JFK & the power of myth
by Peter Collier

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The fiftieth anniversary of President Kennedy’s assassination presents us with a flood of books and television documentaries retelling a story that has become so familiar that it almost seems like a nursery rhyme—a very torqued and twisted nursery rhyme. But this prodigality of media seems less a definitive act than an efflorescence of despair at the prospect of really understanding this familiar stranger whose death and transfiguration are always so much with us. Kennedy contains multitudes, but at the same time has a self-canceling opacity. Rather than having been brought into sharper focus by all the research and writing, as, say, Teddy Roosevelt has been, he has faded further from view. His evanescence was the subtext of the recent omnibus review of Kennedy books by Jill Abramson in The New York Times Book Review: Johnny, We Hardly Knew You. Even that was too optimistic—Johnny, We Don’t Really Know You At All might have been more accurate.

Or, if we think about the implications of the recent Mimi Alford book, Once Upon a Secret, we might opt for Johnny, We Definitely Don’t Want to Know You. Alford’s story is a particularly disheartening trek along the dark side of Camelot—the story of a naïve nineteen-year-old intern deflowered by Jack in Jackie’s bed; afterwards flown around the country to be available as a sexual analgesic because, as we all now know, JFK admitted that he got a headache if he didn’t have intercourse at least once a day; sent callously and impersonally to an abortionist when it appeared that she might have been impregnated after becoming the presidential sex toy; and, probably worst of all, being coerced, while naked with JFK in the White House pool to paddle over and give oral service to Dave Powers, Jack’s longtime pander and bootlicker and later head of the Kennedy Library, who had nothing better to do than sit there and watch.

Fiddle and Faddle, the anonymous blondes from the secretarial pool who also did sexual aquatics with JFK, are one thing. But this vignette is something else. Its after-image is difficult to erase—a Sadean closet drama starring a president with a pornographer’s sensibility and a pimp’s attitude toward women.

Stories similar to Alford’s have appeared with the regularity of water torture during thirty-eight or so of the last fifty years—forming a jagged counter-narrative to the Kennedy Myth thrown together immediately after the assassination. Jim Piereson has shrewdly dissected the Myth in Camelot and the Cultural Revolution, showing how the historical revisionism about JFK and the commitments of his assassin that began almost immediately after the events in Dallas also revised our politics. And Ira Stoll has pointed out in JFK, Conservative the disconnect between Kennedy’s legacy as a programmatic liberal—a legacy purposely created by Schlesinger, So-
renson, and other apparatchiks—and Jack’s own center-right instincts (he called it being a “realist”).

Both of these reevaluations of the Myth establish important truths. But I noticed a different sort of mythmaking when I was writing *The Kennedys: An American Drama* with my friend David Horowitz almost thirty years ago—a book I have plagiarized shamelessly in putting together this paper. I saw that a powerful influence in shaping what came to be thought of as the Myth, before most of the brutal backstory started coming out, was the Kennedys’ own mythomania. Honoring their own fallen dead—inter- and intra-generational—and redefining them so that they were heroes beckoning us toward a better world was something that began, *en famille*, long before *Le Morte de Jack*.

The first hostage to fortune was Joe Jr., Jack’s elder brother, whom their father, Old Joe, envisioned as the one who would take the clan over the finish line in its sprint toward the heart of the American Dream, he himself having fallen short of this goal because of his Irish insurrectionist impatience and his parvenu’s greedy selfhood.

You know the story. Joe Jr. undertook a virtual suicide mission in 1944 against German superguns on the French coast. His bomber exploded before reaching the target, vaporizing him over the Channel. The family quickly moved to entomb this act as a sacrifice in the name of bravery and idealism. (Perhaps it was the first, but probably not the second.) It busily circulated festschrifts commemorating its lost hero, and Old Joe used his influence to get various edifices named after his first son. Nowhere was it noted that one reason Young Joe undertook the mission was because Jack, whose designated role in his generation was to be that of second fiddle in a one-man band, had upstaged him by his ambiguous adventure in PT-109 in the Pacific theater—an incident which MacArthur briefly considered might be worth a court martial, but which Old Joe, using his media contacts, managed to sell as something like a modern version of the Crossing of the Delaware.

Old Joe, whose vulgar courtship of FDR had gotten him the ambassadorship to England, an achievement which he quickly undid by conspiring with the Cliveden Set and trying to make sure that America didn’t annoy Hitler, privately railed against “Roosevelt and his Kikes” for getting the United States into combat and killing his favorite son. Within the family, and as far as he was able publicly, he transfigured Joe Jr., who was in fact his carbon copy—able to deploy a bruising charm at times, but otherwise one-dimensional and something of a bully—into a cause demanding vindication by the Kennedys left behind. They would complete Joe Jr.’s mission, whose target was less the French coast than the nation’s capitol.

It was a heavy burden heavily laid on. Even Jack, who had spent his youth capering around as the heavy-footed heir apparent and who was least sentimental of all the Kennedys, was affected. In a speech to a Boston chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars following the 1946 Congressional victory that put him on the road to the White House, he came to the line, an incidental Freudian slip inserted by a speechwriter, “Greater love has no man than this: to lay down his life for his brother,” and broke down crying, unable to finish.

Thus began the family’s own drama of the eternal return. The old man used his power to get James Forrestal to name a newly commissioned destroyer the *Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.*. As a young midshipman just out of Harvard, Bobby insisted on serving aboard it. And the ship stood in the front line of the blockade during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Kennedys’ mythomania went into overdrive after Jack’s assassination. The old man had been taken out of the picture by a stroke by then, but Bobby was more than equal to the task of creating a version of Jack that would be worthy of the memory that family-mythologizing demanded for his brother. Working in parallel with Jackie’s allusions to “Camelot,” Bobby used the remaining days of his own career to formulate, in action, the notion that his brother died for idealism itself and left behind an unfinished agenda which was an indenture for right-thinking people everywhere.

Bobby made Jack into a crusader for civil rights—Jack, who once snidely referred to
James Baldwin as Martin Luther Queen. He made Jack liberally correct, according to the evolving definition of that notion, a trailblazer on the road he himself was walking as Tribune of the Downtrodden while playing his dangerous game of footsie with the hallucinatory radicalism of the 1960s and its alleged possibilities (which is why, perhaps, Tom Hayden made a point of weeping ostentatiously at his funeral). In the fiery trajectory of his last two years, Bobby was merely going where the meanings of Jack’s death sent him, where Jack himself would have gone with so much more class and consequence if he had not, like their elder brother, been taken so early and so unfairly.

And then, in the weird dialectic working inside the family, after Bobby himself was killed, Teddy, always the dangling modifier of the family, tried to insert Bobby’s sui generis effort to lasso the 1960s zeitgeist into the new politics born after Hayden and the others who had destroyed the Democratic Party in Chicago in 1968 inhabited its corpse in 1972, also cynically appropriating the term “liberal,” which previously they had always regarded with loathing, particularly when it was prefixed by the words “Cold War.” Teddy now made RFK into St. Bobby, just as Bobby had made JFK into St. Jack, inflating the Kennedy myth as he himself became smaller as representative figure of the new liberalism, which increasingly also called itself progressive—thereby presenting itself as permanent social reform, a construction project for Utopia whose foremen would be people of color and women, but whose general contractors would be limousine liberals like him.

Having collaborated in the process of pejoration by which his brothers became holy ghosts of this new version of the Democratic Party, Teddy settled into the only role left for a family member—that of ward heeler and party hack, the role his paternal grandfather, the barkeep Patrick Kennedy, had chosen as a stepping stone out of the Irish-American ghetto.

The myth about Jack that Bobby and Teddy and the rest of the family helped to create became the inheritance of the younger Kennedys, all tutored by Teddy in the art of private vice/public virtue, which they practiced with a recklessness rivaling his own, as seen most recently in the dreary recent revelations about Bobby Jr., once regarded inside the family as a possible second coming of Jack. While engaging in fiery denunciations of our destruction of the environment, Young Bobby was compiling a Willy Loman–like diary of his sexual conquests that was apparently discovered by his wife, Mary, before she hanged herself in 2012.

But these younger Kennedys, whatever chaos they might bring to their private lives, had no doubts about the family’s mission. In fact, the RFK children once staged a protest at the JFK Library because they felt the image it presented was insufficiently liberal, under the new definition of that term and under what they took to be their father’s meanings, and they always had a degree of scorn for their cousin JFK Jr. because they saw the truth—that his father, unlike their own, was actually stodgily centrist, whatever RFK may have said; and that he therefore had no right to what had become the Kennedy political inheritance.

The Myth may have expanded into dogma. But with Teddy acting as just one of these lost boys, the Kennedys’ own ambition contracted into a sparse lesson about how all politics is local. They once began in Massachusetts and then stormed the citadel of power in Washington, D.C. Now they retreated back into Massachusetts and made that the scope of their hope. The only remaining Kennedy in public office, Joseph III, grandson of Bobby and son of the plodding Joseph II, now presides over a family business that has shrunk, during the decades-long effort to revise and reclaim JFK, from a Sears and Roebuck-sized enterprise to a storefront in Roxbury.

In 1980, in what turned out to his premature swan song, Teddy orated: “The cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream will never die.” The Dream he mentions is of course the Impossible Dream—Bobby’s appropriation from Man of La Mancha that trumped even Jackie’s appropriation from Camelot. The hope became the hope-a-dope of Barack Obama, whom Teddy slavishly supported. The cause is no more or less ambitious than cutting everyone off at exactly knee height and then forcing them to bow
to government. No wonder the Clintons and Obama worshiped at Jack's grave in Arlington on the anniversary of his death: He has been tweaked and twisted into the FDR of the party they now define.

There is much we still don't know about the Kennedys, but we can be sure of one thing: Jack would have hated all the huffing and puffing of this familial Hegelianism. He depended on Bobby to be his hatchet man and provide plausible deniability by supervising all the black ops of his administration, but it was when his younger brother was being most "liberal" that Jack regarded him as the biggest pain in the ass. He told a mutual friend who arrived in the Oval Office one afternoon to find Bobby sulking, star-crossed in the corner, "Oh, don't worry about him, he's all choked up about Martin Luther King and his Negroes today." To another friend, after Bobby left the room following a session of liberal nagging: "How would like to hear that voice blaring into your ear six hours at a time?"

After his 1952 Senate victory, when people from Massachusetts began writing letters chiding him for being insufficiently liberal, Jack's acerbic response was: "I'd be happy to tell them that I'm not liberal at all." To him liberals were like Adlai Stevenson, for whom he had undisguised contempt. When he was looking at the appointments for his new administration and the subject of the State Department came up, JFK said, "I know how they are over there—not queer, exactly, but sort of like Adlai." He was exultant when the columnist Joe Alsop said that he was "Stevenson with balls."

No wonder we don't feel that we know Johnny today when so many people—inside the family as much as outside—have desecrated the corpse.

Of course not being known was Jack's intention. He knew that it was in that zone between shadow and act, what he seemed and what he was, that his freedom lay. That remarkable blitheness of spirit, which was real, was in part the squid's ink he used to create a cloud of unknowing that allowed him to make his escape. His mode might not have risen to the status of silence, cunning, and exile—another famous Irishman's way of holding life at bay, but it did allow him to create a lesser but still significant personal artifact—of detachment, irony, and dissimulation.

The book I wrote all those years ago looked at the Kennedys from the first arrival in America to the children of Jack and Bobby and the others of their generation—some of them now already claimed by the Kennedy Curse, as the family calls it, which since that first death of Joe Jr. they've promoted as the price paid by those who dare challenge the gods on behalf of humankind.

Vivid personalities, all of them. But none so vivid as Jack. The authoritative book about him, the book whose absence Jill Abramson in her review lamented, will remain caught in that limbo where the Myth fights its losing battle with the Counter Myth. But it would be a shame to leave it at that. While Jack's story will remain The Greatest Story Never Told, there are some things, small and random things perhaps, that might be said about him on this fiftieth anniversary of his passing—that day in our lives when we all remember exactly where we were.

The first thing is the most obvious: He was shaped by illness. It was with him always, long before he acquired the persona he wore all during his mature life like a ski mask. Robert Dallek has catalogued his ailments very well. Yet it is a story of more than medicine tried and failed, diagnoses made and retracted, diseases remorselessly advancing and tenuously controlled. Jack's sickness was, in a profound sense, character-forming.

As part of my research, I ran into a man named Lemoyne Billings, who was Jack's best friend from the time they were twelve or so when they were randomly assigned to be roommates at Choate. Lem spoke about how, soon after they met and were getting ready for lights out one night. Jack, skinny and bird-chested in his underwear, smiled brightly and said, "The doctors say I have walking leukemia."

He had a survivor's heart and this brittle bravery became a character trait, fount of the famous JFK irony which was—in part, at least—an emotional cuticle he developed to protect against the constant illness that some-
times erupted into life-threatening crises requiring the appearance of a priest to administer what was then still called Last Rites. Instead of doominess, though, Jack’s response was to try to live at a higher level. Billings and many of the others I interviewed who had known Jack well, while disagreeing about other things, all talked about how, from an early age, he had the ability to slow time, bend it into odd shapes with an unique intensity of being. Because he always heard Time’s winged chariot hurrying near, Jack tried to cancel out the noise with an audacious act of personality. Because of his sickness, from an early age he adopted the credo later expressed so well by the maker of the anti-hero in Blade Runner: The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long.

Old Joe had made Hollywood his whorehouse and Shangri-La when he went there in the 1920s to prove that he could beat the “pants-pressers,” his most courteous term for Jews, at the movie game. He was one of the first really to understand the essence of the Dream Factory: It was a place where you could get a new name, a new face, and a new biography and—voilà!—be a new person. Jack, who also spent time there after his father established his forward operating base on Rodeo Drive, saw all this and more. Lem Billings told me about being there with him for a few weeks in 1945 just after V-J Day. They went to a big anniversary party at the Warner Brothers lot. Jack spent the afternoon studying the stars as they talked to each other and ate canapés. Then he obsessively asked Lem, “Where do they get it?” Lem asked him what he meant by “it.” Jack said something like, “It, you know that quality they have.” He was talking about the ability to project the halo effect without trying. He had an intimation that he had this ability himself as a result of his wrestling match with that misdiagnosed walking leukemia of his, and was looking to learn how to turn it on and off and regulate the volume.

And the cognate matter of sex. After being touched so traumatically by platoons of doctors in his youth, he became a touch-me-not. He was like Gore Vidal, otherwise regarded as an enemy by at least Robert Kennedy, who said that sex was one thing and one thing only: ejaculation with as many appealing partners as possible. Same with Jack: It was the spasm that told him he was still alive. He was a predator in the way the undead are: requiring constant infusions of flesh to provide an existential pinch on the arm.

He was also a predator because predation was in the air he breathed at home. Rose was a figure of contempt—“my mother was a nothing,” Jack said to more than one of his friends—because she let the old man humiliate her not only by having women but also by semi-living with them in the house as his “secretaries.” Jack warned the debs he brought down to Palm Beach for weekends to keep their doors locked at night because his father had a “tendency to roam.” He made his father seem amusingly priapic, the old block off which he himself was a chip; yet he knew better than anyone that it wasn’t funny. When he was a boy, the Old Man brought Gloria Swanson, his own pre-version of Marilyn, home for a visit. Jack stowed away when they took the boat out on the Bay one morning. While they were on deck making the beast with two backs, he jumped overboard and started swimming—not back to shore but out to sea.

One woman I spoke to all those years ago who had a relationship with Jack told me that they had long conversations about women in which he, like Freud, kept returning to the question of what women want—from marriage, from family, from love. During one of these mauldering talks, she asked him why he acted like his father in the compulsive and often rote philandering, why he avoided real relationships, why he took a chance on scandal just when his political career was taking off. He thought for a long minute and told her, “I don’t know, really. I just can’t help it.” She said that as he said this a look of deep sadness passed over his face, “the look of a little boy about to cry.”
course; and Pilgrim's Progress; and, when he was thirteen, Winston Churchill's The World Crisis—this last something of a transgressive act of admiration for a man his father thought as much a warmonger as Roosevelt.

He had to keep this bookishness under wraps lest he be roughed up inside the family for putting on the dog. But it was always there. "I read more books in a week than Adlai reads in a year," he said with some asperity about Stevenson when someone, probably Eleanor Roosevelt, compared their intellectual backgrounds to Jack's disadvantage. His love of books, as well as the fact that his father had so easily suborned august figures such as Arthur Krock, eminence of The New York Times, gave Jack the ability to play with writers: Norman Mailer, who did more than anyone to connect Jack to the "existential authenticity" so prized in the early 1960s, was enthralled when he finally had a sit-down and JFK, instead of mentioning the Naked and the Dead like everyone else, cannily said that he particularly admired Deer Park, Mailer's third novel which had been rightfully trashed by the critics.

Partly because of his reading, he was a romantic. Once he was talking to Lady Diana Cooper and the subject turned to his sister Eunice. "She has a wild originality of countenance," Cooper said. Jack, immediately recognizing this as Byron on his lover Lady Caroline Lamb, replied with Lady Caroline's words about Byron: "And is she also mad, bad, and dangerous to know?" Jack saw Byron as a kindred spirit. Byron too had that conflict between irony and romanticism. He too had the disability—his club foot—and the premonition of early death. And he had the obsession with women—the hunger for them and the realization that this hunger was displaced, which led to a fed-upness with women and a sense that the whole sex thing was more philosophical than physical.

And Jack was always his father's son. As someone told me, "Jack's biggest problem from the day he was born until the day he died was not the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Bay of Pigs, or any of that. It was the old man." Old Joe always wanted to be an inside player, but also enjoyed his status as consummate outsider, having what DuBois might have called a "twoness" in that regard. But for his sons he was tough and authentic, willing to play outside the boundary lines: someone who'd actually done something with his life. They were irresistibly drawn to such people—all the quarterbacks they palled with and military heroes like Max Taylor whom they appointed as aides. But Old Joe was always the prototype of the guy who had walked the walk. His boys liked all those tales—Who knows how true they are?—about his Irish thugs fighting Meyer Lansky's East Side Boys in the snow on the Canadian border over shipments of bootleg in which eleven or twelve were said to have been killed. After Jack's death, RFK liked to take the mobster Frank Costello to lunch, despite his well-known vendetta against organized crime, and get him to tell these stories about Old Joe.

While Joe Jr. was alive, he was Jack's heat shield vis-à-vis Old Joe. With his brother alive, Jack could have his cake and eat it too, being the family's unlikely success story but also having freedom to maneuver as far as picking a fate was concerned. Because he was such a reader, he said he wanted to be a writer. But after the brother's death, when the old man's obdurate gaze fell on him as next in line, Jack said sadly to one friend, "I guess Dad's going to be the ventriloquist, so that leaves me to be the dummy." In 1946, so skinny and yellow-looking that someone said he looked like "Mohatma Gandhi," he dragged himself gamely through the process of running for the Congressional seat once occupied by his maternal grandfather Honey Fitz. At one point, Eunice saw him sitting all frail and crumpled up in a corner and said to the old man, "Daddy, do you really think Johnny can be a congressman?" The old man smiled: "You must remember, it's not what you are that counts, but what people think you are."

This statement summarizes the Kennedys' contribution to American politics. Jack eventually came into his own in the late 1950s, gently removing his father from the command center of his life. But he always honored him for, among other things, pioneering this foundational concept.

Another thing: Jack wanted to do something big as president, something comparable to
FDR's accomplishment. And this must happen on the international stage, not domestically. In a conversation with Nixon he once said of foreign affairs, "That's the only important thing for a President to handle, isn't it? I mean who gives a shit if the minimum wage is a dollar fifteen or a dollar thirty-five?"

He was up for the competition with the Soviet Union, and, after their meeting, got a sense of what he faced in Khrushchev, whose snarling rages somewhat resembled his father's. But to a degree his real target were those known in the era as the Revolutionary Revolutionaries—Ho Chi Minh, Sukarno, and most of all Castro—who monopolized the world's imagination in the early 1960s. He resented their celebrity in the way that the Old Man had resented the Back Bay Brahmins who had kept the Irish down. He wanted to outdo them at their own game. This was why he adopted Walt Rostow as his "Marx." It was why he embraced counter insurgency and special ops and brought Edward Lansdale, the model for Graham Greene's *Quiet American*, into the fold and allowed Bobby to ramrod Operation Mongoose to get even with and get rid of Castro after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. It was why he said, on his way to Vienna, "I go as the leader of the most revolutionary nation on earth."

On the limo ride to his inauguration, Jack had peppered Ike with questions about D-Day, having just read and become obsessed with Cornelius Ryan's *The Longest Day*. Ike disappointed his desire for stories of derring-do by replying in a bored tone of voice that the Allies had carried the day only because they had superior meteorologists. But Eisenhower did predict in their conversation that there would be a conflict in Laos. Jack heard him but didn't think it was the place for the U.S. to make a statement. After finally moving away from the efforts to oust Castro, efforts that had brought the family closer to the Mob than his father ever had in his putative rum-running, he turned his attention from Cuba to Vietnam because it was a country, as he pointed out, half of whose population had a reason to hate the Communists, a place where all these desires to outdo the romantic revolutionaries could just possibly pay off.

I've been impressionistic here, but these are some of the things I still think about when I think of Jack. The last thing is his fixation with death, this dark rendezvous he believed he was about to keep at every stage of his life, from the time when he was a little boy and learned to be just a little bit in love with night. Even after all the steroids and feel-good uppers allowed him to mimic a normal life, he devoted regular thought to death. During his run for the White House, he told Joe Alsop that he didn't think he'd live to forty-five. He once asked his aide Ted Reardon, hired only because he had been a college roommate of Joe Jr., what was the best way to die. "Old age," Reardon replied without hesitation. "No." Jack replied, after thinking about it for a minute and possibly allowing his elder brother's fate to flit through his mind. "In war. That's the way to go."

He had this conversation in dozens of different ways with dozens of different people. There was a fleeting interest in the connection between death and martyrdom: Once he closely quizzed the civil war historian David Donald about whether Lincoln would have been considered a great President if he hadn't been assassinated. But most of the time it was just plain old death—how it would come, how to greet it, what it would be like. It gave him a certain aura: Jack could unman his can-do friends by talk-singing "September Song" on the Presidential yacht, as he sometimes did, in performances one of them compared to a death chant. When the subject came up with Senator George Smathers on a fishing trip, Jack wanted to know: "What's a better way to go, freezing to death, drowning, or getting shot?" Not long after, a few weeks before Dallas, when he was sunning himself one day at Palm Beach, he asked the same question again, this time of his friend the Massachusetts Congressman Torbert MacDonald. "What's the best way to go?" Without giving MacDonald a chance to speak, he quickly answered his own question. "A gun. You never know what's hit you. A gunshot is the perfect way."
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