

## John F. Kennedy and the Mythology of Camelot

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By David J. Garrow

EVERY FIFTH November—1983, 1988—now witnesses a major anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination, in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Each anniversary—and seemingly every successive presidential campaign—also witnesses a further burnishing and invocation of the JFK image. Not only does effusive celebration of Kennedy's White House years expand further and further with each new crop of handsomely produced picture books—e.g. *LIFE in Camelot: The Kennedy Years*—but each election

year provides a wider and wider range of office-seekers eager to claim some version of the Kennedy legacy as their own.

Five years ago a Gallup poll found that Kennedy was the most retrospectively popular American president. More pointedly, 65 percent of the Gallup respondents said they believed that the United States would have been "much different"—and presumably better—if Kennedy had not been killed. As Robert MacNeil writes in his introduction to *The Way We Were: 1963, The Year Kennedy Was Shot*, "We are mourning our own unfulfilled promise,"

most particularly "the spirit of hope and optimism that rings through the feelings Americans had, and retain, about that time—and attribute to Kennedy."

The attribution of such roseate remembrances of past hopes and expectations to the Kennedy presidency lies at the center of America's often maudlin and historically blindered celebration of JFK. "Symbols often embody needs that render literal facts irrelevant," Thomas Brown aptly notes in *JFK: History of an Image*, and no reader of Brown's small but eminently useful volume is likely to

finish it still believing that Ronald Reagan's was the first "Teflon presidency."

No serious scholar could successfully contend that the actual achievements and policies of the Kennedy presidency account for the tremendous popular regard in which JFK is now held. Instead, as Brown succinctly puts it, "It is the circumstances of Kennedy's death rather than the events of his life that have elevated him to a primary place in the political consciousness of Americans." However, it is not the assassination alone that has stimulated the mythology of "Camelot," but the very premature and sudden passing of that president from the national scene that has allowed his record in office to benefit from Teflon qualities that will long outlast those of the Reagan presidency.

In fall of 1963 the Kennedy presidential record was far from a smashing success. In foreign affairs the

—Continued on page 10

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# JFK and The Myth Of Camelot

Continued from page 1

most notable event had been the incredibly inept military and human debacle at the Bay of Pigs. On the domestic front Kennedy had been largely unable to persuade Congress to pass any truly significant legislative proposals. Politically the 1962 congressional elections had witnessed no notable Democratic or Republican gains, but re-election to the presidency in 1964 appeared safe only if the Republicans would be so kind as to nominate Barry Goldwater.

That much was known on Nov. 22, 1963. However, any one of several things now known would have, if revealed in 1963 or at any point during the later life of a non-assassinated John F. Kennedy, ended the Kennedy presidency and left the ex-president with a historical reputation inferior to that of Richard M. Nixon, among others. The two most damaging examples will suffice. Revelations of any part of the Kennedy-supported CIA assassination plots targeted at Cuba's Fidel Castro likely would have had as severe a contemporaneous political impact as Watergate had on the Nixon presidency or the Iran-contra scandals have had on Reagan's. Second, even if the Mafia's extensive involvement in those government-sponsored plots had not on its own been enough to generate calls for impeachment or resignation, revelation of an incumbent president's extensive sexual involvement with a top hoodlum's girlfriend—Sam Giancana's Judith Campbell—certainly would have. Looked at with the cold retrospective eyes of history, the assassination in Dallas may well have saved John Kennedy from a political destruction that would have been extraordinarily painful and embarrassing.

**J**OHAN KENNEDY is of course not the only major figure from the 1960s whose reputation in death has far exceeded his popularity while alive or his likely popularity had he lived. The same is equally true for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who at the time of his death was widely viewed as both dangerously radical on the question of Vietnam and as increasingly less influential within black America, and for Robert Kennedy, who at the time of his assassination was struggling both to evade responsibility for the FBI's recently revealed wiretapping of the just-deceased King and to quell the resurgence of "bad Bobby" analyses that followed from his entry into the 1968 presidential campaign only after Eugene McCarthy had all but toppled Lyndon Johnson. For MLK, death in Memphis resulted in a sudden enshrinement in American history that would have been most unlikely had he survived through the late 1960s and into the 1970s, never mind until the present day. For RFK too, popular history's symbolism has been kinder than would have been in the case had he failed to capture the Democratic nomination from Hubert Humphrey in 1968 or had he failed to win out over Richard Nixon.

Thomas Brown says with reference to the Castro plots and the Mafia connections that "the most salient aspect of the revelations was their lack of lasting impact on the Kennedy image," and that conclusion, in light of

both the Gallup statistics and the oncoming flow of reverential picture books, is quite indisputable. Coupled with it, however, has been an ongoing fascination—at least on the part of authors and publishers—with the real and imagined minutiae of the Kennedy assassination itself, a fascination that shows no sign of diminution even as the most determined conspiracy theorists flirt with science fiction in their overheated imaginings of corpse-tampering and Lee Harvey Oswald look-alikes. To anyone who has followed even in a half-hearted fashion the evolution of the burgeoning literature on John Kennedy's shooting, the sinking feeling that less is known with each passing year—and arriving book—becomes increasingly

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John F. Kennedy with his daughter Caroline

FROM "JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY AS WE REMEMBER HIM"

*The books discussed in the accompanying essay include some of the following works, all of which have been released or reissued in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.*

**LIFE in Camelot: The Kennedy Years**

Edited by Philip B. Kunhardt Jr.  
Little, Brown. 319 pp. \$40

**THE WAY WE WERE 1963, The Year Kennedy Was Shot**  
Edited by Robert MacNeil  
Carroll & Graf. 256 pp. \$39.95

**JFK: History of an Image**  
By Thomas Brown  
Indiana University Press. 160 pp. \$19.95

**FINAL DISCLOSURE The Full Truth About the Assassination of President Kennedy**  
By David W. Belin  
Scribners. 249 pp. \$19.95

**CONTRACT ON AMERICA The Mafia Murder of President John F. Kennedy**  
By David Scheim  
Shapolsky. 480 pp. \$19.95

**JOHN F. KENNEDY And a New Generation**  
By David Burner. Edited by Oscar Handlin

Little, Brown. 189 pp. \$16.95

**JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY . . . As We Remember Him**  
Edited by Joan Meyers  
Running Press. 241 pp. \$24.95

**KENNEDY: 25 Years**  
By Theodore C. Sorenson  
Perennial/Harper & Row. 781 pp.  
Paperback, \$10.95

**'LET THE WORD GO FORTH' The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy**  
Selected and with an Introduction  
By Theodore C. Sorenson  
Delacorte. 433 pp. \$25

**MAFIA KINGFISH: Carlos Marcello and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy**  
By John H. Davis  
McGraw-Hill. 580 pp. \$19.95

**ONE BRIEF SHINING MOMENT Remembering Kennedy**  
By William Manchester  
Little, Brown. 280 pp. Paperback, \$16.95

inescapable. Hoping to stem this devolutionary path is David Belin, former executive director of the Rockefeller Commission's inquiry into CIA misdeeds and a counsel to the Warren Commission, whose basic conclusions about the Kennedy assassination Belin persuasively defends.

For all "beyond reasonable doubt" purposes the physical facts of the Kennedy shooting can no longer be disputed. Kennedy was indeed killed by Lee Harvey Oswald firing from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository; no other shots were fired at his car; there was no "second gunman." Similarly beyond dispute is Jack Ruby's killing of Oswald two days later.

Where questions can be asked is in the

realm of motive, both for Oswald and for Ruby. To picture Ruby as a possible operative of organized crime, given Ruby's background, is not at all difficult, although to explain Ruby's actions in the period Nov. 22-24 as those of a conspiratorial hit-man is difficult if not downright impossible. Similarly, to picture Oswald as motivated by political, e.g., pro-Castro desires, rather than by nonideological idiosyncrasies, is also easily possible in light of Oswald's quixotic history as an émigré to the Soviet Union. To tie Oswald to *any* conspiratorial sponsors, however, and especially to any possible organized crime sponsors, as is the current popular rage, has so far not been done in any persuasive fashion and is unlikely ever to be done. Counsel Belin forthrightly puzzles over the still undetermined possible relevance of Oswald's September 1963 trip to Mexico City, but he acknowledges that neither the Warren Commission nor the House Assassinations Committee—nor anyone else—has offered a fully convincing explanation of Oswald's motive. As often is the case, questions of intent are the most difficult to answer, and with regard to the rifle shots of Nov. 22, 1963, perhaps the time has more than come for us to acknowledge that they never will be satisfactorily answered.

The popular mythology of "Camelot" and the popular appetite for unproven—and unprovable—conspiratorial explanations for John Kennedy's death in Dallas now seem destined to enter the long-term annals of American history, the facts notwithstanding. John Kennedy's thousand days in the White House were not the golden age of American presidential leadership any more than Nov. 22, 1963, witnessed the greatest conspiracy in history or the Mafia's most stunning "hit," but until we commit ourselves to a more critical and less simple-minded rendering of our history, we are destined to be saddled with reverential picture books and bizarre conspiratorial tracts.