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PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S IMAGE IN POPULAR  
CULTURE AND THE CLASSROOM

CHARLES L. TAYLOR

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Arts

May, 1998

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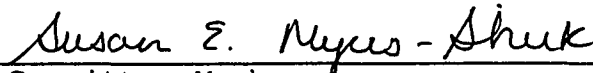
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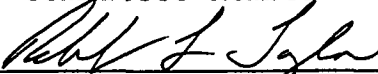
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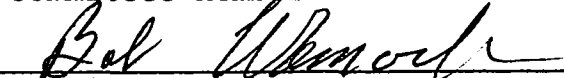
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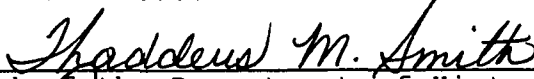
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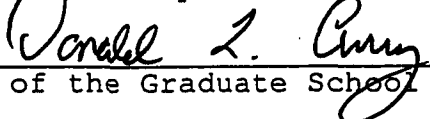
Committee Member



Committee Member



Head of the Department of History



Dean of the Graduate School

To  
my mother, "Morey,"  
The embodiment of good samaritanship  
and  
my father, Paul T. Taylor, deceased for many years  
but still alive in memory

## ABSTRACT

### PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S IMAGE IN POPULAR CULTURE AND THE CLASSROOM

Charles L. Taylor

The purpose of this research is to examine an enduring Kennedy mystique and develop a teaching strategy that helps people to understand a powerful mythology that holds John Kennedy as an exalted national hero. Surveys consistently rank Kennedy as the most popular President among the general public, and President Kennedy remains prominent in the media, literature, and popular culture while the memory of many other presidents has faded into obscurity.

The thesis of this research is that despite critical assessment of John Kennedy's presidency offered by many historians, a powerful mythology holds President Kennedy as an exalted national hero. The popular mythology originated in the conscious use of modern media and by Kennedy's assassination. By becoming more aware of mythic dimensions of JFK's image, students can however develop a more historical understanding of the Kennedy presidency.

This study relied on diverse primary sources such as

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The New York Times, Dallas Morning News, U.S. News and World Report, while also utilizing comments of tourists at The Sixth Floor Museum, in Dallas, Texas, photographs of President Kennedy and his family, and the motion picture, JFK. Major secondary sources include Kennedy biographers Thomas Reeves, Richard Reeves, Theodore White, and William Manchester.

JFK and his associates carefully laid the seeds of a powerful popular image. Kennedy manipulated the print media through rewards and punishments and skillfully used television, projecting himself as a heroic, poised, likeable, and intelligent figure. President Kennedy's TV acumen made him into more of a celebrity and less of a traditional politician.

Kennedy's assassination and symbolic actions during the civil rights movement added to JFK's existing heroic persona. Photographs with blacks and emotionally compelling messages made President Kennedy appear as a paternalistic liberator to African Americans. Moreover, his slaying evoked a sympathy that circumvented a more critical analysis of John Kennedy's death, further promoting him as a martyr and great man.

The teaching model in this research focuses on factors that promoted JFK's heroic persona. Moreover, various pedagogical methods in this study help people to understand



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the nature of Kennedy's heroism and what this heroic persona suggests about contemporary politics.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would have not been possible without the help of many wonderful people. I deeply appreciate the committee involvement and scholarliness of Dr. Richard Moser, Dr. Robert Taylor, Dr. Susan Myers-Shirk, Dr. Thaddeus Smith, and Dr. Robert Womack. Dr. Moser has been especially helpful in suggesting multiple revisions along the way. He has demonstrated much patience and wisdom.

Some individuals from outside the Middle Tennessee State University campus have also been of great assistance. I appreciate the suggestions and editorial comments from Dr. Jim Bryant, Professor Henry Hood, and Ms. Kristin Fabro.

This study was augmented by data from the Sixth Floor and JFK Conspiracy Museums in Dallas, Texas. The staff members from each respective location were thoughtful, courteous and helpful.

I would like to extend heartfelt appreciation to Ms. Imogene Wainwright. She performed miracles in her word processing and demonstrated remarkable patience during the many editorial changes.

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## CHAPTER 1

### RESEARCH GOALS AND SIGNIFICANCE

While the memory of many of the forty-two presidents has faded into obscurity, that of John F. Kennedy remains prominent. Television programs, movies, magazines and newspapers still focus considerable attention on the young, fallen leader. It is still commonplace for Americans to express strong feelings about him. Although some citizens hold negative feelings about Kennedy, the overall general public views him in a very positive light. In evaluating Kennedy's substantive accomplishment, professional historians and scholars have not viewed the former commander-in-chief favorably. The thesis of this research is that despite the critical assessment of John F. Kennedy's presidency by historians, a powerful mythology holds President Kennedy as an exalted national hero. The popular mythology originated in the conscious use of modern media and was decisively shaped by a consumer culture and the Kennedy assassination. By becoming more aware of the mythic dimensions of Kennedy's image, students can develop a historical and critical understanding of the Kennedy presidency.

To understand better how President Kennedy's image was

forged, chapter two examines the concept of heroism and to what degree these qualities were demonstrated by Kennedy. Chapter three analyzes the development of John Kennedy's legendary status by evaluating how television and popular literature shaped the president's image.

To gain insight into the popular shaping of JFK's image, chapter four examines the Kennedy assassination and the public's reaction to it and chapter five provides teaching strategies regarding the Kennedy myth. The concluding chapter analyzes problems in teaching the persona of President Kennedy and propose teaching objectives and exercises to assist students studying Kennedy within a historical context.

This study of the JFK legend is significant in that it focuses upon the popular understanding of the Camelot President. This examination of popular consciousness and memory makes a unique contribution to the research of President Kennedy because few scholars have focused on this area. Thomas Brown's History of an Image assessed the image of JFK but his work focused more upon the events that shaped the Kennedy legend after the President's death and less upon the man.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Wicker also examined the John Kennedy persona but lacked a scholarly approach since his work resembled more of a testimonial to President Kennedy.<sup>2</sup> This

project is also significant in that it provides an intersection between political history and an educational analysis that will promote a more critical knowledge of Kennedy and his presidency.

#### POPULAR VIEWS OF KENNEDY

Opinion surveys consistently rank Kennedy near the top of presidents. Responses from polls conducted by the Gallup organization in 1975 and 1983 provide convincing evidence of the disparity between the popular and scholarly understanding of JFK. When asked which three presidents the respondents considered as the greatest president, the 1975 poll found that 52 percent listed Kennedy, giving him the highest presidential ranking, three percentage points above Lincoln. In the 1983 Gallup Poll taken eight years later, survey participants were asked which of the former presidents they would like to see in office again, Kennedy overwhelmingly received the most votes. An amazing 30 percent of the population sample selected JFK, 20 percentage points higher than the second-place choice, Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>3</sup>

In a survey conducted exclusively for this research, college students at Middle Tennessee State University also rated Kennedy high, though not as favorably as in the



previously mentioned questionnaires. In this poll, respondents were asked to list the five greatest presidents. Participants rated Kennedy as a close second behind Abraham Lincoln. Interestingly enough, JFK more than doubled the point totals of historians' perennial favorites, Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt, while scoring almost 30 percent better than Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>4</sup>

A study of officials at East Texas Baptist University suggests that well-educated professionals held opinions of Kennedy similar to the general public. Few in this study recognized the many flaws in President Kennedy's legislative performance and relationship with Congress. Rather, people interviewed often mentioned his successes in the space and physical fitness programs. Also, a large number of individuals credited JFK, not LBJ with the successful passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.<sup>5</sup>

Professional historians' appraisal of Kennedy's presidential performance differed sharply from that of the general public. Forrest MacDonald, one of the most authoritative presidential scholars, noted that Lincoln, Washington, and Franklin Roosevelt head almost all lists of scholars, while Jefferson, Wilson, Jackson, Truman, and Theodore Roosevelt made up another group rated highly.<sup>6</sup>

Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing compiled an

exhaustive and rigorous study that rated the effectiveness of respective presidents in Greatness in the White House. In a 1982 survey, historians ranked JFK thirteenth while scholars in a 1982 Chicago Tribune and a 1981 Porter questionnaire rated John F. Kennedy fourteenth. Murray-Blessing and the Chicago Tribune polls placed JFK in the "above average" category while the Porter sampling listed the former president in a middle group.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, the general public and professional historians viewed the young leader's performance in a much different light. Though professors and researchers regarded Kennedy above the norm, their appraisals pale in comparison to that of the typical American citizen.

#### HISTORIANS' ASSESSMENT OF KENNEDY

Kennedy received criticism from historians for foreign policy decisions and diplomacy, legislative skills, civil rights, and personal morality. As time elapsed after JFK's death, scholars found increasing fault with many of his executive decisions. Indeed, Kennedy's policies in Vietnam have influenced historians' views of his presidency. David Halberstam, who covered the Asian conflict as a newspaper reporter for the New York Times and later authored The Best and the Brightest, severely criticized JFK's decisions in

Southeast Asia. Halberstam's title was written tongue-in-cheek. "Best and Brightest," two adjectives used frequently by reporters during the early days of JFK's presidency, described the ivy-league inner circle of advisors in the administration. Athletic, charming, cultured, and intellectual, the President's close advisors were perceived by some as supermen. Halberstam shattered this perception by asking how a group of men so gifted could get themselves and the United States into something as blatantly wrong as the Vietnam War. Halberstam saw it as ironic that a president who prided himself on being so informed, could move forward on a failed plan with so little understanding of the conflict.<sup>8</sup>

David Halberstam scathingly attacked the immorality of the Kennedy administration in its escalation of the Vietnam War. President Kennedy, he reported, was unwilling to be candid about the conflict in Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup> Halberstam also suggested that the moral complexities of the war in Southeast Asia severely tested Kennedy's moral philosophy.

Halberstam suggested that a combination of vanity and naivete clouded the judgment of the "best and brightest." By virtue of their intellectual qualities, academic backgrounds, and social standing, members of the Kennedy inner circle assumed that they could act boldly and

rationally. The Kennedy administration exposed its ignorance by not seeing the situation in Southeast Asia as different and unique from previous foreign policy conflicts.<sup>10</sup>

Like Halberstam, Lewis J. Paper, author of The Promise and Performance, pointed to the lack of openness shown by President Kennedy in communicating with the general public and his failure to educate people on the subject of Vietnam. By being less than frank and restricting access to information, Kennedy felt freer to make policy and hoped to prevent opposing groups from forming.<sup>11</sup> Paper also stated that JFK said he would bring troops back to America, but only after the 1964 election.<sup>12</sup>

David Steigerwald, author of The Sixties and End of Modern America, also questioned John Kennedy's motives and his rationale for keeping troops in Southeast Asia. Steigerwald claimed that Kennedy may have been obsessed with prestige, leading to his faulty thinking.<sup>13</sup>

In The Press and the Presidency, Tom Tebel and Sarah Myles Watts also criticized Kennedy's lack of candor with the press regarding the United States' involvement in Vietnam. As the authors pointed out, Kennedy did not want the American public to know the war was widening. Moreover, the researchers, claimed that President Kennedy went against

the wishes of his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, and made it difficult for members of the media to watch operations in the field.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most severe criticisms of Kennedy's Vietnam policies came from his former Secretary of State, Robert McNamara. McNamara, an architect of the Southeast Asia involvement himself, claimed that President Kennedy "misjudged geopolitical intentions of adversaries and exaggerated dangers to the United States."<sup>15</sup> The former cabinet member claimed the Kennedy administration "underestimated the power of nationalism to motivate people to die and fight for their beliefs and values."<sup>16</sup> McNamara claimed the Kennedy administration misjudged friends as well as enemies. This, he maintained, reflected America's "profound ignorance of culture, politics, and leaders."<sup>17</sup> Finally, McNamara confessed that President Kennedy's team received faulty information even though they read an abundance of materials.<sup>18</sup>

John Kennedy's death may have spared him from receiving much of the blame for Vietnam in part because Kennedy died before the Southeast Asian War became a public issue. Kennedy scholars have often refused to treat him so gently, however. These historians, unlike the general public, blamed United States' involvement in Vietnam on John

Kennedy, since he escalated the number of American troops and supply levels.

In summary, many historians gave Kennedy low marks for his performance in Vietnam. JFK's failure to ask tough questions and to recognize South Vietnam as different and unique from Europe led the United States to disaster. Furthermore, his refusal to educate the public on the potential risks and losses in Southeast Asia and his inability to detach his own aspirations and vanity from policymaking were also serious political errors. Still Lyndon Johnson and Nixon, not Kennedy, remain the perceived villains in popular conceptions of the war in Indochina.

Historians have also criticized John Kennedy's dealings with Congress. Kennedy demonstrated an encyclopedic knowledge of problems, an exhilarating curiosity, and understanding of issues that overwhelmed and energized his circle of supporters and the general public. These factors alone proved to be insufficient in passing legislation through the Congress. Kennedy's lack of conviction for what he advocated may have damaged prospects for legislative victory.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Thomas Wicker, author of JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality on Politics, pointed out that JFK failed in his relationship with the legislative branch because he was unorganized and unprepared.<sup>20</sup>

Thomas Wicker noted that Kennedy's knowledge of politics was more focused on winning elections than on dealing with congressional leaders. One of JFK's problems was that he did not know how to deal with legislators on an individual basis and understand that congressmen's votes were often based on their own self-interests.<sup>21</sup>

Wicker also stated that senators liked, admired, and even envied Jack Kennedy. Still, they were not sure that he cared about the things that truly concerned the members of Congress. Wicker further questioned President Kennedy's maneuvering skills. Clearly, his work habits as a senator were questionable and his reputation followed him into office, hurting his prestige.<sup>22</sup>

Victor Lasky, author of The Man and the Myth, also strongly criticized JFK's legislative record. He claimed that nothing of substance passed through Congress in the early years of the Kennedy Administration. His legislation was rejected by both Republicans and Democrats. Few times in American history, according to Lasky, have presidential proposals been so harshly turned down.<sup>23</sup>

In John F. Kennedy's 13 Great Mistakes in the White House, Malcolm E. Smith also took aim at the former president's record with Congress. He claimed that Kennedy's team hastily proposed legislation with too many bills put

before the legislature too quickly. In one year, for example, the administration wrote 405 separate proposals for Congressional enactment. This proved to be unwise since the hurriedly written bills were filled with faulty calculations.<sup>24</sup> Finally, despite JFK's lofty ideals and myriad proposals, few legislative acts passed through Congress.

In assessing the performance of JFK's presidency, historians also criticized his conduct at the Vienna Conference with Nikita Khrushchev. One of the main issues covered at this high profile summit was the status of Berlin. The former Soviet premier, who threatened to reach a separate agreement with Germany and block western access to Berlin, met resistance from Kennedy. In The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, Michael Beschloss suggested that Kennedy overreacted and demonstrated naivete by believing Khrushchev when he was told "that Russia would not be the first country to break the voluntary nuclear testing agreement." in which both had agreed to stop the explosion of certain weapons.<sup>25</sup>

In President Kennedy, Profile of Power, Richard Reeves also found fault with JFK's performance in Vienna. He claimed that Khrushchev dominated Kennedy. President Kennedy did not know how to deal with Communist rhetoric and this



may have contributed to his overreaction at various times. To compound matters even further, John Kennedy had taken large amounts of demerol for back pain and the side effects may have impaired his judgement.<sup>26</sup>

Malcolm Smith argued that Kennedy was caught off guard by the mention of Berlin and the scope and intensity of his deliberations with Khrushchev, especially in the conference's first week.<sup>27</sup>

Though DeGaulle advised Kennedy not to be intimidated by Khrushchev, Louis Paper, author of The Promise and Performance, pointed out that the Soviet inner circle concluded that John Kennedy was "an indecisive young man."<sup>28</sup> According to Paper's assessment, Kennedy was an immature commander-in-chief who needed to grow up.

No policy decision of JFK's has drawn historians' criticism like his handling of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. While scholars have disagreed among themselves about the degree of his blunders in the Vietnam escalation and at the Vienna Conference, a consensus of experts blamed him for failed policy in Cuba. President Kennedy's accusations against his own personal advisers for providing him with inaccurate misinformation have been judged as an attempt to shift blame.

Kennedy was also criticized for his performance in the

Bay of Pigs incident when he changed fundamental plans for the sake of public opinion. President Kennedy moved the invasion to a less populated and accessible site to the media. JFK erroneously concluded that military use of Cuban exiles would make the invasion less sensational, while making the United States appear as more of a neutral party and less of a belligerent one.<sup>29</sup>

Thomas Reeves, author of A Question of Character, also criticized Kennedy's judgment in the Bay of Pigs incident. He claimed that Jack Kennedy "rejected moral and legal objections to an invasion, demonstrated an almost macho temperament, and became involved just enough in military operations to make them worse."<sup>30</sup> Reeves, like Smith, claimed that Kennedy blamed others for the failed policy. Last, he used known lawbreakers to act in an official capacity on behalf of the government by using mafia figures to carry out CIA activities.<sup>31</sup>

Historians, unlike many African-Americans, did not see John F. Kennedy as a great champion of civil rights. In Bearing the Cross, David Garrow noted that President Kennedy did not even see Martin Luther King during his first seven months in office. Additionally, he broke many campaign promises that he had made to King. At the same time, Garrow emphasized the boldness that Lyndon Johnson (not JFK) used

in confronting George Wallace's abuse of blacks' voting rights and his skillfulness in dealing with Congress.<sup>32</sup>

In Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson, and Civil Rights, Mark Stern portrayed JFK as a man who lacked conviction in civil rights. He said that Kennedy was a moderate and a pragmatist, primarily motivated by re-election.<sup>33</sup> In In His Steps: Lyndon Johnson and the Kennedy Mystique, Paul K. Henggeler acknowledged President Kennedy's popularity with the African Americans, but also pointed out that the President was reluctant to support civil rights legislation because of a lack of support in the Senate. Henggeler also credited Lyndon Johnson, not JFK, as the primary achiever in minority advancement.<sup>34</sup>

In President Kennedy, Richard Reeves, like Stern, projected Kennedy as an apprehensive supporter of civil rights legislation, who was concerned about how his philosophical stance would affect his political popularity. According to Reeves, Kennedy clearly prioritized foreign policy over domestic issues.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, African Americans and historians assessed Kennedy's performance in civil rights much differently, obviously suggesting a difference in how the two groups formed their opinions. While scholars have often evaluated JFK's contributions based upon the successful passage of

legislation or specific governmental actions, the African American community admired Kennedy for other reasons that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Other than Richard Nixon, no recent president has received as much character appraisal by historians as John Kennedy. The Congressional testimony in 1975 of Judith Exner Campbell, Kennedy's ex-girlfriend, startled the world and sent many historians on a different path in seeking new information about the morality and character of Jack Kennedy. Campbell's startling accounts of JFK's sexual liaisons in the White House have resulted in scholarly attacks on his ethical behavior.

Thomas J. Reeves also criticized the moral behavior of President Kennedy. He claimed that JFK's reckless liaisons with women and mobsters were irresponsible, dangerous, and demeaning to the office. He also charged John Kennedy with abusing the office for his own self-gratification.<sup>36</sup>

Bruce Mazlish, author of "Kennedy: Myth and History," strongly criticized the character of John Kennedy by utilizing quotes from journalist-historian, Gary Wills. Mazlish mentioned that Wills saw the entire Kennedy family as "power-driven figures surrounded by a self-fabricated mystique, which became an imprisoning cloak."<sup>37</sup> Psycho-historian Nancy Clinch also questioned JFK's motivation for

service. In The Kennedy Neurosis, Clinch charged that the entire clan sought power for dominance of others.<sup>38</sup>

In Reckless Youth, Nigel Hamilton portrayed John Kennedy as an irresponsible young man who was motivated by the unsavory role model of his father and by his own vanity. Hamilton's revelation of John Kennedy's youthful indiscretions confirm that these questionable character traits preceded Kennedy's President.<sup>39</sup>

Historians viewed John Kennedy as an immature, immoral, vane, careless opportunistic figure who used the presidency for ego fulfillment. JFK was perceived as a skilled politician at winning elections but less adept once in office. Scholarly works focused upon Kennedy's presidential decisions, assassination, and subsequent revelations about his illicit sexual affairs. Scholars gave Kennedy poor marks for his legislative skills and portrayed him as an apprehensive supporter of civil rights and as inexperienced and uninformed in dealing with Khrushchev and tensions in Vietnam.

While historians have often indicted the Kennedy Presidency for policy blunders, much of the general public continues to admire him for the qualities he possessed and the way he made them feel. His good looks, charm, appealing smile, sense of humor, and glamorous family have been more

important in shaping public perceptions than his domestic or foreign policy. Similarly, Kennedy's rhetoric, the body language he choreographed, and the messianic zeal he injected in speeches have etched themselves deeper into the collective consciousness of the typical citizen than his legislative or political accomplishments. For many Americans, it was not the memory of the bills that failed to pass through Congress that matters but rather the feelings of hope and excitement he engendered and represented.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Brown, JFK: History of an Image (Bloomington, Indiana: Univeristy Press, 1988), passim.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Wicker, JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality on Politics (Baltimore: Penguin Press, 1968), 89, passim.

<sup>3</sup>James McGregor Burns, J. W. Peltason, and Thomas E. Cronin, Government By the People, 14th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 378.

<sup>4</sup>Survey results of Middle Tennessee State University presidential preferences. This questionnaire was completed in the June 8, 1995. In order to provide a more thorough quantitative study of respondents' presidential preferences, each president was given points when listed in the top five (most given to first place and the least given to a fifth place selection).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Forrest McDonald, The American Presidency: An Intellectual History (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 468.

<sup>7</sup>For a most comprehensive view upon how professional historians view Kennedy's presidency, see Robert Murray and Tim Blessing, Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents Washington-Carter, 2d edition, (University Park, Pennsylvania: University Press, 1988), passim. Blessing and Murray stated the results of five surveys of chief executives. Two of these polls proved to be irrelevant since one took place while Kennedy was in office (1962) and the other prior to his administration (1948). The three other questionnaires, however, provided insight into scholars' perceptions of JFK.

<sup>8</sup>David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York: Random House, 1972), 66. This work strongly attacks JFK's policies in the escalation of the Vietnam War.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., Halberstam discusses the foolishness of Kennedy's Vietnam policies.

<sup>11</sup>Lewis J. Paper, The Promise And Performance: The Leadership of John F. Kennedy (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), 249.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>David Steigerwald, The Sixties and the End of Modern America (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 78.

<sup>14</sup>Tom Tebel and Sarah Myles Watts, The Press and the Presidency: From George Washington to Ronald Reagan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 67.

<sup>15</sup>Robert McNamara, In Retrospect (New York: Time Books, 1995), passim. JFK's former Secretary of State demonstrated humility and honesty in admitting miscalculations in Vietnam by Kennedy and the inner circle.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>To gain insight into some historians' perceptions of JFK as an unethical person, see Thomas C. Reeves, A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy (New York: Free Press, 1991), passim.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Wicker, JFK and LBJ, 18.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 91.

<sup>21</sup>Victor Lasky, The Man and the Myth (New York: MacMillian Publishing, 1963), 32.

<sup>22</sup>To examine a perspective that provides a balanced criticism of JFK's domestic and foreign policy, see Malcolm E. Smith, John F. Kennedy's 13 Greatest Mistakes in the White House (Smithsonian, New York: Suffolk Publishing, 1980), 128.

<sup>23</sup>To gain a perspective on much of JFK's performance in the Cold War, read Michael Beschloss, The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963 (New York: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991), 291.



<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 234.

<sup>25</sup>Beschloss, The Crisis Years, 291.

<sup>26</sup>The often emotionally detached JFK became "rattled" by Khrushchev's confrontational style. Richard Reeves, President Kennedy: Profile of Power (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 147-174.

<sup>27</sup>Malcolm Smith, Kennedy Mistakes, 81.

<sup>28</sup>Paper, The Promise and Performance, 338.

<sup>29</sup>Smith, Kennedy Mistakes, 81.

<sup>30</sup>Thomas C. Reeves, A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy (New York: Free Press, 1991), 416.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 418.

<sup>32</sup>David Garrow, Bearing the Cross (New York: William Morrow Company, 1986). Garrow mentions the energy that LBJ, not JFK, brought to the civil rights movement. To examine Johnson's actions, see pages 167, 308, 407-408.

<sup>33</sup>Mark Stern, Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson and Civil Rights. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 233.

<sup>34</sup>Paul K. Henggeler, In His Steps: Lyndon Johnson and the Kennedy Mystique (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee), 112-113.

<sup>35</sup>Richard Reeves, President Kennedy. 53, 462-470.

<sup>36</sup>Reeves, Study of A Question of Character, 416.

<sup>37</sup>Bruce Mazlish, "Kennedy, Myth and History," in John F. Kennedy, Person, Policy, and Presidency, ed. Richard Snyder (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1988), 25.

<sup>38</sup>Nancy Clinch, The Kennedy Neurosis (New York: Gossett and Dunlap, 1973), 17.

<sup>39</sup>Nigel Hamilton, Reckless Youth (New York: Random House, 1992), *passim*.

## CHAPTER 2

### JFK AND HEROISM

From Greek mythology to American western movies, from spy novels to science fiction, heroes have been prominent in both historical narratives and literature. Real heroic figures and modern celebrities have received the adoration of thousands of people. For example, Mickey Mantle won accolades for winning the triple crown in baseball, and John Glenn earned praise for his space travel. Though heroic figures have shown different characteristics throughout history, they have generally served as role models and provided examples of both achievement and honor. Heroes leave an enduring impression though they live or reign for only a brief moment.<sup>1</sup> The hero functions to let us out of our everyday world by capturing glimpses of life's drama with greatness and tragedy.

Though JFK failed to conduct himself as a heroic figure, he has become a mythical hero. Due to the scope and limitations of this research, this chapter will briefly discuss heroism and how John Kennedy demonstrated it by examining qualities shown by heroes and why contemporary writers categorized President Kennedy as a hero. Finally, this chapter will assess how the civil rights movement and

the 1963 assassination contributed to the image of Kennedy as a hero. The thesis of this chapter is that much of John Kennedy's heroic status can be attributed to his personal qualities, media representations of Kennedy's role in civil rights, African Americans' perceptions of his contributions, and the sentiment that followed his assassination.

#### KENNEDY AND THE HERO

Ernest Hemingway described the hero as a man of action; who acts decisively.<sup>2</sup> Hemingway's heroic figure acted as an artist, conducted himself as a pragmatist, and tested the truth by observing the practical consequences.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, in The Hero, Lord Raglan described the hero as one born of noble or privileged birth.<sup>4</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson described the hero as "an emerging idealist" struggling against "tradition, authority, and conformity."<sup>5</sup> The hero demonstrated a willingness to break the status quo by charting new courses and was often a wealthy and powerful idealist. Novelists Henry James and F. Scott Fitzgerald described heroes as individuals concerned with morality and morals.<sup>6</sup>

According to Thomas Carlyle in On Heroes and Hero Worship, the heroic figure is a prophet inspired by God. This great man uplifted others and made life more pleasant

for them. Finally, Carlyle claimed that a hero acted as a teacher who provided insightful information.<sup>7</sup>

Based upon television programs, movies, and popular literature the hero fights battles for the tragically oppressed. Not only does he or she realize the oppression of the victim and underdog, he/she acts willingly, unselfishly, and even sacrificially to improve conditions in the world.

The hero experiences tragedy. Though he or she is privileged in many ways, he/she often faces catastrophe-- illness, pain and suffering, and a violent death.

The American western hero is certainly one of the more colorful types of heroes. Characters similar to John Wayne or Marshall Dillon make their beliefs clear. They believe that right will prevail in the end, and they clearly express a willingness to fight for justice. Much of the burden falls upon them alone. The heroic character's ability to fight off evil keeps society intact since the citizens are dependent upon the sole performance of the protagonist. Still fighting for the forces of right against those that represent evil as the protagonist does in Westerns, this "great man" shows a special detachment, poise and a virile, attractive appearance.

Like fictional characters, actual men demonstrated heroism. Americans admired the courage shown by commanders

George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and Ulysses S. Grant in warfare and that of Charles Lindbergh in aviation. America, too, admired the athletic qualities of Babe Ruth, the vision and ingenuity of Henry Ford, and the genius of Thomas Edison. Though all were clearly different, they were commonly revered as heroes. Most significantly, the things that they accomplished and the precedent that they set helped people to understand the exalted hero. Consequently, a review of heroes is necessary to understand the JFK myth. Much of this Kennedy myth was carefully planned around heroic qualities in recent or past history.

Though each hero is different, heroes possess similar traits. They tend to be very modest, almost deferential, bold, courageous, compassionate, full of conviction and worldly wise. They are central figures who serve as catalysts, problem solvers, preservers of a good and decent order or initiators of new things. Heroes fought courageously in war, chartered unknown courses, and accomplished tasks far beyond that of the common man.

One could view heroism erroneously by giving a disproportionate amount of attention to the heroic figure and ignoring the society which created the hero. Heroes mirror society since they embody the ideas and values cherished most by a culture. The hero can often possess

glaring faults but society often overlooks them since the image of this revered individual has remained so strong for a sustained period. In the case of JFK, his heroic image overcame the negative sentiment that followed after revelations of his extramarital affairs.<sup>8</sup>

What the "great man" is becomes less important than how he is viewed. Astute individuals cognizant of demographical trends may be able to cast themselves into the exalted person that popular culture identifies with.<sup>9</sup>

John Kennedy fits the hero's image. According to author Richard Slotkin in Gunfighter's Nation, the Kennedys' regal lifestyle in the White House led to the public's identification with a chivalric knighthood. Kennedy had the ability to make himself look heroic and to encourage others to display heroism through sacrificial service to the country. Slotkin mentioned that much of the Kennedy's hero image was purposely projected after JFK discovered that the Rand report emphasized the importance of the appearance of power.<sup>10</sup>

In a 1960 article in Esquire Magazine, renowned journalist and author, Norman Mailer, also found distinct heroic qualities in JFK. Like Slotkin, he emphasized how the Kennedy persona projected heroism. In describing Kennedy's entrance into the halls of the Democratic National

Convention, Mailer said JFK reminded society of the "hero, matinee idol, and movie star who comes to the palace to claim the princess."<sup>11</sup> He added that John Kennedy projected heroism by conducting himself as a box-office actor.<sup>12</sup>

Kennedy's heroism, as Mailer argued, reawakened memories of the "dynamic myth of the Renaissance that every man was potentially extraordinary."<sup>13</sup> Americans understood this mythical concept, and they had seen it in actors, athletes, and pioneers. Still, a certain complacency in politics repressed this idealism. Kennedy brought back this myth, "that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to adventure, and to grow on the waves of violence."<sup>14</sup> John Kennedy projected himself as a hero, but his true genius may have lain in the fact that he made the common person identify with his excitement and see himself as a hero also. Mailer felt that JFK was heroic since he brought together the life of politics and the life of the myth for the first time since the death of F.D.R.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout popular culture and history, heroes demonstrated virtuosity, intelligence, conviction, and actions that preserved society. Kennedy, according to Mailer and Slotkin, appeared heroic by projecting admirable ideals and presenting himself as an inspirational, glamorous, and patriotic figure.

## A HERO TO AFRICAN AMERICANS

Much of President Kennedy's heroic stature came from the civil rights movement and his role in it. Media representations, Johnson's speeches lauding JFK and John Kennedy's personal qualities helped to create a Kennedy myth among African Americans.

JFK, especially after his death, became a respected figure among blacks. According to Newsweek, a Harris poll of blacks ranked him behind only Martin Luther King and the NAACP in having most advanced the cause of equal rights.<sup>16</sup> Following his assassination, national polls indicated that "49 percent of blacks compared with 30 percent of the general public, felt they were more upset by the assassination than most people."<sup>17</sup>

A July 1963, article in Newsweek clearly showed the heroic status of JFK in the African American community. Information from a poll among blacks reported that Kennedy had been endorsed as "Lincoln's heir," while three out of four blacks said that John Kennedy had done more than any other President for civil rights.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, 89 percent of African American leadership said that President Kennedy was doing an excellent job.<sup>19</sup>

Robert Lydia, state treasurer and board member for the Texas NAACP, commented in February 1997 that "JFK was a huge



hero to blacks. He gave us hope like no one ever had before. You could see the compassion in his face and in the words he used. Why wouldn't he be a hero to us?" Lydia said that he was a heroic figure to myriad African Americans because he was young and understood the people. "We felt optimistic because he made a connection to Martin Luther King, and that made us feel very comfortable," Lydia reported. "Kennedy," he emphasized, "made a visible appearance on the behalf of Negroes." He enthusiastically mentioned that "John Kennedy sent administration officials to protect marchers in the South. Things like this," he stressed again, "made us pin much hope in him."<sup>20</sup>

Part of Kennedy's elevated status among African Americans might have been attributed to his speaking ability, according to Robert Lydia. "Black preachers know how to reach each member of their congregation and make them feel important and special," Lydia reported. He added that Kennedy, unlike most Whites, possessed this ability. "President Kennedy provided a message that resonated with the Negro population of the sixties. It went beyond words: A kindness in his face, a trusting smile, and a deep sense of sincerity were a few things that helped him to engender an undeniable hope."<sup>21</sup>

Part of the adoration that the African American

community possessed for John Kennedy was advanced by Lyndon Johnson. In an effort to capitalize on the sympathy for JFK following his assassination, LBJ often drew upon the Kennedy name. Johnson knew the memory of President Kennedy and the mood that the magic of his name evoked, and used Kennedy's name often. A few weeks after the assassination, Johnson said that nothing could more eloquently honor Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the bill for civil rights.<sup>22</sup> At this acceptance speech during the Democratic National Convention, LBJ again made laudatory remarks about his predecessor when he emphatically stated: "So let us here tonight, each of us, all of us, rededicate ourselves to keeping burning the golden torch of promises which John Fitzgerald Kennedy set aflame."<sup>23</sup>

John Kennedy's exalted status among the African American community could have been attributed by historians to the supportive visual images of him with African Americans. Media pictures of the civil rights movement without JFK and his men, however, showed the pain and suffering felt by blacks. An October 1962 Time article showed a number of photographs of whites and blacks throwing rocks at each other while the National Guard intervened in an effort to tranquilize the emotions and violence.<sup>24</sup> The cover of a July 1963, New York Times magazine showed the

faces of six troubled blacks, crying and yelling, in the midst of a racial confrontation with whites.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, on September 1963, Newsweek showed a black lady crying as she watched the explosion and burning of her church.<sup>26</sup> Subsequent pages in the article showed the grieving family members at a memorial service for those who died in the blast.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to these and many other photographs taken by the print media, captions showed John Kennedy and administration officials who were ostensibly supportive. The cover of a May 1963 News York Times magazine showed a pensive John and Robert Kennedy as they huddled and discussed segregation. The caption above the picture, taken from words Kennedy used in his famous speech challenging the immorality of racial discrimination, read "Not token freedom, Full Freedom."<sup>28</sup> A large photograph in a June 1963 edition of Times showed John and Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson as they discussed more equitable treatment for blacks with the top one-hundred chain-store executives of the South.<sup>29</sup> Another Time photograph, possibly the most dramatic, showed Assistant Attorney General Nicholas Katzenback as he and national guardsmen removed George Wallace, who had physically attempted to block the registration of the first black student at the University of Alabama.<sup>30</sup> Finally, a June 1963, Newsweek article pictured

Attorney General Robert Kennedy, acting on behalf of his brother, as he consoled outraged blacks on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.<sup>31</sup>

Pictures of the civil rights movement without JFK in them showed fear, frustration, and hopelessness. Based upon the photographs alone that could be found in popular culture literature, blacks had good reason to feel disturbed. Visual images in Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report showed riots, violence, and grief-stricken faces. On the other hand, photographs of President Kennedy and administration officials demonstrated images of racial harmony and progress. Kennedy was pictured as a concerned and consoling President, who was willing to use the power of his office to protect and even physically confront people who had denied blacks free access or equitable treatment.

Pictures in magazines showed Kennedy consistently doing something that neither Eisenhower, Truman, nor any other President in American history had done, standing shoulder to shoulder with African Americans. Visual images from photographs conveyed the message that President Kennedy was concerned with African Americans' physical, social, economic and legal welfare in the midst of segregation and discrimination. After all, President Kennedy was the first President to call racial segregation and discrimination

morally wrong. He was the first Commander-in-Chief to hold high profile meetings and photographic sessions with black leaders in the White House. Kennedy was the president "that finally gave hope through his words."<sup>32</sup>

Popular polls provided demonstrable evidence of John Kennedy's exalted status among African Americans. JFK's comforting words and pleasant countenance gave hope to blacks. President Johnson, in efforts to gain passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, added to the Kennedy myth by praising JFK's commitment to civil rights. Moreover, photographs in magazines portrayed President Kennedy as a benevolent champion of the civil rights movement.

#### JFK'S ASSASSINATION

Kennedy's assassination contributed to his myth. JFK's murder, aided by television, received world-wide attention and produced an outpouring of sympathy. President Kennedy's death made him a martyr and exaggerated this significance since his legendary status started on the day that he died. No single death in modern history generated the attention that John Kennedy's did. Activities in the United States and in some other parts of the world seemed to stop. Within one hour 68 percent of Americans knew of his slaying and 99.8 percent of the population was aware of this by the end

of the day. Television broadcast 55 of 71 hours without commercials, while American schools and businesses shut down. Regularly televised programs were interrupted to cover the tragedy. Mourners in European countries and in parts of Asia lined streets, burned candles, listened to eulogies, and openly wept. Leaders from many of the world's countries, and even Communist leaders like Khrushchev, eulogized him. Over two-hundred and fifty thousand stood on the sides of the avenues as the funeral procession moved through the streets of Washington, D.C.<sup>33</sup>

This outpouring of sympathy for JFK resulted in thousands of eulogies across the United States and these testimonials had the effect of casting Kennedy into a heroic mold. In Boston, Cardinal Richard Cushing said, "John F. Kennedy, thirty-fifth President of the United States of America, has fought the good fight for the God-given rights of his fellow man and for a world where peace and freedom shall prevail."<sup>34</sup> Reverend William H. Dickinson of Highland Park Methodist Church in Dallas provided the following moving words:

John F. Kennedy was a symbol. There are many symbols of our national life: rich and full of meaning. The flag, the national anthem, and the Grave of the Unknown Soldier, the Memorials of

Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, but none of these even approach the meaning and significance of the symbol of the office of the President.<sup>35</sup>

Immediately following JFK's death, the Reverend Abraham K. Akaka of Honolulu, Hawaii, said "John Fitzgerald Kennedy gave his life not only for his country but primarily and rightly for God and all mankind."<sup>36</sup> The Reverend Marshall Strickland from Mobile, Alabama, stated, "His martyred blood shall nurture the plants that will produce new champions of our cause. Gone now is the voice and physical presence that identified him but the dreamer remains. The martyred body surrendered itself to the fatal hands of death, but the spirit remains."<sup>37</sup> The Reverend Stephen F. Bayne of Oxford, England, like Strickland, equated Kennedy's martyrdom as "part of the price we now pay for the sins of men long dead."<sup>38</sup>

A few universal ideals run through these eulogies: The young politician was motivated by a higher calling that truly made him great. He genuinely worked to help others, and even gave his life for the things he fervently believed in. As horrible as President Kennedy's death was, it left a legacy and spirit for future generations to draw upon.

John Kennedy's beliefs and martyrdom also meant different things to many people. Based upon the context of Reverend Strickland's sermons, he suggested that Kennedy

died for racial equality and that his death served as an inspiration for others to follow. Reverend Stephen Bayne of England suggested that President Kennedy laid down his life for a tumultuous world and thus became a victim of an unfair world. Long-time Kennedy friend, Cardinal Cushing, portrayed JFK as one dedicated to correcting injustices of the oppressed, while a Methodist minister in Dallas promoted John Kennedy as a symbol of national unity and virtue. Kennedy's death, according to Carol Wilkie Wallace, in Rhetorical Devices for Hero Making, "was the act that reminded us of the values that we held most dear."<sup>39</sup>

For some people, JFK's death seems a personal one.<sup>40</sup> The deaths of media stars like JFK have been historically difficult to bring closure to since citizens have been "unable to speak to a family, friend, or attend their funeral."<sup>41</sup> Because of this, the grief and martyrdom may be kept alive, allowing the star of heroism to grow. Many people felt emotionally connected to Kennedy. Based upon responses of tourists at the assassination site in 1995, many citizens maintain a personal response to Kennedy's death.<sup>42</sup>

The nature of Jack Kennedy's death made it difficult to accept. In describing Kennedy's assassination, respondents repeatedly mentioned the word, "shocked."<sup>43</sup> Another person



said, "His assassination was one of the worst days of my life."<sup>44</sup> One individual remarked, "I could not believe it when it occurred."<sup>45</sup> A tourist exclaimed, "Society was not prepared for this shock!"<sup>46</sup> The horrific surprise of President Kennedy's slaying created some fear about the present and future world. One individual, for example, said, "We did not know what to expect next."<sup>47</sup> For a number of African Americans, it meant halt to civil rights progress.<sup>48</sup> Finally, one person said that they feared for the safety of other government officials.<sup>49</sup>

The Kennedy assassination was one of the most memorable moments of the century.<sup>50</sup> Those respondents from a university study conducted for this research who were under the age of ten in 1963 often did not remember the specific events that transpired in Dallas. They did, however, remember the emotional responses of older people. A respondent who was in a third grade classroom in 1963 realized the significance of President Kennedy's slaying by watching the reaction of her teacher when the message was conveyed and by also observing the emotion displayed by her parents during his televised funeral.<sup>51</sup> Another individual, who was also in the third grade, reported feeling sad. He said, "The non-verbal communication of adults, especially my parents, communicated grief and I knew it was a very serious

matter." The respondent added that he stood up with his mother in the living room while the taps were played.<sup>52</sup>

Kennedy acquaintance and author of One Brief Shining Moment, William Manchester, provided the best analysis why President Kennedy was perceived as a hero. Though Manchester was clearly a devotee of JFK's, he recognized that powerful figures often become legendary immediately after death. Legends like John Kennedy, he cautioned, may not have been built totally on the facts. Their death, Manchester claimed, liberates the common people to shape their image as they choose, whether they are true or false.<sup>53</sup>

Manchester made some comparisons between the legendary figure, King Arthur and John Kennedy. Arthur died gallantly and was carried away to a higher and more exalted place. The way he lived made people long for his return. It also caused many to emulate him and look above for inspiration. Similarly, President Kennedy provided a role model of excellence by the way that he lived. "Duty, devotion, and dedication were the essence of him," according to Manchester. "Possibly, inspiration for the future," Manchester said, "might come by looking above and beyond ourselves to those qualities that John Fitzgerald Kennedy demonstrated."<sup>54</sup> Following his death, the country's concept

of President Kennedy changed forever. Kennedy became a martyr and was transformed from a man possessing human weaknesses to a heroic, immortal figure.

The deaths of heroic figures like Kennedy have caused confusion, according to Manchester. He claimed that mourners struggled between the image of the real person and the legend that started on the day of death.<sup>55</sup> In JFK's case, a new John Kennedy, a legendary figure, was born on November 22, 1963.

In assessing Kennedy's slaying and the heroism that followed, Paul Henggeler, author of The Kennedy Persuasion, claimed that death, particularly the unexpected death of someone young, may play tricks on the memories and imagination of surviving loved ones. Henggeler has argued that "the haze surrounding the pain and loss may sometimes obscure unpleasant memories or romanticize them."<sup>56</sup> Kennedy's image could be liberated from his mistakes. Moreover, good contributions, like the Area Redevelopment Act and the President's Council for Physical Fitness became great accomplishments. Now, a smart JFK could become even smarter, posthumously. For many, Henggeler suggested, John Kennedy became bigger in death than he had been in life.<sup>57</sup>

Responses at The Sixth Floor Museum, the alleged JFK assassination site and tourist attraction in Dallas,

demonstrated how the pain and shock of Kennedy's death contributed to his myth.<sup>58</sup> Some individuals indicated that they thought the country was under a Soviet attack, faced an eminent war from an outside enemy or even one from within.<sup>59</sup> According to the prevailing sentiment, Kennedy was blameless and victimized by sinister forces. Sympathy from the American people came easily, especially after observing his wife Jacquelyn and the other grief-stricken Kennedys.

JFK was indeed assassinated but James Garfield, Abraham Lincoln, and William McKinley were also murdered while serving as President. Why then has Kennedy's death generated more attention than the others', even Lincoln's? One reason could be that President Kennedy's murder, unlike the others', remained unresolved and became increasingly mysterious with time. Moreover, in One Brief Shining Moment, Manchester asserted that the loss of the man at such a tender age represented a tragic loss of potential to the average citizen.<sup>60</sup>

This loss of potential was demonstrated by the continuous speculation on "what would have happened if the person would have lived." People have often done this with heroes, according to William Manchester, because they would rather think about "what might have been rather than what is."<sup>61</sup> Though their behavior has manifested itself in

different ways, many individuals have speculated on how movies, music, and politics might have been different had Kennedy lived a longer life.<sup>62</sup>

In the latter part of the sixties, "Kennedy's death would serve as a myth for opponents of the war in Vietnam who asserted that Kennedy would have never let things get out of hand as Johnson did and by proponents of the war who claimed that Kennedy would have spoken more effectively than Johnson against the implicit isolation."<sup>63</sup> JFK was recognized as a hero by three-fourths of the population,<sup>64</sup> and maybe like the heroic western figure who enters the saloon, confronts the dastardly villain, and spares the town from the evil that would have come from this antagonist, Kennedy, could have saved society from lower morale, cynicism, and a general growing discontent.

Like the sports fans who reflect upon how the team might have done if the star could have played, many respondents at The Sixth Floor Museum speculated on how America might have been if Kennedy had lived for two terms of office. Another person there said, "JFK's fatal attack ended opportunities and potential for a greater America. Things would have been better."<sup>65</sup>

Kennedy's assassination served as a benchmark and a reference point for the history of the country and the

personal lives of Americans. One person at The Sixth Floor Museum said, "All our problems started on the day that he was killed."<sup>66</sup> Another person there commented, "America lost its innocence when Kennedy died."<sup>67</sup> A university employee confessed about Kennedy's death, "The event stole my innocence."<sup>68</sup> A tourist passing through the Kennedy assassination site in Dallas, admitted, "I became an adult on that day."<sup>69</sup>

President Kennedy proved to be more than a typical politician. His presence and life made people happy, while his absence brought grief to the country to a degree unparalleled in recent American history. The hopes and aspirations of the nation were contingent upon the fate of a single man. To those people, John Kennedy was indispensable. The Kennedy's heroic myth holds that the United States could have averted a more turbulent and troubled world. Kennedy's death made people paint a picture of him beyond who he was or what he could have realistically accomplished.<sup>70</sup>

Society often finds heroes in individuals who give people hope or represent cherished values. Crisis provides fertile ground for a hero to emerge. Often in times of tragedy, the downtrodden look for a leader to guide them out of their problems and give them a more promising future.

JFK became a heroic figure to blacks at the height of rioting and violence in the streets. Blacks looked to Kennedy as the man who would finally end segregation and discrimination.

The emotional momentum of the civil rights movement forced Kennedy to act. His symbolic actions and high visibility as a central policymaker made him appear to be more of a hero than he actually was. JFK achieved heroism among African Americans more for the way that he made them feel than the actual things that he accomplished.

Tragedy often produces or embellishes the hero's image. The heroic figure often appears more noble or virtuous when he or she meets tragic fate. The drama and realization of affliction or death allows heroes' lives to appear more meaningful and produces an outpouring of sympathetic emotion that prevents society from assessing these figures more critically. Kennedy's heroic persona was created by historical events such as the civil rights movement and his assassination. In contemporary consumer culture, heroism is associated with qualities demonstrated by protagonists in movies, television and novels.

Heroes are made by history, but as we shall see in the next chapter, they also make themselves.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Geoffrey Ashe, The Discovery of King Arthur (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1995), IX.

<sup>2</sup>Carlos Baker, Hemingway, Writer as Artist (Princeton, New Jersey: University Press, 1968), 157.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>4</sup>Lord Raglan, The Hero (New York; Vintage Books, 1956), 6-8.

<sup>5</sup>Theodore L. Gross, The Heroic Ideal in American Literature (New York: Free Press, 1971), 15: cited in Hyatt Waggoner, American Poets from Puritans to Present. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Carlyle, Sartur Resartus on Heroes (New York: E. P. Dotton, 1968), 422.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Brown, JFK: History of an Image (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1988), 100.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation: Myth of Frontier in Twentieth Century (New York: Athenum Books, 1983). Slotkin discusses Kennedy's projected heroism in isolated points throughout this work, but places greater emphasis upon this heroic theme in later portions of this work, 511-512, 514, 516.

<sup>11</sup>Norman Mailer, "Superman Comes to Supermart," Esquire, November 1960, 122.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 123.



<sup>16</sup>"The Negro in America," Newsweek, 29 July 1963, 28.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Robert Lydia, State Treasurer of Texas NAACP, interview by author, February 1996.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>U.S. Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1964 "State of the Union Address" (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office) Volume I, 112-118.

<sup>23</sup>U.S. Presidents, Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson "Acceptance Speech at 1964 Democratic National Convention" in Atlanta City, New Jersey (Washington D.C.: U.S. Printing Office) Volume II, 1013.

<sup>24</sup>"Civil Rights," Time 12 October 1962, 29-32. Shocking pictures captured the violence that often followed protests and marches.

<sup>25</sup>Cover of New York Times Magazine, 16 July 1963. The moving photograph shows the anguish felt by many blacks during the civil rights movement.

<sup>26</sup>"My God, You're Not Even Safe in Church," Newsweek 30 September 1963, 21.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 21, 22.

<sup>28</sup>Cover of New York Times Magazine, 19 May 1963. This photograph creates a perception of deep concern by the Kennedys for civil rights.

<sup>29</sup>"Races," Time, 14 June 1963, 23. The word, "Races," describes a section of the magazine rather than the name of an article.

<sup>30</sup>Time, 21 June 1963, 13. The photograph of federal troops, acting on Kennedy's behest and forcing George Wallace to remove himself from the entrance of the University of Alabama's registration building, provides a

perception of JFK's commitment to civil rights.

<sup>31</sup>"JFK in the Bully Pulpit," Newsweek, 24 June 1963, 30.

<sup>32</sup>Ruth Jordan, employee of East Texas Baptist University, Interview by the author, 6 July 1996. Ms. Jordan's responses do not represent all of the African-American community but they do give insight into how one black felt about JFK and his civil rights policies.

<sup>33</sup>Allen and Cynthia Salzman Mondell, "Films From the Sixth Floor," (Dallas, Texas: Media Projects, 1989), filmstrip.

<sup>34</sup>William M. Fine, ed. That Day With God (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1965), 32.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>39</sup>Carol Wilkie Wallace, "Rhetorical Devices for Hero Making, Charles Lindbergh and John Kennedy," in American Heroes in a Media Age, ed. Robert I. Cathcart and Susan Drucker (Creskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1984), 168-179.

<sup>40</sup>Joshua Meyrowitz, "Life and Death of Media Friends: New Genres of Intimacy and Mourning," in American Heroes in a Media Age, ed. Robert I. Cathcart and Susan Drucker (Creskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1984), 75.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Book of Memories, Collective Responses of Tourists, at The Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, Texas, 18 August 1995. This contains written reaction to JFK and his death by the many people who visit.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>JFK Conspiracy Museum Papers in Dallas, Texas, 12 June 1996. The museum proposes that John and Robert Kennedy were killed by conspiratorial groups.

<sup>51</sup>Comments from Dr. Kathryn Cone, an employee at East Texas Baptist University, regarding her memory of JFK's death. Responses do not reflect a national sentiment but they do provide a sample of how an enlightened group of individuals viewed Kennedy's death. Subsequent citations from these responses will be listed as ETBU #1.

<sup>52</sup>Comments from George Damoff, ETBU #1.

<sup>53</sup>William Manchester, One Brief Shining Moment (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), 276.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Paul Henggeler, The Kennedy Persuasion: Politics of Style Since JFK (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1987), 3.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Book of Memories, 18 August 1995.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Manchester, One Brief Shining Moment, passim.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 276.

<sup>62</sup>Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation: Myth of Frontier in Twentieth Century America (New York: Athenum Books, 1983).

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Book of Memories, 11 July, 1995. This lady, like many others who shared their thoughts, reflected a belief that JFK's death signaled a decline for America.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Anonymous response to E.T.B.U. #1.

<sup>68</sup>Book of Memories, 18 August 1995.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

### CREATING KENNEDY

This chapter will show how media practices built the Kennedy myth by examining the portrayal of John and Jackie Kennedy as celebrities, the Kennedy administration's efforts to control reporting, and the power of television in projecting the JFK personality. The thesis of this chapter is that the Kennedy myth began with the image-making power of television and print media, and celebrity status associated with the entertainment industry.

### PRINT MEDIA

Newspapers and magazine reports contributed to the Kennedy myth. In 1961 alone, The New York Times wrote 130 columns about Kennedy's social travel, family vacations and mass attendance, and forty nine columns about JFK's involvement in sports, discussing his golfing, yachting, fishing, and his attendance at baseball and football games.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of this human interest coverage showed Kennedy and the first family "on the go"--constantly traveling to and from Washington, D.C., Hyannisport, and Palm Beach, making President Kennedy and his family appear as jetsetters

indulging in a romantic and exciting lifestyle.

The image of an exciting and adventuresome John Kennedy was reinforced by thousands of photographs in popular culture magazines. Possibly, no other magazine influenced the public's view of Kennedy more than Life. Life covered JFK on 433 individual assignments and placed him or Jacqueline Kennedy on the cover twenty one times between 1953 and 1963.<sup>2</sup> The publication captured an active JFK throwing out the first ball at the Washington Senators' baseball game, applauding a great play at a football game, sailing with Mrs. Kennedy at Cape Cod, playing with the children, spending time with his brothers, sisters, and parents, and visiting with artists.<sup>3</sup>

Photographs present facts and conjure up romantic memories and emotions, reminding people of meaningful things from their own past. Photographs function to help people put themselves into a certain relationship with the world. Pictures provide miniature images of reality that people connect with.<sup>4</sup>

The enormous number of pictures of Kennedy's glowing countenance and energetic lifestyle reminded individuals of meaningful and moving events in their own personal lives. Images of a happy and vibrant Kennedy encouraged Americans to see the United States in a more positive and optimistic

way.

Magazines also portrayed Kennedy as a man of wealth and power. A 1961 article in U.S. News and World Report reported the wealth of previous Presidents but emphasized that John Kennedy possessed the most.<sup>5</sup> One year later, a comparison of the Kennedy wealth was made with three other presidential families: the Adams, Harrisons and Roosevelts.<sup>6</sup> U.S. News and World Report analyzed Kennedy's wealth and power and compared the clout and status of the Kennedys with the Rockefellers.<sup>7</sup>

These articles on Kennedy's wealth and power appealed to the public's desire for affluence and status. According to Vance Packard in The Status Seekers, individuals often seek prestige through the acquisition of things. The public during this period often sought upward mobility in a materialistic society through the accumulation of wealth and a certain, "snob appeal."<sup>8</sup> JFK's riches and the way that the print media projected his affluence made him more appealing because Kennedy's visible trappings of wealth and power matched the ambitious consumer's longing for more wealth.<sup>9</sup> In JFK: The History of an Image, Thomas Brown said, "The Kennedy image, which has certainly become something of a commodity, exhibits some of the chief traits of the images disseminated by advertisers for popular consumption. In the

John Kennedy image, one also sees projected fantasies of omnipotence and wish fulfillment."<sup>10</sup> In essence, the projected persona of Kennedy matched the ideals of many Americans.

Kennedy manipulatively used photographs for a political symbolism that might obscure his actual accomplishments. JFK's photographs with Blacks spoke more loudly and clearly than any legislation. Kennedy, as Richard Reeves pointed out in President Kennedy's Profile of Power, spent hours selecting the most suitable picture that he had taken with Blacks to send to the press.<sup>11</sup> An image of John Kennedy as a champion of minority advancement was no accident. It had been carefully crafted. Photographic sessions became political opportunities for the President to curry favor.<sup>12</sup>

The media coverage of Mrs. Kennedy also shaped John Kennedy's image apart from his performance as President. Two Detroit newspapers wrote more than 300 stories about the First Lady in three months. Eighty-two articles featured Mrs. Kennedy in popular culture magazines in a twenty-three month period from March 1961 to February 1963.<sup>13</sup> This barrage of publicity netted Mrs. Kennedy about 4,000 letters a week.<sup>14</sup>

Some popular articles portrayed Mrs. Kennedy as an ideal wife and mother. In 1962, Newsweek reported that the



First Lady said, "Carlyle felt that we must give ourselves to the things closest to us, and for me, that is my kids."<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Kennedy also added that her main concern as First Lady was to provide a home that was comfortable to her children. Later portions of the article referred to the young mother as an "old-fashioned girl with conservative tastes...and a strong dame."<sup>16</sup> In 1962, Time portrayed Jacqueline Kennedy as one of the most amazing women in the world. Despite her notoriety, the First Lady, according to the article, still remained committed to her role as mother.<sup>17</sup>

The print media also portrayed Jacqueline Kennedy as a woman of high fashion and beauty. From 1961 to 1963 twenty one articles discussed Mrs. Kennedy as a style trendsetter.<sup>18</sup> A Time article showed some of the most beautiful First Ladies in the world but concluded that Jacqueline, among these women, was the greatest trendsetter and most glamorous of all.<sup>19</sup> Another piece discussed the intense curiosity over who had most recently designed the First Lady's wardrobe.<sup>20</sup> A 1961 article showed pictures of Kennedy look-alikes, mannequins, and bouffant hairdos similar to Mrs. Kennedy's. The piece concluded that Jacqueline Kennedy wore her clothes with "such an effortless grace that she is becoming the number one fashion influence."<sup>21</sup> While Jackie was traveling through India,

Life reported that the international press corps was fascinated by her colorful clothing and shoes.<sup>22</sup> Finally, one magazine went so far as to describe the clothing styles and apparel that Mrs. Kennedy packed on her trip to Asia.<sup>23</sup> In March 1962, Newsweek called the President's wife the most potent force in fashion today.<sup>24</sup>

Popular magazines sometimes showcased the First Lady as a sophisticated monarchical figure. A 1961 Newsweek article entitled, "Like a Princess," described Mrs. Kennedy's first trip to New York since the victorious 1960 election and quoted a New Yorker who spotted her shopping. The star-struck man commented: "She reminds me of a princess. She's the closest thing we have in America to royalty."<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Life pictured Mrs. Kennedy relaxing after a difficult day following the 1960 election. A caption above Jacqueline Kennedy read, "The Making of a King and Queen."<sup>26</sup>

In a representative article, Time Magazine provided a compelling portrayal of Mrs. Kennedy as an aristocratic and queen-like figure. The magazine referred to Jacqueline Kennedy's family, the Bouviers, as "rich, Republican, Catholic, socially impeccable, and in their own less boisterous fashion, fully as impressive as the Kennedys of Massachusetts." Time also emphasized the First Lady's impressive education at the Chapin School, Vassar, and the

Sorbonne in Paris.<sup>27</sup> The article concluded by mentioning that the former Jacqueline Bouvier had been named the number one Deb of the Year at the New Clambake Club and had been described by the master of ceremonies as a "regal debutante who has classic features and the daintiness of Dresden porcelain." He also described "her family as strictly Old Guard."<sup>28</sup>

The print media presented Jackie as a special lady blessed with many assets. Her good looks, beautiful wardrobe, refined tastes, extensive travel and highly publicized role as a mother and First Lady made her one of the most visible women in the world. If Mrs. Kennedy appeared as an ideal lady and a queen-like figure, maybe John Kennedy appeared as the King, who romantically captured the heart and hand of a fair maiden.

First Ladies, as popular literature of Jacqueline Kennedy indicated, can command an enormous amount of attention and help construct the image of the President. Mrs. Kennedy set a precedent in which the popularity of a presidential spouse broadened the expectations of the American culture toward Presidents. To be accepted by the electorate, the public must approve of the leader's wife as well.

According to Sydney Hyman in an article written for the

New York Times Magazine, "A popular president like Kennedy could be universally loved, provided he reigns like the British Crown--provided he is content to be the patron saint of national unity."<sup>29</sup> JFK could maintain a popularity among the people by keeping a monarchical grace and by presenting himself as the symbolic caretaker of America. Hyman claimed that JFK was "universally loved so long as he is a royal and remote figure through whom the people can vicariously enjoy a sense of personal involvement in the affairs of the high and mighty."<sup>30</sup> Citizens could feel strongly connected to President Kennedy by envisioning his trappings of wealth and power in their own personal lives and imagining themselves in his shoes. People reacted to Kennedy more as a personality than as a politician.<sup>31</sup> A certain personalization of the presidency showed that people wanted to know more about their President, his family, friends and leisure time. Ironically, the media's treatment of the Kennedys provided a monarchic treatment of the Free World.

In early 1961, a Gallup poll ranked Kennedy's popularity at 73 percent while a similar survey in 1962 gave him an almost 80 percent approval rating.<sup>32</sup> Immediately after the Cuban Missile Crisis, 80 percent of Americans in a sample approved of John Kennedy's presidency.<sup>33</sup> President Kennedy's image remained strong despite his presidential

performance. During the early months of 1961, JFK had no tangible legislative victories. He had sent fifteen proposals to Congress in as many weeks with nothing to show and had just received a painful defeat of a minimum wage act and a series of foreign policy defeats.<sup>34</sup> Still, Kennedy remained a popular figure, but the public's fondness of him, a Lorey, Ohio, newspaper editor said, "was based on his (personal) popularity and Jackie's--and for that matter on Bobby's and Teddy's."<sup>35</sup>

Kennedy's image was partially shaped by "fluff journalism," a style of reporting that focused upon factors of little consequence to the nation and world.<sup>36</sup> Journalistic practices showcased personalities and fostered a climate that allowed politicians to become legendary figures and celebrities.

Respected Kennedy biographer Theodore White admitted Kennedy's personal qualities and favorable treatment affected his objectivity and colored all of the reporting that came from the Kennedy campaign.<sup>37</sup> No greater effort had ever been made by a President to woo the media.<sup>38</sup> President Kennedy often managed the flow of news with both rewards and punishment.

According to Arthur Krock in a 1963 Fortune article, John Kennedy made the most concerted effort of any President

to control the media.<sup>39</sup> Controlling the news meant "suppressing, concealing and falsely weighing information...and often occurred through threats, implications of threats or by shutting off information to those that might attack the president."<sup>40</sup>

Kennedy also cultivated the press by providing greater accessibility of his office to the press. According to a U.S. News and World Report article, one person out of five at presidential luncheons was a reporter and the invitations to the media exceeded those to Congress by five percent.<sup>41</sup> Publishers were flattered and honored by visits to the White House.

According to Krock's article in Fortune, Kennedy frequently met with editors and publishers. Within a few months, John Kennedy met separately with writers from Florida, New Jersey, Idaho, and California. Krock, who attended White House meetings with a small number of the press corps, admitted that he, like other journalists, had been overwhelmed by the President's kindness.<sup>42</sup>

Part of Kennedy's courtship of the press included a disarming wit. "Journalists valued humor and saw it as a sophistication and a sign of in depth understanding."<sup>43</sup> President Kennedy was not just a remote politician; he was one of the guys. Reporters felt a sense of camaraderie with

him often because of the way that he joked with journalists. According to Gerald Gardner in All The President's Wits, Kennedy seemed like "he was our friend and that we were on the same side."<sup>44</sup>

Kennedy also endeared himself to the press by exchanging views, confiding in writers and seeking them out for advice.<sup>45</sup> Reporters felt important and somewhat connected to the Presidency since JFK laughed with them and sought their advice.<sup>46</sup>

John Kennedy also strengthened his relationship with the press by making reporters' jobs easier. Kennedy provided word-for-word transcripts of all of the public remarks that he made during the previous twenty four hours.<sup>47</sup> Finally, he arranged for a 2-channel telephone that could be placed behind Senator Kennedy so that the broadcasters could remain well informed.<sup>48</sup> This phone system gave reporters and the JFK campaign team constant contact with each other despite crowds, physical obstacles, and logistical problems.

The financial power of the Kennedy family was also used to protect JFK's image. The practice started before John Kennedy's presidency and continued throughout his tenure in office. Joseph Kennedy took advantage of newspapers that suffered with cash-flow problems. The elder Kennedy helped

the Boston Globe by purchasing advertisement in return for kid-glove coverage of his son but later withdrew his business when the publication failed to continue its glowing accounts.<sup>49</sup>

The same John Kennedy who was willing to polish his image with the press through rewards and flattery was also willing to dole out punishments and threats. Kennedy ordered the FBI to interrogate reporters in the middle of the night so that he could track down sources that gave out negative information regarding the manner in which the president handled a conflict with steel executives over price increases.<sup>50</sup>

When Joseph Dealy, publisher of the Dallas Morning News publicly criticized Kennedy to his face, the President offered no immediate reply. After contemplating the matter, Kennedy approached his loyal friend Charles Barlett, editor of the Chattanooga Times, to concoct a story that would make Dealy appear less credible and Kennedy more favorable by editing the actual exchange between the two men.<sup>51</sup>

On some occasions President Kennedy or his staff would call critical journalists and reprimand them for negative reporting. In one instance, a reporter who had recently written an article questioning Kennedy's presidential performance called the White House and asked for



information. A Kennedy aide responded: "If you would have cooperated with us on the last story, we would have helped; you haven't, so all I can say is 'Sorry.'"<sup>52</sup>

Theodore White's authorship of The Making of the President 1960 provided one of the clearest examples of journalists who feared Kennedy's disapproval of their reporting. Prior to the publication of the book, White sent drafts to Theodore Sorensen and Kennedy for suggestions or changes.<sup>53</sup>

The most intimidating figure to the press regarding JFK was Joseph Kennedy. The senior Kennedy, was ready, willing, and able to sue newspapers who gave less than favorable coverage. The media was clearly cognizant of this. When a number of publications expressed interest in publishing a story about his son being previously married, he threatened a massive lawsuit. Other family members and administration officials effectively used litigation as a threat.<sup>54</sup>

During the Kennedy era, members of the media were treated as officials with greater deference. Prior to the Supreme Court decision of *Times v Sullivan*, the press worried that inaccurate or inflammatory coverage of politicians might result in punitive financial sanctions against them.<sup>55</sup> Nixon, certainly no fan of the press, pointed out In The Arena that the Times case changed the

nature of reporting by giving the press greater freedom in criticizing public officials.<sup>56</sup>

The John Kennedy that publicly made fun of himself in a jestful manner privately cowed those who failed to give him positive reporting. Kennedy shamelessly manipulated Ben Bradlee of Newsweek, giving him "stories, classified documents, and even F.B.I. materials in exchange for favorable coverage." When Bradlee contributed to a Look Magazine article that focused upon Kennedy's treatment of the media, JFK "banished him from the White House and refused to speak to him for five months."<sup>57</sup>

JFK's use of negative sanctions against the print media were not aimed at protecting the office of the Presidency of the United States, but at protecting Kennedy, himself. President Kennedy was willing to egregiously misuse government agencies, end friendships, and make frequent use of pressure tactics to obtain positive reporting. John Kennedy would not stop short of any means to protect his image.

The press' decision to not disclose President Kennedy's amorous activities protected the Kennedy myth. In all probability, the press' disclosure of these affairs could have greatly injured JFK's image. The John Kennedy who was photographed as a loving husband and attentive father would

have been perceived as an adulterer and philanderer.

Kennedy biographer Richard Reeves claimed that JFK had extramarital affairs with Marilyn Monroe and Judith Exner, former girlfriend of mafia boss, Sam Giancano.<sup>58</sup> Kennedy, according to Reeves, had sex with Exner on a number of occasions in the White House.<sup>59</sup>

Kennedy had gall. Not only did he sleep with women of national notoriety, but he also carried on illicit relations with women closely associated with Jacquelyn Kennedy. These included Jackie's press secretary, Pamela Tenure and White House staff members Priscilla Wear and Jill Cowan.<sup>60</sup> Richard Reeves, who colorfully described the Kennedy affairs in President Kennedy: Profile of Power, mentioned Kennedy's relationship with Jayne Mansfield, burlesque strippers Blaze Starr and Tempest Storm, and Florena Pritchett, socialite and wife of Earl T. Smith, ambassador to Cuba during the Eisenhower Administration. Unbelievably, Reeves claimed that the President "had affairs with casual acquaintances and virtual strangers, who surreptitiously entered the southwest service entrance of the White House as the result of solicitations of friends and aides."<sup>61</sup> That workers in presidential offices and living quarters elected to remain silent about Kennedy's illicit affairs demonstrated their loyalty and the young President's uncanny ability to inspire

devotion among those close to him.

On the night of the inauguration, Kennedy engaged in sex with one, possibly two other women. He slipped off to a large party at the Statler Hilton with Angie Dickinson.<sup>62</sup> The wanton behavior that Kennedy engaged in during his first day and night as President of the United States continued until his death in Dallas.

After Kennedy's death, his family continued to control much of the flow of information to the general public. In apparent efforts to protect JFK's image and conceal evidence of his extra-marital affairs, the Kennedys withdrew much information, especially logs indicating the names and dates of White House visitors. A few insiders and researchers like Sorensen and Schlesinger were given access to this information if they would agree to silence about much of the former President's activity.<sup>63</sup>

If the media were aware of Kennedy's marital infidelity, why did they not report it? One explanation could be that reporters thought that "what a president did in his own spare time was his own business--if he wanted it that way and provided that his extra-curricular activities did not impair his own performance as chief executive."<sup>64</sup> Also, respected reporters of the early Sixties "generally avoided being the first to report on rumors or evidence

concerning sex."<sup>65</sup>

Finally, President Kennedy and his staff worked to shape a positive image by providing misleading or inaccurate information. The Kennedy team worded press releases in a way that led reporters to headline or start stories in a manner supportive of the President.<sup>66</sup> In other instances, the White House purposely gave out incorrect data when journalists lacked time or opportunities to check out other sources.<sup>67</sup>

Objectivity, the stated value of professional journalism, had been seriously compromised. Reporters often took the path of least resistance by pursuing colorful but not substantive stories and by refusing to ask tough questions and seek answers to troubling issues.

Print reporting salvaged much of John Kennedy's image by refusing to make a correlation between personal conduct and presidential performance. Journalists' reporting of Kennedy reflected their own impartiality and rose-colored glass perspective. Writers sometimes demonstrated a greater concern for pleasing the President than for presenting a balanced story. This situation created an illusion of presidential propriety and left the public poorly informed.

Reporters like Theodore White represented a new breed of journalists who saw it as their job to write supportively

of the system and the men who governed. Creating an appealing illusion and presenting themselves as dutiful members of the team that JFK coached took precedent over objectivity.<sup>68</sup>

The print media portrayed John Kennedy and his family as glamorous, wealthy, monarchical figures who traveled extensively. JFK cultivated relationship with the press by treating reporters with much deference, but also used threats and punishment to gain a more favorable reporting. Gaining positive coverage, as the next section will show, was something that Kennedy also sought with television.

#### TELEVISION

Much of the Kennedy myth was based upon television's coverage of him, the growth of television in American culture, and projection of the JFK personality, which was often showcased on this new medium. From the start of Eisenhower's presidency to the start of Kennedy's, the number of television sets increased rapidly. By 1960, Americans viewed televisions an average of five hours per day.<sup>69</sup> Utilizing television effectively became a political necessity. One televised speech could allow a president to reach more people in thirty minutes than he could have reached in several months of personal encounters. By 1960, 97 percent of homes owned one television set and 9 percent

owned two or more sets.<sup>70</sup> Television provided information as viewers watched programs primarily for entertainment yet learned in an effective if incidental way.<sup>71</sup>

Kennedy's reliance on television encouraged television networks to build large permanent structures for covering the president's daily activities. Indeed, the White House built its own media infrastructure. Being president became full-time show business. With an engaging commander-in-chief and a growing number of televisions in living rooms, American culture seemed prepared for a more entertaining brand of politics.

Kennedy gave sixteen public addresses over television during his thousand days of office compared to Eisenhower's twelve speeches during the same amount of time.<sup>72</sup> Kennedy provided the first live televised press conferences, the first of which drew one hundred more reporters than had ever attended a news conference and an audience of over sixty million people.<sup>73</sup> With an expanded prime time news coverage from fifteen to thirty minutes, unedited press conferences, and CBS' feature of Jacqueline Kennedy's tour of the White House, politics became a cultural spectacle.

JFK's live, televised news conferences helped him to reach the typical citizen. His decision to use this format was carefully calculated. Regarding this new revolutionary

method (live televised news conferences), JFK once said to reporters, "I can go directly to the American people without having to go through you sons of bitches."<sup>74</sup> Realizing the press' ability to spin a story and turn it into their own interpretation, he was determined to establish his own relationship with American citizens independent of the press.

The public received JFK's news conferences favorably. Ninety-five percent of the people in a random sample conducted for the White House by a New York advertisement agency found Kennedy news meetings beneficial. Respondents felt that his live press meetings were "informative and comfortable." They also felt that this give-and-take process gave a sense of democracy. Even those who opposed the President were favorably impressed with his performance in this new format.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, "those in the general public who did not form political opinions through reading saw John Kennedy positively in news conferences. They applauded President Kennedy for his wit and charm."<sup>76</sup>

Like the overall population, the press also recognized the President's skillfulness in meeting the media at live press conferences. In 1982, writers evaluated the performance of Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan at televised, unrehearsed meetings with



the media. They overwhelmingly rated Kennedy the best for his candor, quality of information, ability to handle combative reporters, and humor.<sup>77</sup>

Humor, no doubt, helped Kennedy's image at press conferences. By skillfully using self-depreciating wit, JFK appeared vulnerable and human. Kennedy changed tense situations into relaxed ones by making himself likeable and fun. Televised news conferences showing the countenance on the faces of reporters and the general public demonstrate this. Humorous stories and responses came naturally to JFK. His comedic remarks seemed to unite reporters during press conferences in a chorus of laughter. By standing in front of a large number of reporters and responding to questions with witty remarks, the President somewhat resembled a comedian delivering a monologue in front of a studio audience. In the year prior to Kennedy's death, seven out of the top ten television programs were comedies.<sup>78</sup> President Kennedy recognized that Americans responded favorably to humor. Unlike a professional humorist, however, Kennedy offered witty rejoinders as a leadership style.<sup>79</sup>

"President Kennedy appeared on television more often and in more forms than any other predecessor."<sup>80</sup> Televised programs promoted Kennedy as a star comparable to figures in the sports and entertainment world. "Political programs

became the Kennedy show. He was the man in the arena-- charming, informal, caring and witty."<sup>81</sup> According to Norman Mailer in a 1960 Esquire article, "Politics became a new kind of show with the President the matinee idol."<sup>82</sup>

An ABC closeup called "Adventures of the New Frontier" claimed to analyze how government operated under the Kennedy Administration and the manner in which President Kennedy organized the White House and made decisions. This program, however, seemed to be more of a version of "What is John Really Like?"<sup>83</sup> The show focused on the mannerisms and personality of John Kennedy and less on Kennedy's official activities and duties as President.

Prior to Jacqueline Kennedy's renowned tour of the refurbished White House, CBS set up a production infrastructure, resembling a Hollywood movie set. Six months of planning were involved in the programming while nine tons of equipment were strategically placed in the presidential mansion by fifty-four technicians. President Kennedy was to appear on the last five minutes of the nationally televised production. Kennedy, not happy with the taping of himself that was to be used, asked to retape his segment so that he could make a more favorable appearance.<sup>84</sup>

In October, 1963, ABC produced a program that was to

analyze efforts made by John and Robert Kennedy to tranquilize the civil rights conflict. Once again ABC focused more upon the personal qualities of the Kennedys.<sup>85</sup> A New York Times Magazine article lambasted the gaudy display of cameras in the White House and President Kennedy for turning the presidency "into a melodramatic peep show with homespun family touches to lighten tension between government officials and George Wallace."<sup>86</sup>

Television's focus on the President in an effort to simplify its coverage of politics along with television's projection of Kennedy as a celebrity gave the illusion that all governmental decisions emanated from the Commander in Chief. Presidential prestige reached a high-water mark in history and a tendency to glorify the presidency affected the broadcast media's reporting.<sup>87</sup> Kennedy was portrayed as the man at the nexus of power.

Television allowed Kennedy and other Presidents to engage in mythmaking. People often failed to see the politicians as they actually were but instead saw an image that was created collectively by presidential staffs and technicians who cut, edited, and refilmed to make the Chief Executive look better."<sup>88</sup> Politics became a form of show business and politicians, like Kennedy's star, often shined more brightly because of prudent production and less for

presidential performance.

While Kennedy may have been considered the great television president, no United States leader could have survived past the Fifties without recognizing this form of broadcasting's impact upon the American culture. Television sets in living rooms across America often changed the way that family members communicated with each other, resulting in less personal interaction between individuals in American families. Television elicited new forms of political socialization. Throughout the first half of the Twentieth century, the father possessed the most prominent influence in shaping how people viewed politics.<sup>89</sup> During the Eisenhower Administration, newspapers influenced opinions more than any other medium, but by the mid-Sixties, television became the dominant force in molding attitudes, and Kennedy obviously recognized and took advantage of this new medium.<sup>90</sup>

Television served as an educational tool for political and social events, revealing problems and exposing the public to war, recession, and poverty as no other medium had. The combination of ongoing visual images and sounds provided a political commentary that the print media could not. Televised coverage of politics allowed viewers to make political assessments beyond what they read in popular

literature. "With a choice of three network news shows that were broadcast about the time working Americans got home, the demand for evening papers was shrinking."<sup>91</sup> Television became a dominant force in shaping thinking because it provided a more convenient and compelling way for people to gain information.

Before a more adversarial relationship developed between the press and politicians, television coverage engendered a patriotic sentiment toward its leaders. Television captured political leaders with historic government buildings and national symbols of power in the background. Public officials appeared as representatives of a cherished American system and not as individuals to be mistrusted.<sup>92</sup>

In The Power and the Glitter, Ronald Brownstein claimed that a "political personality is built around building credibility by showing sincerity, authenticity, vulnerability, and attractiveness." Attraction to personality has caused "the American politicians, consultants, and a disengaged public to trivialize politics...and lower the level of discussion to a point where stars can participate."<sup>93</sup> Meaningful political discourse has become subordinate to celebrity appeal. Politics became increasingly artificial as viewers saw an

image and not the actual candidate.

The monarchical ghost of John Kennedy influenced future leaders. The perception of Kennedy as a royal figure challenged later Presidents, especially Johnson, since they could not live up to the mythical, king-like figure of JFK. "There was the feeling that the Golden Age had passed." The burden of a Camelot style had been passed to subsequent leaders who would feel compelled to emulate Kennedy's Arthurian persona.<sup>94</sup>

By 1960, Americans gained useful information from television but often "got lost in the cult of personality and the razzle-dazzle of politics."<sup>95</sup> People's fascination for the office seeker's hair, clothes, and mannerisms obscured the importance of meaningful issues. "TV," according to Bill Ewald in a 1960 Newsweek article, "became a supermarket for personality projection."<sup>96</sup> The persona of politicians was carefully shaped by political consultants and entertainment moguls to impress the consumer. Candidates like Kennedy became a commodity and were sold to America like "toothpaste or soap."<sup>97</sup>

In JFK: History of an Image, Thomas Brown recognized the power of the Kennedy personality. President Kennedy showed "coolness, charm, detachment, wit, irony, elegance, lightness, litheness, taste, zest, and zeal for excellence

in all things."<sup>98</sup> The public's attraction to John Kennedy was fueled by personal desires for wealth, good looks and urbanity. He embodied the American dream and symbolized what many Americans wanted to be.

The popular image of Kennedy, largely created by the print media, proved problematic for John Kennedy. "The more popular a President has been--the more there has been a tendency to make him the prisoner of his own popularity and this popularity seems to be the essence of the administration."<sup>99</sup> To keep the public's devotion, an admired leader like Kennedy would have to make a greater commitment to himself rather than to politics.<sup>100</sup> The Kennedy image did not translate itself into Congressional victories or help Jack Kennedy in his negotiations with Adenauer, Khrushchev, or DeGaulle.<sup>101</sup> Kennedy missed opportunities to build upon the base of popularity and convert it into substantive accomplishments.

In a New York Times Magazine article, journalist Sydney Hyman suggested that popular Presidents like Kennedy should recognize that within the "American imagination," the President represented "an American counterpart to the British Crown." In light of this phenomenon, Hyman admonished leaders like Kennedy to liberate themselves from popularity and do what they are supposed to do--run the

government.<sup>102</sup> In the end, Hyman emphasized that overwhelming popularity could prove to be more of a burden than a blessing.

The media's coverage of John Kennedy sometimes served as a smokescreen because it diverted attention from failed policies and caused the general public to look at interesting and entertaining tidbits in the President and the First Family's life. Rather than concentrating on JFK's legislative defeats or possible miscalculations in international affairs, the media allowed people to evaluate John Kennedy as a handsome, energetic, and fascinating man and not as the architect of sometimes flawed foreign and domestic policies.

The Kennedy myth grew with the growth of television in American culture. John Kennedy skillfully used television as a political tool to showcase his admirable qualities and to create an intimate relationship with Americans. JFK's carefully polished television image obscured his presidential performance and human failings.

The print and broadcast media helped to shape a Kennedy mythology, and as we shall see in the next chapter, this myth would continue through contemporary sources many years after JFK's death.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Harvey L. Holmes, ed., New York Times Index (New York: New York Times Company, 1961).

<sup>2</sup>Phillip Kumbardt, Jr., ed., Life in Camelot: The Kennedy Years. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1988), 6.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. Pictures showing Kennedy "on the go" can be seen throughout Life's Commemorative Edition, passim.

<sup>4</sup>Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux), 4.

<sup>5</sup>"Some Other Presidents Have Been Rich Too," U.S. News and World Report, 30 January 1961, 29.

<sup>6</sup>"The Power of the Kennedy Brothers," U.S. News and World Report, 16 July 1962, 56-59.

<sup>7</sup>"Politics Becoming a Millionaire's Game?," U.S. News and World Report, 25 February 1963, 58-61.

<sup>8</sup>Vance Packard, Status Seekers (New York: David McKay, 1959), 67.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Brown, JFK: History of an Image (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), 106.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Reeves, President Kennedy: Profile of Power (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 64.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Sarita Robinson, ed., Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, (New York: the W. Wilson Company, 1963), 1019-1020.

<sup>14</sup>"First Lady's First Year," Newsweek, 1 January 1962, 32.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

- <sup>17</sup>"Reigning Beauties," Time 8 June 1962, 38.
- <sup>18</sup>Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, 1963, 1019-1021.
- <sup>19</sup>"Reigning Beauties," Time, 38.
- <sup>20</sup>"Potent Force," Time, 16 March 1962, 67.
- <sup>21</sup>"You Don't Have too Look Hard to See Another Jackie," Life, 20 January 1961, 17-23.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup>"Queen of America," Time, 23 March 1962, 13.
- <sup>24</sup>"Potent Force," Time, 67.
- <sup>25</sup>"Like a Princess," Newsweek, 3 April 1961, 26-28.
- <sup>26</sup>Phillip Kumbardt, ed., Life in Camelot. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1988), 76-77.
- <sup>27</sup>"Women," Time 10 January 1961, 19.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup>Sydney Hyman, "Presidential Popularity Is Not Enough," New York Times Magazine, 12 August 1962, 64.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup>William Carleton, "The Cult of Personality Comes to the White House," Harper's December 1961, 64.
- <sup>32</sup>Time, "The Kennedy Image: How Its Built," 9 April 1962, 56-59.
- <sup>33</sup>Richard Reeves, President Kennedy: Profile of Power (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 473.
- <sup>34</sup>"Nation", Time, 14 April 1961, 25.
- <sup>35</sup>"Mood of America," U.S. News and World Report 25 February 1963, 31-33.
- <sup>3</sup>"Cronkite Visits," "Larry King Live," CNN, December

1995.

<sup>37</sup>Theodore White, Making of the President, 1960 (New York: Athenum Press, 1961). White makes no efforts throughout this account to hide his partiality toward JFK.

<sup>38</sup>"The Kennedy Image: How It's Built," U.S. News and World Report 9 April 1962, 56-59.

<sup>39</sup>Arthur Krock "Mr. Kennedy's Management of the News," Fortune, March 1963, 82.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>"The Kennedy Image," U.S. News and World Report, 57.

<sup>42</sup>"Kennedy's Management of the News," 199.

<sup>43</sup>Gerald Gardner, All The President's Wits (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 218.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 217.

<sup>45</sup>"Kennedy's Management of the News," 199.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Victor Lasky, The Man and the Myth (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1963), 32.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>49</sup>Ralph Martin, Seeds of Destruction (New York: Putnam, 1995), 175.

<sup>50</sup>Fletcher Knebel, "Kennedy vs. The Press," Look Magazine, 28 August 1962, 18.

<sup>51</sup>Lasky, The Man and the Myth, 534.

<sup>52</sup>"The Kennedy Image," U.S. News and World Report, 58.

<sup>53</sup>Joyce Hoffman, Theodore H. White and Journalism as Illusion (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1995), 152-153.

<sup>54</sup>Thomas C. Reeves, A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy, (New York: Free Press, 1991), 251.

<sup>55</sup>Richard Nixon, In The Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 256.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Reeves, A Question of Character, 251.

<sup>58</sup>Reeves, President Kennedy, 315-316, 322, 289.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 290.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>62</sup>Peter Collier and David Horowitz, The Kennedys (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 198.

<sup>63</sup>James Giglio, "Past Frustrations and New Opportunities Researching the Kennedy Presidency at the Kennedy Library," Presidential Studies Quarterly XXII, no. 2 (1992) 371-278. Giglio's research reveals that a cloud of secrecy still remains over much of Kennedy's life and time in office since many records are amazingly still not accessible.

<sup>64</sup>Reeves, President Kennedy, 291.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 315.

<sup>66</sup>Krock, "Kennedy's Management of the News," 199.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Joyce Hoffman, Theodore H. White, 182.

<sup>69</sup>Gordon L. Lypitt, "Factors Motivating Citizens to Become Active in Politics," Journal of Social Issues XVI, No. 1 (1960), 11-20.

<sup>70</sup>"American Television: A Brief Survey of Research Findings," Journal of Social Issues, XVIII, no. 6 (1961), 36-42.

<sup>71</sup>Melvin DeFleur, "Occupational Roles as Portrayed on Television," Public Opinion Quarterly XVIII, no. 1 (1964), 57-58.

<sup>72</sup>Craig T. Norback, ed., TV Guide Almanac (New York: Triangle Publications, 1980), 497-500. This is a compilation of numerous TV Guide articles published over the last thirty years.

<sup>73</sup>Kenneth W. Thompson, Ten Presidents And The Press (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America: 1983), 63.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>John Tebel and Sarah Myles Watts, The Press and the Presidency: From George Washington to Ronald Reagan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 67.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>78</sup>Craig T. Norback, ed., TV Guide Almanac, 554-555.

<sup>79</sup>Television And The Presidency prod. And dir. Sander Vanocur, 60., Freedom Forum, videocassette.

<sup>80</sup>Carleton, "The Cult of Personality," 63.

<sup>81</sup>Kenneth Walsh, Feeding the Beast: The White House vs. The Press. (New York: Random House, 1996), 31.

<sup>82</sup>Norman Mailer, "Superman Comes to the Supermart," Esquire, November, 1960, 122.

<sup>83</sup>John Cogley, "The Presidential Image," New Republic Magazine, 29 April 1962, 31.

<sup>84</sup>"The TV Tour," Newsweek 26 February 1962, 23-24.

<sup>85</sup>"Lights, Action, Camera," U.S. News and World Report 4 November, 1963, 67.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>William Carleton, "The Cult of the Personality," 64.

<sup>88</sup>"Lights, Action, Camera," 67-69.

<sup>89</sup>Albert Cantril, The Opinion Connection: Polling, Politics, and the Press (Washington, DC: Congressional

Quarterly, 1991), 19.

<sup>90</sup>Gordon L. Lypitt, "Factors Motivating Citizens to Become Active in Politics," 11-20.

<sup>91</sup>Jeff Greenfield, Television: The First Thirty Years (New York: Harry Abrahms Publishers, 1977), 236.

<sup>92</sup>"Small Screen, Super Weapon," Newsweek, 19 August 1963, 77.

<sup>93</sup>Ronald Browstein, The Power and the Glitter: The Hollywood-Washington Connection (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 390.

<sup>94</sup>Thomas Wicker, "Lyndon Johnson vs. The Ghost of Jack Kennedy," Esquire, November 1965, 64.

<sup>95</sup>Bill Ewald, "Who Projects the Image of Winner?" Newsweek, 5 September 1960, 21.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

<sup>98</sup>Thomas Brown, History of an Image, 12.

<sup>99</sup>Sydney Hyman, "Presidential Popularity," 64. .

<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CONTEMPORARY SOURCES OF THE KENNEDY MYSTIQUE

Fascination with John F. Kennedy has continued among historians, journalists, television commentators, and has remained prominent in American literature, media, movies, and memories for over thirty years after JFK's death. Because the Kennedy mystique did not end on the day he died in Dallas or when the sixties drew to a close, this chapter examines the Kennedy legacy and things closely concerned with his death that have continued its growth such as The Sixth Floor Museum, JFK Conspiracy Museum, and Oliver Stone's movie, JFK. Other sources of the Kennedy mystique exist but will not be focused upon because of the scope and limitations of this research. This chapter also utilizes classroom discussions, research, and activities that will help students understand the Kennedy mythology.

The assassination of President Kennedy and the constant conspiracizing shaped the Kennedy myth by creating an outpouring of sympathy toward JFK and by making Kennedy the central figure and victim of an unresolved crime. Museums and tourists attractions offered wild speculations about who killed John Kennedy--adding to an existing mystique that

killed John Kennedy--adding to an existing mystique that grows as public discussion of his death remains undiminished.<sup>1</sup> The mystery surrounding his murder has created unlimited opportunities for the popular and commercial creation of the Kennedy mystique.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy, according to Theodore P. Kovaleff in a 1994 Presidential Studies article, has already been the "subject of over two-thousand books, innumerable articles, panels, radio and television shows and movies."<sup>2</sup> Lisa Grunwald reports in a 1991 Life article that, "JFK has remained the only former President who is commemorated on the day of his death, not his birth."<sup>3</sup> Over four million people a year visit his gravesite, and many have written and still write letters to him in care of Arlington Memorial Cemetery.<sup>4</sup>

As JFK has become a cultural and historical icon, numerous sources of the Kennedy myth have emerged. Airports, centers of performing arts, and schools of universities bear his name. Popular singer of the sixties, Dion, canonized President Kennedy in his hit, Abraham, Martin, and John. Photographs of John Kennedy have appeared regularly, reminding people of the Kennedy legend. For the purpose of this research, however, I will concentrate on public expressions made at The Sixth Floor Museum and



Conspiracy Museum and Oliver Stone's JFK, while also examining how these sources of a JFK myth can be used as teaching tools.

#### THE SIXTH FLOOR MUSEUM

A part of the popular creation of the Kennedy myth can be found at The Sixth Floor Museum. This Dallas County owned historical site, located in the former Texas Schoolbook Building, from which Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly fired the shots that killed President Kennedy, has drawn people from all over the United States and the world. The efficiently run museum is a non-profit organization that is managed by professional historians and staff members of the Dallas County Historical Foundation. On a typical day, tourists from such places as the Phillippines, California, Washington, and neighbors of the Kennedys in Massachusetts tour the historical site.<sup>5</sup>

The museum sealed off the area from the public from which Lee Harvey Oswald supposedly shot his fateful bullets. Also in this area are arranged boxes allegedly used by Oswald as props and rests for his twelve dollar rifle. An area about fifty feet away from where Oswald allegedly shot Kennedy displayed a number of large television screens showing highlights of JFK's life. Monitors and tape-recorded messages of radio broadcasts recreate the dramatic,

initial remarks about Kennedy's death.

Though many tourists approached various parts of The Sixth Floor Museum in a different sequence, the reality of this horrible experience seemed to strike people within a few minutes of visiting the area. The countenance on various individuals changed as many people wiped tears from their eyes. Those who cried were generally middle-aged to older adults. The idea that a young man possessing loving family, friends, and overwhelming power could die so unexpectedly may have reminded tourists of their own life's mortality and uncertainty. Kennedy's public life and death were mourned as a personal and private loss. A television monitor displayed CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite. Cronkite's voice from a screen echoed, "From Dallas, Texas--the flash apparently official--President Kennedy died at 1 PM, some 38 minutes ago."<sup>6</sup> The revered journalist adjusted his glasses and fought for composure but was clearly shaken. Close by, a radio broadcaster in a coarse voice quaked with emotion as he announced the tragedy. This adrenalin-charged announcer showed less control than Cronkite, however. The combination of the two riveting messages being played simultaneously seemed to capture the entire thought process of tourists. All discussion centered on John Kennedy, the tragedy that his death presented to the country, and the mystery of the

assassination.

A larger monitor showed the JFK funeral. Pictures of the Kennedy family, especially his wife, were flashed across the screen frequently. Her taciturn, drawn demeanor made many weep. A few people who had cried before, now wept more intensely. A contagious sense of grief swept through the room. Pictures of mourners passing the Kennedy coffin and wiping tears away from their faces seemed to trigger more emotion in the museum.

Several large books inviting patron commentary were placed upon shelves. Each book was laid out so that people could share their feelings. To bring closure to an event which resisted closure, the museum helped to create a therapeutic ritual of catharsis and healing. One lady claimed, "I am glad that I finally came here. I have wanted to come for a long time. This helped me to finally bring closure to this."<sup>7</sup> Another wrote a long commentary regarding the abuses of governmental power. "That we, the general public were left with so many questions unanswered," she wrote, "proved that those in power were hiding something." After pouring her thoughts out in the book, she stood up straight and said, "I just had to say some things to feel better."<sup>8</sup>

A number of individuals thought the Kennedy

assassination could serve as a growing experience for the nation. One tourist wrote in the memories book, "I still remember that sad day. Maybe we can learn from this tragedy."<sup>9</sup> Another commented, "I hope that we could look at this and learn."<sup>10</sup> Those making remarks similar to these just mentioned, however, never explained what we could learn by this slaying. The belief that JFK's death could serve as a learning tool may have indicated a psychological need to find something positive or even redeeming in the face of tragedy. Tragic events, according to Carol S. Person in The Hero Within, help society to learn that the world is often unfair.<sup>11</sup>

After leaving the Texas Schoolbook Depository Building, people walked to the area where Kennedy and John Connally were shot. The countenance on the faces of tourists changed as the people left the Sixth Floor Museum. The sympathy and grief demonstrated for Kennedy was replaced by a mysterious expression, curiosity, and mistrust as tourists offered cynical responses about the Warren Report.

The Kennedy assassination mystique perpetuated itself. Recognizing the general public's fascination with the tragedy and the doubts about the Oswald single-gunman theory, astute businessmen, like some historians, have capitalized upon this. One example was the Kennedy

Chronicle, written by Bobby J. Dobbs. The document, written in magazine format and displaying the tabloid style of journalism, was sold by a Dallas husband and wife for \$5.00 each. It apparently provided a comfortable and profitable income for the couple. The salesman claimed that he and his spouse "sell about 80 to 100 of these on the weekend and about 30 to 40 on weekdays." Americans, he suggested, shared his skepticism about Lee Harvey Oswald acting along.<sup>12</sup>

Bob Porter, Director of Public Programs at The Sixth Floor Museum, visits with tourists on a daily basis. Typical of his encounters with tourists, an elderly man approached Porter and authoritatively blamed Lyndon Johnson for John Kennedy's death.<sup>13</sup> As the man departed, Porter reported that he constantly hears new theories about what actually happened. "People," he claimed, "really do want to resolve this."<sup>14</sup>

The public's perception of JFK's assassination reflected a growing mistrust, frustration, and feeling of powerlessness toward government. Demands for the "truth" and the opening of confidential files were repeatedly mentioned. Those who wrote entries in the log book at the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas shared this lack of trust for public officials. Approximately 80 percent offered some

comment about federal departments' or agencies' possible involvement. The CIA, FBI, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Richard Nixon, and Lyndon Johnson were all mentioned as possible murderers of President Kennedy.<sup>15</sup>

The Sixth Floor demonstrated the value of museums since the historical attraction might help the public to reach some sense of resolution about the past. Furthermore, the historical landmark may help our culture better to understand who we are by being reminded of our past. More than anything else, however, The Sixth Floor Museum demonstrated the public's fascination with Kennedy's death as evidenced by over 300,000 annual visitors and narration offered in seven languages to accommodate tourists.<sup>16</sup>

The Sixth Floor Museum, like the funeral parlor and coffin, which hold the deceased on display for loved ones, provides a means for people to grieve and accept Kennedy's death. Though closure has not been reached regarding how JFK died and who killed him, a certain closure has been obtained by tourists who could finally place Kennedy's death in perspective. The flood of people to the assassination site shows the human need to deal with traumatic events of the past by going to actual locations where tragedies occurred and by reliving crucial moments of the past.

The Sixth Floor Museum, not only memorializes Kennedy

but also provides a respectability that borders on religious reverence for his life and death. According to Dallas Morning News journalist Chris Tucker, "The museum commemorates John Kennedy without whitewash or hyperbole... It is also a good place to ponder the high price we pay for believing in others."<sup>17</sup> The historical site uniquely shows the power of the enduring Kennedy legacy.

Thousands of people came to The Sixth Floor Museum from all over the world. The historical site reminded tourists of the Kennedy assassination, evoking sympathy and admiration for President Kennedy and causing people to raise additional questions about the JFK murder. A curiosity regarding the John Kennedy assassination furthered the Kennedy mystique, as we will see in the next section which discusses the JFK Conspiracy Museum.

#### THE JFK CONSPIRACY MUSEUM

The JFK Conspiracy Museum provided a source of the Kennedy mythology. The museum is dedicated to well-known conspiracies in American history but predominantly focuses upon President Kennedy's murder. The museum is owned by a corporation primarily funded by a trust from R. H. Culter of Boston, a private investor and assassination student, and managed by Tom Bowden, a former businessman and computer consultant to the Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>18</sup>

Despite its rather unimpressive appearance, the JFK Conspiracy Museum presented some sobering and thought-provoking information and theories. After walking past the entrance, visitors were shown a prototype of the pistol Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly used in murdering Dallas Police Officer Tippit following the Kennedy shooting. This display showed in an interpretive caption that this weapon, supposedly found on Lee Harvey Oswald, could not have killed the young policeman since the bullet removed from his body would not have fit into the chamber of the gun found on Oswald at the time of his arrest.<sup>19</sup>

The Conspiracy Museum stated that John, Robert, and Edward Kennedy were all targets of adversaries who clearly wanted them removed from positions of power. Those who plotted against the Kennedy brothers supposedly killed President Kennedy to remove him from office and later murdered Bobby Kennedy to prevent him from taking the nation's number-one post. Similarly this theory postulated that Edward Kennedy's car accident at Chappaquiddick, which killed Mary Jo Kopechne, was carefully constructed by the same conspirators who killed his brothers.<sup>20</sup>

The JFK Conspiracy Museum contended that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in slaying JFK and the additional murderer/murderers positioned themselves along the grassy



knoll during the shooting.<sup>21</sup> Pictures of a man with an umbrella standing close to the limousine carrying President Kennedy and Governor Connally were shown. Immediately following the volley of gunshots, the "umbrella man" and an accomplice were photographed sitting peacefully while everyone else pictured in the grassy knoll area scurried for cover. Photographs revealed another suspicious man hiding behind a wall close to the path of the presidential limousine. The names of three individuals who could have shot Kennedy and Connally were displayed. An additional name was given by the museum director as a person who might have killed the President.<sup>22</sup> That individual still resides in Dallas and worked for the CIA at the time of Kennedy's death.<sup>23</sup>

The famous Zuprader film, enhanced by film producer Robert Groden, was also shown. Unlike the pictures that Life released to the public, the Zuprader film was unedited and clear. The presentation captivated the attention of the tourists, evidenced by curious facial expressions, furrowed eyebrows, finger pointing, shaking heads and dramatic high-pitched voices and sighs. The film showed Connally being struck and Kennedy being hit in the throat. The President immediately crossed both hands in front of his neck. As Jackie Kennedy advanced toward her husband, JFK was hit by

another bullet, driving his head back and to the left. This graphic image showed the explosion of Kennedy's skull and the exit of massive brain tissue and blood.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this horrific scene of the President's death, tourists, unlike those at The Sixth Floor Museum, seemed much less grief stricken and much more curious. No tears were shed but endless speculations were made on the murder. One man represented the conclusion of millions of Americans when he said, "That bullet had to come from another direction than the Texas Schoolbook Depository Building."<sup>25</sup> The newly created establishment has drawn approximately 800 visitors a month, at \$5.00 a person. Still, ticket sales comprise less than half of the revenues. The remainder of the proceeds have come from the purchase of conspiracy-related videos, and books.<sup>26</sup> Director of the Conspiracy Museum, Tom Bowden, said, "People are interested in Kennedy, his assassination, and what we have here because the truth has never come out and people want to know it."<sup>27</sup>

In a 1992 NBC poll, only six percent of the American people believed the results of the Warren Commission Report,<sup>28</sup> clearly showing that most people thought that someone other than Lee Harvey Oswald was involved in the Kennedy murder. In The Sixth Floor Museum Book of Memories, approximately one out of fifteen respondents mentioned

something about who actually killed the President.<sup>29</sup> Typically, one person commented, "The truth has to be known."<sup>30</sup> America's rejection of the committee's finding has kept the Kennedy mystique alive.

As long as the "crime of the century" remains unresolved<sup>31</sup> and as long as places like the Conspiracy Museum raise unanswered questions, a special interest or mystique about Kennedy will continue. The unknowns over who committed the crime and why President Kennedy was killed have created opportunities for businessmen, film-makers, and fortune seekers to make money by capitalizing on the public's curiosity about what really happened. JFK's death created a unique cottage industry of producers and authors. The combined efforts of entertainers and quasi-scholars to sell or promote new assassination theories have fueled a seemingly permanent Kennedy mystique. The JFK Conspiracy Museum proposed that the same conspirators murdered John and Robert Kennedy and caused Edward Kennedy's car accident at Chappaquiddick. Some of the arguments were based on selected clips from the Zuprader film and photographs of suspicious men at the grassy knoll area who were considered to be suspects. Responses of tourists showed an extreme curiosity about President Kennedy's death. Oliver Stone's JFK, as the next section discusses, added to the Kennedy mythology by

also appealing to unanswered questions surrounding John Kennedy's death.

#### STONE'S JFK

Oliver Stone's JFK furthered the Kennedy mystique by freely mixing fact and fiction, appealing to the public's conspiracizing craze, and by taking advantage of the wealth and power of Hollywood. Stone's presentation, discussed in Life, Time, and Newsweek magazines, was seen by nearly 50 million viewers. Recognition of the movie included a Golden Globe Award for Stone and two Academy Awards.<sup>32</sup>

Stone's production set an immediate moral overtone by placing a caption on one of the first visual images in the film. It read: "To sin by silence when we should protest makes us a coward."<sup>33</sup> Mr. Stone seemed to be suggesting that citizens should be willing to leave their comfort zones and speak out against society's wrongs and find the true killer of Kennedy. In Oliver Stone's presentation, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison was the person who spoke out and risked his personal safety, reputation, and career. Garrison challenged the Warren Report and blamed a corrupt military-industrial complex and accused a host of other government agencies and individuals with plotting the murder of JFK.

The movie opened with President Eisenhower giving his

last State of the Union address and warning the country about the dangers of a burgeoning military-industrial complex. In the three-hour production, District Attorney Jim Garrison charged not only the CIA but even Lyndon Johnson with plotting the murder of JFK. Kennedy's assassination, according to the story line, was based partially upon his decision to pull troops out of Vietnam, resulting in profit losses for much of private industry that depended upon a war economy.<sup>34</sup> The heroic figure, Garrison, valiantly charged New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw with plotting to kill President Kennedy. Despite Garrison's dedication and hard work, he was unable to prove wrongdoing on Shaw's part. Garrison's closing arguments appeared to be more of an attack against the sinister forces of government and an admonition for the common man to fight public corruption than a presentation of charges against Shaw. Failed efforts by the courageous prosecutor against "the powers that be" underscored an all powerful federal government and the vulnerability of the average citizen. Garrison symbolized the struggles of those who fight the encroachments of city hall and government at all levels, and he was portrayed as the underdog that Americans have traditionally pulled for.

Oliver Stone demonstrated a disregard for historical

accuracy. Stone presented himself as one who does not believe in official history.<sup>35</sup> The producer also suggested that he was setting forth not just fiction but some form of historical truth.<sup>36</sup> Stone took a series of separate events and closely tied them together to build upon the theory that those in the military-industrial complex or someone, other than Lee Harvey Oswald, conspired to kill JFK. Stone, for example, took Eisenhower's warning about a military-business marriage and its growing influence and added his theory about events in Cuba and Vietnam as if one could draw a cause-and-effect relationship between these various happenings.

Stone presented unsubstantiated truths as fact and filled in details to match his conceptual framework. Building on an unproven story, he portrayed Lee Harvey Oswald in the United States or the Soviet Union while a double of Oswald was reportedly elsewhere. Furthermore, Oliver Stone implicated LBJ in Kennedy's death. The movie suggested that Johnson as President could escalate military activity in Vietnam, and as a result, gain a lucrative defense contract for Brown and Root Construction Company. Finally, to prove that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone or that he did not even play a role in killing President Kennedy, Stone showed a man standing behind a picket fence

shooting at the President. After his last shot, the man exclaimed, "Come on, let's get the hell out of here."<sup>37</sup>

Jack Valenti, President of the Motion Picture Industry, vehemently attacked Oliver Stone's work. In a December 25, 1991, New York Times' article, Valenti blasted Stone for omission of basic historical facts and for portraying Jim Garrison as a more virtuous and balanced individual than he actually was. Valenti also lambasted Stone with making a "plausible story by mixing half-truths and total lies."<sup>38</sup> A January 1992 New York Times' editorial took JFK to task for "using trick photography and spurious evidence to charge that the murder of Kennedy was a coup by the nation's highest officials."<sup>39</sup>

Writers and entertainment moguls fought against Stone's right to declare himself as an authority. Production and release of the controversial feature might have been more acceptable to Richard Corliss of Time if producers had stated in initial captions that JFK was "a drama based on fact and conjecture."<sup>40</sup> But the galling factor for journalists and critics was that Stone presented the movie as truth.

"Stone, as artists do, 'painted a picture' in making JFK in the way that he wanted to see it."<sup>41</sup> Producers did not worry about all of the facts fitting together in the

plot, but concerned themselves with creating "a tapestry with various textures, sizes, and colors" that fit into the context of the story line.<sup>42</sup> Stone, an artistic genius, created rather than recreated, by putting people in places where they never were and having them do things that were never done. Oliver Stone had not allowed a few facts to get in the way of the illusion he created.

JFK was not the first movie to take a historical event and fictionalized it as evidenced by All The President's Men, Gandhi, and Lawrence of Arabia.<sup>43</sup> These movies focused upon dramatic issues, but the Kennedy assassination was more emotional to more people. John Kennedy's slaying was the most "traumatic moment of the TV age," the murder of the century, and "the greatest murder ever."<sup>44</sup> Stone's production reminded people of this tragedy, causing individuals to rethink the personal loss that they and the country felt. Though Stone craftily wove a mythical tale based upon fact, he connected with the way that many people realistically viewed the world and the tragic day in Dallas.<sup>45</sup>

Stone's plot gave the American people what they already believed--that someone other than Lee Harvey Oswald killed JFK. A January 1992 Time article showed that 72 percent of Americans thought that Kennedy was killed by conspirators.



The CIA, Mafia, Cuban Government, Anti-Castro Cubans, the military industrial complex, and the Dallas Police were often mentioned as groups who may have murdered John Kennedy.<sup>46</sup> Pointing fingers in so many directions offered a demographical appeal since it connected with so many individuals' thinking about who assassinated President Kennedy. According to a 1991 Time article written by Richard Corliss, "A buffet banquet of theories were offered."<sup>47</sup> Stone built upon existing sentiment but appealed to his audience for more converts who would buy into his story.

Stone's work encouraged the existing democratization of historical interpretation. Laymen, untrained as professional scholars, became involved in shaping the interpretation of one of the world's most traumatic events. The passage to historical authority had widened. Enthusiastic zeal, not educational credentials, was all that was needed. Accuracy of reporting and sophistication of analysis gave way to the ability to spin a half-plausible, animated story. In Covering of the Body, Barbie Zelizer stated that published narratives of Kennedy's assassination empowered and glamorized those who wrote of his death. By writing history and engaging in mythmaking, these individuals attached themselves to history and a certain

nostalgia and myth that emerged. Historical research in the pursuit of truth had been subordinated to those seeking fame and fortune.<sup>48</sup> Writing articles and books or making movies about JFK's assassination gave individuals the opportunity to become celebrities.

Warner Brothers spent 40 million dollars in crafting the film's own legend, allegedly blocked the opening of rival movies that may have hurt JFK's publicity, and hired Washington executive and former Robert Kennedy campaign manager, Frank Mankiewicz, to direct public relations for the film.<sup>49</sup> The money and influence of Hollywood legitimized Stone's storyline of the Kennedy's assassination and invalidated the Warren Report.

Hollywood, the most powerful site for modern mythmaking, created a more salient and compelling version of the JFK assassination than the Warren Commission or credentialed historians. A crisis in faith toward government and cultural authorities emerged. Artistic creativity and attacks on the Warren Report's accuracy greatly shaped the public's perceptions. Real events, thanks to the money, power, and technology of movie makers, became mythical and these myths were accepted as truth.

Stone's work deserved nominal praise despite its obvious weaknesses. He forced many media representatives

and historians to look harder at the Kennedy assassination. According to Barbie Zelizer in Covering the Body, the movie was featured as the front cover story in Life, Esquire, and Detail magazines and was the focus of two major television programs, CBS' 48 Hours and ABC's Nightline.<sup>50</sup> In American Historical Review, Robert A. Rosenstone suggested that no one else in America before Stone, "had dared to raise such historical issues so powerfully or at all in a popular medium."<sup>51</sup>

In the same article, Rosenstone claimed that historical films like Stone's could not be evaluated like books, especially since historians of the written word established no rules of the game for history-related productions. Shockingly, Rosenstone claimed that the errors of Oliver Stone's work may have been "less the fault of the film-maker than of a condition of the medium and the kind of movie" that he chose to make.<sup>52</sup> Rosenstone's kid-glove treatment of Stone's work is hard to accept since Oliver Stone admittedly utilized fiction in the construction of this film.

The theories of Kennedy's assassination advanced by Stone in JFK greatly influenced the thinking of a significant number of people. Although Oliver Stone's ideas of President Kennedy's murder promoted in his movie were not original, tourists at The Sixth Floor Museum recorded ideas

taken from Stone's movie. Just as the New Orleans prosecution asked in the production, one tourist at the assassination site wrote, "Why didn't Oswald shoot sooner when he had a clear shot?"<sup>53</sup> Again, as Garrison had stated, one person at the Dallas site wrote, "Kennedy was killed by the military-industrial complex when he pulled troops out of Vietnam."<sup>54</sup> Finally, taking lines from Garrison's closing statement at Clay Shaw's trial, one individual adamantly demanded the declassification of President Kennedy's assassination and asked why papers regarding his death had to be sealed until well after the year 2000.<sup>55</sup> The word-by-word explanations, remarkably resembling lines from the cinematic presentation, suggested that the movie possessed persuasive appeal.

The public's attraction to JFK and the movie's impact upon America's thinking reveals much about American culture, showing how easily the typical citizen might accept a theory or narrative based upon a mixture of fact and fiction. Ignorance of facts about Kennedy's assassination and vulnerability to Hollywood's sensationalism has caused people to find mythology more compelling than history. The general public might not possess the time or inclination to read history. When bombarded by an overwhelming amount of information and multiple events that are as hard to follow

as in Stone's movie, some people might feel compelled to accept the details and theories presented at face value.

The popularity of JFK suggests that Americans see history as entertainment. The writer who performs as an artist first and historian second might possess a greater appeal to the general public than the historical scholar. The writer who is concerned primarily with an artistic work can clearly depart from what actually occurred and freely provide a more stimulating and entertaining story. Maybe scholarly professionals, truly committed to presenting history as it actually occurred, could provide an accurate and truthful work that stimulates and even entertains the general public.

Additional evidence showed that Oliver Stone's JFK helped to shape of America's consciousness regarding Kennedy's assassination. Shortly after the movie's release, four books related to President Kennedy's slaying made the New York Times' bestseller's list, and over half of the American people believed that the CIA was involved in the President's death.<sup>56</sup>

A certain powerlessness or frustration fueled these conspiracy theories. Democracy failed. There was no majority rule, but a dominance by a few people who acted covertly to protect their own self-interests and destroy

their rivals.

Conspiracies may have created a way for people to deal with insecurities. At the height of the Cold War, Communism appeared in the center of many conspirational theories. As tensions between the East and West ended, cynicism turned inward, and conspiracies pointed at powerful agencies within the mistrusted national government--the CIA, the FBI, or the military. The Cold War created a visible target for people to point accusing fingers toward. Soviet-American conflicts ended but an "us versus them" philosophy continued and fostered a growing skepticism.

Conspiracy buffs thrive on the idea that the evil forces beat the system, remain uncaught, and are "laughing over cocktails" as they discuss the crime.<sup>57</sup> Reports show no one apprehended, charged, or punished. Those who committed the heinous crimes remain mysteriously free, keeping curiosity in a teased state.

The JFK assassination theories make Kennedy more mysterious and add to the legend. Imaginations are free to roam with no boundaries, making John Kennedy into a quasi-fictional character and cultural icon. He serves as a template upon which people are free to cast their fears, insecurities, and hopes.

Accepting conspiracies allows people to reject more

rational theories about problems that plague America long after Kennedy's death. Individuals point to bizarre conspiracies to account for the demise of "the hero" in America but often fail to look at critiques of our country that examine racism, disproportionate wealth, or unreasonable military escalation.

Historian Stephen Ambrose offered an insightful analysis of America's fascination with conspiracies. He claimed that stories of conspiracy have occurred frequently and could usually be found in times of tragedy such as the loss of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union and the rise of Communist China in 1949.<sup>58</sup>

What explains the popularity of Kennedy conspiracy theories? According to Ambrose, conspiracies have become rampant because "people are loathe to believe that chance or accident can change world history, and reject the idea of Oswald acting alone. Additionally, extreme elements of the "left or right blame each other to advance themselves in the present." Finally, the idea that the sixties would have been much better with Kennedy has caused people to recall happier times when he was alive, and to speculate how Kennedy died.<sup>59</sup>

Many conspiracies have been ridiculous since they did not pass the test of common sense, but the rise of

conspiracies was understandable since so much of history has been marked by some sort of conspiracy. Conspiring by government officials comprised an enormous part of British and Russian history, and the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which triggered World War I, was part of a sinister plot.<sup>60</sup>

The public's rejection of the Warren Report and acceptance of Stone's fictional version shows a much larger problem: a grievous mistrust of those who govern. A crisis in faith of leaders has emerged. A 1992, Time poll revealed that 75 percent of people thought that government had become increasingly corrupt over the last decade.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, a 1988 Gallup Poll ranked politicians as slightly more respected than car and insurance salesmen.<sup>62</sup> "Stories of public officials' broken campaign promises, marital infidelity, and mishandling of funds have occurred all too often." The average citizen expects his or her political leaders to lie.<sup>63</sup>

A precedent of fabrication had been set by Presidents. According to Stephen Ambrose in an article in the New York Times Book Review, Truman lied about Hiss being a Communist, Kennedy was less than honest about America's role in the Bay of Pigs invasion and Nixon covered up Watergate.<sup>64</sup> If public officials had acted dishonestly so frequently, one might ask



why leaders should be trusted in their involvement and investigation of JFK's slaying.

With government perceived as suspect, Oliver Stone and others sowed his conspiracy ideas in more fertile ground. By taking advantage of public officials' lessened credibility, Stone appeared more credible to viewing audiences. All cultural authorities were called into question. It was no surprise, then, that the nation accepted cinematic rather than governmental theories of Kennedy's assassination.

Hypocrisy plays a role in the public's diminished faith in government. Nearly everyone lies. Often citizens do not want to hear the truth. A higher standard of integrity is set for politicians than constituents, themselves, are willing to abide by. The general public freely points to corruption in Washington but engages in cheating on taxes, lying out of convenience, and lying on a daily basis.<sup>65</sup>

The press' muckrakash, self-righteous attitude has also contributed to an erosion of faith and delegitimization of public officials. Politicians in recent times may be no less evil than their predecessors. Public officials may in fact, be perceived as less ethical because they are both more scrutinized and exposed, and "their peccadillos are turned into scandals."<sup>66</sup>

The death of public officials like Kennedy has influenced the public's perceptions. Dying, according to Joseph Campbell in Hero of a Thousand Faces, brings the deceased to an exalted status. It "allows for a dissolution of an individual to enter into a pristine knowledge of the world and a creative divinity."<sup>67</sup> Dying allows a person to find completion and his or her maximum potential. In life, the individual is limited by human qualities, but death allows the person to escape his/her frailties and enter into an arena of immortality with other saints.

JFK escaped a microscopic examination that would have revealed personal and political blemishes. As society looks at the death of a heroic figure like Kennedy, people may see a part of themselves and realize that "each of us bears the burden of carrying the cross of the redeemer--not in the moments of great victories but in the silences of life's own personal despair."<sup>68</sup> The tragic fate of a hero has often caused people to examine the nobility and worth of their own life.

Through death, a hero may symbolize different things to diverse people. JFK's life and presidency served as a time of innocence, public sacrifice, and change; however, his death was seen as the unraveling of America and a breakdown of traditional and basic values. Music, clothing, and hair

styles changed.<sup>69</sup> To many blacks, JFK became the white symbol of freedom like Abraham Lincoln during the previous century.

Kennedy became an enduring--possibly a permanent--part of American mythology and politics, perhaps as much for what people did not know about his death as for what they did know. President Kennedy was not just perceived as a part of history but more as one who changed the course of history. Americans exaggerated John Kennedy's accomplishments because of the drama that surrounded his death and the movies, television shows, and historical sites that caused society to fixate upon him. According to James Reston in a New York Times Magazine article, "The tragedy of John F. Kennedy was greater than the accomplishment, but in the end, the tragedy enhanced accomplishment and revived hope."<sup>70</sup>

Throughout JFK, Oliver Stone attempted to present a believable story by tying unrelated facts together. Stone appealed to the public's disbelief in the Warren Report and conspiracy spinning by using multiple explanations of who and why President Kennedy was killed, and by freely mixing fact and fiction. Despite the production's historical inaccuracies, the movie proved beneficial since it caused people to reexamine the JFK assassination. Classroom exercises, discussed in the next section, will cause

students to reevaluate not only John Kennedy's death, but the broader Kennedy mythology.

#### HELPING STUDENTS UNDERSTAND SOURCES OF KENNEDY MYTHOLOGY

The informed history teacher will utilize many resources outside of the traditional classroom to demonstrate a Kennedy mythology. Visits to The Sixth Floor Museum and Conspiracy Museum and viewing Stone's JFK will help students partially to understand the President Kennedy myth.

Of these three sources, The Sixth Floor Museum most effectively demonstrates a mythic power that Kennedy held over the public. The museum successfully evokes sympathy for President Kennedy and his family by focusing upon the assassination, while also showing intimate details of his personal and private life. Reactions of tourists as they view pictures of the grief-stricken Kennedy family at the JFK funeral and see the window in which Oswald supposedly fired his shots demonstrate the emotions felt by patrons.

Students must not allow their emotional visit to The Sixth Floor Museum and sympathy for JFK to prevent them from viewing Kennedy critically. Still, observing the emotional responses of tourists expressed through facial expressions, tears, and reading comments written in the Book of Memories

demonstrate the impact of President Kennedy's life and death on others.

Before arriving at The Sixth Floor Museum, the instructor will carefully plan the visit by anticipating thought-provoking parts of the tour and planning places and times in which the class can isolate themselves, discuss, and reflect upon things observed and felt.<sup>71</sup>

After examining the window from which Oswald allegedly shot JFK, viewing film clips from parts of John Kennedy's personal and private life, and walking across the grassy knoll area, students will discuss if The Sixth Floor Museum tour contributed to a Kennedy myth. If pupils did view President Kennedy more mythically as a result of their visit, class members will be asked to explain what led them to this conclusion and whether the museum's focus upon his life or death contributed more to this myth.

In order to understand Dallas County's motivation for constructing The Sixth Floor Museum, students will study museum literature, interview its historians, and communicate with officials of the Dallas County Historical Foundation. After conducting this research, students will participate in a teacher-led discussion that addresses the following questions: Did Dallas County construct The Sixth Floor Museum as a way of dealing with its collective grief, guilt,

and humiliation? Do cities unconsciously perpetuate legends such as Kennedy through the recreation or purposeful protection of historical sites? Did The Sixth Floor Museum provide a balanced presentation of John Kennedy's life and death? Are museums more likely to promote historic figures into legends than history books are?

To preserve students' memories of the tour and enlightening discussions with their professor and peers, class members will record the day's activities. After returning home, pupils will write a three page essay, discussing how The Sixth Floor Museum influenced their image of JFK.

To better understand sources of the Kennedy mythology, students will view Oliver Stone's JFK and read Barbie Zelizer's Covering the Body.<sup>72</sup> Before watching the production, class members will be warned to weigh cautiously the historic facts presented. Viewing the movie will not greatly add to class members' knowledge of President Kennedy's assassination<sup>73</sup> but will show how Hollywood often creates legends and will cause the class to critically reexamine the assassination.<sup>74</sup>

To counter Stone's barrage of details and help the students separate the movie's mixing of fact and fiction, a Kennedy scholar will debunk myths and answer questions about

JFK before and during the film.<sup>75</sup> Pupils will then discuss how contemporary legends are often built on the way that society communicates to the public with assistance from Zelizer's Covering the Body.<sup>76</sup>

Students will focus on the mythmaking power of Hollywood in creating legends out of JFK and other historical figures after reading Robert Rosenstone's article, "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Fiction." Classmates will discuss why historical movies, according to Rosenstone, are often "not a window into the past but a construction of the past."<sup>77</sup> The professor will lead a discussion that focuses upon whether the motion-picture industry, in an effort to make their productions more exciting, creates heroes out of historic figures.

Class members will examine whether history told in visual images rather than in written word helps to promote historic figures into mythical heroes after reading "Return of Martin Guerre, Teaching History in Images, History in Words."<sup>78</sup> The professor will emphasize Voeltz's argument that history read from a book is perceived differently from history portrayed visually. The teacher will ask students if part of Stone's success in capturing the public's consciousness and further promoting a Kennedy legend could be based upon a preference for learning history through

visual imagery.

After viewing JFK and visiting The Sixth Floor Museum and Conspiracy Museum, students will discuss which of the three activities most effectively promoted a Kennedy mythology and which provided the most balanced representation of Kennedy. Since Stone's work struck a chord of responsiveness that professional historians have not, the teacher will explore with pupils whether a history mixed with fiction has more appeal than a historically accurate account.

Students will discuss what the public's attraction to history presented in motion pictures or in sensationalistic museums suggests about contemporary culture. The class will explore what professional historians can learn about the presentation of historical events from producers like Stone, while discussing how the entertainment industry can benefit in its chronicling of history from educators. Classmates will explore ways in which professors and entertainers can merge their talent, training, and resources to improve the presentation of history.

Students will visit the Conspiracy Museum. Like Oliver Stone's JFK, this historical site promotes the JFK myth by presenting bizarre theories about who killed John Kennedy and why, making him appear more as a fictional character in



a mysterious plot.

Before taking students to the Conspiracy Museum, the teacher must inform the class that the museum presents artifacts and arguments that promote its own interpretation of Kennedy's murder. Each pupil will carefully weigh the arguments presented before accepting the unusual murder arguments at face value and remember that this museum offers only one of many assassination theories.

After studying the Conspiracy Museum's arguments of who assassinated JFK and why, students will consider whether the museum's conclusions about Kennedy's death were based upon historical fact or conjecture. If class members felt that the museum developed theories speculatively, students will identify inaccuracies and places where details were filled in to support the conspiracy theory. Finally, pupils will discuss whether unsubstantiated truths produce a mythical interpretation of history.

A mythology that followed Kennedy was partially based upon the public's adoration of him and sadness over his death. The Conspiracy Museum and JFK, unlike The Sixth Floor Museum, failed to capture the country's grief over John Kennedy's assassination by exclusively making President Kennedy the target of a bizarre, emotionless crime and by failing to show the admiration that people had for John

Kennedy as a politician, family man, and entertaining figure. The appeal of these two sources of Kennedy mythology demonstrate America's fascination with an approach that is traditionally not taught in college history classes. Moreover, the different interpretations of Kennedy offered by The Sixth Floor Museum and the Conspiracy Museum demonstrate the danger of relying on one source in pursuit of historical truth. Each presents history and JFK uniquely, while raising questions that deserve examination.

#### CONCLUSION

To better understand the enduring Kennedy mythology, students will tour The Sixth Floor Museum, JFK Conspiracy Museum, and watch Oliver Stone's JFK and reflect upon how these three sources of John Kennedy's myth through classroom discussion, oral presentations, and written research. Museum representatives will be interviewed and assassination scholars will discuss Stone's inaccuracies.

The Sixth Floor Museum tour caused people to mourn Kennedy's death, reflect upon how things might have been different had he lived, and ask additional questions about his slaying. The JFK Conspiracy Museum rejected the Warren Report and offered conspiracy theories about John and Robert Kennedy's murders and the car accident of Edward Kennedy at

Chappaquiddick. Responses of tourists demonstrated how the museum furthered even more curiosity about President Kennedy's assassination. Oliver Stone's JFK provided erroneous historical facts about President Kennedy's murder and drew much criticism for mixing fact and fiction, but won praise for causing a more scrutinizing examination of the assassination.

Teaching the legend of JFK proves to be difficult, but as the next chapter discusses, exercises and activities will help students to better understand the enduring Kennedy myth.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Zelizer, Covering The Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and The Shaping of Collective Memory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), passim. Zelizer provided a definitive work that assesses factors that shaped memories of the Kennedy assassination while analyzing the motives of many researchers or so called "experts" of John Kennedy's slaying.

<sup>2</sup>Theodore Kovaleff, "Reviews of Kennedy Assassination Theories," Presidential Studies Quarterly, XXVI no. 1, (1994), 904-905.

<sup>3</sup>Lisa Grunwald, "Why We Still Care," Life, December 1991, 35-46.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>The Sixth Floor Museum literature, obtained 12 June 1996. The Sixth Floor pamphlets explained the assassination site's appeal to the general public.

<sup>6</sup>Allen Salzman and Cynthia Salzman Mondell, Films From the Sixth Floor, (Dallas, Texas: Media Projects, 1989), filmstrip.

<sup>7</sup>Book of Memories, 12 June, 1996.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Carol S. Pearson, The Hero Within (San Francisco: Harper Collins' Publishers, 1986), 27.

<sup>12</sup>Salesman of Kennedy literature in grassy knoll area, interview by author, 18 August 1995.

<sup>13</sup>Comments by a tourist in lobby of The Sixth Floor Museum, 18 August 1995.

<sup>14</sup>Bob Porter, Director of Public Programs at The Sixth Floor Museum, interview by author, 18 August 1995.

<sup>15</sup>Book of Memories, 12 June 1996.

<sup>16</sup>The Sixth Floor Museum literature.

<sup>17</sup>Chris Tucker, "A Truce With History," Dallas Morning News, 22 November 1993, 13(A).

<sup>18</sup>Tom Bowden, manager of the JFK Conspiracy Museum, interview by author, 10 December 1997.

<sup>19</sup>JFK Conspiracy Museum literature, obtained 12 June 1996.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Conspiracy Museum papers and photographs, 12 June 1996. A photograph showed suspicious men sitting in the grassy knoll area after gunshots while other tourists ran for cover.

<sup>22</sup>Tom Bowden, interview by author, 12 June 1996. Bowden offered actual names of individuals who may have killed JFK but he understandably expressed extreme caution about publicly saying who the person/people might be.

<sup>23</sup>Films Of The Assassination, prod. and dir. Robert Groden, 30 min., JFK Conspiracy Museum, 1996, videocassette.

<sup>24</sup>Films of the Assassination, Groden.

<sup>25</sup>Comments of a tourist at Conspiracy Museum, 12 June 1996.

<sup>26</sup>Bowden, interview by author, 12 June 1996.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Zelizer, Covering The Body, 209.

<sup>29</sup>Book of Memories, Collective Written Responses of Tourists, at The Sixth Floor Museum, 12 June 1995.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Barbie Zelizer, Covering The Body, 209.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>JFK, prod. and dir., Oliver Stone, 2 hrs. 45 min, Brothers, 1991, videocassette.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Zelizer, Covering The Body, 207.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Oliver Stone, JFK.

<sup>38</sup>"Valenti Calls 'JFK' Hoax and Smear," The New York Times 25 December, 1991, 9(c).

<sup>39</sup>"Get the Best of the JFK Story," The New York Times 16 January 1992, 22 (A).

<sup>40</sup>Richard Corliss, "Who Killed JFK?" Time, 23 December 1991, 69.

<sup>41</sup>Bernard Weinraub, "Hollywood Wonders If Warner Brothers Let 'JFK' Go Too Far," New York Times, 24 December 1991, 9(c).

<sup>42</sup>Corliss, "Who Killed JFK?", 67.

<sup>43</sup>Bernard Weinraub, "Hollywood Wonders If Warner Brothers Let JFK Go Too Far."

<sup>44</sup>Brent Staples, "Hollywood: History by Default," New York Times, 25 December 1991, 30(I). Additional comments showing the significance of JFK's death can be found in: Grunwald, "Why We Still Care."

<sup>45</sup>Book of Memories, 12 June 1995.

<sup>46</sup>Ron Rosenbaum, "Taking a Darker View," Time, 13 January 1992, 38-40, 54.

<sup>47</sup>Corliss, "Who Killed JFK?". 69.

<sup>48</sup>Barbie Zelizer, Covering the Body, 141-159.

<sup>48</sup>Bernard Weinraub, "Substance and Style Criticized In 'JFK'" New York Times, 7 November 1991, 19 (c).

<sup>50</sup>Zelizer, Covering The Body, 204-205.

<sup>51</sup>Robert Rosenstone, "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Film," American Historical Review, 97 (April 1992): 511.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 506.

<sup>53</sup>Book of Memories, 12 June 1996.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Zelizer, Covering The Body, 206.

<sup>57</sup>Kris Millegan, Mind Control, the Illuminati and the JFK Assassination, [excerpts of book on line]; (accessed 10 January 1997); available from <http://www.paroscope.com/articles/1196/kenindex.htm>; Internet.

<sup>58</sup>Tom Bethel, "Patterns of Conspiracy," National Review, 28 August 1995, 33.

<sup>59</sup>Steven Ambrose, "Writers on the Grassy Knoll: A Reader's Guide," New York Times Book Review, 2 February 1992, 23.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Paul Gray, "Lies, Lies, and More Lies," Time, 5 October 1992, 32.

<sup>62</sup>James MacGregor Burns, J. W. Peltason, Thomas E. Cronin, ed. Government By The People (Englewood, New Jersey: ed. Prentice-Hall, 1990), 622.

<sup>63</sup>Steven Ambrose, "Writers on the Grassy Knoll", 24.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Gray, "Lies, Lies, and More Lies," 34.

<sup>66</sup>"Pirahnas of the Press," Psychology Today 27 April 1992, 12. This brief piece relies heavily on quotes from Virginia University Government Professor Larry Sabato.

<sup>67</sup>Joseph Campbell, Hero of a Thousand Faces, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Press, 1949), 367.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 391.

<sup>69</sup>Milligan, Mind Control, the Illuminati and the JFK Assassination.

<sup>70</sup>James Reston, "What Was Killed Was Not Only The President But The Promise," New York Times Magazine, 15 November 1964, 24-25.

<sup>71</sup>David Sutter, "How To Plan An Educational Visit," Teaching History: A Journal of Methods, XVIII. no. 2 (1994), 71-72.

<sup>72</sup>Zelizer, Covering The Body, passim. Zelizer closely examines how Stone and the Hollywood community created a public fixation over JFK.

<sup>73</sup>"Valenti: "Calls 'JFK' Hoax," 9(c).

<sup>74</sup>Rosenstone, "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Film," 509-511. Rosenstone acknowledged Stone's inaccuracies but praised him for making historians reassess the Kennedy assassination.

<sup>75</sup>Libby O'Haight, "The History Channel and History Education," American Historical Association Newsletter, 33 (October 1995): 15.

<sup>76</sup>Zelizer, Covering The Body, passim. Zelizer emphasizes not only Hollywood, but how magazines, newspapers, books, congressional reports, historical sites, and private research groups promoted a Kennedy following that appealed to the country's collective memory.

<sup>77</sup>Rosenstone, "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Fiction," 509.

<sup>78</sup>Richard Voeltz, "Return of Martin Guerre, Teaching History in Images, History in Words," Teaching History: A Journal of Methods, 28 (October 1993): 71.



## CHAPTER 5

### TEACHING THE LEGEND OF JFK

The teaching of JFK could be problematic since the real John Kennedy and the mythical one were very different. Kennedy often presented himself one way in public but demonstrated a different persona once he left center stage, the cameras, and microphones. While speaking in front of the world, for example, he spoke with tremendous conviction when he called "segregation morally wrong" and when he acted like a military general in calling upon the American people to "bear any burden and pay any price." Privately, however, biographers like David Halberstam described Kennedy as a detached pragmatist and as a man who possessed few convictions.<sup>1</sup>

Other tensions between the private Kennedy and the public figure could create problems for the teacher. People interviewed for this research regarding John Kennedy mentioned his youth, physical energy, and vitality. Biographers like Herbert Parmet in Struggles of JFK and Joan and Clay Blair in The Search for JFK, however, exposed Kennedy's physical weaknesses and debilitating health problems.

John Kennedy created an image that enhanced his political career. Some of the public's perceptions were consciously greatly constructed by Kennedy and his family, while factors like his assassination and the media's reaction to it also shaped the JFK legend. Because of these many forces that have shaped the Kennedy persona, the teaching of JFK could prove to be difficult. Books, magazines, television shows, and movies might so overwhelmingly portray him as a celebrity figure that typical citizens may not be able to objectively assess him.

This chapter will examine the Kennedy mystique. Unlike previous chapters in this research, however, this JFK persona will be analyzed through teaching objectives and the completion of specific tasks. College students will gain a more historically accurate view of the Kennedy mythology through research, discussion, essays and oral presentations.

To understand the Kennedy legend, this chapter, divided into four parts, will attempt to help students understand the John Kennedy mystique by examining his communications and image-making style; the concept of heroism and how he appeared as a heroic figure to different groups; trends and characteristics of the early sixties; things that have furthered the JFK persona some three decades later; and the discrepancy between the public and scholars' view of

President Kennedy. Each of the five sections will be divided into teaching objectives. To reach each objective, class members will involve themselves in a variety of activities--conducting and analyzing surveys, observing films and movies, touring historical places, and carefully examining books, magazines, cultural tendencies, and video tapes. Testing and evaluation will follow each section.

Section I will examine JFK's communications and image-making style.

A. So that students will understand this style of communication and image that JFK tried to project, class members will examine the young president's use of humor. They will examine Kennedy Wit, and More Kennedy Wit and the recorded minutes of The Kennedy Presidential News Conferences and the videotape, Television's Impact Upon the Presidency.<sup>2</sup> To better analyze JFK's humorous communication's style, individuals will examine where, when, and how Jack Kennedy used wit and comedy and the apparent impact that it had upon the listening audience.

B. To comprehend JFK's use of alliteration in his communication's style, students will examine Kennedy's rhetoric in Vital Speeches.<sup>3</sup> They will also interview professional speechmakers to determine the usefulness of

this literary and oratorical tool.

C. So that class members will understand how Kennedy's mixture of idealism and pragmatism in speeches influenced his communication's style, students will find examples of each. Class members will read his use of idealistic and pragmatic rhetoric to other individuals. Those listening will comment upon the president's purposeful use of these kinds of oratory by writing their thoughts. Selected monitors will collect the responses and report them to other pupils.

To better understand how President Kennedy utilized a mixture of idealism and pragmatism, students will read Diane Botsdorf's "Idealism and Pragmatism in American Foreign Policy Rhetoric: The Case of John F. Kennedy."<sup>4</sup> After examining the article, students will summarize and analyze it.

So that college students will better understand how President Kennedy's pioneering changes in television influenced his image, students will read Tebel and Watts' Ten Presidents and The Press and Pierre Salinger's P.S.A. Memoirs and With Kennedy.<sup>5</sup> Selected students will act out or simulate some of JFK's practices.

Students will play recorded videotapes of President Kennedy at selected news conferences while also watching his performance during the 1960 presidential debates in comparison to that of Richard Nixon. Following their observation of historic Kennedy footage, each student will write a brief paper on the subject, "Was There Anything Special About JFK's Television Presence?" More specifically, students will also make comments about Kennedy's physical appearance by commenting upon his hair, skin color, clothes, countenance, and demeanor.

To gain additional insight into how JFK's physical appearance might have influenced/influences his image, students will observe fifteen photographs of the Kennedy in family, social, and political settings. After carefully examining these pictures placed at the front of the classroom, students will answer the following questions: Did you think that President Kennedy was a handsome man? If so, please state why.

Results of these responses will be shared with the entire class. To gain even further insight about how looks and appearance may influence an image, students should read The Power of Style by Annette Tapert and Dress For Success by John T. Malloy, while also viewing attractive pictures of Kennedy in Philip Kunhardt's Commemorative Edition of Life

in Camelot.<sup>6</sup>

To understand how the Kennedy family used tools of manipulation to shape his image, students will read Seeds of Destruction, A Question of Character, and In Search of JFK.<sup>7</sup> After examining this literature, students will discuss ways in which JFK insiders used the carrot and stick approach. The teacher will continue this discussion by asking, "Could a President today influence the media through positive and negative reinforcements as John Kennedy did during the early Sixties?" Students will engage in a controlled discussion regarding this with the support and supervision of the professor.

To understand more about the Kennedy family's "carrot and stick approach" in shaping JFK's image, students will also read the story describing the Kennedys' suppression of a story regarding JFK's sordid past that was to appear on a televised program. Students will gain insight in this by reading Mike Wallace's Encounter: Mike Wallace's Own Story.<sup>8</sup>

So that students will gain more understanding about the Kennedy's system of punishment and rewards with the press, they will divide into two groups. One group will tell the students about positive tools that he used, while other classmates will discuss negative tactics utilized by Joseph

Kennedy and other family members.

Unit Test I

I. Discuss three of the four following questions regarding John Kennedy's communication style.

A. John Kennedy's speaking style was quite unique and set him apart from other presidents. Based upon literature, film presentation, and discussions in class, cite specific elements that made President Kennedy's oratory so unique.

B. Recent lectures focused upon JFK's humor. Please discuss Kennedy's humorous remarks. Where, when, why, and how did he make use of humor? Did certain situations cause him to respond in a particular humorous fashion?

C. Remember the fifteen photographs of JFK that you and your fellow classmates observed and the survey completed, regarding his appearance. Please describe the collective responses of students regarding Kennedy's looks. Based upon literature reviewed and recent lectures, please discuss how looks influence image and more specifically if Kennedy's television presence or photographic appeal influenced how people viewed him.

D. Analyze the impact of President Kennedy using presidential news conferences? Describe specific things



## **NOTE TO USERS**

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**UMI**

Section II will examine heroism and how JFK could be seen as a heroic figure.

A. So that students will better understand the concept of heroism and why JFK might be regarded as a heroic figure, one-half of the class will describe characteristics of heroes in Greek mythology, westerns, police stories, cartoons, comic books, and in the Fifties and Sixties. The other portion of the room will write down qualities that citizens perceive in the Kennedy image. The two groups will compare their lists, showing how President Kennedy fits into the persona of a hero.

B. To better understand how JFK might be perceived as a heroic figure, students will watch Warner Brothers' production of PT-109. After observing the film, students will discuss qualities shown by the young Lieutenant Kennedy in the mediocre, less-than-thrilling movie.

C. To gain a greater insight of how Kennedy's persona as a hero worked its way into the American consciousness during the early sixties, students will call Warner Brothers Production Company to find out the number of people who watched PT-109. This, of course, could be calculated by estimating the gross income of the movie and dividing it by

the average ticket price.

1. In order that students might understand that John Kennedy is a hero to the African American community, class members will pass out a survey. It will ask: Which President do you feel made the greatest impact to the advancement of civil rights and why? If results follow other representative samples, African Americans will often select Kennedy in this questioning process. If they perceive him in an extremely popular light, class members should find out why respondents selected him.
2. In order to better understand why some Blacks saw Kennedy as a hero to African Americans, students will bring photographs of national guardsmen physically removing Governor George Wallace and other officials at the University of Alabama who tried to block the admission of Blacks in 1962. Life provided pictures of this. Classmates will discuss these snapshots and discuss what it might suggest about President Kennedy's support of civil rights. Please see 1962 articles of Life.  
  
To gain even greater comprehension of why JFK was perceived as a hero to the African American community,

one group of students will find Kennedy's televised civil rights speech that called segregation "morally wrong." This same group of pupils will provide copies of President Kennedy's historic speech. Class members will analyze and discuss this presidential address. For a copy of President Kennedy's 1962 speech, please see Vital Speeches.<sup>9</sup>

Following this discussion of Kennedy's speech that challenged the morality of racial segregation, students will ask a collective body of African Americans (fifty years of age or older) to reflect upon JFK's words.

3. To understand how John Kennedy was perceived as a hero among journalists, historians, and close friends, students will read Norman Mailer's, "Superman Goes to the Supermart" in a 1960 edition of Esquire, Theodore White's 1960 edition of Making of the President, White's additional publication of In Search of History (528-532), William Manchester's One Brief Shining Moment, and Richard Slotkin's Gunfighter Nation.<sup>10</sup>

Students will divide into different groups, with each group reading one of the preceding works. Pupils will discuss heroic qualities of Kennedy that were emphasized in their reading assignment and then compare their discoveries with other classmates.

4. Some of John Kennedy's heroism may have been earned but some of his heroic image may have been carefully planned and constructed by his father, Joseph. So that students will understand that much of the public's view of Jack Kennedy was assiduously conceived and orchestrated by Joe Kennedy, students should read selected portions from Herbert Parmet's Struggles of JFK.<sup>11</sup>

After carefully reading these assigned works, students will write a five-hundred-word essay that describes and analyzes Joseph Kennedy's behind-the-scene efforts to promote his son, John, as an exalted figure.

5. To gain a greater insight into how John Kennedy and his key supporters tried to portray him as a hero to the general public, students will simulate a consulting team that carefully plans the heroic image of a presidential candidate. What would these supposed consultants do to project their person as a heroic figure? How did their ideas compare with what JFK supporters did? In retrospect, did President Kennedy and his team do the correct things to portray him as one of the great American heroes.
6. In Gunfighter Nation, Richard Slotkin asserted that heroes might use a certain kind of rhetoric to justify

their actions.<sup>12</sup> In order to gain greater insight into the kind of words or phrases a heroic figure like Kennedy utilized to gain American support, each student group will study a Kennedy speech or parts of a Kennedy speech. Each of these groups will identify elements of his oratory that make John Kennedy appear as a sacrificial hero. Excerpts from many of his addresses can be found in America the Beautiful.<sup>13</sup>

7. In order to understand qualities that JFK saw in heroism and heroic characteristics that he might have tried to project, students will read Profiles of Courage, a Pulitzer Prize winning book that he supposedly wrote. This will be significant since he might have tried to glean exemplary qualities from these figures. A different class member will take one of the eight men profiled by Kennedy and report to the class how these individuals have demonstrated courage.

Test II. Please answer three of the following four questions.

1. Warner Brothers portrayed JFK as a hero in the movie, PT-109. What heroic qualities did he show in this production? Please explain how these perceived characteristics would have helped his image with the American public?

2. The 1964 Civil Rights Bill passed during the Johnson administration and not that of Kennedy's. Still African Americans often regard JFK, not LBJ, as the true hero to blacks. Utilizing comments in surveys from the African American community, literature, and class discussions, please explain why blacks have often seen President Kennedy as a heroic figure.

3. Authors and journalists Theodore White, William Manchester, Richard Slotkin, and Norman Mailer offered varied arguments about why JFK was a heroic figure. Please explain what each of the four said about his heroism. Which of the four was the most convincing? State why.

4. Remember our discussion of the characteristics of heroes, ranging from Greek mythology to westerns, James Bond

movies, and space exploration episodes. Please describe these qualities. Compare the heroic myth of JFK to that of other heroes. Elaborate.



Section III will examine how characteristics of the early sixties contributed to the image of JFK.

A. So that students will understand how television favorably influenced the image of JFK, students will watch an episode of popular television programs during the early Sixties—"Ozzie and Harriet," "Donna Reed," "Andy Griffith," and "Leave It To Beaver." Following pupils' observation of these shows, class members will discuss how these situation comedies made them feel about society. To gain even further insight into how these televised serials arguably reflected a more trusting society, another group of students will interview people who could remember these programs.

A third group of students will watch later programs, such as "All In The Family" and "The Jeffersons" that projected a much more cynical society.

B. To gain further insight into how television may have shaped the image of JFK, students will observe the monologue of comedians like Jack Benny, George Burns, Milton Berle, and Bob Hope. These monologues will be compared to those offered by more recent standup comics. By doing this, students will understand how televised programs of the early Sixties may have been more advantageous for Kennedy than for later presidents since greater deference was given to the

political leaders, apparent by the kind of jokes they utilized.

In order to further test the hypothesis that the kind of humor used by comedians and entertainers treated the presidents with much more respect (which helped Kennedy's image), class members will read aloud two monologues to a group of university students—one by Jack Benny during the early sixties and another by a popular comedian in more recent days. A comparison between the two will effectively show how the earlier humorists gave greater respect to chief executives. Of course, to corroborate that comic figures thirty years ago treated the President with more deference, class members will vote on which of the two monologues treated the Commander-in-Chief with the greatest amount of respect.

C. In order to understand how a friendlier news media shaped a more popular image of presidents and thus helped JFK, students will compare the number of negative, positive, and neutral stories in the early Sixties with those of more recent times. The pupils selected for this assignment will quantify their results, showing that newsmen of the early Sixties provided more upbeat, less critical coverage at the time of John Kennedy's presidency. Class members will turn

in a five-hundred-word paper to their professor showing these results. The same individuals will also report their findings to other classmates.

So that students will understand more about the favorable news environment that existed during JFK's presidency, class members will read, "The Six O'clock Presidency," by Fred Smoller.<sup>14</sup> This article, a quantitative study of negative news coverage, will show more positive reporting of presidential performances by reporters in the early Sixties and times prior to this.

D. So that students will understand that a greater level of trust existed for government during the late fifties and early sixties, pupils will examine the American population's perceptions toward those in public service during the period from 1959 to 1963 by interviewing people born between 1934 and 1944 and then comparing these perceptions to those of more recent times. This stark contrast in the trustworthiness toward the public sector during these two periods will reveal how a more trusting population proved advantageous to President Kennedy's image. Class members will orally report their findings to their classmates.

E. To gain additional insight into the public's trust toward government that existed during the early sixties, pupils will compare the number of governmental scandals in popular culture magazines from January to June 1996 with those during a six month period in the sixties.<sup>15</sup> Students will post the scandalous stories during the first six month period of 1963 on bulletin boards in the front of the classroom. This exercise will offer introspection into the general public's level of confidence toward the public sector during the early sixties since many more publicized scandals could be found in the later period.

F. So that students will understand more about the level of amount of negative advertising that existed during the early sixties and how this may have helped or even salvaged Kennedy's public image, they will observe television commercials utilized by Richard Nixon during the presidential campaign. A careful examination of these advertisements will show fewer strong personal attacks. Students will play videotapes of political commercials provided by Vanderbilt University's Freedom Forum to other class members, illustrating a kinder and gentler campaigning at this juncture.

G. To gain better comprehension of how journalistic trends during the early Sixties enhanced or preserved JFK's image, students will learn more about the darker side of Kennedy's life that the press did not report. So that pupils will familiarize themselves with many of these lies of omission, they will read select books that reveal scandalous and potentially damaging information about John Kennedy such as Thomas Brown's History of An Image and Richard Reeves' President Kennedy: Profile of Power.<sup>16</sup> Following their examination of these works, individuals in the class will discuss many previously unknown matters about President Kennedy.

H. In order to understand a kind of excitement and/or idealism that existed toward public service which Kennedy in part engendered, students will read the first three chapters of David Halberstam's The Best and the Brightest and Robert Morrison's From Camelot to Kent State.<sup>17</sup> They will also listen to and analyze President Kennedy's inaugural address. Last, class members will each interview ten people over the age of fifty, asking them to describe the emotions they felt on the day that John Fitzgerald Kennedy was inaugurated as President. Pupils will then take this information and reenact a dramatic scene that will capture much of the

American sentiment toward government during the early days of the Kennedy Administration.

I. In order to understand this excitement that Kennedy engendered that made the possibility of government service seem more exciting, students will examine additional film footage of JFK and read excerpts of Slotkin's Gunfighter Nation.<sup>18</sup>

J. In order to understand how the times and characteristics of the sixties shaped the image of JFK, students will discover how he, in turn made the days of his presidency more exciting to many Americans. So that each student can see some of the excitement that John Kennedy evoked, class members will read of the pomp, ceremony, and glamour of the Kennedy Administration in the early pages of From Camelot to Kent State and Phillipa Strum's description of the Kennedy grandeur in Presidential Government.<sup>19</sup>

Unit Test III.

I. Please answer three of the following four questions.

A. Remember our discussions of From Camelot to Kent State and the early chapters from our reading assignment on David Halberstam's The Best and the Brightest. Using this information along with the oral interviews mentioned in class, please discuss a kind of idealism that existed in the early sixties. How did JFK contribute to it and how did this idealism impact upon his image?

B. The press of the sixties chose not to reveal skeletons in the JFK closet, many which might have destroyed his political career. Thoroughly discuss some of these secrets in John Kennedy's life. What does the media's decision to not expose these things suggest about them (their values and behavior) during the Kennedy Administration?

C. Television of the sixties influenced the image of President Kennedy. Situation comedies and the monologues of comedians may have fostered a friendlier environment for politicians. Please explain how JFK's image may have benefited from these different tendencies.

Section IV will focus upon things that furthered the Kennedy mystique such as Barbie Zelizer's Covering of the Body. Much of this Kennedy mystique might be attributed to his tragic assassination.

A. So that students might understand the attention and attraction that the Kennedy assassination drew, students will read the article entitled "Why We Still Care," in 1991 the edition of Life, and Theodore P. Kovaleff's, book review in the Fall 1994 publication of the Presidential Studies Quarterly.<sup>20</sup> These two studies provide quantitative evidence of the public's fascination with JFK's slaying.

B. In order that students might understand how select places furthered the Kennedy mystique, class members will tour The Sixth Floor Museum, the site of the JFK assassination. Students will take notes over significant features of their journey through the supposed Texas Schoolbook Depository Building, paying painstaking attention to the comments and reaction of each tourist since this might reveal the general public's reaction to this historic, and often emotionally moving, experience. Students should also consider purchasing literature relevant to this location since it might provide additional, revealing information about the public's fascination over JFK's death.



C. Also, to gain a greater perspective on how select places may have furthered the Kennedy mystique, students will tour the Conspiracy Museum, four blocks from The Sixth Floor Museum in downtown Dallas. Pupils will take notes over special areas of interest, especially the public's reaction to the tour.

D. After returning from the two museums, students will compare and contrast the two places, pointing out things, especially tones and historical themes, that marked each place as unique.

E. So that students might recognize how a lack of psychological closure of the Kennedy assassination may have fueled an unquenchable curiosity and furthered a certain mystique, students will study theories about who actually killed the President. Class members will not assess different ideas about JFK's murder to gain expertise regarding the whos, whats, and whys of "the crime of the century," but will examine these multiple suppositions in an effort to understand the lure of the Kennedy death that has resulted from the still unanswered, provoking questions.

1. Students will analyze Gerald Posner's Case Closed, a well chronicled book, praised by

historians, that claims Lee Harvey Oswald could and did act alone in killing President Kennedy.

2. Students will read Peter Dale Scott's Deep Politics and the Death of JFK, a book that alleges the "Kennedy assassination, McCarthyism, Watergate, and Iran Contra were all crises that arose because of perceived threats to the prosecution of the Cold War."
3. Students will read Frank Ragano and Selwyn Raab's Mob Lawyer, a publication that theorizes the Mafia's involvement in Kennedy's assassination.
4. Finally, to better understand the public's attraction to these theories, students will calculate the book sales of Posner, Ragano, Scott, and Harrison Livingston's High Treason 1, High Treason 2, and Killing Truth.<sup>20</sup>

F. To gain an appreciation of the multiple types of literature published on the Kennedy assassination, students will read Theodore P. Kovaleff's article in the Fall, 1994, edition of Presidential Studies Quarterly.<sup>21</sup>

Of all of the books, magazines, newspapers, journal articles, and movies that examined the Kennedy

assassination, none arguably fueled the curiosity of the "Who done it" phenomenon like Oliver Stone's JFK. The movie, which built on mystery and intrigue, added to a Kennedy mystique by making him seem more of a mysterious person (because of the nature of his death).<sup>22</sup>

G. In order to better understand how this movie shaped much of America's opinions regarding the JFK assassination, giving Kennedy an even more intriguing and romantic image, students will carefully watch JFK and take notes regarding presidential murder theories.<sup>23</sup> The almost verbatim ideas of those touring The Sixth Floor Museum to Oliver Stone's production suggest that Stone significantly helped to shape and even reshape the image of President Kennedy. Following this, the professor will lead students in a discussion of how Stone's presentation may have influenced John Kennedy's legend.

H. To gain insight into how many people viewed JFK, students will contact Warner Brothers' marketing division and ask company representatives about the number of tickets and video sales generated by Oliver Stone's work. Pupils will compare the production profits with those of book publishing companies so they will know which medium may have

most influenced Kennedy's image the most.

I. Music, like books and movies, played an important role in shaping the American consciousness toward John Kennedy. One song in particular, "Abraham, Martin and John,"<sup>52</sup> magnified the posthumous image of JFK. In order to understand how this 1969 hit by Dion furthered the Kennedy mystique, students will research the record sales of this recording while also calculating the number of times that the hit has played on "oldie" radio stations in the nineties.

J. So that students might understand how "Abraham, Martin, and John" furthered a Kennedy mystique, students will play a recording of this hit from the late sixties. After listening to this song, a group of respondents will be asked to write down their thoughts, revealing much about the American psyche and its impact upon his image. Class members will take the collective responses and report them back to other classmates.

K. To understand how the nature of JFK's early death furthered the Kennedy mystique, students will read Thomas Brown's History of an Image<sup>53</sup> and selected works on

martyrdom. Following completion of these readings, students will write a one-thousand-word paper that assesses how tragic, sensationalized deaths only served to enlarge President Kennedy's posthumous image.

L. The theatrical nature of Kennedy's death indelibly etched itself into the memory of many Americans. To understand how the dramatic and traumatic memory of November 1963, furthered the JFK mystique, students will interview adults over the age of fifty about their reaction to the news of President Kennedy's slaying. Following this exercise, pupils will read the responses to class members, noting that people often remembered precisely where they were and what they were doing when the word of JFK's assassination surfaced.

Unit Test IV.

Please answer three of the following four questions.

1. Please compare and contrast the JFK and Conspiracy Museums. Specifically, how are they both similar and different? Do the two places attempt to set the same tone and environment? Please state why. How could each of these historical sites further the Kennedy mystique?

2. Americans have not reached psychological closure on the assassination of President Kennedy. Assess the general public's reaction to the Warren Commission. Also, please describe three popular theories of Kennedy's death based upon lectures and books assigned in class.

3. Based upon recent lectures, provide statistical data that show the public's fascination with the Kennedy assassination. Also, based upon class discussions and Barbie Zelizer's Covering of the Body, what singular thing most furthered the Kennedy mystique?

4. Based upon collective responses regarding feelings evoked by Dion's "Abraham, Martin, and John," what psychological impact did this song have upon Americans? Also, provide evidence of how this song influenced the

attitudes of Americans toward the memory of JFK.

Section V will focus upon the discrepancy between how historians and the general public view Kennedy.

A. To substantiate the discrepancy between the general public's and historians' views of JFK, students will study results of a 1983 Gallup Poll and a 1995 survey taken among freshmen history students at Middle Tennessee University. Findings from the 1983 Gallup Poll show the general population ranking Kennedy as the most popular president, while the subsequent poll taken among university class members show only Lincoln as being more popular than John Kennedy. Pupils will also study a 1982 Murray-Blessing sampling in which historians rank Kennedy as the thirteenth best president and a 1981 Porter questionnaire ranking President Kennedy fourteenth among scholars.<sup>24</sup>

B. To better understand the discrepancy between the public's and historians' rankings of Kennedy, students will give a survey to randomly picked students at a state university and to eighty pupils within a ninety mile radius asking: What makes a president great? Results of the two groups will be discussed and analyzed. The professor will then lead a discussion that focuses upon what the general public's responses suggest about American culture and what the different views among professors and the public (represented by random sampling of students) suggest about



the way society evaluates presidents. The instructor will conclude the class by leading an interactive conversation that focuses upon whether the general public evaluates politicians superficially and whether the gulf between historians and the public's view of Kennedy suggests a dilemma in the understanding and communication among the two groups?

C. To gain a better understanding of why historians have collectively ranked Kennedy as a good but not a great President, students will examine scholarly assessments of JFK's presidential performance in foreign policy, congressional relations, and civil rights.

1. Students will discuss and analyze historians' criticism of JFK's civil rights plans after reading Mark Stern's Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson, and Civil Rights, Paul Henggeler's In His Steps: Lyndon Johnson, and the Kennedy Mystique, and David Garron's Bearing the Cross.<sup>25</sup>
2. Students will discuss Kennedy's most significant foreign-policy errors after reading Malcolm E. Smith's John F. Kennedy's 13 Greatest Mistakes and Michael Beschloss' The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963.<sup>26</sup>
3. Students will learn more about scholars'

assessment of JFK's legislative record by reading Victor Lasky's The Man and the Myth and Thomas Wicker's JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality on Politics.<sup>27</sup>

D. To gain insight into Kennedy's popularity with the general public, students will read Thomas Brown's JFK History of an Image, interview five individuals over the age of fifty who viewed Kennedy favorably, and analyze the comments of Middle Tennessee State University students who viewed John Kennedy positively.<sup>28</sup> Based upon this information, the professor will discuss with students what factors contributed most to a public adoration for President Kennedy and whether class members agreed more with historians' or the public's assessment of JFK.

Unit Test V

Please answer two of the following three questions:

1. Provide statistical evidence and sources that demonstrated a discrepancy between the general public and historians' view of Kennedy. Also, based upon interviews, surveys and Thomas Brown's History of an Image, explain why the American culture viewed JFK so favorably?
2. Recent classroom discussions have focused upon some of Kennedy's weaknesses in civil rights, congressional relations, and foreign policy. In which of these areas did he fail the most? Explain why.
3. After studying the discrepancy between the public's and historians' views of Kennedy, which do you most agree with? Explain why.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York: Random House, 1972), 66.

<sup>2</sup>Jack Adler, ed., The Kennedy Wit (New York: Citadel Press, 1966): Jack Adler, ed., More Kennedy Wit (New York: Citadel Press, 1968): George W. Johnson, ed., The Kennedy Presidential News Conferences (New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, Inc., Publishers, 1978): Sander Vanocur, Television and the Presidency (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University, 1991).-Video tapes.

<sup>3</sup>Vital Speeches (New York: City News Publishing Company, 1962).

<sup>4</sup>Diane Botsdorf, "Idealism and Pragmatism in American Foreign Polity Rhetoric: The Case of John F. Kennedy," Presidential Studies Quarterly, XXIV no. 3 (1994), 510-515.

<sup>5</sup>John Tebel Watts and Sara Myles Watts, The Press and the Presidency: From George Washington to Ronald Reagan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): Pierre Salinger, PSA Memoirs (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995): Pierre Salinger, With Kennedy (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

<sup>6</sup>Annette Tapert, The Power of Style (New York: Random House, 1995): John T. Malloy, Dress For Success (New York: P. H. Wyden, 1975): Phillip Kunhardt, ed., Life in Camelot (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988).

<sup>7</sup>Ralph Martin, Seeds of Destruction Joe Kennedy and his Sons (New York: G. P. Putnam Sons, 1995: Thomas C. Reeves, A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy (New York: Frees Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup>Mike Wallace, Encounter: Mike Wallace's Own Story (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984).

<sup>9</sup>Vital Speeches, (New York: City news Publishing Company, 1962).

<sup>10</sup>Norman Mailer, "Superman Comes to the Supermart," Esquire, November 1960, 119-124: Theodore White, Making of the President, 1960. (New York: Athenum House, 1961):

Row Publishers, 1978): William Manchester, One Brief Shining Moment (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983): Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation: Myth of Frontier in Twentieth Century America (New York: Athenum Books, 1983).

<sup>11</sup>Herbert Parmet, Jack: The Struggles of JFK (New York: Dial Press, 1980).

<sup>12</sup>Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Polley, ed., America The Beautiful: In the Words of John F. Kennedy, (New York: Country Beautiful Foundation, 1964).

<sup>14</sup>Fred Smoller, "The Six O'Clock Presidency: Patterns of Network News Coverage of the President," Presidential Studies Quarterly, XVI No. 1 (1986), 31-49.

<sup>15</sup>Sarita Robinson, ed., Reader's Guide To Periodical Literature (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1963), 1476: Jean M. Marra, ed., Readers' Guide To Periodical Literature (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1992), 1603-1604.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Brown, JFK: History of an Image (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1988): Richard Reeves, President Kennedy: Profile of Power (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

<sup>17</sup>David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, 1-38: Robert Morrison, ed. From Camelot to Kent State (New York: Times Books, 1986).

<sup>18</sup>JFK: The Camelot Years (New York: Time-Life, 1992) - audiovideo presentation: Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation.

<sup>19</sup>Robert Morrison, ed. From Camelot to Kent State: Phillipa Strum, Presidential Power and American Democracy (Santa Monica, California: Goodyear Publishing Incorporated, 1979).

<sup>20</sup>Lisa Grunwald, "Why We Still Care," Life, December 1991: Theodore P. Kovaleff, comprehensive review of multiple theories offered in books, movies, and articles about who killed JFK, Presidential Studies Quarterly 26, no. 4 (Fall, 1994) 904.

<sup>21</sup>Gerald Posner, Case Closed. (New York: Random House, 1993).

<sup>21</sup>Harrison Livingston, High Treason 2: The Great Coverup: "The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1992); Harrison Livingston, Killing Truth: Deceit and Deception in the JFK Case (New York: Carroll and Graf), 1992).

<sup>22</sup>Theodore Kovaleff, "Reviews of Kennedy Assassination Theories," Presidential Studies Quarterly, XXVI no. 1, (1994), 904-905.

<sup>23</sup>Oliver Stone, JFK, (Warner Brothers, 1991). A movie. Peter Dale Scott, Deep Politics and the Death of JFK (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Dion, Abraham, Martin, and John, Performed by the author, Right Stuff 29667, 1968, cassette. The popular two minute record eulogized Kennedy and increased the public's perception of his martyrdom.

<sup>26</sup>Thomas Brown, JFK: History of an Image (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1988).

<sup>27</sup>James McGregor Burns, J. W. Peltason, and Thomas E. Cronin, Government By the People, 14th edition. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 378: Survey results of Middle Tennessee State University presidential preferences. This questionnaire was completed in Summer, 1995: Robert Murray and Tim Blessing, Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents Washington--Carter, 2nd edition, (University Park, Pennsylvania: University Press, 1988), passim.

<sup>28</sup>Mark Stern, Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson, and Civil Rights. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992): Paul K. Hengler, In His Steps: Lyndon Johnson and the Kennedy Mystique (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee): David Garrow, Bearing the Cross (New York: William Morrow Company, 1986).

<sup>29</sup>Malcolm E. Smith, John F. Kennedy's 13 Greatest Mistakes in the White House (Smithsonian, New York: Suffolk Publishing, 1980): Michael Beschloss, The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963 (New York: Edward Burlingame, 1991).

<sup>30</sup>Victor Lasky, The Man and the Myth (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1963): Thomas Wicker, JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality on Politics (Baltimore: Penguin Press, 1968).

<sup>31</sup>Thomas Brown, JFK: History of an Image: Survey results of Middle Tennessee State University Students.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

A mystique surrounds the memory of JFK. Despite his brief time in office and limited accomplishments, the general public has consistently ranked him as the greatest president. Movies, books, magazines, and songs have made him almost a cult figure. Even though Kennedy has been dead for over thirty years, his short life receives more attention than ever before.

The thesis of this research is that despite the critical assessment of John F. Kennedy's presidency by historians, a powerful mythology holds President Kennedy as an exalted national hero. The popular myth started in the conscious use of modern media and was strongly shaped by consumer culture and JFK's death. By becoming increasingly aware of the mythic dimensions of Kennedy's image, students can develop a more historical and critical understanding of the Kennedy presidency.

A huge disparity exists between scholars and the general public's perceptions of JFK. Random samples from Gallup and Porter organizations and the Chicago Tribune rank Kennedy as the most popular President but historians view



President Kennedy more negatively for his miscalculations and lack of candor in Vietnam, misjudgments in diplomacy with Khrushchev, poor legislature skills, and immoral personal conduct.

Americans have possessed a great attraction to heroism and JFK indeed benefited from the nation's passion for heroes. Kennedy was perceived heroically for his contributions to civil rights as represented by the media, appealing personal qualities to African Americans, and assassination.

JFK worked hard to create his own heroic mystique by studying demographical trends and casting himself into the heroic ideal of the sixties. Indeed, President Kennedy understood America's attraction to heroes as evidenced by his authorship or contribution to Profiles of Courage and his use of heroic metaphors and speeches.

Kennedy became a mythical, heroic figure to African Americans. Time and Newsweek showed photographs of JFK touching, smiling, and laughing with blacks. The print media portrayed Kennedy as a great liberator to minorities. President Kennedy's gentle tone of voice and countenance, one black leader claimed, gave hope to blacks.

The Kennedy myth, as public expressions at The Sixth Floor Museum indicated, grew as a result of the JFK

assassination. President Kennedy's murder produced an outpouring of sympathy and affection for him, and caused people to think the world would have been better if John Kennedy had lived longer. The perceived martyrdom of JFK made him appear to be a man of deep conviction. John Kennedy's traumatic departure enriched his significance and accomplishments.

The Kennedy myth began with the image-making power of television and print media, and celebrity status associated with the entertainment industry. Magazines and newspapers photographed John and Jacquelyn Kennedy traveling, playing sports, attending social and cultural events and spending time with the extended Kennedy family. Popular culture literature portrayed Mrs. Kennedy as America's fashion trendsetter. Personal interest stories about JFK and his family often diverted attention from his presidential performance. JFK often projected a positive TV image by persuading producers to cut less impressive scenes and reshoot spots that he felt needed improvement.

The wealth, power, and charm, of JFK and his family helped to shape a Kennedy mythology in the print media. Intimidation and fear of litigation caused reporters to minimize or exclude negative reporting while President Kennedy's rewards and personal popularity also gave him a

more favorable coverage.

As Kennedy's presidency started, he prioritized style, photographic appeal and carefully choreographed his television image in ways that resonated with America's consumer culture. The ability to create illusion became an increasingly important part of politics. Policy and principle became less crucial because consumers were preoccupied with star quality and the packaging of candidates like JFK. Experts in demographic trends could cast political actors in the image that Americans favored. A "rhetoric of democracy," a well-conceptualized language that appealed directly to the consumer/voter, emerged.<sup>1</sup>

In Culture as History, Warren Susman argued that personality was central to new concepts of the self produced by consumer culture. Those with attractive personalities became performers and appealing figures with special power by making themselves unique and distinctive. Moreover, Susman argued that powerful personalities possess the potential to shape the attitudes of mass society.<sup>2</sup>

Image-making has greatly influenced the political system. Style has disguised substance. Failed policies can be camouflaged by effective sound bites and photo opportunities. Creating a myth through style is now an irreversible part of politics. Still Americans must be able

to look beyond the cosmetics and assess leaders by their past accomplishments or potential to perform in office. Citizens must painstakingly attempt to see public officials for who they are by detaching themselves from the polished images created by the media and consultants.

The assassination of President Kennedy and the constant conspiracizing have shaped the ongoing myth by creating an outpouring of sympathy toward JFK and by making John Kennedy the central figure and victim in an unresolved crime. Museums and tourists' attractions have offered wild speculation about who killed John Kennedy--adding to an existing mystique that grows as public discussion of his death remains undiminished.<sup>3</sup> The mystery surrounding his murder has created nearly unlimited opportunities for the popular and commercial creation of the Kennedy mystique. The Sixth Floor Museum, the JFK Conspiracy Museum, and Oliver Stone's JFK are three of the many sources of Kennedy mythology.

The Sixth Floor Museum keeps the Kennedy legend alive. For some, it reinforces memories of his murder, provides an emotional catharsis, and raises additional questions about his assassination. The dignified establishment contributes a reverence to the life and death of President Kennedy and leaves many with a sense of loss over his slaying.

The JFK Conspiracy Museum provided a source of the Kennedy mythology. This establishment was/is dedicated to well-known conspiracies in American history but focuses predominantly upon President Kennedy's death. The museum linked multiple conspiracies together into one grand conspiracy. The historical site made Kennedy into a more mysterious figure by arousing curiosity about the event that surrounded his death.

Oliver Stone's JFK also added to the Kennedy mythology. JFK, as box-office sales, awards, and media articles demonstrated, captured the attention of much of the general public. Stone provided an entertaining and thought-provoking movie that freely mixed fact and fiction. The popularity of JFK demonstrated the influence of nonhistorians in chronicling history and the nation's willingness to accept conspiracy theories at face value.

Teaching the John Kennedy myth will help students to separate fact from fiction and see President Kennedy in a more critical and historically accurate way. By assessing what this Kennedy mythology actually was, students will be able to understand why JFK was ranked as the most popular president and showcased in so many books and films despite a rather mediocre record of presidential performance. Furthermore, by studying the Jack Kennedy mystique, students

of history will be able to see that our assessments of leaders might be superficial, based more on glitz, glamour, emotion and assumptions than on performance or competence.

By becoming aware of the JFK myth, students might be able to form more balanced interpretations of John Kennedy, while understanding that this mixing of fact and fiction, which Oliver Stone did in JFK, has become increasingly popular. This merger of fantasy and truth, called "historical fiction," has been used to portray Abraham Lincoln and Nat Turner, as well as John Kennedy.<sup>4</sup> With the realization that history productions and publications might place false but entertaining facts in presentations, students will be able to more soberly and objectively view media spins and interpretations.

To better understand some of the sources of the ongoing Kennedy mythology, students will tour The Sixth Floor Museum and the JFK Conspiracy Museum and watch Oliver Stone's JFK. Pupils will discuss how each propagates the JFK legend in a unique way and examines which source most successfully furthers the Kennedy mystique.

Students will discuss Hollywood's ability to create legends out of historical figures like Kennedy after reading Rosenstone's article, "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Fiction."<sup>5</sup> The professor will lead a discussion that focuses

upon whether motion pictures compromise the truth to make history more stimulating and whether professors could improve their style of presentation by emulating some of the motion picture industry's practices.

A study of the Kennedy mythology produced both cynicism and nostalgia of a golden age that passed. Revelations of JFK's sexual escapades and speculation into the government's covering up or involvement into the presidential slaying have engendered a growing mistrust toward society and public officials. Moreover, those waxing in nostalgic thoughts of the Kennedy years often saw the early sixties as a period of unparalleled excellence forever gone.

The teacher of Kennedy mythology must warn the public about the dangers of nostalgia and cynicism. Those swept away in mistrust and overwhelmed by nostalgia must be cautioned to avoid withdrawal and disengagement. Citizens, the instructor should suggest, must be active participants in society. Individuals should counter their mistrust of public officials by recruiting or supporting honest office holders and neutralize the excuses of nostalgia by consciously making themselves active participants in the future world.

A powerful mythology holds John Kennedy as an exalted national hero. His astute use of the electronic and print

media, skills in casting himself as a heroic person, and tragic assassination made Kennedy an enduring figure in American history.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, Hidden History: Explaining Our Secret Past (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 127-137.

<sup>2</sup>Warren Susman, "Personality and Making of Twentieth Century Culture," in Culture as History: Transformation of American Society in Twentieth Century America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). Susman provides a compelling argument for the power of personality on pages 277-281.

<sup>3</sup>Barbara Zelizer, Covering The Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), passim.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Voeltz, "The Return of Martin Guerre, Teaching History in Images, History in Words," Teaching History: A Journal of Methods, 28 (October 1993): 71.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 71.

APPENDIX I

Please answer the following questions by checking or marking the correct line.

1. I am
- A. \_\_\_ African American
- B. \_\_\_ Hispanic
- C. \_\_\_ Caucasian
- D. \_\_\_ Asian
- E. \_\_\_ Other
2. I am a
- A. \_\_\_ Male
- B. \_\_\_ Female
- 3 My age falls between
- A. \_\_\_ 18-25
- B. \_\_\_ 26-35
- C. \_\_\_ 36-55
- D. \_\_\_ 56-up
4. I am
- A. \_\_\_ Single
- B. \_\_\_ Married
- C. \_\_\_ Divorced
- D. \_\_\_ Seperated (sic)
5. My family earns this much
7. My political philosophy is or is most close to
- A. \_\_\_ Conservative
- B. \_\_\_ Liberal
- C. \_\_\_ Moderate
8. I spend the most time
- A. \_\_\_ Reading the newspaper
- B. \_\_\_ Reading magazines
- C. \_\_\_ Listening to the radio
- D. \_\_\_ Watching television programs
- E. \_\_\_ Watching movies
9. Please select the 5 Presidents that you consider to be the greatest.  
Mark 1 for first, 2 for second, 3 for third, 4 for fourth, 5 for fifth,  
putting the number beside their name.
- \_\_\_ 1A Washington    \_\_\_ 3E Buchanan    \_\_\_ 6D Harding
- \_\_\_ 1B John Adams    \_\_\_ 4A Lincoln    \_\_\_ 6E Coolidge
- \_\_\_ 1C Jefferson    \_\_\_ 4B Johnson    \_\_\_ 7A Hoover
- \_\_\_ 1D Madison    \_\_\_ 4C Grant    \_\_\_ 7B Roosevelt
- \_\_\_ 1E Monroe    \_\_\_ 4D Hayes    \_\_\_ 7C Truman



APPENDIX II

The following information will be used for Charles Taylor's dissertation from Middle Tennessee State University. Your name will not be used in anyway.

Was the assassination of John Kennedy one of the more memorable moments in your life? Do you remember what you were doing, where you were, and how it made you feel? If so, could you elaborate?

Thank you for your helpfulness.

## APPENDIX III

### The Kennedy Mythology History 3500

Charles L. Taylor  
Assistant Professor of Political Science and History  
Ext. 263 - Office 116 - Marshall Hall

#### Office Hours:

Monday, Wednesday, Friday 9 to 11  
Tuesday, Thursday 8 to 9:20 and 12 to 1:20

#### Description of Assignments:

1. Five unit exams will be given approximately every 3-1/2 weeks over one part of the Kennedy mythology.
2. Student participation will be evaluated upon discussion, oral reports, presentation of relevant materials over the Kennedy mythology and other contributions that further the class' knowledge of a JFK mystique.
3. Students will write a paper ranging from 4 to 7 pages over each of the five aspects of the Kennedy mythology.
4. Students will visit The Sixth Floor Museum and the Conspiracy Museum, taking thorough notes over the experience, while also interviewing the general public and museum officials. Attendance is mandatory for course completion.

General Objective: Students will understand a Kennedy mythology that continues to grow thirty years after JFK's death.

#### Specific Objectives of the Course:

1. To help students understand the discrepancy between historians and the general public's assessment of Kennedy.
2. To recognize some of historians' criticisms of Kennedy's performance in foreign policy, civil rights, and moral leadership.
3. To help students understand how Kennedy's communications style and society's reaction to him as a hero shaped an enduring image.
4. To see how press and media practices of the early sixties helped to promote politicians in a more favorable light.
5. To understand how death, grief, and martyrdom often cast people into legendary figures.
6. To recognize how the Kennedy assassination raised the public's curiosity about JFK's death and reinforced society's cynicism toward government.
7. To enlighten students about historical approaches that freely mix fact and fiction as evidenced by Oliver Stone's JFK and the power of Hollywood in shaping historical figures into legends.
8. To help students understand the role of the print and broadcast media and film industry in contemporary society.
9. To help pupils understand American perceptions of government.
10. To help students understand the role of the hero in American culture.
11. To help pupils understand the role of public history and historians.

Grading:

1. Grading methodology  
60% Unit exams

15% Participation  
 15% Written assignments  
 10% Attendance

## 2. Grade distribution

90-100	A
80-89	B
70-79	C
60-69	D
Below 60	F

## Attendance Policy

Regardless of illness or personal/family problems, all students must be in attendance for three-fourths of all class sessions.

## Absence-Grade Ratio

0	100
1	96
2	92
3	90
4	84
5	78
6	72
7	66
8	60
9	Academic Suspension

## CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION

This is a three hour course, focusing upon the life, death, and influence of John Kennedy.

## Tests and significant dates

A	1st Exam	September 3rd week	- Kennedy image
B	2nd Exam	October 2nd week	- Heroism and JFK
C	3rd Exam	November 1st week	- Characteristics of the sixties and President Kennedy

- D Analysis of JFK assassination by a Kennedy scholar  
November 2nd week.
- E Visit to The Sixth Floor Museum and Conspiracy Museum  
November 2nd week
- F 4th Exam - The Kennedy assassination and society's  
response to it - December 1st week
- G 5th Exam-Opposing Views of Kennedy - Final exam

#### Reading List

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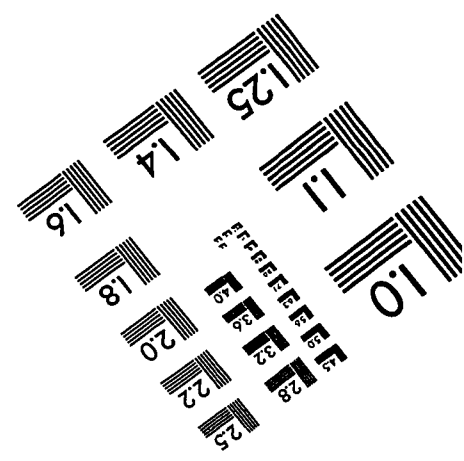
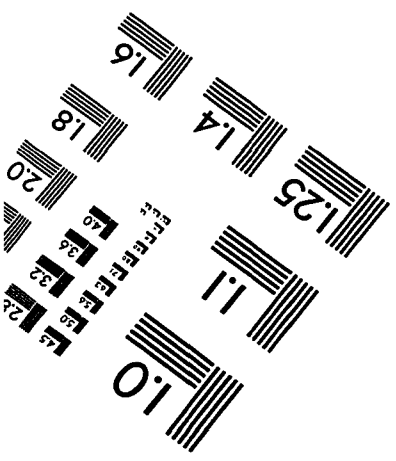
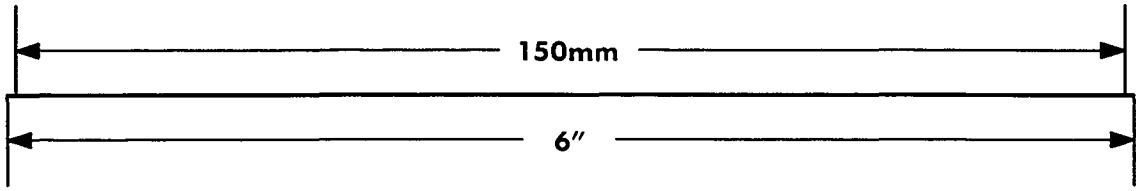
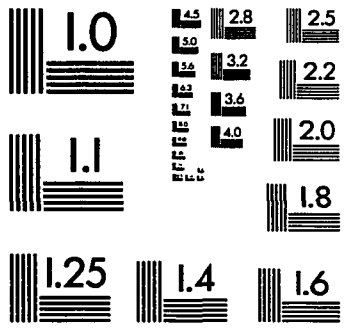
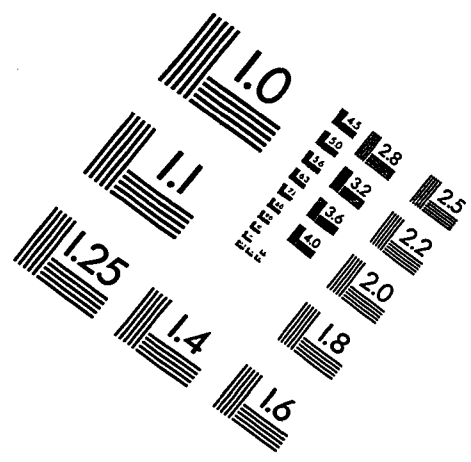
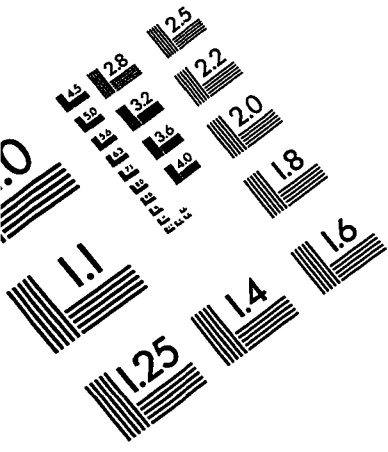


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