

**BOOKS OF THE TIMES**

# Substance Over Sex In Kennedy Biography

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By **DAVID J. GARROW**

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The New York Times reported last November that Robert Dallek's coming biography of President John F. Kennedy would disclose, based on newly opened medical files, that the president had suffered far more dire health problems than American voters and previous biographers had ever known.

Mr. Dallek's success in winning access to those long-sealed documents was not singular; he similarly persuaded a former Times reporter and onetime Kennedy White House

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## **AN UNFINISHED LIFE**

**John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963**

By Robert Dallek

*Illustrated. 838 pages. Little, Brown & Company. \$30.*

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press aide, Barbara Gamarekian, to release closed portions of a 1964 oral history in which she described Kennedy's 18-month sexual affair with Mimi, a young White House intern recently identified as Marion Beardsley Fahnestock, now a 60-year-old Manhattan church administrator.

But "An Unfinished Life" is no salacious exposé. Mr. Dallek, a professor of history at Boston University and the author of several well-respected scholarly books, including a two-volume biography of Lyndon B. Johnson, instead offers an impressively judicious and balanced account of Kennedy's life and presidency.

Mr. Dallek views Kennedy's medical records as more a testament to the young president's stoic fortitude than evidence of political deception and historical cover-up. "Kennedy courageously surmounted his physical suffering," and medical problems "did not significantly undermine his performance as president," Mr. Dallek writes. And Mimi, like Marilyn Monroe and other rumored Kennedy paramours, receives little

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# Substance Over Sex in Kennedy Book

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more than a passing mention. Mr. Dallek confronts Kennedy's "reckless womanizing" directly, yet succinctly, and concludes that Kennedy's myriad dalliances "were no impediment to his being an effective president."

"An Unfinished Life" may be a third-generation synthesis in Kennedy biographies, following the initial romanticized celebrations of "Camelot", and then a shelf full of hostile tomes in which one presidential girlfriend, Judith Campbell Exner, and the Chicago gangster Sam Giancana played larger roles than Cabinet members and Congressional leaders did. Mr. Dallek addresses all the negatives, but his consistent assertion that Kennedy's policy record as president decisively trumps his personal peccadilloes is cumulatively quite persuasive.

Mr. Dallek's first three books all concerned foreign policy, and "An Unfinished Life" accords Kennedy's overseas challenges a fuller and more engaging treatment than most domestic policy issues receive.

Three subjects dominate this account of the Kennedy presidency: Cuba, Vietnam and Kennedy's tension-filled dealings with the Soviet prime minister, Nikita S. Khrushchev. Mr. Dallek readily acknowledges how both the 1961 Bay of Pigs debacle and the administration's continuing obsession with ousting Fidel Castro showed "Kennedy at his worst." He also admits that "Kennedy was as much in the grip of conventional cold war thinking as most other Americans," yet his portrait of Kennedy's behavior concerning Vietnam repeatedly emphasizes how Kennedy "had no intention of being drawn into an expansion of

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Robert Dallek

American ground forces in Vietnam and the possibility of an open-ended war."

Mr. Dallek concedes Kennedy's hesitancy and indecisiveness about Vietnam but implies that the uncertainty was largely the result of exceptionally divergent expert advice. "The two of you did visit the same country, didn't you?" he quotes Kennedy asking two advisers just back from a trip to Saigon. Yet Mr. Dallek insists that by 1963 Kennedy "was more skeptical than ever about putting in ground forces" and would never have expanded the war as President Johnson did in 1965.

Kennedy's handling of nuclear tensions with the Soviet Union was "the greatest overall achievement of his presidency," Mr. Dallek argues.

Kennedy's caution and restraint during the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis, particularly in the face of aggressively warmongering advice from most members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was "a model of wise statesmanship in a dire situation," he writes.

But Mr. Dallek's emphasis on Kennedy's foreign relations efforts runs the risk of giving domestic policy issues short shrift. He cites Kennedy's "limited interest in domestic affairs" and notes how a 1962 Gallup Poll showed that 63 percent of respondents thought issues of war and peace were "the most important problem facing the country," compared with just 6 percent who named civil rights.

Yet he heaps praise on a June 10, 1963, Kennedy speech on world peace, which "received barely a mention in the press," while decidedly playing down an arguably far more important Kennedy address on civil rights to a national television audience the next evening. Mr. Dallek complains that Kennedy "did not fully understand... the importance of taking a moral stand on civil rights," but Kennedy's June 11 telecast voiced an explicit declaration that racial equality indeed was "a moral issue" that "is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution."

"An Unfinished Life" is nonetheless an excellent biography, one that will convince any fair-minded reader that the Kennedy presidency should be remembered not for medical deceit and sexual high jinks but for resolute caution during the cold war's most dangerous hours.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.