

Ending the Kennedy Romance

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The first volume of Frederik Logevall's biography of JFK reveals the scope of his ambition and the weakness of his political commitments.

John F. Kennedy at his graduation from Harvard

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

John F. Kennedy at his graduation from Harvard, Cambridge, Massachusetts,
1940

Reviewed:

JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917–1956

by Fredrik Logevall

Random House, 792 pp., \$40.00

Why, nearly six decades after his murder, do Americans still care so much about and, for the most part, continue to think so highly of John Fitzgerald Kennedy? More than 40,000 works of fiction and nonfiction have been published about his life and death, a steady stream that spiked on the fiftieth anniversary of his assassination in 2013. "So few years in the nation's highest office—yet so many books," a Washington Post reporter remarked at the time. A poll taken last June by YouGov rated JFK one of the four greatest presidents—tied for third place with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and trailing only Abraham Lincoln and George Washington.

That posthumous ranking is a rather remarkable feat. Everyone who can recall where they were when they heard about what happened that Friday afternoon in late November 1963 is now old enough to receive a social security check. Most Americans of any age are probably unaware that Kennedy achieved little of lasting significance during his legendary thousand days in office. Aside from a big tax cut, he signed no major domestic policies into law, and his only enduring diplomatic success was a treaty banning atmospheric nuclear tests, which he accurately described as merely "a single step" on "a journey of a thousand miles" toward the goal of stopping the race to Armageddon. In contrast, FDR governed the nation through a dozen years scarred by economic calamity and followed by the bloodiest war in history; he signed into law such bills as the Social Security Act and the GI Bill, which remain pillars of the welfare state, while his decision to authorize the Manhattan Project arguably initiated the nuclear age.

Kennedy's dramatic rhetoric and the elegant beauty of his young family certainly account for some of the posthumous renown. During the 1960 campaign, Norman Mailer wrote that the Democrats

were going to nominate a man who, no matter how serious his political dedication might be, was indisputably...going to be seen as a great box-office actor, and the consequences of that were staggering and not at all easy to calculate.

But Kennedy actually became more popular and far more consequential dead than alive. In 1960 he carried just under half the popular vote; narrow margins of 2 percent in Texas and two tenths of a percent in Illinois gave him the victory over Richard Nixon in the Electoral College. In office, Kennedy's approval grew, but he took the fateful trip to Dallas to resolve a bitter conflict among Texas Democrats that he feared could throw the state to the GOP nominee in 1964. The op-ed columnist James Reston wrote in *The New York Times*, mere days before the president's death, that "he has touched the intellect of the country but not the heart...he has not made the people feel as he feels, or lifted them beyond their private purposes to see the larger public purposes he has in mind." After his murder, however, two thirds of Americans recalled having voted for him. Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy's vice-president, turned his predecessor's ambitious policy agenda into what he called "a martyr's cause," signing, within just two years, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, Medicare, two expansive education bills, and other landmarks of what he boasted would be a Great Society.

And the obsession with Kennedy's image and death rolls on. Jacqueline Kennedy, his former aides, and all manner of journalists, artists, and conspiracy buffs stoked a bonfire of wonderment and controversy that continues to burn. JFK, Oliver Stone's popular 1991 film, gave new life to an unending spate of theories about whether the CIA or the Mafia or perhaps Lyndon Johnson had planned the assassination. At least twenty-seven different actors have portrayed Kennedy onscreen, and as of 2013 some 1,300 memorials to him exist around the world—including a museum on the floor of the Dallas building from which Lee Harvey Oswald fired his rifle. JFK's gravesite is still the most famous attraction at Arlington National Cemetery—and the sole one lit by an eternal flame.*

Kennedy's presidency appears so admirable in part because of who followed him in office. Compare the unmet hopes of his unfinished term with the policy blunders and malevolent acts committed or excused by nearly every president since then. It was only after the murder in Dallas that there began the deluge of unnecessary full-blown wars, scandals, and infamous characters that soured Americans on the promise of a

benevolent, efficient government. Soon after JFK's death, his widow described their White House tenure as "a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot"—quoting a song from the musical, based on the Arthurian myth, that opened on Broadway the year he was elected president. It remains a lovely metaphor to set against the horrid realities of My Lai, Watergate, Iran-contra, Abu Ghraib, the heartless response to Hurricane Katrina—and nearly every action the dark lord of Mar-a-Lago took in the Oval Office or bragged about at his rallies.

But a good biography can be an excellent leveler. As the Harvard historian Fredrik Logevall describes in engrossing detail in this first of a two-volume work, Kennedy groomed himself for power by taking full advantage of his privileged upbringing while developing a penchant for ideological opportunism and a limitless appetite for sexual conquest. That he did so as he self-consciously prepared to lead what policymakers from both parties still call "the indispensable nation" suggests both his extraordinary political talent and a determined hubris that his less alluring successors imitated, to their peril and ours. One can empathize with the Kennedy romance—after all, he was a charismatic leader—while still confronting the myopia and moral shortcomings of his career.

Jack Kennedy had the fortune to be born into a family whose political history and financial resources served his ambition to gain high office. His maternal grandfather and namesake, John Fitzgerald, served three terms in the House of Representatives as a Democrat from Boston and two stints as the city's mayor. Born during the Civil War, "Honey Fitz" lived long enough to advise his grandson's first campaign for Congress in 1946 and to treat the victory party to a rendition of "Sweet Adeline," which he made a habit of singing on public occasions, sometimes accompanied on the piano by his daughter (and Jack's mother) Rose.

By the onset of the Great Depression, Jack's father, Joseph, had built an enormous fortune from shrewd investments in stocks and movies and was about to attain a powerful position in the Democratic Party, the electoral home of most Irish Catholics since the famine migration. Joe helped finance Roosevelt's presidential campaign in 1932, then joined his administration as first chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, a watchdog over the financial markets he had played so well.

But Joe's desire for greater public power set him up for a very public fall. In early 1938 FDR named him ambassador to Great Britain, the plum assignment in the diplomatic service. As Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain appeased and then ended up at war with the Nazi regime, the elder Kennedy urged a negotiated settlement with Hitler and lashed out, mostly in private, at Jewish journalists who condemned his stand. When

a close aide visited Germany and told the ambassador about acts of anti-Semitic violence he had witnessed there, Joe snapped, “Well, they brought it on themselves.” In the fall of 1940, when the Luftwaffe was bombing London nearly every night, he sailed back to the US. When FDR was elected to a third term, he met the president at the White House and told him he wanted to resign.

His father’s disastrous tenure in London ensnared young Jack in a dilemma from which he concocted a clever escape—with aid from the patriarch, who longed for one of his sons to become president if he couldn’t attain that summit himself. While Jack could not explicitly criticize his father, he did prove a sager commentator about the same events that had brought Joe down. At Harvard, Jack produced an impressive senior thesis that critically analyzed the British government’s failure to counter the German menace. Arthur Krock, the Washington bureau chief of the Times, who was devoted to Joe, polished Jack’s prose and made sure his book found a good publisher. The leading interventionist Henry Luce graced *Why England Slept* with an introductory essay (while perhaps unaware that Joe was carrying on a long affair with his wife, Clare Boothe Luce). The book received fine reviews, sold well, and inspired a letter praising its “great argument for acting and speaking from a position of strength at all times” from President Roosevelt. (Kennedy’s second book, *Profiles in Courage*, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1957.)

While Kennedy deftly separated himself from his father’s politics, he didn’t hesitate to emulate the old man’s rather manic sex life. Joe had spent many nights in Hollywood with Gloria Swanson, perhaps the most popular film actress at the time. Joe took other women to bed whenever it suited him and, one hopes, them. “Obsessively focused on winning, on conquest,” writes Logevall, “he always wanted more, more, more—in all areas of life.”

Jack fell in love several times before meeting Jacqueline Bouvier in 1951, when he was a young congressman; his longest and most intense relationship had been with Inga Arvad, a Danish beauty queen turned journalist who had written sympathetic portraits of several Nazi leaders. But, like Dad, Kennedy treated an unending series of other women as disposable receptacles for his lust—a habit that continued for the rest of his life. The actress Angie Dickinson later quipped that having sex with Kennedy was “the most memorable fifteen seconds of my life.” As president, he put the moves on Mimi Alford, an intern just nineteen years old. (“I wouldn’t describe what happened that night as making love,” she would recall. “But I wouldn’t call it nonconsensual, either.”) They went on to have an extended affair, and her memoir about it is full of affection.

Logevall won a Pulitzer for his previous book, *Embers of War*, an unparalleled narrative about how the US ensnared itself in Vietnam, and his treatment of JFK’s

evolving thinking about foreign affairs is the most incisive feature of this biography—as indicated by its subtitle, “Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917–1956.” Kennedy began his political career during an era of rising national power led by men who shared the confidence that they could bend the world to what they believed to be their exceptionally virtuous will. His declaration on taking office as president, “that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty,” is a classic expression of that hubristic faith.

What Luce in *Life* magazine in 1941 proclaimed would be “the American Century” actually lasted only about half that long; the US defeat in Indochina tempered its leaders’ world-saving arrogance, for a time. But it reemerged after September 11, inflating retribution against al-Qaeda into two decades of inconclusive wars in poor Muslim nations. As Peter Beinart contends, the idea that emerged from World War II that the United States must lead all other nations has been “a misguided, and even dangerous, vision for America’s relationship with the rest of the globe.”

The young Kennedy did prepare himself splendidly to put that blinkered vision into practice. Before he graduated from Harvard, he had traveled around Europe and the Arab world and immersed himself in the study of comparative politics and diplomacy. In the spring of 1939, JFK toured Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East, sending reports to his father from every stop. His dispatch from Jerusalem proposing “autonomous districts” for its Arab and Jewish inhabitants was, according to Logevall, “on par—in content if not in presentation—with what a veteran diplomat might produce.” The central question the biographer raises but does not answer, at least in this volume, is whether his travels and self-education nurtured in Kennedy a desire to extend the reformist legacy of the New Deal or taught him instead to surrender to the exigencies of cold war politics and the ideological makeup of his party as he rose to the top of it.

With the success of *Why England Slept*, Kennedy emerged, at just twenty-three, as a notable voice in the debate about the causes of the war. With his Ivy League degree, connections to influential men, and all the wealth he would ever need, he was primed for a political career. He pursued a course that promoted his name and appeal while avoiding such contentious progressive causes as Black freedom and civil liberties for radical artists and activists.

A nearly fatal misadventure in the South Pacific during World War II helped advance his career. One dark night in August 1943, Lieutenant Kennedy steered the small torpedo boat he commanded too close to a Japanese destroyer, which unintentionally rammed and sank it, killing two sailors. He led his ten surviving crew

members to safety on an uninhabited island and then spent a week searching, often with lengthy swims, for friendly forces. The ordeal ended with a smirk: "Where the hell you been?" Kennedy shouted when another torpedo boat located him, bringing him and his men to an American base. "We got some food for you," the captain of the ship responded. "No, thanks," Kennedy answered. "I just had a coconut." A few days before the disaster, he had written home that he was "completely and thoroughly convinced that nothing is going to happen to me."

Kennedy realized this tale of sangfroid under pressure would be particularly useful on any future campaign trail. John Hersey wrote a laudatory article about the ordeal for *The New Yorker*. At father Joe's urging, *Reader's Digest* ran a condensed version. When Jack first ran for Congress in 1946, campaign volunteers sent 100,000 copies of the shorter piece to voters all over his district. "One opposing candidate's wife," writes Logevall, "reportedly was so moved by the article that she said she might have to vote for Kennedy."

Neither in that successful race nor in the four that followed (two for the House, then two for the Senate) nor in office did Kennedy say or do anything that might annoy his largely Catholic, increasingly conservative white base in Massachusetts. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Democrats were embroiled in arguments over race and alleged Communists in government that imperiled the dominance they had achieved under FDR. A civil rights plank in the 1948 platform angered millions of white southerners enough to make them back Strom Thurmond against Truman for president on a breakaway "States' Rights" ticket. That same year, former vice-president Henry Wallace ran as the candidate of the new Progressive Party, staffed mostly by Communists and their allies, which called for a permanent truce in the cold war. Democratic leaders like President Harry Truman and Senator Hubert Humphrey struggled to prove their bona fides as Red hunters. But Senator Joseph McCarthy's charge that, since the 1930s, Democrats had engaged in "twenty years of treason" struck a chord with many Massachusetts voters alarmed by the "loss" of China, the stalemate in the Korean War, and the repression of the Catholic Church by the Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe.

During his first campaign for the Senate, in 1952, Kennedy deftly avoided antagonizing either McCarthy or his many Irish Catholic admirers in Massachusetts. Running against Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., a centrist in a GOP that still retained a healthy minority of moderates, Kennedy, writes Logevall, accused the incumbent Republican of being "too supportive of Truman on foreign policy, too reticent in opposing Communism." Instead of denouncing or remaining silent about McCarthy's wild charges against fellow Democrats like Truman and Adlai Stevenson, the party's nominee for

president, he wooed the demagogue's followers. Near the end of the race, he received a surprising endorsement from The Boston Post, one of the Wisconsin senator's prime journalistic boosters in the state. Its editor resented Lodge's coolness toward McCarthy. But Joe Kennedy's secret \$500,000 loan to the paper didn't hurt. Joe was also friends with McCarthy (who attended his daughter Eunice's wedding) and may have asked him to refrain from endorsing Lodge, his fellow Republican.

As a result, Kennedy won a narrow victory in a year when Dwight Eisenhower carried Massachusetts while leading a Republican sweep of the presidency and both houses of Congress—for the first time since the Great Depression. Kennedy's Senate race was, an aide later enthused, "the most nearly perfect political campaign I've ever seen." But to Eleanor Roosevelt and other keepers of the New Deal flame, it was clear that this rising star would sacrifice liberal principle for the sake of victory.

Kennedy avoided controversy during his time in office. He called for kicking Communists out of unions while voting for most of labor's economic agenda. He courted African-American voters and backed home rule for the District of Columbia, with its rapidly growing Black population. But he avoided proposing any bills to guarantee Black rights that would have made him a pariah to Dixiecrats who, after Thurmond's defeat, had returned to the "party of the fathers"; because of seniority, southern Democrats chaired the most powerful committees in Congress.

As president, Kennedy remained a profile in antiracist caution instead of courage as long as the explosive politics of the issue allowed. He championed the growing freedom movement in speeches but rebuffed demands that he propose a civil rights bill to Congress until midway through his third year in office. He then took decisive action only after police brutally assaulted young demonstrators on the streets of Birmingham, Alabama, and Governor George Wallace defied a court order to desegregate the main campus of the state university.

Such canny amorality did not blind Kennedy to the flaws in his government's cold war mentality. In 1951 he spent ten days in Vietnam with Robert, his younger brother and trusted adviser, and their sister Patricia. The French, with increasing amounts of funding from the US, were fighting the Communist-led independence force, the Viet Minh, for control of the colony they had seized in the 1880s. The young congressman interviewed the French general in charge of battling the Viet Minh, as well as the top US envoy and several journalists covering the conflict. He left the country deeply skeptical that the attempt to reinstate European rule could or should succeed. "We are more and more becoming colonialists in the minds of the people," Kennedy wrote in his diary. If the struggle remained one "between native communists and western imperialists," he

told an audience back home, “success will be impossible.” It’s both a tragedy and an enduring outrage that as president, Kennedy failed to acknowledge that his nation had replaced the French as the foreign aggressor, one whose destruction of lives and land would dwarf that of its ally. The credo of American exceptionalism made the American century possible and also cut it short.

The first volume of Logevall’s biography concludes with an episode that underlines the scope of JFK’s ambition and the weakness of his commitment to anything else. At the 1956 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Stevenson, having just been nominated to face Eisenhower again, decided, in a sharp break with tradition, to let the delegates choose his running mate. An attractive war hero with a centrist record, Kennedy had already been campaigning hard, if unofficially, for the position. Knowing white southerners were uneasy about a Catholic from New England, he sought to reassure them, once again, that he was no firebrand about civil rights. On national TV, he dodged a question about whether the Democratic platform should endorse the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling on school desegregation.

On the first night of the convention, Kennedy narrated a twenty-eight-minute film about the party that he had helped write. The film almost completely ignored slavery (which every Democratic president from Andrew Jackson to James Buchanan had defended), while praising Andrew Johnson for seeking to soothe defeated Confederates with “humaneness and compassion”—a grotesque scanting of his rigid hostility to every attempt by Congress to give freedmen the vote and grant equal protection of the laws to Black Americans. If only, scolded Kennedy, Republican “hotheads and fanatics bound on vengeance against the South” had not impeached the poor man on spurious grounds. Such a benighted view of Reconstruction was widely taught in schools at the time; not until the Black freedom movement grew larger and more popular did most white historians reject the racist interpretation of the era. But it would also have been politically inconvenient for the aspiring candidate to acknowledge that “fanatics” like Representative Thaddeus Stevens (whose severe image flicked briefly across the screen) were determined to win for former slaves the legal justice Johnson vehemently opposed.

Despite what Logevall calls the film’s “smashing success,” Kennedy just missed winning over enough delegates to claim the vice-presidential nomination. Ironically, the victor, Senator Estes Kefauver from Tennessee, drew more support outside the South than in his own region, where many considered him a dangerous renegade for favoring school integration. But the drama of the unexpected race for the second spot made Kennedy one of the best-known figures in his party and whetted his desire to run for the

White House after Stevenson suffered another lopsided and entirely expected defeat by the well-liked GOP incumbent.

The president from Camelot may gently descend from the lofty position in popular memory he has occupied for nearly six decades. Aside from a few places like the Kennedy Space Center and that sprawling airport in New York City, his name adorns few institutions of note. He is honored by no holiday, and while admirers and family managed to install a monument to Dwight Eisenhower near the Washington Mall last year, no movement exists to do the same for his successor. During the 2020 campaign, one might have expected Joe Biden to evoke the only other Irish Catholic elected to the White House, but he ran instead as the disciple of the first African-American to get there. Given how the demographic makeup of the Democratic Party has changed over the past six decades, that was a sensible as well as inevitable decision. Perhaps the admiration of Kennedy as the last white liberal icon will give way to a sober evaluation of how the relentless pursuit of global power by politicians like him too often betrayed the promise of their altruistic oratory. “Unhappy the land that needs heroes,” wrote Bertolt Brecht in 1939, a sly reference, in his play about Galileo, to the leader of his own nation and a warning to citizens of other lands too. Americans who have been divided, often quite bitterly, since Kennedy lost his life would do well to finally take that wisdom to heart.

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