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What Might Have Been

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Robert Dallek: *Camelot's Court: Inside the Kennedy White House*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2013. Pp. xii, 492.)

Larry J. Sabato: *The Kennedy Half-Century: The Presidency, Assassination, and Lasting Legacy of John F. Kennedy*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. xiii, 603.)

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.: *Journals, 1952–2000*. (New York: Penguin, 2007. Pp. xvi, 894.)

The Letters of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Edited by Andrew Schlesinger and Stephen Schlesinger. (New York: Random House, 2013. Pp. xxxi, 631.)

Ted Sorensen: *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008. Pp. xvi, 556.)

The fiftieth anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in November 2013 was commemorated by countless television documentaries recalling the shock and horror of the news from Dealey Plaza. The anniversary also led to the publication of scores of additional books on John F. Kennedy's life and death, to add to the already existing list of over 1,400 titles.

The jolt of the Kennedy assassination for those Americans who were alive in 1963 is rivalled only by the events of September 11, 2001. The poignant images of the thirty-four-year-old first lady kissing the president's casket and his three-year-old son saluting the same were almost too much to bear. When the news broke from Dallas, the nation's three television networks suspended their normal broadcasting schedule for the first time in their short history to focus nonstop on the funeral of the president, followed shortly by the murder of his assassin.

The fleeting Kennedy presidency, the first television presidency, was from the beginning to its tragic end a media event. JFK was made for television, and his bronzed appearance in four televised debates had helped him defeat a sweaty, shifty-eyed, and ghostly Richard Nixon. Kennedy was the first president to hold press conferences on live television, and his quick wit and apparent mastery of detail impressed his fellow Americans. Jack and Jackie served as the inspiration for Rob and Laura Petrie on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and Caroline and "John-John" were the subject of affecting

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photo essays in *Life* magazine (a media-savvy president would arrange for the photos to be taken while the first lady was absent from the White House). This same media, drawn in good part from JFK's fellow World War II veterans, liked the new president, in part because he was interested in their work and his photogenic family was good for business.

The American public was taken by the contrast between the chic Kennedys and the dowdy, coupon-clipping, bridge-playing Eisenhowers. The nation's oldest president (at the time) had been succeeded by the nation's youngest, at a point when youth was becoming all the rage. JFK was the favorite of the Hollywood glitterati, including his friends in the "Rat Pack" such as Frank Sinatra who provided him with women and served as an "intermediary" for the president's "joint ventures" with Chicago mob boss Sam Giancana (Sabato, 198). This lowbrow appeal was offset by Kennedy's reputation for being something of an intellectual, with his Harvard pedigree and Pulitzer Prize, and his selection of Ivy League professors for important posts in his administration.

One Ivy League recruit on Kennedy's team, although by no means an influential member, was Arthur Schlesinger Jr. While Schlesinger played a minimal role in the administration (he was, Robert Dallek notes, relegated to an office "in the East Wing, where various secondary aides to the president and first lady worked") (Dallek, 83), his contribution in the decades after Kennedy's death to the creation of the Camelot legend was extraordinary. Whenever an ill word was spoken of the martyred president, be it in an academic journal or in the *New York Times*, Schlesinger would set the record "straight." Described by former *Washington Post* reporter David Broder as "James Carville in a cap and gown" (*Journals*, 834), Schlesinger reveled in his role as keeper of the Kennedy flame. With JFK unable to write a memoir, the torch was passed to Schlesinger and to Kennedy's speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen, who played a very influential role in the administration, earning the label of JFK's "intellectual alter ego" and "a lobe of Kennedy's mind" (Dallek, 76).

Schlesinger and Sorensen helped shape the Kennedy legacy by publishing the first insider accounts of that short-lived presidency. *A Thousand Days* and *Kennedy* were both released in 1965, with each author celebrating the Kennedy presidency as a brief but shining moment in the nation's history. Schlesinger and Sorensen quickly emerged as the creative talent behind a carefully managed marketing strategy. Jackie Kennedy was determined to elevate her husband into a mythic figure and she set the stage for this by planting the "Camelot" canard in the mind of presidential chronicler Theodore White. Mrs. Kennedy recoiled at the idea that a nonentity like Lee Harvey Oswald had murdered her husband, noting that Jack "didn't even have the satisfaction of being killed for civil rights. . . . It had to be some silly little communist. It . . . robs his death of any meaning" (Sabato, 30).

In spite of the evidence pointing at Oswald as the assassin, the notion that the president was killed by the forces of right-wing hate in Dallas, including

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those opposed to his civil-rights agenda, was widely circulated from the start with the encouragement of members of the Kennedy circle. Jacqueline Kennedy was right that a "silly little communist" killed her husband, but she underestimated the power of the myths surrounding her husband, including the idea that the president was a martyr for civil rights. From this point on, this tale, and others, would shape the Kennedy image in the American mind.

The keepers of the Kennedy flame had friends in the media who were, at the very least, averse to challenging the mythological version of Kennedy's life and death. Schlesinger's network of luncheon and dinner companions reads like a *Who's Who* of late-twentieth-century media personalities: Robert Manning of the *Atlantic Monthly* (*Journals*, 387); John Chancellor and Sander Vanocur of NBC News (*Journals*, 280); Art Buchwald (*Journals*, 415); George Plimpton; presidential-election chronicler Theodore White; Tom Braden; Ben Bradlee, editor of the *Washington Post*; Katherine Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*; James Wechsler (editor of the *New York Post*); and David Burke (president of CBS News), among others. Ben Bradlee became the object of some concern when he wrote a memoir which revealed that JFK was prone to use salty language, prompting members of the Kennedy circle to condemn the book as "mischievous and damaging" (*Journals*, 387).

There were a few media and literary figures who called into question Schlesinger's mythmaking, most of whom emerged in the mid-1970s after revelations of the role the Kennedys played in attempting to eliminate Fidel Castro. Christopher Hitchens, Seymour Hersh of the *New York Times*, and Joan Didion ("a viperish . . . little creature") and her husband John Gregory Dunne ("this dreadful couple") all made Schlesinger's list of undesirables (*Journals*, 745). Academics occasionally appeared on Schlesinger's enemies list, including Thomas Reeves, the author of an insightful biography of JFK's character issues, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (Free Press, 1991), and Michael Beschloss, author of *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960–1963* (Edward Burlingame Books, 1991), who published unflattering information about Kennedy's Cold War miscalculations and his reckless private life (*Journals*, 710). Special wrath was reserved for Bill Moyers, a former Lyndon Johnson aide who went on to produce documentaries for CBS News and for the Public Broadcasting System. Moyers had the audacity to serve as the writer and host of a CBS documentary *The CIA's Secret Army* (1977), which documented the involvement of the Kennedy brothers in the effort to remove Castro.

Only a handful of high-ranking US government officials out of the 189 million Americans alive in November 1963 were aware that assassination had been adopted as a tool of American foreign policy by Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. In the aftermath of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, JFK appointed his brother Robert, in blatant disregard for the concept of plausible deniability, to oversee the effort to topple Fidel Castro.

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Codenamed "Operation Mongoose," the campaign was designed, according to RFK, to "stir things up" with "espionage, sabotage, general disorder" (Dallek, 215), although the attorney general omitted any reference to the crown jewel of the plan, assassinating Castro with the assistance of the mafia.

RFK was informed by J. Edgar Hoover on May 22, 1961, of the mafia's involvement in assassination attempts to kill Castro, this collaboration having been initiated at the end of Eisenhower's presidency. And, it should be noted, the collaboration did not stop; RFK was briefed again in May 1962 about the CIA's connections with organized crime, with the same result.[1]

Future CIA Director Richard Helms coordinated Operation Mongoose and later testified that "it was made abundantly clear to everyone involved in the operation that the desire was to get rid of the Castro regime and to get rid of Castro. No limitations were put on this injunction." Helms stated that Robert Kennedy "would not have been unhappy if [Castro] had disappeared off the scene by whatever means," and Helms added that the pressure from RFK to remove Castro was akin to "white heat."[2] Bobby Kennedy viewed the Bay of Pigs as an "insult that had to be redressed" and he pressured a sclerotic bureaucracy to ensure that Mongoose received all of the funding it needed to carry out its terror campaign. Over time, Mongoose became one of the largest covert operations in the CIA's history, involving some 400 agents and an annual budget of over $50 million.[3]

Arthur Schlesinger believed that a rogue CIA, acting beyond the control of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, had attempted to kill Castro. This notion was rebuffed by David Eisenhower, the grandson of Dwight D. Eisenhower, in a discussion with Schlesinger over President Eisenhower's legacy. Schlesinger was mortified when Eisenhower bluntly rejected Schlesinger's "rogue CIA" theory by indicating that the World War II generation had a different take on the propriety of assassination (*Journals*, 675). For the remainder of his life, Schlesinger would engage in duels with journalist Christopher Hitchens and others in an effort to exculpate the Kennedys from any involvement in assassination plotting. The stakes were high, for a concession on this count would fuel the arguments of those who viewed JFK and RFK as committed Cold Warriors, and would also serve to complicate the established tale of right-wing complicity in JFK's assassination.

All of those who were involved with Operation Mongoose, including Richard Helms, the CIA's deputy director for plans, Ray Cline, the agency's deputy director for intelligence, and U. Alexis Johnson, the State Department's Mongoose liaison, insisted that the agency was doing the

[1]Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy, His Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 154–59, 171.

[2]Jeff Shesol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud that Defined a Decade* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 129.

[3]Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting "The Final Failure": John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 15.

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president's bidding. As Ray Cline put it, "The assassination of Castro by a Cuban . . . might have been viewed as not very different in the benefits that would have accrued from the assassination of Hitler in 1944." Alexis Johnson added, "There was never, to my knowledge, any foundation for charges of freewheeling by the CIA."[4] Testifying years later, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara noted that "the C.I.A. was a highly disciplined organization, fully under the control of senior officials of the Government."[5]

While no "smoking gun" exists to definitively prove that JFK ordered Castro's assassination, the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming. The best-case scenario for Kennedy acolytes was that the president was unaware of the numerous attempts to kill Castro during his presidency, which, like President Reagan and the Iran-Contra affair, would have been an egregious example of executive negligence. Unlike Reagan, Kennedy was not a delegator, so this theory does not appear credible. Arthur Schlesinger, who could not contain his delight when news broke about the Iran-Contra affair, never thought of asking the same questions he gleefully hoped the media would ask President Reagan: "How much did he know? When did he know it?" (*Journals*, 624).

When Mongoose was exposed by the Church Committee in 1975, Schlesinger wasted little time dismissing the idea that the Kennedy brothers were involved. When CBS News broadcast the aforementioned Bill Moyers's documentary, Schlesinger dismissed it as "an extraordinarily shabby and tendentious polemic" (*Journals*, 432). On the other hand, during the administration of "Old Ike" (*Journals*, 675), the CIA had recruited "gangsters to murder Castro" although Schlesinger continued to deny that "any of the three presidents [Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson] authorized or were aware of these plots" (*Letters*, 488). The hated Lyndon Johnson had in fact terminated Operation Mongoose, expressing concern over the fact that Kennedys were operating "a damned Murder, Inc., in the Caribbean" (Sabato, 194).

Remarkably, Schlesinger asserted in 1985 that "Cuba was not a major concern for US policy-makers" during the Kennedy years (*Letters*, 488–89). As recently as 2008, Ted Sorensen was adhering to the party line that the CIA misunderstood JFK's interest in "deposing" Castro, for "that did not mean he wanted him [Castro] murdered" (Sorensen, 319). In Schlesinger's assessment, "revisionist" historians who portrayed JFK as a Cold Warrior and an advocate of operations such as Mongoose were possessed by an "obscure and sour envy of Kennedy." They were "paying [him] back" for being "too handsome, too popular, too rich" and having "too beautiful a wife" (*Journals*, 558). The dissembling over the role the

[4]Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 275–76.

[5]Abram N. Shulsky and Gary J. Schmitt, *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2002), 223n4.

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Kennedys played in Mongoose continues to this day, as Robert Kennedy's heirs continue to deny access to documents in the John F. Kennedy Library which would likely shed new light on the obsessive pursuit of Fidel Castro by the Kennedy brothers.

Another awkward issue for the purveyors of the Camelot legacy was the fact that the president had bedded a number of women in an attempt to satisfy a ravenous libido. John F. Kennedy presents a challenge for those who contend that the private life of an elected official is none of the public's business. Unfortunately, some of JFK's private affairs bled over into the public arena. It is simply not true, as Sorensen claims in *Counselor*, that Kennedy "never permitted the pursuit of private pleasure to interfere with public duty" (Sorensen, 121). Worse, he endorses the position of "the greatest Kennedy historian of them all, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.," who proclaimed that "questions which no one has a right to ask are not entitled to a truthful answer" (Sorensen, 117–18).

In his quest to protect the president's reputation, Sorensen slandered members of Kennedy's Secret Service detail who decades later expressed their disgust and dismay at Kennedy's conduct (Sorensen, 117). One member of this detail recalled "morale problems" among his fellow agents, due to their jobs being reduced to guarding a john and his prostitutes: "you were on the most elite assignment in the Secret Service, and you were there watching an elevator or a door because the president was inside with two hookers" (Sabato, 129).

Kennedy's affairs included, but were not limited to, a woman whom the president was sharing with Sam Giancana, the Chicago mob boss who was providing assistance to Operation Mongoose; a nineteen-year-old intern who had been on the job for four days when she was summoned by the president (JFK later shared her with one of his aides, and watched while the teenager serviced the aide); two of his secretaries and the first lady's secretary; the ex-wife of the CIA's covert-operations planning division, and, allegedly, a suspected East German spy, Ellen Rometsch, who was quickly deported after word reached Robert Kennedy that J. Edgar Hoover believed the president was sleeping with her. As Larry Sabato dryly observes, "records related to Rometsch's deportation have either vanished or were never created in the first place" (Sabato, 129). This information, and more, ensured that Hoover, whose time had already passed, would not be removed as director of the FBI.

The president's health was another area of concern for Camelot's courtiers. JFK was a sick man, contrary to a carefully crafted media image of youth and vigor conveyed by images of touch-football games in Hyannisport and New Frontiersmen participating in fifty-mile hikes. The president suffered from Addison's disease and a degenerative condition of the lumbar spine, among numerous other ailments, and was secretly attended to by Dr. Max Jacobson, who later ministered to Elvis Presley, and was known as "Dr. Feelgood" by his rich and famous clientele. Kennedy was on Jacobson's concoctions, which were essentially a cocktail of amphetamines, when he

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met with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna and was bullied, as JFK put it, "like a little boy" (Sabato, 87, 90).

Robert Kennedy and JFK's personal physicians lied to the media about Kennedy's health, and as Dallek notes, JFK himself lied to members of his own team, understanding that a "discussion of his medical history would probably have put his [1960] victory out of reach" (Dallek, 79; Sabato, 53). Sorensen claims that when he raised the issue of JFK's reliance on Dr. Feelgood, he was told that Jacobson was "treating Jackie, not the president" (Sorensen, 106). At one point, according to Robert Dallek, the president was treated for two days with an antipsychotic drug. And as Dallek also notes, Theodore Sorensen and others did their best to "hide the true state of his [JFK's] health" before, during, and after his presidency. Sorensen regretted the decision to open Kennedy's health records decades after the president's death (Dallek, 79), despite the fact that Dallek, who first published the records, portrayed Kennedy's battle with his afflictions as a heroic personal struggle.

The highlight of the young president's tenure in office was his handling of the Cuban missile crisis. Secretly recorded conversations of the deliberations over the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba reveal a president in command of the facts and probing his advisors with insightful questions, all the while placing himself in the shoes of his adversary. But despite JFK's successful management of the missile crisis, the Camelot courtiers once again distorted the record. Former Kennedy Library historian Sheldon Stern has conclusively exposed the misleading accounts offered by RFK, Schlesinger, and Sorensen, all of which were designed to conceal the fact that Robert Kennedy had offered hawkish advice to the president throughout the crisis and to cover up the secret concessions made by President Kennedy to defuse the superpower standoff. Stern notes that the "heroic" interpretation of Kennedy's actions in the missile crisis was "popularized by the selective and manipulative writings of administration insiders like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Theodore Sorensen." Sorensen was still "spin[ning] and shap[ing] the evidence" as late as 2008, in support of this "mythic" version of the Cuban missile crisis.[6]

One lesson that the New Frontiersmen learned from the missile crisis was that in an age of nuclear weapons it was essential for the White House to tightly control the military and to respond to acts of aggression incrementally. This approach would prove disastrous for the growing American involvement in Vietnam. Air Force Chief of Staff, General Curtis LeMay, was the personification to the Kennedy team of the reactionary warmonger, and served as a model for the right-wing general plotting a coup in *Seven Days in May* (Sabato, 465n18) and as the inspiration for General Jack D. Ripper in *Dr. Strangelove* (Dallek, 74). While LeMay's counsel was justifiably ignored

[6]See my "Legends of the Fall," *Review of Politics* 75, no. 3 (2013): 484– 87.

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during the missile crisis, his opposition to the halting, gradual escalation in Vietnam advocated by Kennedy's and Johnson's advisors was prescient. LeMay and other senior military officers advocated unleashing America's conventional military superiority to defeat North Vietnam. Had this policy been adopted in 1965, instead of in 1972, it may well have spared thousands of American and Vietnamese lives. Robert McNamara rejected this approach, convinced that the same management techniques that succeeded at Ford Motor Company and in the missile crisis would work against Ho Chi Minh.

Underlying all of this was a contempt for the military that was shared by JFK and many of his advisors, including Schlesinger. Kennedy claimed that both he and Nikita Khrushchev sought a world at peace but were "opposed by the hard-liners," a.k.a. the military, in their respective countries, an assessment endorsed by Schlesinger (*Journals*, 534). Sabato notes that Kennedy believed he might become the victim of "a military and intelligence community coup d'état" (Sabato, 192), and he applauds Kennedy for the "courage" he demonstrated in standing up to the Soviet Union and to his own generals (Sabato, 131). Many of the "best and the brightest" who surrounded the president, as well as the president himself, believed that the military "brass hats" were simply not that bright.

These same Ivy League recruits held Dwight Eisenhower and his hierarchical White House operation in contempt, believing that Ike's military management-style stunted creativity and isolated the president. According to Robert Dallek, the president and his closest advisors "had diminished regard for the military's judgment on defense questions" (Dallek, 70), betraying a certain myopia coming from a team that campaigned in 1960 on the nonexistent issue of a "missile gap" and concluded that it could topple the Cuban government with an invasion of 1,400 exiled merchants. Arthur Schlesinger considered the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Lyman Lemnitzer, to be "that sweet but dopey man" (Dallek, 69-70), while Sorensen deemed Curtis LeMay "my least favorite human being" (Dallek, 74). Needless to say, Sorensen, a conscientious objector, and LeMay, the architect of the firebombing of Japan, were from two different worlds.

John F. Kennedy's greatest domestic achievement was his ringing endorsement of civil rights for African-Americans. He reminded his fellow citizens in June 1963 that the time had come to dispense with one hundred years of Jim Crow, a reminder that was grounded in the noblest principles of the American political tradition: "We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. . . . This is one country. . . . It has become one country because all of us and all the people who came here had an equal chance to develop their talents" (Sabato, 114). Belated though this was, it was nonetheless a costly political move for a president who hoped to retain the support of Southern Democrats in the 1964 election—thus the trip to Dallas in November 1963.

While Kennedy's rhetoric in support of civil rights assisted Dr. Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in other

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areas his rhetoric was counterproductive. Kennedy's oratory, crafted with a considerable assist from Ted Sorensen, was as soaring and as visionary as any of his twentieth-century peers. Kennedy claimed that "man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings," and that the president "must be prepared to exercise the fullest powers of his office—all that are specified and some that are not." His vision of American omnipotence led him to proclaim that the United States would "bear any burden, pay any price" to defend liberty around the globe, including in the swamps of South Vietnam.

An expectations or credibility gap did not occur on Kennedy's watch; but it did begin under his successor Lyndon Johnson. Nonetheless, Kennedy's inflated rhetoric contributed to this gap, although in fairness it was also fueled by the insatiable demands of the American public. Kennedy was arguably the epitome of the visionary president promoted by Woodrow Wilson and the leaders of twentieth-century American progressivism. Determined to liberate the American government from the constraints of the Constitution's antiquated checks and balances, the president (assisted by talented administrators) was to serve as a visionary and lead the nation into the Promised Land. The founding fathers understood something many progressives, including JFK's "best and brightest," did not: that the more you expand the roles and responsibilities of the office, the more you diminish it. It is important to note that the founders' presidency provided both a floor and a ceiling that protected but also energized the office; without this, the office is trapped in a cycle of raised expectations followed by public disappointment and cynicism.

A century of progressive disregard for the Constitution, of which Kennedy was a part, damaged our nation's polity, possibly beyond repair. The progressive revolution promised too much of the federal government, especially of the presidency. Even strong nationalists like Alexander Hamilton acknowledged limits to what the presidency should do: it should concentrate on administering the government, conduct foreign negotiations, oversee military preparations, and if need be, direct a war. It should not attempt to bear any burden, nor should it engage in the kind of destructive hubris found in JFK's proclamation that "man can be as big as he wants" and that "no problem of human destiny is beyond human beings."

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Theodore Sorensen, Robert Dallek, and Larry Sabato all venerate President Kennedy. Schlesinger, in fact, notes that after the 1960s he was unable, politically speaking, to "fall hopelessly in love again. I don't suppose I will ever enjoy the careless rapture of my engagement with . . . JFK or RFK" (*Journals*, 547). Sorensen observes that he worked for JFK for eleven years and that he "loved him," so much so that his first marriage failed due to his all-consuming relationship with Kennedy (Sorensen, 115). Dallek writes in reverential terms about John F. Kennedy, arguing that Kennedy's presidency appealed to the better angels of our nature and confirmed the idea that the United States was

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the last best hope of mankind.[7] Larry Sabato outdoes them all, comparing JFK to the first Christian martyr, Saint Stephen. Kennedy was no saint, Sabato concedes, "but he had shown and earned grace during the better part of three years in power." Three weeks after attending a mass at St. Stephen's Church in Middleburg, Virginia, President Kennedy was assassinated, "proceed[ing] to his own martyrdom" (Sabato, 131).

There is something tragic in all of this, beyond the murder of a young president. It is a tragedy that so many Americans persist in judging Kennedy's successors by the mythical standards of an abbreviated presidency that lasted two years, ten months, and two days. These Americans would do well to note the words from a speech delivered in 1962: "the great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic."

[7]Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003), 440, 467, 711.

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