

I

The Afterlife of John Fitzgerald Kennedy

An Introduction

The president woke up in a good mood on November 22, 1963. His back hurt more than usual, so he reinforced the corset he normally wore with a bandage-wrap for extra support. The discomfort did not darken his spirit, however; nor did the news of continued wrangling among leaders of the Democratic Party in Texas, particularly a squabble between conservative Governor John Connally and liberal Senator Ralph Yarborough that even Vice President Lyndon Johnson had been unable or unwilling to resolve. Despite this annoyance and his aching back, the president seemed more impressed by the large crowds and thunderous welcome that he and his wife had experienced during the first leg of their Texas trip. Even First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, who normally disliked campaigning, was thrilled by their reception, and she and her husband had no reason to expect anything less from the day ahead. On the contrary, another enthusiastic crowd was already forming in the street below their hotel window. “I’ll go anywhere with you,” said the first lady, as she watched a smile flash across the handsome face of her husband.¹

Nor was their mood darkened by a newspaper advertisement just published in the conservative *Dallas Morning News*. It began with sarcastic words welcoming President John F. Kennedy to the Lone Star State, but then launched a scurrilous attack, concealed in a series of leading questions, on the president’s liberal policies at home and his supposedly soft stand on communism abroad. The ad revealed a degree of hostility toward the Kennedy administration that had been building for some time. Right-wing groups had physically and verbally assaulted Vice President Johnson and his wife when they campaigned in the state three years earlier, and similar groups had roughed up UN ambassador Adlai

Stevenson during his visit to Dallas only a month before the president arrived. Stevenson was the darling of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, a status that did not endear him to the increasingly conservative voters of Texas, who also viewed Johnson, a Texas native, as a traitor to his state for supporting the president's progressive agenda, especially on civil rights for African Americans.²

All this was well known to Kennedy, as was the politics of the *Dallas Morning News* and its publisher and board chairman, E. M. Dealey. Dealey was a leading figure in Dallas and a member of its Citizens Council, a private group of local elites that acted like an unofficial city council and was sometimes called the "White" Citizens Council. He had made the *Morning News* a strong defender of states' rights and segregation, and an arch-critic of the federal government, liberal social programs, civil rights, foreign aid, the United Nations, the Supreme Court, northern cities, and the Catholics, Jews, blacks, and Democrats who inhabited them. He had personally confronted Kennedy at one of the president's regular meetings with newspaper publishers, editors, and columnists, accusing the president of surrounding himself with "weak sisters" who were soft on communism. What the people needed, he said, was "a man on horseback," but what Kennedy gave them was a man barely adept at riding his daughter's tricycle. Under the circumstances, it came as no surprise to see the scurrilous ad in the *Morning News* – nor that it had been paid for by the local John Birch Society, an extremist right-wing group, and by Nelson Bunker Hunt, son of ultra-conservative oil magnate H. L. Hunt. Together, these men and others like them, including other members of the Citizens Council, had made Dallas the epicenter of an aggressively right-wing movement that was spreading through a good portion of the South, much to the detriment of the Democratic Party and Kennedy's reelection prospects.³

Still, the president was undaunted, even jocular, teasing his wife that they were now entering "nut country."⁴ He seemed to make light of any threats against him, perhaps because he had met similar challenges in the past and had triumphed time and again. His bad back and other ailments had led him to death's door more than once, each time receiving the last rites of the Catholic Church and each time bouncing back, like Lazarus arising from the grave, with renewed life and vitality. He had survived the Second World War as well, serving as a PT boat commander in the Pacific and saving most of his crew when a Japanese destroyer rammed their ship. The incident, which made him a decorated war hero, was celebrated in a best-selling work by the author, John Hersey, and more recently in a

popular movie that President Kennedy and friends had just screened in the White House theater. Nor were these the only examples of his success against the odds. His bid for the Democratic Party nomination in 1960 and his subsequent victory over Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon in the fall election had both overcome significant obstacles, the greatest being his young age, inexperience, and the widespread prejudice, especially in the South, against a Catholic politician whose decisions were supposedly guided less by the U.S. Constitution than by religious doctrine. He had dealt with these issues directly and successfully during the Democratic Party primaries, especially the West Virginia primary, and in a major address to a gathering of Protestant ministers in Texas.

Few could doubt that Kennedy led a charmed life. Harvard-educated scion of a wealthy Irish family, he was a hero of the Pacific War with the medals to prove it, and a published author of some distinction, having won a Pulitzer Prize for his book *Profiles in Courage*. Blessed with Hollywood good looks, he was also a man of enormous personal charm, quick intelligence, and a self-deprecating sense of humor, whose public appearances and televised press conferences had made him the most popular politician in the country. And if all that were not enough, he was married to a beautiful and intelligent woman and the father of two attractive children. Kennedy himself must have felt fortunate as he began laying the groundwork for his reelection bid just one year away, including his trip to raise funds as well as votes in Texas, mend fences in the state's Democratic Party, and calm the ferocious spirit of an ascendant conservatism.

Enthusiastic receptions by large crowds in San Antonio, Houston, and Fort Worth had exceeded expectations, and the last stop was to be a brief, overnight visit to Vice President Johnson's ranch outside of Austin. Only a three-hour campaign in Dallas remained, and that part of the trip began with another exuberant crowd welcoming the Kennedys when Air Force One landed at Love Field. Teeming throngs waved and screamed wildly as the president's motorcade wound its way through Dallas to the Trade Mart, where he was to deliver remarks and enjoy lunch with a large group of local businessmen and party donors. For the Kennedys, and for Governor Connally and his wife, the trip to that point had been a resounding success. "You sure can't say that Texas doesn't love you," Mrs. Connally told the president as she and the governor rode with the Kennedys to the luncheon. "No you can't," he replied, a broad grin breaking across his face just before rifle bullets pierced the back of his neck and exploded the right side of his head. The president of the United States was dead.⁵

But was he really? Or would John F. Kennedy somehow transcend death to occupy a special place in the living memory of the nation? If so, how would this happen and who would decide how Kennedy was remembered? How would they define his identity and delineate his legacy, and what would their constructions have to say about the nation's sense of itself – about what it meant to be an American? As these questions suggest, this is not another book about the life and times of John F. Kennedy. It says little about his presidency or, for that matter, his assassination. It presents instead a new perspective on the president, as seen not from his life but from his afterlife in American memory.⁶ That being said, the following introduction briefly surveys Kennedy's domestic and foreign policies. It provides background for what follows in the text and notes why so many people saw the president as a liberal champion whose identity was defined less by his achievements than by what he appeared to represent, what he tried to accomplish, and what conservatives had to say about him.

Similarly, the second chapter goes into some detail about the so-called style on display in the Kennedy White House. It uses the words “style,” “brand,” and “image” more or less interchangeably and draws for its argument on sociological theories dealing with performance in the theater of everyday life. Kennedy's style was in many ways a self-constructed representation of the parts that he and his wife played as president and first lady. Much like any commercial brand, moreover, it concealed some aspects of their real selves, featured other more appealing attributes, and was designed to popularize or promote a particular product or personality – namely, the president and his policies. Style and substance thus went hand in hand in the Kennedy White House. By conjuring up an idealized image of what it meant to be an American, Kennedy's style, or the style of his presidency, added enormously to his popular appeal and political effectiveness. It was widely admired at the time of his death and remained central to the social construction of his memory in the years that followed. This explains why I devote so much attention to how the Kennedys presented themselves. Doing so establishes the Kennedy style as a central theme in the chapters that follow and helps to account for the visceral public reaction to the president's brutal murder.

That reaction is described in Chapter 3. Borrowing again from sociological theories, this time dealing with cultural trauma and collective memory, it describes how Kennedy's assassination triggered widespread feelings of grief, shock, and insecurity, as well as a tendency, typical in moments of great national trauma, to idealize those who lost their lives

in the tragedy. In this case, the trauma led most Americans to burnish the image of the president that he and his wife had already constructed, turning it into a sacred symbol of mythical proportions and lodging it deep in the collective memory of the nation. The assassination thus began the process of transporting Kennedy from history to memory. It set the stage for a long struggle over how he would be memorialized, who would own or control his memory, and how his legacy would be defined. In many ways a struggle over what would be remembered and what would be forgotten, it highlights the persistent tension between history, memory, and heritage that runs throughout the story of Kennedy's afterlife.⁷

These themes open one upon the other, like the folds of an expanding accordion, in the remainder of this book. Using the metaphor and language of the theater, Chapter 4 describes the president's funeral. It tells how Jacqueline Kennedy staged one of the most dramatic events in American history, largely with an eye to reproducing her husband's presidency as she wanted it remembered, and how, in doing so, she, too, became a symbol of what it meant to be an American. Chapters 5 through 8 show how the former first lady and her allies worked in subsequent years to nourish and protect the popular image of the president, as he had played his part in the White House. Their goal was to make the president worthy of remembrance, which they largely achieved in the decade following his death, when artists, poets, and musicians commemorated his life more or less as the former first lady wanted him remembered. This was also true of the many mementos that would bear his name and of the great monuments erected in his honor. These chapters treat the Kennedy monuments and memorabilia as text and try to discern the message they conveyed, especially when the former first lady was involved, which was the case, for example, with the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, the president's memorial gravesite in Arlington National Cemetery, and the Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, Massachusetts.

In all of these endeavors, as with her careful scripting of the president's funeral, Jacqueline Kennedy became the chief guardian of her husband's memory. She devoted herself to what had become, in her mind, his inviolable image and to embedding that image in the approved version of his life and presidency. This was evident not only in the physical monuments to his memory, but also in the literary monuments erected by the first generation of Kennedy scholars, some of whom, like Theodore Sorensen and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., had been close colleagues of the former president. There were critics, of course, but not many, in part because

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Jacqueline Kennedy, her friends and family, were largely successful in blocking alternative narratives and controlling the way history remembered her husband.

By the mid-1970s, however, frustration over the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, among other things, had created a new political culture in the United States, out of which came a wave of revisionist historians whose views were decidedly at odds with those of their predecessors. Unlike Schlesinger and Sorensen, revisionist scholars pictured Kennedy as a cautious and mediocre president with little success to his credit and a private life, including poor health and extramarital affairs, that betrayed his public persona and the way his family wanted him remembered. At that point, as discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, Kennedy's identity became contested terrain in a memory war that engaged not only historians but the media as well, not to mention the Kennedy family and officials at the Kennedy Library, who did what they could to protect the sanctified image they had helped to construct in the first place. As we will see, the memory wars raged through the 1970s and 1980s before eventually producing a more balanced, postrevisionist history of Kennedy and his administration.⁸

This is hardly the whole story, however. Although postrevisionism eventually gained the upper hand among professional historians, it had little appeal to the nation at large, where views once typical of the founding generation of Kennedy scholars seemed to prevail over time. This was evident in the many sympathetic books about Kennedy that flew from the bookstores every time the nation commemorated his assassination. It was also evident in the respect he garnered over the years from so many in the mainstream media and from the inexorable tide of Hollywood movies, TV specials, and documentaries recounting his life. It was evident as well in the deference he claimed from the many politicians who tried to appropriate his memory, not to mention his famous style, for themselves and their party. And it was evident in the high ratings he received in one public opinion poll after another in the years following his death.

It was as if historians made no impression on the American mind, except perhaps, when mainstream cultural institutions and the so-called heritage industry translated historical scholarship for public consumption. And because that process could obscure as much as it revealed, it tended to preserve the Kennedy brand as a vital part of the nation's heritage, if not always its history. For the heritage industry, in fact, including the makers of mementos, popular books, movies, TV specials, and museum exhibits, the past was a product and the Kennedy brand a boon

to business. For this reason, it reinforced the image that Kennedy had constructed of himself, and in the process contributed to how Americans would remember the late president. This is one of the many reasons why Kennedy still has such an enduring grip on the American imagination – now more than fifty years after his assassination.⁹

II

All of this will become clear in the following chapters, but first, a brief introduction to the politics and policies of the Kennedy administration. This will spare us the need to repeatedly explain these subjects at different points in the text and help us understand why so many people viewed the president, or at least his brand, as a noble reflection of their own values – of who they were or aspired to be as Americans. When he traveled to Texas in November 1963, Kennedy knew that deep racial, regional, and partisan divisions in Congress and across the country had made it difficult to deal effectively with the pressing economic and social issues of the day. International issues were no less partisan, contentious, and apparently intractable, even though the Cold War seemed to be reaching its most dangerous point. All of this had been evident already in the 1960 campaign. Aware that Republican Party leaders had earlier accused the Truman administration of “losing China” to the communists, Kennedy had decided in 1960 to protect his own prospects by turning the tables on his Republican opponents. During the course of the campaign, he charged President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Vice President Richard M. Nixon with losing the space race to the Soviet Union and creating a “missile gap” in the nation’s defense posture – a charge that later proved to be unfounded. He also accused them of weakness in Europe, where West Germany faced the constant threat of Soviet aggression, and of giving ground to communism in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and especially Cuba, where Fidel Castro’s communist government had just come to power. Kennedy promised to close the missile gap and reverse the communist tide, partly by spending more on defense and partly by stressing the deterrent power of conventional forces, including Special Forces like the Green Berets, which could fight and win guerrilla wars in the underdeveloped world.

Kennedy did not ignore domestic issues entirely. On the contrary, he called for a war on poverty, more aid to education, a more lenient policy on immigration, health care for the elderly, a higher minimum wage, and civil rights for minorities, notably African Americans. On these issues,

however, he knew that progress would be difficult, if not impossible, in the face of a powerful congressional coalition of Republicans and conservative southern Democrats. This prospect, together with the global dangers confronting the nation, helps to explain Kennedy's emphasis on foreign rather than domestic policy during the course of his campaign.¹⁰

Nor did the election change things. Winning with only 49.7 percent of the vote, Kennedy's majority was not strong enough to throttle the conservative bloc and secure his domestic agenda in Congress. On the international front, moreover, he still faced a potentially deadly arms race with the Soviet Union, new challenges from communist China, and major crises in Europe, Latin America, and Asia. Under the circumstances, it's not surprising that national security issues dominated his famous inaugural address, or that he spent most of his time in office dealing with these issues. He increased spending for the space program and added to the defense budget. He also established new foreign aid programs like the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress to encourage economic development, foster democracy, and contain communism in developing countries around the world. Just three months into office, moreover, he threw his weight behind a wildly reckless plan to topple Fidel Castro's communist government in Cuba.¹¹

Poorly conceived by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and previously approved by President Eisenhower, the plan called for Cuban exiles, trained by the CIA, to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. The CIA expected the invasion to trigger a popular uprising against Castro's government, which would then be replaced with a pro-American administration. The outcome instead was an unmitigated disaster. Ambivalent about the plan to begin with, Kennedy refused to be drawn deeper into the conflict when the exiles failed. He would not use American air power to rescue the invaders or oust Castro, as many of his advisors suggested, and came away from the experience deeply suspicious of both the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The results were evident in the many crises that followed, including the Berlin crisis in the second half of 1961.¹²

Just months after the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy and his wife traveled to Europe to meet with leaders from Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. The first two meetings went more or less as expected, but the conference in Vienna with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev sparked a heated confrontation that nearly ended in disaster. Kennedy had hoped for productive discussions on a range of issues, including a nuclear test ban agreement, but his most pressing concern was the future of Berlin. After the Second World War, Germany had been divided into Eastern and

Western occupation zones; the former became a Soviet protectorate while the United States and its allies supported the latter. When the two sides could not agree on a treaty that would reunify Germany and recognize its sovereignty, the zones eventually hardened into separate East and West German states, with the city of Berlin, also divided into separate jurisdictions, located in the Eastern Zone. Always a sore point in East–West relations, the divided city became a particular embarrassment for the Soviets when a large number of East Germans and others from Eastern Europe began fleeing through Berlin to freedom in the West.

Anxious to halt the exodus, Khrushchev and the Soviet delegates in Vienna renewed earlier threats to negotiate their own treaty with East Germany, thereby making permanent what was supposed to be a temporary arrangement. The proposed treaty would recognize East Germany's sovereignty over a unified Berlin, including its right to limit western access to the city and staunch the flow of its own citizens from East to West. Kennedy rejected the proposal, as did the allies, and the Vienna Conference ended with fruitless ideological exchanges and threats of war on both sides. Privately, however, Kennedy worried about the sanity of those, including some of his own military advisors, who talked of nuclear war if the Soviets did not back down. He looked for a way to resolve the crisis short of national suicide, as he called it, and found the solution in August 1961, when the communists closed the border between East and West Berlin and began building what came to be known as the Berlin Wall. Because this solution appeared to rule out the reunification of Germany, nationalists in West Germany and hawks in the United States denounced the president as an appeaser, which forced him to reassure Americans and their allies by adding still more to the defense budget. At the same time, however, Kennedy dismissed his critics as extremists. He said the Berlin Wall, though deplorable, was preferable to a nuclear war and reminded everyone that Khrushchev and the communists had blinked first – and with a solution that made them look like jailers who imprisoned their own people behind a concrete barrier.¹³

Twice in less than a year – his first year in office – Kennedy had managed two major crises short of war. He admitted his personal culpability for the Bay of Pigs fiasco, but pulled back in time to prevent an even greater disaster; he acknowledged his failure in Vienna, but seized on a solution that ended the Berlin crisis without a nuclear exchange. There were other challenges and some triumphs as well. To deal with a civil war in the small, Southeast Asian country of Laos, and to prevent it from becoming another site of superpower confrontation, Kennedy managed

to engage the Soviets in a negotiated agreement that neutralized the little country under a shaky coalition government. He was also cautious when it came to the civil war in Vietnam, which he considered the most serious problem in Southeast Asia. Although he increased the number of American military advisors training South Vietnamese troops in their fight against the communist Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies, he clearly preferred a political to a military solution. He urged progressive political and social reforms on President Ngo Dinh Diem and his government in Saigon, thinking that such reforms could win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people and undercut popular support for the Viet Cong. When reforms were not forthcoming, he blamed Diem, sanctioned a military coup that toppled his government, and hoped for more success under a new regime. He did not authorize Diem's assassination, however, and was reluctant as well to commit American troops to the battle. On the contrary, he began talking toward the end of his life about decreasing the number of American military advisors and disengaging from the struggle altogether.¹⁴

Something similar can be said of Kennedy's Cuban policy after the Bay of Pigs. Because of that reckless effort, not to mention subsequent plans to destabilize the Cuban economy and assassinate the Cuban leader, it's not surprising that Castro would seek economic aid and military protection from the Soviet Union. Nor is it surprising, given the Berlin crisis, that Khrushchev would try to right an unfavorable balance of power with the United States in Europe, which included American missiles in Turkey, by seeking a foothold in the Western Hemisphere. So it was that in October 1962, less than two years after taking office, Kennedy learned from U-2 reconnaissance photos that Soviet leaders were installing offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba. He immediately convened a task force of national security advisors to review the situation and recommend a course of action. The president himself came to favor a naval blockade, or embargo, that would stop Soviet missiles from reaching the Caribbean island and allow time for a negotiated resolution of the crisis. The Joint Chiefs and other advisors criticized this approach as tantamount to appeasement. It would make the United States look weak, they argued, and undermine its credibility with allies who counted on American protection against communist aggression. They wanted an immediate military response, notably a preemptive attack on Cuba, including, if necessary, a full-scale air bombardment and ground invasion.

Their recommendation reminded Kennedy of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. He thought it would alienate the United Nations as