported that 'Kennedy's son is hero in Pacific as destroyer splits his PT boat'. Pulitzer-Prize-winning author John Hersey penned a panegyric on the episode for the *New Yorker*, which was abbreviated and reprinted for the *Reader's Digest*. In Kennedy's congressional campaign in 1946, hundreds of thousands of copies of Hersey's *Reader's Digest* article were distributed. From the beginning of his political career, Kennedy's status as a military hero was an important part of his appeal. It would continue to be so, even after his death. In 2000 a GI Joe doll of Kennedy in his PT uniform was put on the commercial market.⁷

Before he had even entered politics, then, Kennedy had already developed a usefully dual image as both man of letters and man of action. During the late 1940s and 1950s, the notion of Kennedy as a precocious political talent was added to those earlier perceptions of him. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1946, whilst still in his twenties, he became a senator for Massachusetts, and in 1956 very nearly the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, whilst in his thirties. By winning the 1960 presidential election, he became the youngest elected president in American history. Particularly after his 1952 Senate victory, Kennedy was seen as a political star in the making; and coverage of him in the press became correspondingly vast.⁸

Another aspect of Kennedy's emerging image was the way he came to symbolize the family. This seems paradoxical given his philandering, which continued even after his 1953 marriage to Jacqueline Bouvier. Knowledge of his hedonistic lifestyle, however, did not become widespread until the 1970s, because prior to that point the press was far less prurient than it would subsequently become. As far as the American people were concerned, Kennedy was a credible symbol of family life.⁹

This aspect of Kennedy's image had its origins in the late 1930s during his father's ambassadorship in Britain. Early press coverage put him in the context of his large and interesting family. Then in the 1950s the media often discussed his relationship with his wife, parents, siblings or children. Likewise, he was frequently photographed in a familial setting. A 21 April 1958 *Life* magazine cover showed Kennedy sitting

⁶ Hamilton, *JFK*, pp. 563–602, 653.

⁷ Robert Dallek, *John F. Kennedy: An Unfinished Life* (2003, paperback edn.), p. 98; Hamilton, *JFK*, pp. 652–4, 755; Leslie Gevirtz, 'GI Joe JFK Doll Unveiled', ABC News, 30 Aug. 2000 [accessed on 29 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=95956&page=1>>].

⁸ For excellent coverage of JFK's pre-presidential career, see Herbert S. Parmet, *Jack: The Struggles of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1980).

⁹ 'Scandals: J.F.K. and the Mobsters' Moll', *Time*, 29 Dec. 1975 [accessed on 6 Oct. 2011 at <<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,945439,00.html>>]; Judith Exner, as told to Ovid Demaris, *My Story* (New York, 1977).

with Jackie and their baby Caroline in the baby's bedroom. In August 1959 *Life* again put Jack and Jackie on its cover with the caption: 'Jackie Kennedy: A Front Runner's Appealing Wife'. By the summer of 1960, with that year's presidential campaign well under way, *Time* magazine put JFK on its cover with Jackie and his parents behind him, with pictures on the walls of his siblings (including Robert, his campaign manager), and his maternal grandfather, who had been a notable Massachusetts politician. John Kennedy's bid for the presidency, *Time's* cover implied, could be understood only by reference to the family that had propelled it.¹⁰

Even before he was president, JFK became a personification of family values. Of course there was a certain media focus with other politicians on their relationships with their wives, but not usually with their parents or siblings. It was the familial contextualization of JFK that would ultimately lead to the Kennedys being regarded as America's royal family. A key aspect of royalty is that, unlike politicians, they are always understood in terms of their position within a family. Thus it was with John Kennedy. It might seem an extravagant claim but it is nevertheless a defensible one that more than any other politician in American history Kennedy symbolized the family.

At the same time that JFK became a familial symbol, he became a sex symbol too. A good-looking, well-groomed and (in political terms) young man, it was not difficult in the 1950s for Kennedy and his advisers to use his physical attractiveness to raise his profile and broaden his appeal. The use of glamour for self-promotion was second nature to Kennedy in part because of his and his family's ties to Hollywood. Joe Kennedy had been a major Hollywood producer in the 1920s. In the 1940s JFK spent a good deal of time in California, and had an affair with the actress Gene Tierney. By the time he ran for president he was associating with Frank Sinatra and his cronies. Immersed in the world of Hollywood, Kennedy paid careful attention to matters such as his own sense of fashion and the styling of his hair. Long before the time when later presidents took professional advice on these sorts of cosmetic issues, JFK was his own, one-man image guru.¹¹

What added to Kennedy's glamour was his marriage in 1953 to the elegant, stylish Jacqueline Bouvier. Even before their marriage, the

¹⁰ See the images of these covers at <<http://www.store.jfklibrary.org/Original-LIFE-Magazine-The-Kennedy-Family/PADCABJKNCKLJHH/product>>; <<http://www.lifemagazineconnection.com/images/8-24-59.jpg>>; <http://img.timeinc.net/time/magazine/archive/covers/1960/1101600711_400.jpg> [all accessed on 16 Sept. 2011].

¹¹ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys: An American Saga* (New York, 1987 paperback edn.), pp. 339–418; Hamilton, *JFK*, pp. 777–8; Sammy Davis Jr. with Jane and Burt Boyar, *Why Me? The Autobiography of Sammy Davis Jr.* (1989), pp. 98–9; oral history of Princess Grace of Monaco, p. 4, Kennedy Library [accessed on 29 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-GDM-01.aspx>>].

young couple generated publicity. *Life* magazine put on its front cover in July 1953 a picture of them sailing on a boat, with the caption: ‘Senator Kennedy Goes A-Courting’. The picture conveyed a sense of upper-class glamour and sophistication, and appealed to Americans in an aspirational sense.¹²

Before running for the presidency, therefore, John Kennedy had developed a potently alluring, multi-faceted image as a war hero, man of letters, precocious politician, family symbol and sex symbol. The politician whose image has sparked the greatest grassroots excitement in the United States in recent decades has been Barack Obama. It does provide a sense of how powerful Kennedy’s image was when one considers that, unlike JFK, Obama in 2008 was not a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, had not been decorated for wartime service and had less resonance as a familial symbol.

In his 1960 presidential campaign against Republican rival Richard Nixon, Kennedy presented a heroic image of himself and claimed that he and the American people would join together in an important mission of national self-renewal. The reasons for JFK’s triumph over Nixon have long been debated. Factors such as the recession in 1960, the support Kennedy received from African Americans, and the contrasting campaigning strategies employed by Kennedy and Nixon have been cited. But it seems probable that the four Nixon–Kennedy television debates, and particularly the first of them, were of decisive importance to the outcome of the election. A majority of those who listened to the first debate on radio believed it to be evenly matched, whilst most Americans who watched it on television thought Kennedy had triumphed – and that said everything about the power of the visual image. Nixon’s voice was more resonant and sonorous than Kennedy’s, and that to some degree accounts for the way the radio audience perceived the debate. On television, however, Kennedy appeared more attractive and more impressive. JFK’s dark-grey suit contrasted sharply with the background of the television studio, whereas Nixon’s light-grey suit blended into it. The ‘lazy shave’ powder used by Nixon to conceal his beard became slightly streaked by sweat under the television lights. Moreover, Nixon, who ordinarily enjoyed good health, appeared emaciated, recovering as he then was from an infected knee. Kennedy, by contrast, who had often been ill, looked tanned, calm and a picture of health. In terms of the image projected, Nixon was no match for Kennedy. The impact of this on the polls was significant. Before the debate, the candidates had been neck and neck, with Nixon on 47 per cent and JFK on 46 per cent in a 14 September Gallup poll. In the Gallup poll immediately following the debate, 49 per cent backed Kennedy, with Nixon trailing on 46 per cent. Furthermore, 43 per cent

¹² See this image at <http://www.lifemagazineconnection.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=36_58&products_id=963> [accessed on 16 Sept. 2011].

of Americans thought Kennedy had won the first debate whilst only 23 per cent believed that Nixon had triumphed.¹³

Kennedy was able to use rhetoric as well as the visual image to connect with the American people in the 1960 presidential campaign. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention in Los Angeles on 15 July 1960, he framed his quest for the White House in historical and mythical terms. 'I stand here tonight facing west,' he declared,

on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind us, the pioneers gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build our new West. They were not the captives of their own doubts . . . They were determined to make the new world strong and free . . . and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960's, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfulfilled hopes and unfulfilled threats.

What was required to meet these challenges of the 1960s, he argued, was 'leadership, not salesmanship. And the only valid test of leadership is the ability to lead, and lead vigorously.' Kennedy implied that, together, he and the American people should conjoin on a special mission of national self-renewal.¹⁴

In his inaugural address on 20 January 1961, JFK again described the 1960s as a period of acute challenge that would require an exceptional brand of leadership that he could provide, and self-sacrifice that the American people would have to be prepared to make. 'In the long history of the world,' asserted Kennedy in Churchillian terms, 'only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility – I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation.'¹⁵

Kennedy had not actually written these and other dazzling speeches, though he did often edit them. They were largely the handiwork of long-serving aide Theodore Sorensen, and a few other talented word-smiths such as Richard Goodwin. Sorensen would go on to serve as Kennedy's main speech writer during his presidency, crafting such key addresses as the one JFK delivered on 22 October 1962 in the midst of the Cuban missile crisis; in this way he played an important role in constructing the rhetorical edifice of the Kennedy image.¹⁶

The impression made by Kennedy in the television debates with Nixon and his use of rhetoric in his quest for the White House, as well

¹³ Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York, 1967 paperback edn.), pp. 323–9; Christopher Matthews, *Kennedy and Nixon: The Rivalry That Shaped Postwar America* (New York, 1996), pp. 144, 155.

¹⁴ John Kennedy, speech, 15 July 1960, microfilm collection, 'The John F. Kennedy 1960 Campaign', Part II: Speeches, Press Conferences, and Debates [materials from the Kennedy Library, Boston], Archives, Queen Mary Library, University of London.

¹⁵ John Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 20 Jan. 1961, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961* (Washington, DC, 1962), pp. 2–3.

¹⁶ Ted Sorensen, *Counselor* (New York, 2008), pp. 130–8.

as his dynamic appearances on the campaign trail, served to vivify the image he had developed in the years before his presidential campaign. This process continued during the ‘thousand days’ or so that Kennedy spent in the White House. His time as president bolstered all the essential elements of his image that had been established before 1960.

The mere fact that on his inauguration he became the youngest ever elected president in American history strengthened Kennedy’s reputation as a precocious politician. Also, the energetic commitment made by the Kennedy White House to the arts reinforced the idea of JFK as a man of letters and cultural refinement that had been created by the publication of *Why England Slept* and *Profiles in Courage*. The key figure in this effort to promote the arts was Jackie Kennedy. Graduating with a degree in French literature, she was a Francophile whose hero and favourite author was André Malraux, whom she arranged to meet when accompanying JFK on a state visit to France in the spring of 1961. She spoke a number of foreign languages and was knowledgeable about the history of art, interior design and classical music. Most of the febrile activity of the Kennedy White House in showcasing the arts was a result of Jackie Kennedy’s cultural interests. JFK, a willing participant in this endeavour, benefited from the reflected glory of Jackie’s efforts.¹⁷

The Kennedy administration’s attempt to depict itself as a high-minded, civilizing force started right from the outset of JFK’s presidency. The poet Robert Frost gave a reading at his inauguration; and at the inaugural gala Leonard Bernstein conducted ‘Fanfare for the Inauguration’, a piece of music he had written specially for JFK.¹⁸

During his presidency, the Kennedy White House continued to celebrate the arts. Most famously, in November 1961 renowned Spanish cellist Pablo Casals played after a state dinner, fifty-seven years after he had last performed at the White House, for President Theodore Roosevelt. On Valentine’s Day in 1962 Jackie Kennedy gave a televised tour of the White House, watched by three out of every four television viewers in the US, in which she described the work she had done to redecorate the White House in a tasteful and historically respectful manner. Two months later JFK honoured forty-nine Nobel Prize winners at a special ceremony. The following month André Malraux was honoured at a White House dinner organized by Jackie Kennedy. In the summer of 1963 JFK established a special Advisory Council on the Arts.¹⁹

¹⁷ Margaret Leslie Davis, ‘First Ladies’, *Vanity Fair*, Nov. 2008, p. 222; C. David Heymann, *A Woman Named Jackie* (New York, 1994 paperback edn.), pp. 33, 79, 197–8. See also Margaret Leslie Davis, *Mona Lisa in Camelot* (New York, 2008) [hereafter Davis, *Mona Lisa in Camelot*].

¹⁸ Jacqueline Trescott, ‘Kennedy Center celebrates 50th anniversary of inauguration with music, dance’, *Washington Post*, 18 Jan. 2011 [accessed online on 16 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/18/AR2011011806259.html>>].

¹⁹ ‘The White House: An Evening with Casals’, *Time*, 24 Nov. 1961 [accessed on 29 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,828830-1,00.html>>]; Davis, *Mona Lisa in Camelot*, pp. 26–7, 29–31, 207–8.

The high point of the administration's promotion of the arts came when the French government agreed to loan the *Mona Lisa* to the National Gallery of Art in Washington and then the Metropolitan Museum in New York. This huge cultural event in America took place only after indefatigable work by Jackie Kennedy behind the scenes to persuade Malraux to arrange the loan. At the unveiling of the *Mona Lisa* in Washington on 8 January 1963 Kennedy gave a speech in which he described the painting as a symbol of western progress and freedom, stating that 'Politics and art, the life of action and the life of thought, the world of events, and the world of imagination, are one.' In the end, more than 1.5 million Americans saw the *Mona Lisa*; and the way this connected JFK with Da Vinci's masterpiece strengthened the idea that Kennedy was a leader who occupied not only the grubby and at times morally compromising terrain of American politics but also the loftier, edifying realm of artistic appreciation and the life of the mind.²⁰

Kennedy's time as president also enhanced his status as a war hero. This was principally because of the release in the summer of 1963 of a Hollywood film, *PT-109*, about the wartime exploits of a young John Kennedy. Produced by Warner Brothers, directed by Leslie Martinson, and starring Cliff Robertson as JFK, the film was not a fortuitous coincidence for a president only months away from what he assumed would be his 1964 re-election campaign. On the contrary Kennedy had been very much involved in the planning of the film. His original choice as to who should portray him on the big screen was the young Warren Beatty. Kennedy no doubt thought that Beatty possessed the requisite glamour for the part. In addition, JFK was aware that Elia Kazan, director of *On the Waterfront*, believed Beatty to be the ideal actor to play him. Having met both men, Kazan observed, 'Warren had everything Jack had. Looks, intelligence, cunning and a commanding eye with the girls.' Kennedy thus instructed his press secretary Pierre Salinger to act as a liaison between himself, Beatty and Warner Brothers. Beatty, however, proved obdurate. Though admiring Kennedy as a politician, he thought – with a shrewd perspicacity – that the script was weak. Believing he would be unable to refuse the project if he actually met Kennedy, he declined a request from Jack Warner to fly to Washington to discuss the film with the president.²¹

Without Beatty's involvement, the making of the film *PT-109* proceeded. In the end, its box-office performance disappointed. Nevertheless, the Americans who did see the movie were reminded of their president's wartime service. The script for the film suggested that this

²⁰ Davis, 'First Ladies', pp. 226–35; *Mona Lisa Timeline* [accessed on 29 Sept. 2011 at <http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/mona_lisa/mlevel_1mtimeline.html>].

²¹ BID Online material on *PT 109* (1963), British Film Institute (BFI), London; David Thomson, *Warren Beatty: A Life and a Story* (1987), pp. 193–4; John Parker, *Warren Beatty: The Last Great Lover of Hollywood* (1993), pp. 88–9.

was a young man whose leadership qualities were so marked, and his altruism so considerable, that this was clearly a president in the making. When asked at one point in the film whether he thought his crew would be able to do a good job, Cliff Robertson's JFK replies, 'If we do a good job for them.'²²

A number of critics assessed *PT-109* in a way that bolstered Kennedy's reputation as a war hero. *Variety* praised Cliff Robertson for 'a warm and straightforward portrait of a dedicated, courageous patriot who is all business and determination in a crisis but has a playful streak in lighter moments.' The *Hollywood Reporter* said the film was about, 'One of the most inspiring acts of heroism in World War II', and lauded it as 'a war drama of pathos, humor, action and inspiration'. Hence the movie *PT-109* served as a reminder to Americans that their president was a credible and courageous military hero.²³

Kennedy's erotic appeal was also magnified during his time in the White House. In part this was because he was linked to the great sex symbols of the age. In May 1961 former Hollywood actress and Princess of Monaco Grace Kelly (and her husband) visited Jack and Jackie Kennedy at the White House. Newsreel footage and press photographs showed Kelly, clad in an elegant Givenchy dress, listening attentively to and looking dreamily at JFK. She would later say, 'he was almost too good to be true – he was just like the All-American boy, handsome, a fighter, witty, full of charm.'²⁴

A year later, at a Democratic Party fundraiser and his forty-fifth birthday celebration at New York's Madison Square Garden, Marilyn Monroe serenaded JFK with her famously sensuous rendition of 'Happy Birthday'. This has become one of the great iconic moments in the history of twentieth-century popular culture. The event was televised at the time; and it has played an important part in shaping recent perceptions of Kennedy as many millions of people have watched the footage of Monroe singing 'Happy Birthday' on YouTube.²⁵

Deepening the retrospective resonance of this episode is the knowledge that there was a personal dimension to Monroe's public display of breathless affection for the president – namely, that they were sexual partners. It has been difficult for Marilyn Monroe biographers to chart the affair with precision. It certainly took place during the Kennedy

²² Nicholas J. Cull, 'Anatomy of a Shipwreck: Warner Bros., The White House, and the Celluloid Sinking of *PT 109*', in *Hollywood and the American Historical Film*, ed. J. E. Smyth (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 156; 'Mister Kennedy', *Time*, 28 June 1963, BFI microjacket on *PT 109* (USA, 1963).

²³ *Variety* review of *PT 109*, 20 March 1963 (from the BFI); *Hollywood Reporter* review of *PT 109*, 14 March 1963, p. 3.

²⁴ Image of Princess Grace with John F. Kennedy [accessed on 20 Sept. 2011 at <http://www.upi.com/topic/Grace_Kelly/photos/pg-6/>]; oral history of Princess Grace of Monaco, p. 2 [accessed on 20 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-GDM-01.aspx>>].

²⁵ Happy Birthday, Mr. President, You Tube [accessed on 20 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4SLSISmW74>>].

presidency, and it may have begun as early as the 1950s. The recollections of her associates make clear the affair did take place.²⁶

Kennedy was linked with another of the great sex symbols of the early 1960s, Anita Ekberg, when in January 1963 *Esquire* magazine decided to put on its front cover a picture of the voluptuous Swedish actress in the famous Trevi Fountain scene from Federico Fellini's 1960 film *La Dolce Vita* alongside a picture of a dripping-wet, bare-chested Kennedy. The picture was arranged so that it appeared Ekberg was gazing approvingly, even lasciviously, at JFK.²⁷

Augmenting Kennedy's sex appeal – and accentuating the masculinization of his image that his war-hero status had helped bring about – was the way he became associated in the public mind with the James Bond character. In March 1961 *Life* magazine published a list of Kennedy's top ten books, which included Ian Fleming's *From Russia with Love*. Indeed Fleming was Kennedy's favourite author. When he met Fleming during the 1960 campaign he solicited his advice on a sensitive national security issue: how best to handle Fidel Castro's Cuba. Fleming recommended a covert campaign to damage Castro's reputation by ridiculing him. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Fleming exerted at least a slight influence on Kennedy's thinking, for in November 1961 JFK launched a top-secret CIA programme, Operation Mongoose, to knock Castro off his stride. Reciprocally, Kennedy had an influence on Fleming's depiction of Bond; in Bond's modest library, one of the books he owns is Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*.²⁸

In May 1963 the first Bond film, *Dr No*, was released in the United States, with Sean Connery in the lead. Coming only months after the Cuban missile crisis, the plot of *Dr No* appeared to overlap with Kennedy's own presidential experiences because, as one critic has observed, it is about 'a malevolent island despot and secret missile base in the Caribbean'. This linked Kennedy to Bond, but that linkage had already been established as JFK's penchant for Fleming's British spy was widely known and frequently commented upon by the press, and would continue to be discussed during the last six months of his life. A September 1963 edition of the *New Yorker*, for example, included a cartoon of the Kennedy White House, late at night, with a light still on. It seemed that JFK was up late, dealing with a major crisis. 'Then again,' the caption read, 'it may merely be the new Ian Fleming [novel].'

²⁶ Sarah Churchwell, *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* (2004), pp. 291–2; Anthony Summers, *Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe* (London, 2000 paperback edn.), pp. 289–90.

²⁷ *Esquire* magazine cover, January 1963 [accessed on 20 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.esquire.com/cover-detail?year=1963&month=1>>].

²⁸ J. Hoberman, 'When Dr. No Met Dr. Strangelove', *Sight and Sound*, iii (1993), 18 [hereafter Hoberman, 'When Dr No Met Dr Strangelove']; Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960–1963* (New York, 1991), pp. 134–5; James G. Hershberg, 'Before "The Missiles of October": Did Kennedy Plan a Military Strike on Cuba?', *Diplomatic History*, xiv (1990), 163–98; Kingsley Amis, *The James Bond Dossier* (1965), p. 37.

The association in the public mind between Kennedy and Bond linked the president with a confident sexuality and a decisive brand of decision-making, and contributed to the masculinization of his image that his ties to the likes of Grace Kelly, Marilyn Monroe and Anita Ekberg – as well as his war-hero status – had brought about.²⁹

JFK's friendship with Frank Sinatra further masculinized the Kennedy image. Crooner, actor and renowned tough guy, Sinatra had publicly backed Kennedy in 1960, even providing the theme tune for the campaign. A reworking of an earlier Sinatra song, 'High Hopes' proclaimed that 'Jack's the nation's favorite guy' and urged everyone to 'Come and vote for Kennedy'. Sinatra helped organize the inaugural-evening gala, which he did by recruiting a host of major stars. When he sang himself at the inaugural gala, Sinatra's words emphasized Kennedy's erotic magnetism:

That ol' Jack magic had them in his spell,
That old Jack magic that he weaved so well,
The women swooned, and seems a lot of men did, too,
He worked a little like I used to do.

Kennedy remained close to Sinatra until 1962 when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover warned him that Sinatra's ties to the mob could compromise his presidency. But whilst it lasted the friendship with Sinatra infused Kennedy's persona with a heightened sense of machismo.³⁰

What is important is not just that this eroticized, masculinized image of Kennedy increased his appeal to sections of the public, but also that it had a political utility related to the ideological inferences that were made on the basis of his persona. The standard attack by Republicans on Democrats in recent decades has been that they are 'soft', that they suffer from a type of machismo deficit. In the Kennedy years the usual GOP accusation was that the Democrats were 'soft' on communism. Later this critique would be broadened so as to include the allegation that Democrats were 'soft' on crime and on welfare recipients. This line of Republican attack helps explain why many of the Democrats who have been successful, notably Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton, have had markedly masculinized personalities. It is interesting to note, for example, that Clinton has been the one Democrat in recent decades whom the American people trusted more than the Republicans when it came to tackling crime. Conversely, those Democratic candidates whose personalities did not so easily deflect the claim that they were somehow 'soft' – think Adlai Stevenson, George McGovern and Michael Dukakis – paid the price at the ballot box. With Kennedy, the

²⁹ Hoberman, 'When Dr No Met Dr Strangelove', p. 18; cartoon, *New Yorker*, 21 Sept. 1963 [displayed at the Bond exhibition, Imperial War Museum, London; seen on 1 June 2008].

³⁰ Todd S. Purdum, 'From That Day Forth', *Vanity Fair*, no. 606, February 2011, pp. 97–8, 104, 109; 'High Hopes' Lyrics, 1960 [accessed on 28 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/JFK-Miscellaneous-Information/High-Hopes.aspx>>].

political value of his sex-symbol status and perceived machismo was that it prevented his Republican adversaries from being able to make convincingly the accusation that he was 'soft' – and particularly that he was 'soft' on communism.³¹

The presidency sustained and enhanced JFK's status not only as a sex symbol but as a familial symbol too. The press focused not only on JFK but also – as probably the most beautiful, glamorous First Lady there had ever been – on Jackie Kennedy. JFK's brothers came under the spotlight too. Robert Kennedy, as attorney general, emerged as the most influential presidential adviser – and, truth be told, the second most powerful man in America. Unsurprisingly, his role, and his relationship with JFK, received a lot of press attention. The youngest brother, Edward Kennedy, became a major figure as well when in 1962 he was elected to Congress to fill the president's old Senate seat. JFK's parents, sisters and children were also much discussed by the media. There had, in fact, never been a presidential family that had so fascinated the press and the American people.³²

Kennedy's time in the White House thus enhanced his multi-faceted, pre-presidential image as man of letters, war hero, gifted politician, sex symbol and familial symbol. This dazzling image was projected through the use of an incipient form of media management and 'spin'. Kennedy was obsessed with how the press reported on him, spending a sizeable chunk of every day devouring the major newspapers. A journalist reporting on Kennedy with anything less than gleeful admiration would invariably find himself or herself cold-shouldered. That is precisely what happened to Ben Bradlee, who was ostracized for months after making some mildly critical comments in a magazine article. The lesson Bradlee drew from the experience – and it was precisely the one Kennedy had intended him to learn – was that interviews with and access to the president would be granted only if favourable coverage was forthcoming.³³

Those polished live televised press conferences, for which Kennedy was so praised, were the result of assiduous preparation. Aide Pierre Salinger would talk to the assembled journalists long before the press conference was due to begin. He would ascertain the issues they were most interested in and the questions they intended to ask, relay this back to JFK, who (with his advisers) would formulate appropriate answers. Journalists were not naive about how Kennedy was attempting to influence media coverage, and some accused him of press management – a charge he sought to refute. Despite these criticisms, Kennedy's

³¹ David B. Holian, 'He's Stealing My Issues! Clinton's Crime Rhetoric and the Dynamics of Issue Ownership', *Political Behavior*, xxvi (2004), 95–124.

³² See, for example, Richard Avedon, 'An Informal Visit with Our New First Family', *Look*, 28 Feb. 1961, pp. 100–6; 'Family Thanksgiving', *Time*, 1 Dec. 1961, p. 12.

³³ Oral history of Walt W. Rostow, p. 154, Kennedy Library; Mark J. White, *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (Basingstoke, 1996) [hereafter White, *Cuban Missile Crisis*], p. 32; Benjamin C. Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy* (New York, 1976), p. 108.

slick, astute handling of the media played an important role in ensuring that the seductive image he projected was not besmirched by excessively hostile press coverage.³⁴

What may well be the most famous murder in history ended the presidency of John Kennedy on 22 November 1963. There was a macabre appropriateness to the fact that even the death of the first truly television president had been filmed – by Dallas dressmaker Abraham Zapruder, whose footage has been scrutinized ever since by both conspiracy theorists and supporters of the Warren Commission. Though Kennedy's life and presidency were over, the image would endure.

How it endured was something that was of particular concern to Jackie Kennedy. Even amidst the trauma and grief of the days following the assassination, she worried that historians – ‘bitter, old men’, as she described them – would judge her late husband uncharitably. Hence she resolved to shape how JFK was remembered by granting a *Life* magazine interview to Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Theodore White. In the interview that took place only a week after the tragic events in Dallas, she told White that JFK was a fan of the Alan Jay Lerner–Frederick Loewe musical *Camelot* and that he liked to listen to a recording of it late at night. One line, in particular – she said – was meaningful to him: ‘Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.’ At the end of the interview White quickly wrote the article, Jackie Kennedy edited it, and he phoned it in to his editors at *Life* magazine. When one of those editors suggested that the article made too much of the Camelot theme, Jackie Kennedy, who was in the room with White, shook her head to indicate that she wanted the Camelot theme to remain salient. ‘I was her instrument in labeling the [Kennedy] myth’, White ruefully acknowledged in later years. Historian Stephen Ambrose said of that Jackie Kennedy interview with White that ‘She certainly wanted to take control of history, and in many ways she managed to do so.’³⁵

By implanting the idea deep within the American psyche that JFK's presidency brought to mind the Arthurian legend, Jackie Kennedy had ensured that future attempts (particularly by the American people) to interpret the Kennedy historical record dispassionately would be thwarted by the powerful mythology that now adorned JFK's reputation. With the collective sense of grief felt by millions of Americans in the wake of the assassination, it was inevitable that Kennedy would come to be viewed as a martyr, a fallen hero. But the infusing of that sense of tragedy with the Camelot mythology meant that it was even

³⁴ White, *Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 14–15; Arthur Krock, ‘Mr. Kennedy's Management of the News’, *Fortune*, March 1963, pp. 82, 199–202.

³⁵ Nigel Hamilton, ‘The Rise and Fall of Camelot’, *New England Journal of History*, lii (1995), 91–108; Susan Baer, ‘The Mystique of Camelot’, *Baltimore Sun*, 27 May 1995, <http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-05-27/features/1995147124_1_jacqueline-kennedy-camelot-kennedy-years> [accessed on 25 January > 2013].

more the case than it would have otherwise been that millions of Americans simply accepted that Kennedy and his advisers, like King Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable, had provided a remarkable, inspiring brand of leadership.

The early historical literature solidified this ‘Camelot’ view of Kennedy. Distinguished historian and Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, and JFK’s speechwriter Theodore Sorensen burned the midnight oil throughout 1964 and 1965 to produce their ‘instant’ histories of the Kennedy years. They were both fervent admirers of JFK. So in terms of their basic interpretation of the Kennedy presidency they were in agreement. They were also competitive: at one point Sorensen urged Schlesinger to write more slowly so that his own book could be published first. The Kennedy family was deeply involved in both undertakings. With Schlesinger’s book, for example, the author submitted it to both Jackie and Bobby Kennedy for corrections. Amongst other things, Schlesinger agreed to perpetuate the untruth that JFK had not been afflicted by Addison’s disease. Sorensen’s *Kennedy* and Schlesinger’s *A Thousand Days* were published in 1965. Both sold well, especially Sorensen’s biography.³⁶

These books essentially confirmed the claim made by Jackie Kennedy in her interview with Theodore White that JFK had been an outstanding president. Astonishingly, Sorensen argued that Kennedy should not be rated behind any twentieth-century president, including Franklin Roosevelt, the man who had met the two greatest challenges of the twentieth century posed by the Great Depression and the rise of fascism. Quite simply, Schlesinger and Sorensen exaggerated Kennedy’s accomplishments. To be sure, there were achievements of importance – defusing the 1961 Berlin crisis and the Cuban missile crisis, and putting civil rights firmly on the national agenda in 1963. However, the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba had been a calamity; Kennedy had massively increased US involvement in Vietnam; he had escalated the arms race by instigating the largest peacetime military build-up in US history (up to that point) at a time when the United States enjoyed a huge advantage over the Soviet Union in nuclear missiles, and he had failed to get passed in Congress most of what he regarded as his key pieces of legislation. His overall record, then, was mixed. The writings of Schlesinger and Sorensen, however, militated against this sort of nuanced appraisal of Kennedy. In this way, they sustained Kennedy’s post-assassination, Camelot image.³⁷

Not only did the post-1963 image of JFK inflate his achievements, it also skewed understanding of the sort of leader he had been. After the assassination there was a collective desire to remember JFK well – to see him as a principled president rather than as just another pragmatic

³⁶ Hamilton, ‘The Rise and Fall of Camelot’, 91–108.

³⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965); Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965).

politician. Hence he was invariably depicted as a moralistic liberal fighting for social justice at home and peace overseas, rather than what he in fact was, which was a cautious, centrist Democrat. Indeed this might well be the most pervasive misconception of Kennedy since his assassination, for JFK's attitude towards the liberal wing of the Democratic Party was akin to Bill Clinton's 'New Democrat' outlook three decades later. Before he was president, Kennedy had frankly revealed: 'I'm not a liberal . . . I'm not comfortable with those people.' As president, he appointed a number of Republicans to important positions, such as C. Douglas Dillon as secretary of the treasury and John McCone as director of the CIA. Prominent liberals were often given peripheral positions in his administration. Though he did promote some liberal reforms at home, it took him two and a half years to introduce major civil-rights legislation – and in terms of foreign and defence policy, he prosecuted a secret war against Fidel Castro, deepened US involvement in Vietnam and presided over a huge military build-up. His two political heroes were conservatives: Winston Churchill and Senator Robert Taft. Tactically, he believed that liberals were impractical and naive and that the essential thing for a Democrat to do was to occupy the political centre to win support from moderates and even some conservatives. Essentially, he invented the Third Way a quarter-century before Bill Clinton appeared to do so.³⁸

That reality, however, did not fit easily with the image of Kennedy (which was formed in the wake of his assassination) as a principled leader who had not made the sorts of compromises that lesser politicians tended to make. Post-assassination portrayals of JFK thus glossed over the inconvenient truth about his ideological fudges and inconsistencies by depicting him as a quintessential liberal.

One way this was done was by linking him explicitly to other, progressive leaders. For example, on the thirty-fifth anniversary issue of *Esquire* in October 1968 the magazine put on its front cover a picture of JFK, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King standing together in a graveyard behind a tombstone. Three slain leaders from the 1960s, and – it was suggested – three slain progressive leaders. The implication was that in their quest for a more just America these three men had been brothers-in-arms. In fact, it had been more complex than that. Before the summer of 1963, many African Americans – including Martin Luther King – felt that JFK could have pushed harder for civil rights reform. After November 1963 Robert Kennedy moved to the left of the ideological position that his elder brother had occupied to become an impassioned advocate of racial equality and the rights of the poor. What this *Esquire* magazine front cover suggested was that no such differences had existed between these three men.³⁹

³⁸ White, *Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 15–18.

³⁹ *Esquire* magazine cover, October 1968 [accessed on 20 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.esquire.com/cover-detail?year=1968&month=10>>]; James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*

That idea was conveyed again that same year, 1968, by the release of a pop single written by Dick Holler and performed by New York singer Dion called 'Abraham, Martin and John'. The song was a major hit, reaching number 4 in the US charts – and would subsequently be performed by numerous artists, including Marvin Gaye, Ray Charles, Smokey Robinson and Bob Dylan. The song opened with the following lyrics:

Anybody here seen my old friend Abraham,
 Can you tell me where he's gone?
 He freed a lot of people – but it seems,
 The good they die young.
 You know I just looked around and he's gone.

The following verses repeated those words but substituted for Abraham the name 'John', and then 'Martin' and then 'Bobby'. The names referred to Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy – the progressive tapestry of American history of which JFK was, apparently, a crucial thread.⁴⁰

This depiction of JFK as a progressive leader would continue in the years after 1968. For example, in 2000 New Line Cinema released the film *Thirteen Days*, about the Cuban missile crisis. Directed by Roger Donaldson, and starring Canadian actor Bruce Greenwood as JFK and Kevin Costner as White House adviser Kenneth O'Donnell, *Thirteen Days* emphasized Kennedy's capacity to withstand pressure from the hawks in his administration, especially the military, who were proposing the sort of US attack on Cuba that could have resulted in nuclear Armageddon. At one point a contemplative JFK is shown in church with Jackie during the crisis. His decisions on the missiles in Cuba, which would decide the fate of the world, would be influenced – the film suggested – by moralistic, even religious considerations. It was easier for *Thirteen Days* to make that claim by ignoring, as it did, JFK's earlier policies towards Cuba. These had included the Bay of Pigs invasion, the CIA programme of sabotage and infiltration called Operation Mongoose, attempts to assassinate Castro, and the development of contingency plans to attack Cuba.⁴¹

As well as exaggerating Kennedy's achievements, connecting him to the Arthurian legend, and portraying him as a more progressive president than he in fact had been, the post-assassination fashioning of his image endowed his life with a *subjunctive significance* – a sense of *what might have been* for America had he not been killed. As the Vietnam

(Lawrence, Ka., 1991), pp. 171, 176; David Burner and Thomas R. West, *The Torch is Passed: The Kennedy Brothers and American Liberalism* (New York, 1984), pp. 206–23.

⁴⁰ Lyrics to 'Abraham, Martin & John', MP3 Lyrics [accessed on 20 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.mp3lyrics.org/d/dion/abraham-martin/>>]; 'Abraham, Martin & John' by Dion, Songfacts [accessed on 30 Sept. 2011 at <<http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=2724>>].

⁴¹ BID Online material on *Thirteen Days* (2000), BFI; *Thirteen Days* microjacket, BFI; Art Simon, 'Thirteen Days', *Cineaste*, xxvi (2001), 43–4.

War eroded America's credibility on the international stage, as the Watergate scandal reduced Americans' faith in the nation's institutions, as their sense of security was diminished by the country's relative economic decline, the Kennedy years became for many Americans both an arcadian age and a signpost to a better future than the path followed by his presidential successors. In other words, Americans looked back at the Kennedy presidency nostalgically in a way that allowed them to imagine a post-1963 America with no Vietnam War, no Watergate, no loss of national self-confidence.

Popular culture sustained that view, particularly in terms of the significance of the loss of Kennedy for US involvement in Vietnam. In 1991 Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, about the assassination, reflected on this issue. Stone advanced the theory that the assassination was a *coup d'état*, a killing planned by reactionary forces within the US government to rid America of a president who was determined to take the United States out of Vietnam and ultimately to end the Cold War. Whatever he would have done in Vietnam, what Kennedy in fact did was to increase the number of US military officials there from around 800 to more than 16,000. Moreover, as Kennedy was someone who focused on the short rather than the long term, it was probably the case that he had not decided on his future course in Vietnam, and so it is difficult to determine whether he would or would not have gone to war in July 1965 as Lyndon Johnson did. Nevertheless, many cinemagoers came away from Oliver Stone's film with not only the suspicion that the US government had been complicit in Kennedy's murder but also the belief that the consequence of that act was a disastrous war that JFK would have avoided.⁴²

Another feature of the posthumous development of the Kennedy image was the way it became ingrained in America's memory by becoming a part of the very fabric of the nation – and in ways that confirmed pre-existing assumptions about him. The new arts centre in Washington, which opened in 1971, was named the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, thereby perpetuating the idea of JFK as a leader of cultural refinement. The John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, which housed the key documentation on his life and presidency, included a museum that emphasized his achievements in the White House; and its design, by the architect I. M. Pei who would later produce the pyramidal extension to the Louvre, provided a sense of the epic. The Kennedy Space Center in Florida, named after the late president only a week after the assassination, highlighted what many regarded as his visionary leadership on space exploration; in 1961 he had declared that it should be a key objective for America to put a man on the moon by the end of the

⁴² Screenplay in Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, *JFK: The Book of the Film* (New York, 1992), pp. 1–185; EDI report (USA) for *JFK* (1991), BFI; Fredrik Logevall, 'Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been', in *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited*, ed. Mark J. White (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 19.

decade. In terms of the nation's basic infrastructure, many streets in the United States were named or renamed after JFK. Schools, hospitals, airports, bridges, ships, academic departments, and sports stadiums were also named after Kennedy.⁴³

In these ways, the image of John Kennedy was sustained, burnished and adapted after his assassination. An issue that arises is the extent to which the image conformed to the reality of the man. Of course Kennedy's image was inevitably an inaccurate reflection of him – a simplification of his attributes. The question is whether the divide between the reality and the image of the man was narrow or great. As argued earlier, the notion of Kennedy as an ardent liberal is a fallacy. He was more a cautious centrist than a bold progressive. His standing as a man of culture and erudition was likewise chimerical. He was not, in fact, particularly cultured or intellectual at all. He liked sports, show tunes and commercial Hollywood movies, but he had little or no interest in the theatre, ballet, opera, classical music in general, or literature. As for the famous invitation of cellist Pablo Casals to the White House, Kennedy privately admitted: 'I didn't know what the hell he played – someone had to tell me.' Jackie Kennedy once observed the only music he liked was 'Hail to the Chief'. Rather than enjoying the sublime skill of the dancers when obliged to watch the Bolshoi Ballet, his chief concern was that he avoid being photographed with them afterwards in case it made him look effeminate. He was involved in editing *Profiles in Courage*, but essentially did not write it; that was done mainly by Theodore Sorensen. As a cultural leader, one could make a far more compelling case for Jackie than for John Kennedy.⁴⁴

As for his status as a war hero, even that is contentious. He certainly acted with courage once the Japanese destroyer hit his PT boat, but controversy remains over how he allowed his boat to be rammed by the destroyer in the first place. PT boats were fast and nimble, and certainly capable of eluding a Japanese destroyer. Kennedy's PT boat was the only one to be rammed by a Japanese destroyer during the entirety of the Second World War. One military authority apparently believed that Kennedy should have been court-martialled for his handling of this incident, not decorated for it.⁴⁵

Kennedy's status as a symbol of the family is, we now know, risible. He was very close to his father and brothers, and loved his children. But he despised his mother, whom he once described as 'a nothing', and was

⁴³ James D. Wolfensohn, 'John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts', John F. Kennedy Presidential Library [accessed on 14 April 2008 at <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/John+F.+...>>; Carter Wiseman, *The Architecture of I. M. Pei*, rev. edn. (New York, 2001), pp. 10–13, 92–119; Lyndon B. Johnson, Executive Order 11129 Designating Facilities in Florida as the John F. Kennedy Space Center, 29 Nov. 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–64* (Washington, DC, 1965), pp. 12–13.

⁴⁴ Reeves, *A Question of Character*, pp. 127–8, 315–16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 66–8.

chronically unfaithful to Jackie Kennedy with prostitutes, secretaries, and actresses such as Marilyn Monroe, Angie Dickinson and Jayne Mansfield. But it was not just the infidelity; it was the callous dimension to his treatment of his wife that shocks. After the 1956 Democratic Convention, for example, he went to the French Riviera essentially for extra-marital sex. It was a difficult time for Jackie Kennedy as she was eight-months pregnant and worried – worried because she had already suffered a miscarriage in the first year of her marriage. This time she was forced to undergo a caesarean operation and gave birth to a stillborn child. For a time her condition was critical. Only three days later – and only after pressure from his father and a friend who warned him that a divorce could damage his presidential ambitions – did JFK agree to return home. It has even been reported that Joseph Kennedy offered Jackie a million dollars during this period to stay in the marriage. So as a symbol of the family, it would be difficult to think of anyone less appropriate than JFK.⁴⁶

Much of the Kennedy image was, therefore, a gross distortion or exaggeration of his attributes. There was a chasm between the truth of the man and the image of him. That in itself, though, says much about the skill with which he constructed that image in the first place.

Over the years Kennedy's preoccupation with his own image has been used by some observers to damn him. It has been seen as an example of his vanity and superficiality, and it has been suggested – for instance, by historian Thomas Reeves – that his concern with image affected the way he devised and implemented policy. In other words, his preoccupation with image – with the surface of things – was a weakness. That criticism, however, is not convincing. His concern with image was in fact a rather shrewd, sensible response to the way politics was changing, especially with the advent of television. Image was becoming more important. For Kennedy to have ignored this development would have been naive. Moreover, there are no clear instances of Kennedy crafting policy in a way that was beneficial to his own image but detrimental to America's interests. To be sure, he was concerned about the *credibility* of his presidency, his administration and the nation overseas – but that consideration has shaped the policies of all presidents. Furthermore, the relationship between Kennedy's fashioning of his image and his shaping of policy was not inversely proportional. That is to say, just because he was effective at developing an appealing image did not mean he had less substance when it came to crafting policy. (Likewise, a leader who is relatively unconcerned about image will not inevitably be a skilled policymaker.)⁴⁷

Rather than being any sort of shortcoming, Kennedy's development of his own seductive image was – this essay would argue – his greatest,

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 137–8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 249–50.

most enduring achievement. Defusing the Cuban missile crisis was very important, but it did not stop Cold War tensions persisting for another quarter-century or more. The introduction of the 1963 civil rights bill to end racial segregation was significant too, but it took Lyndon Johnson's skill and tenacity to ensure that the legislation passed after Kennedy's death. Had JFK lived, it is not at all clear that he would have persuaded Congress to enact the legislation. Indeed his track record with major pieces of legislation suggests not. The 1963 Test Ban Treaty, which limited nuclear testing, was of symbolic significance but had no actual impact on the arms race. However, the exciting, alluring, potent Kennedy image persists to this day. Historians could point to other leaders who were exceptionally adept at cultivating a powerful image of themselves. Early modernists, for instance, could point to Louis XIV. So there have been others. Nevertheless, Kennedy's image is one of the most effectively multi-faceted and seductive ever constructed. It represents his greatest accomplishment.

Finally, how can Kennedy's extraordinary appeal, particularly at the time of his presidency, be explained in the final analysis? What he did that worked so well was to fuse together a sense of himself as a symbol of traditional, family-orientated 1950s values, with the idea that he also represented the greater change and eroticism ushered in by the 1960s. In this way, his image was both comfortably familiar and excitingly new. And that was the heart of his appeal.

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