Political Myth as Subjective Narrative: Some Interpretations and Understandings of John F. Kennedy
Author(s): Patricia K. Felkins and Irvin Goldman
Source: Political Psychology, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Sep., 1993), pp. 447-467
Published by: International Society of Political Psychology
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3791707
Accessed: 12-11-2017 23:01 UTC

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

International Society of Political Psychology is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Political Psychology
Political Myth as Subjective Narrative: Some Interpretations and Understandings of John F. Kennedy

Patricia K. Felkins
Department of Communication, Loyola University Chicago

Irvin Goldman
Department of Communication Studies, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario

The current discourse on mythic representation is explored in relation to the popular political myths associated with John F. Kennedy. Q-methodology is utilized as a framework to arrive at understandings of the underlying subjectivity of the Kennedy myth. A Q-sample of 52 statements was selected from a concourse of numerous biographies and critical accounts of the Kennedy years. A group of 34 people Q-sorted the 52 items. Three operant factors emerged. All of the factors show some crisis related to the loss of myth in contemporary social life. Factor I, the Defender of the Promise, epitomizes the narrative archetype and is indeed suggestive of the most enduring element of the Kennedy myth. The Unenchanted Skeptic (Factor II) reflects the cynicism and cultural impoverishment of the modern political discourse, while Factor III (Reformed Believer) captures the dialectic between faith and loss of faith in mythic representation.

KEY WORDS: Q-methodology; subjectivity; political mythology; John F. Kennedy; quantum theory.

INTRODUCTION

The narrative associated with John F. Kennedy and the Promise of a better world is part of American political mythology. This myth provides a provocative discourse for exploring the underlying subjectivity in the construction and understanding of mythical narratives in contemporary culture. Shifting the interpretation of myth from a philosophical to an empirical realm, we will explore the underlying meanings and substructures of mythic discourse associated with John Kennedy by utilizing Q-technique and its meth-
odology (see Stephenson, 1953, 1967; Brown, 1980, 1986; McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Our intention is to arrive at some understandings of the subjective narrative contained in the political mythology of John Kennedy. Fundamentally, political mythologies help us identify rudimentary planes of cultural experience and hence magnify our sensitivity to modern mythic discourses.

The discussion and research related to defining myth and interpreting mythic experience are the subject of continuing debate. On one hand, the so-called objective sciences challenge myth as lacking in validity and truth, while humanistic studies celebrate myth as central to culture and self. Our own framework embraces the latter epistemological outlook, and in fact challenges the grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984) associated with the modernist scientific episteme (Foucault, 1972). The signification of the mythic narrative within culture can be best understood by its multiplicity of meaning, creativity, diversity of language games, and structures of thought. Q-methodology with its quantum theoretical roots (Stephenson, 1982, 1983) provides us with a useful methodological device to tap into the miscellany of language games and hence the substructures of political mythology.

**CREATING POLITICAL MYTH**

Tudor (1972) discusses political myths as historical phenomena with two prominent characteristics: narration of events in dramatic form and promotion of some practical purpose. Certainly the emotional narrative related to John Kennedy is still being told in books, dramas, documentaries, and conversations. Myth collects symbols and reinforces values through vehicles such as a loosely related story, parable, or saga with a familiar plot and consistent characters. From a situational perspective, myth does not have meaning in itself but presents a context in which meaning occurs (O'Flaherty 1988, p. 35). Camelot, for instance, provides an abundant context for myth that includes a royal life style, gallant knights, and quests for truth and justice. Yet the revisionists have suggested a different tale about a more sinister Camelot in which the Kennedys attempt to manage events and images for their own political purposes. Vidal (1967) represents this revisionist view: “Today Kennedy dead has infinitely more force than Kennedy living. . . Part of the phenomenon is attributable to the race’s need for heroes. . . But mostly the legend is the deliberate creation of the Kennedy family and its clients” (p. 99).

The charge that political leaders try to exploit symbol and ritual is not new. Braden (1975) characterizes the myth-user as one who takes myth as “a strategy, a mood or a modus operandi” (p. 126). The potential for myth-making and myth-using is substantial in the incredible power and exposure of the American presidency, which has been described as a “breeding ground” for myth (Rossister, 1960).
In the case of John Kennedy, the opportunities for enhancing image and using myth are apparent. Kennedy invoked the power and identification with “good” myths, especially those associated with the political, spiritual, and artistic development of the United States. He also used strategic rhetorical references to presidents who have taken on mythic proportions—Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Franklin Roosevelt. John Kennedy’s speeches and public statements contain links to mythic archetypes. For example, Kennedy heralds the “New Frontier” with visions of the “last frontier,” the Old West, and calls for new “pioneers.” May (1991) characterizes this archetypal image of the Frontier as a major American myth with the “healing power” of the New Land, symbolizing the rebirth of humanity beyond the evil and injustice of the Old World.

Often dramatic contexts and rhetorical exigencies inspire mythical discourse as the most fitting response to a particular situation. While Camelot and the New Frontier inspire substantial discourse, the most demanding “rhetorical situation” (Bitzer, 1968) of the Kennedy years is the context of John Kennedy’s death. There was and continues to be an insatiable, emotional need for information, explanation, and eulogies. In his martyred death Kennedy himself inspires the most authentic mythic discourse. Joseph Campbell (1972) recalls John Kennedy’s funeral procession in a classic mythic context:

... the symbolism of the gun carriage bearing the flag-draped coffin, drawn by seven clattering gray steeds with blackened hoofs, another horse prancing slowly at their side, bearing an empty saddle with stirrups reversed... I saw before me, it seemed, the seven ghostly steeds of the gray Lord Death, here come to conduct the fallen hero youth on his last celestial journey. (p. 53)

Manchester (1967) also associates the assassination of John Kennedy with a common mythical theme—the ritualistic murder of the folk hero as a messenger to the gods.

Kennedy’s assassination is the tragic context in which archetypal images of life and death, the Promise and the loss of the Promise, dramatically collide. Reston (1964) described most poignantly the archetypal Promise of hope and renewal that became the essential mythic image of the Kennedy years: “What was killed in Dallas was not only the President, but the promise. The death of youth and the hope of youth, of the beauty and grace and the touch of magic” (p. 127). It is in his death that Kennedy is assured a place in the American mythos, not as much the man himself, but what he represented to many people—a rebirth of hope, a promise of youthful possibilities, and of individual commitment to create a better world.

The national mourning associated with Kennedy’s death might be compared to the Aristotelian concept of tragedy as an emotional catharsis. Stephenson (1967) assesses the emotional reactions and feelings associated with the Kennedy assassination as an example of “primitive comradeship” and communication in an absorbing drama where the participants enjoy the tears and pathos as “communication pleasure.” Stephenson (1967) argues that mass communication is best
understood as communication-pleasure when audiences subjectively manipulate or play with narratives and images to create an “imagination of reality” (Huizinga, 1950). Edelman (1988) suggests the “spectacle” of political news constructs and reconstructs reality as “observers and what they observe construct one another” (p. 1).

John Kennedy spoke “to the young in heart, regardless of age—to the stout in spirit, regardless of party” and asked Americans for a commitment to fight “tyranny, poverty, disease and war” and in return he promised them a kind of greatness in a New World: “The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world” (Sorensen, 1988, p. 14). This heroic vision, contrasted with Kennedy’s tragic death, completes the mythic drama.

**SUBJECTIVITY AND MEANING IN MYTH**

The objective scientific paradigms (see Stephenson, 1980) contrast myth with factual events as something arbitrary and unverifiable, “what cannot really exist” (Eliade, 1963, p. 2), lacking in historical and scientific validity, often fabricated to explain a belief or phenomenon, resolve a problem, or symbolize a particular worldview. This functional worldview of mythic analysis can be traced to Malinowski (1954) who reflected the standard late-nineteenth century outlook which positioned science as the container of truth. Myths, although entertaining, were fundamentally misrepresentations and faulty perceptions of reality.

Functionalists conceptualize and contain the study of myth within the narrow Newtonian outlook of causality and determinism. Rowland (1990), for example, contends that any definition of myth should be pragmatic, with a focus on the “work” that it does. Sebba (1962), as well, presents a typical functional assessment in stating that we create and value myths because they preserve social institutions and maintain a culture against disruption and defeat. Myths create unity and maintain stability by channeling “individual anxieties and impulses into a widely shared scenario to guide action” (Edelman, 1971, p. 54). Others such as Kolakowski (1989) take issue with the functionalist position and maintain that mythological creativity cannot be separated from science and technology because mythic thought itself is present in all forms of human discourse.

Moreover, this perspective toward myth does not elucidate any theory of meaning. Language and symbol are separated from the subject and evaluated in utilitarian terms. As Rushing (1990) explains, “the functional approach looks at myths externally, from the outside in, in terms of expedience, not internally, from the inside out, in terms of what myths are existentially” (p. 137). In
opposition to the functional outlook (Rowland, 1990), which defines myths as serious stories with heroic characters that occur outside normal historical time and place, Rushing (1990) argues for a broader interpretation of myth with a variety of formats and content, characters that are less than heroic, revelations of contemporary problems, and settings in real time and place. An interpretative approach to myth recognizes that myths are the way humans dream and seek answers to eternal questions. Eliade (1963) explains that the sacred aspects of myth are something that is “transhuman and transmundane, but accessible to human experience” (p. 140). As an alternative to the Newtonian structural-deductive outlook, we propose to engage the mythic narrative from a Q perspective with its basis in modern quantum theory of probabilistics and indeterminism (Stephenson, 1982, 1990). Q embraces the cultural interpretive framework and situates meaning as fundamental to its project.

Some of these meanings may focus on romantic accounts of the past as well as idealistic dreams or fateful models for the future. Myths help us to transcend our own experience and recognize our connections to a greater cosmic order. Myths also serve critical individual needs that include establishing personal identity, creating a sense of community, supporting moral values, and dealing with the mystery of creation (May, 1991). Jung (1959) explains that one of the most difficult tasks in personal development is finding and understanding our myths. Without myth we are “uprooted” from our past and present. Myths also help to structure essential meanings and maintain equilibrium through “life-supporting illusions” (Campbell, 1972), “metaphysical dreams” (Weaver, 1948), and “wish-phantasies” (Freud, 1963). Freud compares myth to the words of the poet or writer. As the writer allows the reader to enjoy secret daydreams and fantasies without reproach or shame, the myth allows mankind to experience pleasure and release pain in public dreams.

While others may challenge the truth of myth, those who have faith in myth seldom question the content or validity of the mythic framework of their personal and collective identity. Often myths are simply accepted, integrated into the total cultural mosaic and passed from generation to generation as part of a personal heritage that gives identity and meaning by linking past, present, and future. Indeed the origin of many parables, allegories and legends has been lost in a kind of “cultural amnesia” (O’Flaherty, 1988, p. 29) that does not recognize any need for justification or verification.

By probing the subjective substructures of myth evoked by a particular narrative content contained in the Kennedy Q-sample, as language-in-use, we come to understand the ways in which meaning is created in mythic discourse as forms-of-life (Wittgenstein, 1953). Within the interpretative framework of Q-methodology and its quantum theoretical base (Stephenson, 1982), our fundamental concern is with subjectivity, which is brought to light by operant factor structures.
METHOD

Our study uses Q-methodology to tap into the underlying subjectivity of the mythic narrative associated with John Kennedy. Q-methodology (see, Brown, 1980, 1986; McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Stephenson, 1953, 1967) establishes a framework to operationalize the cultural/interpretative approach (see also Goldman, 1990; Goldman & Emke, 1991) to myth in general and provides some understandings of the subjectivity of the political myth associated with John Kennedy in particular.

A Q-sample of 52 statements was selected from a concourse (see Stephenson, 1978) of numerous biographies and critical accounts of the Kennedy years and replicated according to the Fisherian design as given in Table I. Fisherian designs in Q-studies provide a logical frame of reference from the investigators' point of view and allow for the systematic replication of Q-samples (see Brown, 1980; Stephenson, 1953, 1967). For example, item 1, “John Kennedy should have withdrawn in favor of someone with the greatest possible maturity and experience. . . .” would fall into cell A (personal characteristics), D (negative), and H (presidential functions). Factor analysis is utilized in Q-methodology to determine how individuals classify themselves. Thus, factor analysis is free from a priori categorization, allowing for the evolution of natural operant effects within the phenomena.

A nonrandom sample of 34 people, including 16 men and 18 women, ranging in age from 19 to 65 were asked to Q-sort the 52 statements along a +5 (most like my view) to −5 (most unlike my view) continuum as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>+5</th>
<th>+4</th>
<th>+3</th>
<th>+2</th>
<th>+1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>−1</th>
<th>−2</th>
<th>−3</th>
<th>−4</th>
<th>−5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This Q-sorting technique is a modified rank-ordering procedure whereby the individual places the statement in the order that is significant from her or his standpoint. Persons were also asked to write comments on their +5 and −5 choices. The 34 Qsorts were then duly correlated and factor-analyzed (principal-components method) with varimax rotation (see JINNI program, Brown, 1980).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I. Fisherian Design for Statement Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Accomplishments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Private Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Presidential Function</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The three-factor solution is given in Table II. The standard error for a zero factor loading is given by the expressions $1/\sqrt{n}$ where $n$ equals the number of items in the Q-sample. For 52 statements, the $SE = 1/\sqrt{52} = .14$ and thus loadings in excess of $2.58 \times SE = 3.6$ are significant at the .01 level and indicated by the use of parentheses.

**RESULTS**

Out of the 34 individuals who participated in this study, 29 have significant loading on one of the three factors, five do not load significantly on any of the factors, and four are cross-loaded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>(.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>(.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>(.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>(.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>(.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>-.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>(.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>(.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>(.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>(.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>(.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>(.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>(.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>(.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>-.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>(.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>(.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>(.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the interpretation of Q-factors or types, each factor is represented as a hypothetical person or feeling state. This hypothetical person is a composite of the persons with significant loading on the factor. The array for each factor represents the Q-sort of this hypothetical person. Because of a common mean and standard deviation, the rankings can easily be converted into standard scores reflecting the differences in placement of various items. The factors are interpreted by looking at the overall array as well as the most salient statements (+5 +4 −5 −4) and the discriminating items (those with a difference of 2 or more pile scores in relation to the other two factors.) The statements from the Q-sample and their respective factor scores are given in Appendix A.

The dominant characteristics of the underlying feeling within a factor often suggest an appropriate name for that factor. In this case, the three factors are differentiated most clearly in their response to the mythic Promise associated with John Kennedy. The Promise is interpreted as the hope, optimism, and energy that President Kennedy represented, as well as a shared commitment to making the world a better place. This theme was introduced in Kennedy's acceptance speech and his *Inaugural Address* and the discourse is elaborated throughout the Kennedy presidency.

A general overview of the three factors reveals the following observations: Factor I (Defender of the Promise) has faith in myth; Factor II (Unenchanted Skeptic) is cynical; while Factor III (Reformed Believer) has lost faith in myth. While there are substantial differences in views toward Kennedy, there is also general agreement on some rhetorical elements of the Promise as indicated by items 51 and 44, the most significant positive consensus statements for the three factors. The three numbers after each statement represent the pile placement scores transformed from z scores for each of the three factors.

51. “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” John Kennedy’s words inspired this country in the early 1960s and continue to have great significance today. (5, 4, 4)

44. John Kennedy’s public speeches were eloquent and persuasive. His inaugural address is probably one of the most significant speeches of modern political oratory. (4, 3, 4)

**Factor 1: Defender of the Promise**

The largest number of persons loaded on Factor I. Fifteen of the loadings are in simple structure and four are cross-loaded. Age and political and religious affiliation are widely represented in this factor. Factor I epitomizes the dominant American legitimizing mythic discourse of the Promise, the idealized and legendary presidential image, which Stephenson (1967), for example, characterizes as essential for building national character. Unlike the critics who describe Kennedy as hypocritical, unfaithful, and power-hungry, Stephenson draws our attention to
Kennedy’s charismatic attributes, those elements that people will continue to talk about as communication-pleasure. What people saw in Kennedy, according to Stephenson, did not need to have a basis in reality because it symbolized “much that can never be articulated except in dreams or by poets” (p. 95).

The statements that are most representative of the Kennedy image (+5) for this factor are items 51 and 26.

51. And so, my fellow American, ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” John Kennedy’s words inspired this country in the early 1960s and continue to have great significance today. (5, 4, 4)

26. Because of John F. Kennedy, young people, in many cases for the first time, felt a connection and a concern with politics. (5, 0, 3)

“Inspiring” is perhaps the most frequent word in the comments of persons in Factor I in relation to the Inaugural Address and Kennedy’s rhetoric. They heard President Kennedy’s call for service and commitment and believed that they could make a difference in the world. This group also thought that Kennedy could have made a significant contribution if he had lived longer.

The sentiments represented by Factor I link the Promise in the Kennedy rhetoric directly to the loss of the Promise in Dallas. This is the essential drama in the mythic discourse. Youth, idealism, and hope are lost, but for the Defender of the Promise, the memories of what might have been continue to exist. Items 21 and 22 are discriminating items for Factor I. These statements both relate to the Promise and Kennedy’s tragic death.

22. What was killed in Dallas was not only the President, but the promise. The heart of the Kennedy legend is what might have been—he had barely begun—he had so much to give to his family, his nation, and his world. (4, −1, −1)

21. Kennedy somehow made himself a part of everyone’s world, in this country and abroad, without anyone realizing it. Only when a bullet crushed his life did people suddenly become aware how part of their own lives disappeared. And this feeling was universal. (4, 1, −1)

Comments supporting these items are made by some respondents who were born after Kennedy’s death: “He would have done so much. America today would have been totally different.” “The magic is never lost.” Statements from the older respondents are similar: “The world could have been a better place.” “The Promise he held for the future is void in America today.”

Item 15 (3, −5, −1), stating that “Kennedy was really one of our greatest Presidents,” is one of the discriminating items for this factor. While the Defender of the Promise supports Kennedy as president more than the other two factors do, those on Factor I still rank him as only a moderately successful leader. However, the statements which attack Kennedy and refer to him as unprepared, superficial, mediocre, and dangerous elicit strong defensive responses from persons in Factor I. The following statements are placed in the −5 column and seem especially bothersome to the respondents.
10. John Kennedy was a calculating, untried, overambitious and probably undeserving young stud who came from a very wealthy and much unloved family. (−5, 0, −3)

1. John Kennedy should have withdrawn in favor of someone with the greatest possible maturity and experience. It was too soon for him to try for the Presidency. He was too young. (−5, −2, −3)

The Defender of the Promise recognizes the value of youth in the Kennedy narrative and is upset that anyone would say Kennedy was too young to be president. The persons in this factor make strong defenses against the “lies” in item 10: “This is vile and reprehensible slander.” “They had hatred toward the Kennedy name.” “There was prejudice toward Catholics.” “He was a victim of the media.” One of the most distinct characteristics of this group is the angry statements with which they defend the man who for them represents the Promise. One of the most discriminating items for Factor I is item 6 (−4, 3, 2), stating that Kennedy was “sold to the voters like a box of soap flakes.” This superficial concept is rejected by those who defend the myth.

However, the factor is cross-loaded and therefore has some relationship with Factor III, The Reformed Believer. While this group can see Kennedy as the hero and the person who gives inspiration and direction to American ideals, there also may be a hint of contentious elements in the factor structure. When material is conflictual one may indeed find it situated in the neutral pile (Stephenson, 1954; Goldman, 1985). For example, statement 19, describing Kennedy as a “loving and devoted father,” is hidden in the neutral pile, and this may in part be a reaction to rumors about Kennedy and his affairs. Other discriminating items relating to superficial qualities and appearances are also placed in the neutral category. Item 41 (0, 4, 3) emphasizes the “Pied Piper magic,” and item 29 (0, 3, 3) describes a “prince” and “princess” and their life in Camelot, while item 13 (0, 4, 1) suggests the “appeal of Hollywood” and the “aura of royalty.” One would at least anticipate that Kennedy’s ability to instill “hope” and “pride” were fundamental to the Promise, yet item 34 (0, −2, −2) is also placed in the neutral column. When these types of elements appear within the structure of the factor, one wonders if the nobility and purity of the mythological hero are being called into question. The Defenders may be disappointed in some aspects of Kennedy’s image, but they continue to defend the Promise.

**Factor II: Unenchanted Skeptic**

Six persons define Factor II, and there are no cross-loadings. These people have no direct identification with the Promise. A revealing comment for this factor comes from a older businessman: “Magic? What magic?” The “truthful facts” of the revisionists simply confirm what the Unenchanted Skeptic has always felt. One person expresses concern about the rumors of Kennedy’s asso-
cation with Marilyn Monroe and other women: “Kennedy was involved in immoral and sinful acts.” Discriminating items for Factor II include the following:

11. John Kennedy was a total political animal—a relentless and persuasive pursuer of votes—prepared to do anything in his determination to become President. (−3, 2, −2)

50. John Kennedy was a political playboy, bright but superficial, energetic but incapable of following through; a compromiser who avoided the tough issues. (−4, 3, −4)

13. There was about John Kennedy the appeal of Hollywood, but it wasn’t just smile and profile. There was also the aura of royalty about Kennedy. (0, 4, 1)

The feelings expressed in Factor II show little respect for John Kennedy as a noble or moral person and indeed reflect the cynicism and “cultural impoverishment” (Habermas, 1984) of the modern political discourse. The factor is a critique of what Lasch (1979) has termed “politics as spectacle.” Lasch argues that while the Kennedy inaugural was the high point, “a spectacle that solidified the myth of Camelot before Camelot had come into being” (p. 147), the continuing discourse, however, was marked by a distinct decline. The myths and manufactured illusions in Lasch’s “culture of narcissism” (also see Goldman, 1990, 1991) are far from comforting. They are constituted in an indifference to reality, in a society where money and class determine political power (item 4).

16. John Kennedy was a legendary figure, and his name will be sung as long as men tell stories to each other about their past. (3, 5, −5)

4. John Kennedy studied for the Presidency; he had the money to find it and the family to help him find it. (−1, 5, 4)

Item 16 identifying Kennedy as a “legendary figure” is a discriminating statement for those in Factor II. The Unenchanted Skeptic uses the word “myth” to describe Kennedy. As one person explains, “The myth generated back then is still quite prevalent today.” This interpretation of myth, however, is a pejorative one. The Skeptic recognizes the myth as manufactured, empty and false. This group also rejects item 19 (0, −4, −1), relating to Kennedy as a family man and a “loving and devoted father.” As they matter-of-factly state, “Ideal American families do not live in the White House.”

One of the discriminating statements for this factor is item 26 (5, 0, 3), which suggests John Kennedy brought many young people into politics. The Skeptic does not acknowledge any specific youth angle and places this statement in the neutral pile with Kennedy’s foreign policy accomplishments (item 43) and his liberal bent (item 39). This group is indeed suspicious of Kennedy’s underlying motivations in relation to his achievements.

The −5 statements are especially important in emphasizing the Unenchanted Skeptic’s rejection of any mythic narrative related to John Kennedy and his exalted place in history and politics.
33. When John Kennedy spoke to the American people, they knew he was sincere—that he spoke the truth. Kennedy made politics once again the highest of professions and not just a fabric of fraud and sham. (3, -5, -5)

15. I think it is important that John Kennedy be remembered for what he did rather than how he died. J.F.K. was really one of our greatest Presidents. (3, -5, -1)

As item 33 illustrates, the Unenchanted Skeptic would probably agree with Lasch’s observation that modern political life has become impression management, a situation where credibility replaces truth. Lasch (1979) describes Kennedy in these terms, “No other president exemplified so completely the subordination of policy to national prestige, to the appearance and illusion of national greatness” (p. 148).

**Factor III: Reformed Believer**

Four of the individual loadings are in simple structure on this factor and four have cross-loadings. This comment represents the attitudes of the Reformer Believer: “I was captivated then; now I have a much more negative view.” We don’t know exactly when the people associated with Factor III stopped believing. Perhaps loss of belief is part of a process of maturation. However, many of these people still seem to need a faith in myth.

Four out of the eight individuals on this factor also cross-loaded with Factor I (Defender of the Promise), which indeed captures the dialectic between faith and loss of faith as a fundamental condition of the modern narrative (Jung, 1958; May 1991). It appears as though some are still struggling with their need to believe in the Promise and their sense of betrayal in the specific actions of John Kennedy. The following discriminating items for this factor show the conflict between an appealing style and unpopular actions.

45. What the Kennedy Administration did was actually less significant than its manner of doing it—the Kennedy “style” was most appealing. (-2, 0, 2)

47. Reactions to the Bay of Pigs could hardly have been worse if President Kennedy had sent the Marines into Cuba to overthrow Castro. Kennedy clearly made a serious mistake. (-2, -2, 3)

The +5 statements for this group reflect their recognition of the manipulation of image and symbol and the superficial aspects of John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy. These responses show a more objective assessment of the Kennedys and may be affected by some of the revisionist perspectives.

24. John Kennedy evoked much sympathy in female hearts by his tousled hair and boyish looks. During the Kennedy years, American politics became America’s favorite movie and Kennedy was a superstar. (-1, 2, 5)

38. Jacqueline Kennedy, of course, played a significant role in shaping John Kennedy’s taste—and the nation’s taste—during the Kennedy years. (-1, 1, 5)
The Reformed Believers might say that they were “intoxicated” with the spirit of the Kennedy years. “We were so proud,” one comments. Perhaps what disappoints the Reformed Believer most is that President Kennedy was not as sincere and noble as they thought. Because of this, they reluctantly reject the man and the myth. The −5 statements for this group illustrate the rejection of Kennedy as an honest politician as well as a legendary leader.

33. When John Kennedy spoke to the American people, they knew that he was sincere—that he spoke the truth. Kennedy made politics once again the highest of professions not just a fabric of fraud and sham. (3, −5 −5)

16. John Kennedy was a legendary figure, and his name will be sung as long as men tell stories to each other about their past. (3, 5, −5)

Note that both the Skeptic and the Reformed Believer place item 33, related to Kennedy’s sincerity, in the −5 column. The Reformed Believer agrees with the Skeptic, but the motivations are quite different. The placement of item 16 helps to explain this difference. The Reformed Believer places item 16 on the Kennedy “legend” in the −5 column. The Skeptic gives the legend +5 placement. The Reformed Believer will not sing Kennedy’s name again, even though, as the Skeptic recognizes, others will.

Nevertheless, this rejection of the man and the legend by persons on Factor III may also in part be conflictual. While on Factor I there was some avoidance of questions relating to Kennedy’s morals and lack of substance, the respondents on Factor III may also be struggling with some of their positive feelings toward Kennedy by placing them in the neutral pile. For example, item 36 (2, −2, 0) suggests that “Kennedy was a good man and a truly religious man,” while item 17 (2, 2, 0) portrays him as “synonymous with the United States; his victories were American Victories.” The sense of loss and disappointment that characterizes the factor, is reminiscent of the spiritual and mythological crisis confronting contemporary political and cultural life that Jung (1958) so aptly describes.

DISCUSSION

Results show that while the narrative of John Kennedy does not in itself have the grand qualities of the classical definition of myth, there are several points at which links to mythic archetypes, such as the death of the young hero and the Promise of a New World, do influence our perceptions of the narrative as myth. Other mythic elements of the Kennedy narrative, such as parallels to Camelot, appear to be more secondary for these respondents. For example, Camelot never inspired the devotion and sacrifice of the Promise. While the concept of the Promise of a better world may have been present in the mythical Camelot, the representation of the “Kennedy Camelot” did not have the power or
authenticity connected to the primary archetype. For the Unenchanted Skeptic (Factor II) and the Reformed Believer (Factor III), there is only a cynical recognition of a manufactured Camelot, which is most explicit in item 29 (0, 3, 3). The Defender of the Promise (Factor I) places this statement in the neutral category. Even for those who believe in myth, Camelot is a fairy tale, a fantasy. As Campbell (1988) explains, adults need a “sturdier mythology” (p. 138).

For the individuals in this study, the Promise is the sturdiest aspect of the Kennedy myth. The ideological narrative of the Promise is not significantly damaged by the negative publicity that affects the more superficial image of John Kennedy himself. Even in the Reformed Believer and the Skeptic, there is some recognition of the power of the mythical Promise to inspire devotion and a sense of renewal among some believers. Much of the context of the Kennedy narrative has faded or disappeared completely. Yet the content is both implicitly and explicitly constituted as an aspect of American popular culture. The Promise is safely in the realm of myth, which transcends Kennedy the man.

As Campbell (1949) notes, “The symbols of mythology are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented or permanently suppressed” (p. 4). Universal archetypes have always existed and they exert power, even if they are applied on a more local level. From a traditional perspective, John Kennedy may not have represented a grand myth or an ideal mythical hero, but he did invoke some regional interest in universal mythic archetypes. He pointed clearly toward the Promise.

Some genuine mythic experience or association with archetypal elements such as the Promise is evident in Factor I (Defender of the Promise) and Factor III (Reformed Believer). The Defender of the Promise continues to hold on to that mythic experience and belief in the Promise against growing opposition. The Reformed Believer rejects the initial mythic experience as being inauthentic and false. Those individuals associated with each of the three factors might be seen as representing various forms-of-life in the social construction of modern mythologies: faith, scepticism, and loss.

If we take a broader interpretative view of myth in relation to contemporary problems and circumstances, we see some indicators of the eclipse of myth in our society. Factors II (Unenchanted Skeptic) and III (Reformed Believer) are especially problematic in relation to the disillusion of myth in the modern world. May (1991) emphasizes that much of the crisis in our culture is a result of the disintegration and loss of myth, which helps us make sense of the world. Campbell (1994) also stresses the split in the human psyche when the “great coordinating mythologies” become known as “lies” (p. 388). This split is not only of the individual from the community, but also of the individual from his or her own self.

All of the factors show some crisis related to loss of myth. The crisis of myth and the fragility of mythic experience in the modern world touches Factor
I. That is, the persons on this factor can best be identified not as "Believers" or "Followers," but rather as "Defenders of the Promise." The Defenders of the Promise are idealistic in evaluating John Kennedy. Yet they are bothered by a recurrent feeling that the Kennedy narrative may not be as it appears.

The Unenchanted Skeptic of Factor II conveys an aura of cynicism and is perhaps exemplary of the moral and spiritual crisis that envelops all of our institutions. In some sense the factor has truth-value in portraying the loss of virtue in contemporary culture. This group is not open to the mythic experience associated with the Promise. Yet while they reject romantic hero myths, they may still hold the myths of science, progress, and rationality as valid truth claims.

Factor III, the Reformed Believers, are struggling with their feelings of loss and betrayal in the Kennedy myth. They confront a "crisis of representation" (Boyne & Rattansi, 1990) when their old methods of defining and ordering the world are no longer credible. They once believed in the mythology of the Promise, but much has changed and the halos are gone.

As we begin to witness an ever-increasing crisis in our national political identity, with professional mythmaking and self-appointed shamans, we search for authentic myths but find shallow manufactured copies. Moreover, when genuine links between the natural and the social realm grow weaker, we lose our sense of coordination and mystery. Pearce (1989) explains that any sense of "mystery" is difficult in modernist communication, as we abandon our traditions in the name of "progress" and dismiss ancient wisdom as mere superstition.

The meanings associated with political myths in our "postmodern culture" are certainly diverse, fragmented, and complex, yet one can illustrate that the underlying subjectivity of mythic experience and communication has both form and structure. Q technique with its quantum theoretical base provides us with a useful epistemological framework. In both methodology and theory, Q allows one to grasp the range of cultural meanings and understand the structures of subjectivity identified with the political mythic narrative of John F. Kennedy and the Promise.

---

**Appendix A. The Q Sample and Factor Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor Scores</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. John Kennedy should have withdrawn in favor of someone with the greatest possible maturity and experience. It was too soon for him to try for the Presidency. He was too young.</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
2. The Kennedy Administration—it was really quite a Roman administration—great dinners, great tours, great redecoration. It was the style of a man "playing the role" of being President and not a man being President.

3. President Kennedy sounded the call for civil rights. He cared deeply about the plight of the Blacks in America and placed himself in the very thick of the fight for equal rights.

4. John Kennedy studied for the Presidency; he had the money to find it and the family to help him find it.

5. John Kennedy, as President, was generally a mediocre Chief Executive and occasionally a dangerous one.

6. John Kennedy was sold to the voters like a box of soap flakes. The advertising agencies and the mass media helped to propel a charming—but thoroughly unprepared—young man into the most important job in the world.

7. Americans would never have walked on the moon if John Kennedy had not pushed the space programs in the early '60s. Americans owe Kennedy much credit for this historic landmark.

8. The Kennedys—all those wondrously wealthy people—rode around in limousines, wearing glittering jewels and ballgowns, and just looking rich. They had the glamour, the razzle-dazzle quality that only money can buy.

9. John Kennedy was merely the representation of his father's political ambitions. Indeed, during the Kennedy Presidency, the "Kennedy Dynasty" achieved a power and prominence on the national scene seldom matched in American politics.

10. John Kennedy was a calculating, untried, overambitious and probably undeserving young stud who came from a very wealthy and much unloved family.

11. John Kennedy was a total political animal—a relentless and persuasive pursuer of votes—prepared to do anything in his determination to become President.

12. John Kennedy's obsession with "toughness" and power increased the possibilities of a nuclear war between the U.S. and Russia. In 1962, Kennedy led the U.S. to the very brink of destruction.

13. There was about John Kennedy the appeal of Hollywood, but it wasn't just smile and profile. There was also the aura of royalty about Kennedy.

14. John, Bobby, Teddy—as far as the public is concerned one Kennedy is the same as another Kennedy.

15. I think it is important that John Kennedy be remembered for what he did rather than how he died. J.F.K. was really one of our greatest Presidents.

16. John Kennedy was a legendary figure, and his name will be sung as long as men tell stories to each other about their past.
17. Mr. Kennedy was synonymous with the United States; his victories were American victories; his health was American health; his smile, his family, his hobbies, his likes and dislikes, became symbolic of the country. 2 2 0

18. I feel suddenly old without Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy in the White House. Not only by ability, but by sheer verve and joy, the Kennedys imparted their youth to everyone and put a sheen on our life that made it more youthful than it was. The magic is gone. -1 -3 1

19. John F. Kennedy was a loving and devoted father. The few glimpses Americans caught of him holding Caroline or playing with John-John are among the most treasured memories of John Kennedy. 0 -4 -1

20. With J.F.K. courage became a bit more fashionable. We discovered new recesses of chivalry, and adventure was not dead. 0 0 0

21. Kennedy somehow made himself a part of everyone’s world, in this country and abroad, without realizing it. Only when a bullet crushed his life did people suddenly become aware how part of their own lives disappeared. And this feeling was universal. 4 1 -1

22. What was killed in Dallas was not only the President, but the promise. The heart of the Kennedy legend is what might have been—he had barely begun—he had so much to give to his family, his nation, and his world. 4 -1 -1

23. The Cuban Missile Crisis ended as a victory for Kennedy, perhaps the most formidable one of his Administration. It was John Kennedy’s finest hour. 1 0 2

24. John Kennedy evoked much sympathy in female hearts by his tousled hair and boyish looks. During the Kennedy years, American politics became America’s favorite movie and Kennedy was a superstar. -1 2 5

25. I am still deeply affected by the remembrances of John Kennedy. I shall never lose the sorrow I feel for his tragic death. 3 -3 -3

26. Because of John F. Kennedy, young people, in many cases for the first time, felt a connection and a concern with politics. 5 0 3

27. John Kennedy seemed, at times, like a young professor whose manner was adequate for the classroom, but somehow too intellectual, too serious and too remote for the reality of political life. -3 -1 1

28. Vigor, or “Vigah” as he supposedly pronounced it, became a humorous byword during the Kennedy Administration, but it was accurate. -1 1 0

29. John Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline—their entire way of life was much like Camelot—a handsome young prince and his beautiful princess living in a shining white castle amid wealth and fame. 0 3 3

(continued)
### Appendix A. (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Factor Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. John Kennedy’s calm bravery when a Japanese destroyer sliced his PT boat in half, his extraordinary feat of towing one of his crew to refuge—this was one of the authentic passages of heroism in the war.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. John Kennedy made a great contribution in giving art, literature and music a place of dignity and honor in our national life.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. During the Kennedy years, Washington seemed engaged in a more collective effort to make itself brighter, gayer, more intellectual, more resolute. It was a golden interlude. Kennedy held out such promise of hope—euphoria reigned and for a moment we thought the future was unlimited.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. When John Kennedy spoke to the American people, they knew that he was sincere—that he spoke the truth. Kennedy made politics once again the highest of professions not just a fabric of fraud and sham.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. John Kennedy made me proud and hopeful to be an American—something I had not felt for many years.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. John Kennedy was a courageous, young hero—the slayer of the dragons of discrimination, poverty, ignorance and war.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. John F. Kennedy was a good man and a truly religious man. His choice of religious affiliation should never have been a campaign issue.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. For all his vitality, John Kennedy had both a frailness and a sensitivity which set him somewhat apart from the extroverted and gregarious family. He may even have been a little lonely at times.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Jacqueline Kennedy, of course, played a significant role in shaping John Kennedy’s taste—and the nation’s taste—during the Kennedy years.</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. John Kennedy was the truest and oldest kind of liberal: the free man with the free mind.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. He was a Catholic—by heritage, habit and conviction—and a friend of Cardinals.</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. John Kennedy possessed a Pied Piper magic over the street crowds. Everywhere, they reached out to touch him. Indeed, Kennedy seemed to arouse more emotional reaction with his personal presence than with the logic of his speeches.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. It should be obvious from the crowds John Kennedy attracted, the applause he stimulated, the devotion of his followers, that Kennedy was an extraordinary leader.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. John Kennedy’s greatest accomplishments were in the areas of foreign policy, not only in improving U.S.-Soviet relations, but also strengthening our alliances in Europe and South America. Kennedy was a true diplomat and a man of peace.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. John Kennedy’s public speeches were eloquent and persuasive. His inaugural address is probably one of the most significant speeches of modern political oratory.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Appendix A. (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. What the Kennedy Administration did was actually less significant than its manner of doing it—the Kennedy “style” was most appealing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. John Kennedy was the most civilized President we have had since Thomas Jefferson. He was a cultured man who applauded the arts and sought intellectual company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. Reactions to the Bay of Pigs could hardly have been worse if President Kennedy had sent the Marines into Cuba to overthrow Castro. Kennedy clearly made a serious mistake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. During the Kennedy years, the rhetoric of imperialism—of personal emperorship—was so exalted that we grew to cherish it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. John Kennedy’s bright charm was only skin deep; underneath there was a core of steel—metallic, sometimes cold, sometimes unbending, unusually durable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. John Kennedy was a political playboy, bright but superficial, energetic but incapable of following through; a compromiser who avoided the tough issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51. “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” John Kennedy’s words inspired this country in the early 1960s and continue to have greater significance today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. John Kennedy, his wife and two children represented the ideal American family.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES


Reston, J. (1965, November 15). What was killed was not only the president but the promise. New York Times magazine.


