

Chapter 22

JFK: The Exceptional Ideal?

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Introduction

The events of November 22, 1963, had a profound impact on the course of history and on widespread public perceptions. On that date the presidency of John F. Kennedy came to a sudden and shocking conclusion, but a powerful and emotional legacy that continues unabated, began to emerge. In the decades that have followed, considerations of the Kennedy legacy have undulated wildly, from initial plaudits to salacious gossip, much of which has focused on the style of the administration to the detriment of its achievements. Such an approach is inadequate if we are to gain an insight into the man, his legacy and the rationale for its continuing relevance in the Twenty-first Century. This paper will rectify this by considering both the style and substance of the Kennedy legacy to quantify the qualities that are responsible for memories that long endure in those who remember his presidency and which draw such interest in those who were born after the events in Dallas.

President Kennedy's demeanour has given rise to an adjective; *Kennedyesque*, a term that is used regularly, but often without context. This has caused generations of leaders to be characterised as *Kennedyesque*, but with scant explanation as to why this is, or what it is exactly that this is meant to imply. This paper will define *Kennedyesque* and consider why it is that almost half a century after coming to office, the Kennedy style is still very much in vogue. With the election of Barack Obama and the numerous allusions to the Kennedy style, it is important to consider two questions: Is it possible for politicians to emulate JFK without demeaning themselves and why do they attempt this political impersonation? The Kennedy legacy is not bound to the confines of history, however, for it must be recognised that the legacy of President Kennedy has exceeded the bounds of the historian and entered the realms of fantasy. From docudramas to science fiction epics, the image of President Kennedy is pervasive and this paper will accordingly consider the manner in which Kennedy has entered the international psyche due to his incorporation into works of fiction.

Casting a long shadow over our appreciation of the Kennedy legacy is the manner of his passing. No understanding of the Kennedy legacy is complete without an acknowledgement of his assassination on the national and international psyche. The event transcended borders and left, as Alistair Cooke noted at the time, "a desperate and howling note over the land."¹ The death of the president stunned the world and forever altered his stature, but has this event made subsequent presidents appear less *Kennedyesque* by their very survival in office? Is it possible to compare favourably to Kennedy in life, or must one pay the ultimate price before any such comparisons are possible?

¹ Alistair Cooke, *Letter From America 1946-2004*, London: Penguin Books, 2004, 125.

This paper addresses these questions and others, but their collective weight signifies a profound conclusion; the presidency of John Fitzgerald Kennedy was the exception rather than the rule in terms of U.S. administrations. His presidency was so dynamic; his time in office so dramatic; his passing so tragic; and his legacy so profound that emulation appears doomed to failure. However, Kennedy's time in office appears to have become set as the measure of success; a high-water mark against which to judge future leaders of America. Implicit in this, is the idea that what is being measured is not what Kennedy achieved, but more importantly, what he *would* have gone on to achieve. "At its most elemental level, the Kennedy image is that of unfulfilled promise. This is not merely because of the personal calamity of a young man cut down in the prime of manhood, but also because Kennedy's murder has come to symbolise the nation's thwarted hopes."² Inevitably, his successors appear inadequate because their efforts are measured against sentimental constructs of the Kennedy golden age. This paper will consider the apparent shortcomings of those who have followed in Kennedy's wake and why they seem to have failed in comparison.

Defining Kennedy

Decades after his assassination, John F. Kennedy's legacy remains a potent force in American political life. The image of the late president has been adopted and imitated by politicians from both sides of the political aisle and his demeanour has given its name to an adjective: *Kennedyesque*. However, when politicians as diverse as Dan Quayle and Barack Obama are described as being *Kennedyesque*, the specificity of the expression must be questioned. How can two such diverse individuals, with such varying backgrounds and aspirations, possibly be described in the same manner?

In an effort to reconcile this dilemma it is necessary to note the contradictions that arise not only in the term *Kennedyesque*, but also in the man himself. One of the challenges faced by efforts to comprehend the legacy of John F. Kennedy stems from the focus upon the president's image as opposed to his achievements or complex personality. A superficial focus upon JFK's image belies an individual of great intellect and charm, yet also one of great contradiction. As Rorabaugh explains, Kennedy was "as enigmatic a political personality as the United States has ever produced," however, "when asked questions, Kennedy often replied with questions rather than answers, preferred listening to talking, deflected the unwanted probe with quick wit, refused to make decisions that would disappoint some of his followers, and interposed himself between two people who disagreed with each other by leaving the impression that he agreed with that person."³ This may seem like the characteristics of most politicians, but surely there was something different about Kennedy that has caused him to be so beloved by successive generations, including those not born when he was president.

The challenge arises partly due to the simplified legacy of the late president. By concentrating upon the photography of Jacques Lowe and the flowing prose of William Manchester, the inner complexities of JFK are whitewashed, allowing and perhaps forcing us to project our own ideas and aspirations on to the memory of John

² Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1988, 44.

³ W. J. Rorabaugh, *Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, xx.

Kennedy. This is all the more viable for aspiring politicians, discussed within this paper, who have chosen to utilise JFK's imagery and mannerisms in an attempt to produce an echo through time that will resonate with those who seek a restoration of the Kennedy presidency. But if the ghost of President Kennedy continues to haunt American political life, it behoves us to consider the qualities of this man in an effort to comprehend what it means to be *Kennedyesque* and why it is that diverse politicians seek the mantel of the fallen Commander in Chief.

The on-line Urban Dictionary defines *Kennedyesque* as being an adjective, "describing the actions of a person (usually a politician) that relates to an action that John F. Kennedy would've done. Positive term, as Kennedy was seen as a rather popular president."⁴ This rather limited description only considers actions, however, and it is often the case that when the term *Kennedyesque* is utilised, it is done so in reference to a demeanour that is projected, as much as to an action. Accordingly, for the sake of this paper, the term *Kennedyesque* will be utilised to refer not only to actions, but also to qualities and mannerisms reminiscent of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. When used as a compliment it can be defined as possessing an inspirational quality in public affairs; of an individual at ease with himself and his place in the world; of a debonair and charming manner, accompanied by deep-rooted intelligence and a thirst for knowledge and understanding. The term can relate to a series of images; of touch football and windswept vistas, of wayfarers and tweed jackets, of sailing and reading, of tousled hair and rolled up sleeves; of dynamic leadership conducted in a relaxed and stylish fashion.

However, due to revelations that have arisen in recent years, *Kennedyesque* is a term that can also be applied pejoratively. Critics highlight the contradictory record of the administration; the shadowy connections between the president's father and members of the underworld; the president's recklessness in office and undisclosed health issues; the assassination plots against foreign leaders and the sordid events in Dallas. *Kennedyesque* has even been used in reference to scandals surrounding Senator Edward Kennedy, which further complicates efforts to define the term. Indeed, the events of the prevailing years have done much to undermine a Kennedy legacy. The deaths of the president's brother and son prevented political restoration, while another brother and several nephews have damaged the family's public perception. The fact that imagery associated with President Kennedy remains a force in American politics despite these factors is an indication of its potency and resilience.

Issues of Style and Substance

Efforts to fully comprehend the rationale for the lasting impact of Kennedy's legacy are hampered by two powerful elements; the pervasive imagery associated with JFK's time in office and the violent manner of his passing. Both perpetuate fascination with the president but in a manner that divert attention from the substantive aspects of his administration and his personality. This dilemma, of a powerful image threatening to overwhelm substantive performance, is not a construct of recent years; indeed it was a matter that President Kennedy was all too aware of during his time in the White House. "Overexposure became his major concern, particularly since an expanding

⁴ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Kennedyesque>

news format provided more opportunities to cover the presidency.”⁵ The recognition that image could replace a focus on substantive issues was a paradox for Kennedy, who had been elected president partly by advancing his own carefully constructed image as a dashing senator and as a faithful family man who was intellectually curious and trustworthy with the future direction of the western alliance at the height of the Cold War. His very election appears to have hinged on the first ever televised debates. Those who *saw* them felt Kennedy had triumphed, while those who only *heard* them on the radio felt that Nixon had emerged victorious. It must be questioned therefore, as to whether Kennedy could have been elected without the powerful visual impact that he brought to the campaign trail in 1960.

As Sorensen reminds us, “style (was) a part of the Kennedy legacy; a cool, convincing, self-confident style that spoke to and for the young at heart, cut through can’t, overrode trivia and elevated eloquence and gallantry and wit.”⁶ However the legacy endures due to the reservoir of talent that lay behind the imagery that was so artfully projected from the White House. All too often in subsequent years it has been the image that has been adopted and not the intellectual curiosity that Kennedy brought to the presidency. This would be a continual annoyance to those who served in the White House, indeed “no charge stung them more than the one that the Kennedy administration has seen the triumph of style over substance.”⁷ It is revealing that this intelligent president would owe his election in part to the effective use of superficial imagery and that this would be the enduring legacy that many would take from this time in office. Accordingly, when the term *Kennedyesque* is applied, it is often in relation to an appearance or mannerism, not to a Pulitzer Prize winning mindset or a capacity to empathise with an opponent at the height of a global conflict. Grace under pressure was the late president’s aspiration, yet discussion of any traditional bravery is often overlooked in favour of his physical grace under the glare of the television lights. The impact of this attention to superficial detail would impact not only his administration, but also those of all presidents who would follow.

Indeed, just as the attention on image within the presidency has become dominant, so too did the 1960 Kennedy campaign for the presidency become the blueprint for modern political efforts; the focus upon an individual rather than the party; the focus upon image rather than substance; the utilisation of mass media advertising and simplistic slogans. The concept espoused by the candidate’s father, of “sell(ing) Jack like soap-flakes”⁸ became the all too often imitated approach to political advertising. Therefore, this contradictory approach, of intellectualism concealed by a veneer of glamour was initiated by the Kennedy family itself and was in part a deliberate effort to conceal worrying aspects concerning the candidate’s health. It was a deception that continued following his death, since the image of a robust, healthy chief executive was central to Kennedy’s appeal both in 1960 and today. This concealed the reality of a middle aged man suffering from a range of debilitating medical ailments, the exposure of which may have derailed his bid for the White House. Yet Kennedy’s determination to overcome ailments and govern effectively could be viewed as a laudable quality revealing a strength of character that is as worthy of admiration as

⁵ James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991, 261.

⁶ Theodore C. Sorensen, *The Kennedy Legacy*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969, 16.

⁷ Brown, *JFK: History of an Image*, 28.

⁸ John H. Davis, *The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster, 1848-1983*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984,151.

any act conducted in an official capacity. This more complicated element of his personality is often overlooked.

A Kennedyesque Culture

As familiar as we are with the Kennedy years, it is important to recall that much has changed in the decades since his time in office. John F. Kennedy was president in a very different era and these differences are reflected in the cultural, political and moral aspects of his presidency and legacy. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the sexual politics of the era. In the early 1960s “a tryst in the Washington area seemed almost as common as golf at the country club,”⁹ and as a result the Kennedy years are renowned in some circles for their swimming pool parties, skinny dipping and barely concealed adultery. The antics of the president and his advisers were concealed during their lifetimes, but even when the tales began to emerge it merely reinforced a certain *joie de vivre* that the president exuded. Rather than appearing sordid, Kennedy made sex seem sexier than ever, associating with the skirt-chasing, hard-drinking Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack. Acceptance of his philandering had much to do with JFK’s demeanour and charming personality, but this would not have been enough to save him from the sexual McCarthyism of the 1990s. By the time Clinton arrived at the White House, the rules had changed; employing secretaries who couldn’t type and having affairs with world famous actresses were a thing of the past. In the 1960s, Marilyn Monroe could openly serenade President Kennedy, but by the 1990s the moral climate was very different. Caught red-handed in a lie to the American people, Bill Clinton appeared sleazy rather than masculine, charming or virile.¹⁰

The contrast between John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton is synonymous with the differences between the times in which they served. Not only did their styles reflect the morality of their times, but also the distinct manners in which politics was conducted. Despite his connection with the American people, Kennedy would appear somewhat distant compared to the empathetic politics personified by Bill Clinton. The political culture of the early twenty-first century would appear undignified and emotional for Kennedy’s times. Although he was mobbed by adoring supporters on the campaign trail, Kennedy was not asked what underwear he wore on national television, never cried in public to gain political support, was never forced to acknowledge causing pain in his marriage live on television and was actually averse to physical contact in many ways. The Oprah-style politics as perfected by President Clinton sit in stark contrast to the more rigid political styling of the Kennedy years, which was rooted in a 1950s culture straining to evolve.

In the 1960s President Kennedy battled what he saw as “a grey tide of mediocrity and an implacable enmity toward the concept of excellence which he exalted.”¹¹ His 1955 Pulitzer Prize winning text *Profiles in Courage* extolled the virtues of sacrifice and honour as it detailed those who had placed the needs of the country ahead of their own

⁹ Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 267.

¹⁰ It is entirely possible that his impeachment ultimately caused the Kennedy family to throw their political support behind Barack Obama in 2008 rather than continue to back the Clintons in their quest for dynastic glory. It would appear possible, therefore, that Bill Clinton proved to be a little too *Kennedyesque* for his own good.

¹¹ William Manchester, *Remembering Kennedy: One Brief Shining Moment*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983, 275-6.

careers. Kennedy “inspired in Americans of all ages a zeal for achievement, a yearning to test the ancient Athenian maxim that genuine pleasure can be found only in the pursuit of excellence.”¹² Such praise from William Manchester could be seen as an attempt to heal wounds that had arisen from the publication of *Death of a President*¹³, but it is important to recall that the specific phraseology reflects precisely that used by Kennedy on a number of occasions. In a style that his brother Robert would later adopt, the president was not averse to quoting Athenian philosophers in an effort to make a point, in stark contrast to George W. Bush who referred to Greeks as Grecians and courted the anti-intellectual vote.¹⁴

Although the political environment has changed, concepts of style associated with Kennedy continue to be imitated. The recognition of Jackie Kennedy as a style icon is far from revelatory, but it is important to acknowledge the president’s contributions to 1960s style and its long-term impact. Before Kennedy became president in January 1961, men in America wore hats. The only time of note that Kennedy wore a hat was at his inauguration and at this point he was still president-elect. Kennedy avoided hat wear during his presidency, delicately avoiding political stunts, up to, and including the morning of his assassination, when he received a white Stetson in Fort Worth. “I will put this on Monday in my office at the White House,” he noted warily. “I hope you can be there to see it.”¹⁵ Kennedy was not beyond holding a hat, but American hat manufacturers lamented the president’s unwillingness to continue the hat-wearing motif of the 1950s over into the new decade.¹⁶

As well as fashion, Kennedy influenced literary consumption. He not only wrote two best selling books (*Why England Slept* and *Profiles in Courage*), but also contributed to the *James Bond* phenomenon by endorsing *From Russia with Love* in 1961. Such praise would prove priceless in marketing the film, which American trailers heralded as having ‘fans from Hong Kong to Hyannis Port.’ It would also become the final film that John F. Kennedy would ever watch, as an early print was rushed to the White House prior to the president’s departure for Texas.¹⁷ Culturally, President Kennedy’s tastes ranged from the popular to the more reserved, for this was a time when an American president could admit to being an admirer of Cecil’s biography of Lord Marlborough, without worrying about it costing votes among anti-intellectuals. “Those Kennedy students who rushed to the library for a copy found it described a ruling class of people with remote resemblance to the Kennedy clan.”¹⁸ To be *Kennedyesque* today might, therefore, be to challenge low expectations and high culture illiteracy, something a generation of politicians has avoided for fear of appearing out of touch with mainstream, popular culture.

¹² Ibid., 10.

¹³ For more data on this, see Brown, *JFK: History of an Image*, 6-7

¹⁴ As quoted in Nicholas Kristof, ‘The God Gulf,’ *The New York Times*, January 7, 2004. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/07/opinion/the-god-gulf.html>

¹⁵ Jim Bishop, *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*, New York: Harper Collins, 1992, 78.

¹⁶ For more on this see Neil Steinberg, *Hatless Jack*, New York: Granta Books, 2005.

¹⁷ Such public uptake of a novel would arguably not occur again until the mid 1980s when President Reagan praised the tale of a defecting Russian submarine as “the perfect yarn,” and helped launch the career of Tom Clancy.

¹⁸ Hugh Sidey, *John F. Kennedy: Portrait of a President*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1964, 65.

Kennedy in Fiction

The far reaching impact of the Kennedy legacy is not constrained by the confines of reality, for its influence also extends into the realm of fantasy, further idealising his position in the history of the American presidency and blurring our comprehension of the real John F. Kennedy. When the age and appearance of American presidents throughout history are considered, they are, with few exceptions, grandfatherly figures. Yet when the president is portrayed in fiction, this is often not the case. Time and again, filmmakers portray an American president who is young, vigorous and dynamic. The role model for such characterisations is hardly Eisenhower or Truman. Accordingly, the appropriation of the Kennedy image has become central to the promotion of the ideal presidency. The utilisation of a *Kennedyesque* image in fictional interpretations of the American presidency contributes greatly to a subliminal appreciation of his time in office and a projection of what may have been.

The depiction of Kennedy on screen has been accompanied by a fictionalisation of his life and times. This has led to conflation between fact and fiction, between the real John F. Kennedy and the reel John F. Kennedy, until the boundaries of reality have become blurred beyond distinction to many observers. The real John F. Kennedy may have disappeared from view on November 22, 1963, but the reel Kennedy burst into view a decade later in December 1974. *The Missiles of October*, aired on ABC in the aftermath of Watergate and Vietnam, presented a portrayal of the Kennedy brothers as heroic and high-minded.¹⁹ Staged in a theatrical style, the film confirmed the traditional opinion of the Kennedy White House and of its inhabitants as having saved the world from the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Both William Devane's JFK and Martin Sheen's Robert Kennedy are courageous and dashing characters. The non-too subtle message of the film was clear. The events depicted were historic and the individuals particularly heroic; viewers are made to feel a sense of profound loss.

In the years that have followed, the Kennedy family has been the subject of more than a dozen television docudramas that continue to blur the lines of understanding between fact and fiction. The portrayal of President Kennedy by James Franciscus in 1981's *Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy*, Martin Sheen in 1983's *Kennedy*, Stephen Collins in 1991's *A Woman Named Jackie*, Patrick Dempsey in 1993's *JFK: Reckless Youth* and William Peterson in 1998's *The Rat Pack* have ensured that the president's image remained dominant, but superficial, as these docudramas "were largely morality tales, giving velocity to counter revisionist trends by disputing or ignoring unflattering disclosures surrounding the family."²⁰ However, it is important to note that the media presentation of a glorified and glamorous JFK was not entirely a sentimental reaction to the assassination. The process began when JFK was still alive,

¹⁹ This is perhaps unsurprising considering that it is partly based upon Robert Kennedy's posthumous memoir of the event.

²⁰ Lance Morrow, "The History Devouring Machine," *Horizon*, July 1978, 18-23, William Cohn, "History for the Masses: Television Portrays the Past," *Journal of Popular Culture* 10 (Spring 1976), 280-289, Paul R. Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion: The Politics of Style Since JFK*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee: 1995, 173.

in Warner Brothers' *PT-109* starring Cliff Robertson, in a project overseen by Kennedy from the Oval Office.²¹

Perhaps the most successful attempt to portray a realistic and balanced portrayal of the president on screen came in *Thirteen Days*. As portrayed by Bruce Greenwood, Kennedy is depicted as intelligent, but also under tremendous pressure to make decisions that may threaten the continued existence of humanity. The relationship between the president and the military is key to the film and the apparent insubordination that is depicted on screen mirrors that which is outlined in David Talbot's exposé, *Brothers: The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years*. A key aspect to the text is the claim that the president petitioned Hollywood to produce motion pictures depicting the growing rift JFK saw between military and civilian leadership. Films such as *Fail Safe*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Seven Days in May* were all produced in this time period, in a chilling indication of the pressure Kennedy felt from the Pentagon.²²

In addition to the portrayal of Kennedy as a historic character on screen, the legacy also benefits from the efforts of filmmakers to imbue fictional presidents with mannerisms that are *Kennedyesque* in tone. In 1996 a blonde, dashing war hero president with a young daughter saved the world from annihilation. This was not a depiction of the Cuban Missile Crisis, but rather Bill Pullman's portrayal of President Thomas Whitmore in *Independence Day*. Twelve months later a young vigorous athletic president with an attractive wife and daughter was forced to confront his nation's enemies in a struggle that was literally eyeball-to-eyeball, as Harrison Ford's President James Marshall struggled to reclaim *Air Force One*. Throughout the 1990s the American presidency became a topic of fascination and fictionalisation, aided by the real life antics of Bill Clinton and by his willingness to open the White House to filmmakers. The depiction of the president exploded in the decade, as *The West Wing*, *The American President*, *Dave*, *Forrest Gump*, *Commander in Chief* and *Nixon* amply demonstrate. Clearly these are not all focused upon the Kennedy presidency, but when *Kennedyesque* aspects are revealed, there are done so in a favourable manner. The love theme from *Camelot* plays subtly during the JFK scene in *Forrest Gump* and the sense of reverence and loss when *Nixon* addresses the official portrait of JFK is all too apparent. When Kennedy is referenced it is with a sense of awe and reverence, tinged with a deeper sadness at the inevitability of his eventual demise.

Casting is also a salient aspect in the consideration of the Kennedy image on screen since actors who have previously played Kennedy, have then been recast in roles intended to tap into that reservoir of affection for the late president. The most obvious example of this is Martin Sheen. Having played Robert Kennedy (*The Missiles of October*) and JFK (*Kennedy*), his portrayal of Josiah Bartlett in *The West Wing* would appear to be the embodiment of Presidents Carter, Clinton and Kennedy.²³ Having played the real president, his physical manifestation cannot fail but conjure up the image of his earlier portrayal. This is not to suggest that the producers of

²¹ Intriguingly the actor that President Kennedy initially sought to portray himself in his adventures in the South Pacific, was Warren Beatty.

²² David Talbot, *Brothers: The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007, 148-151.

²³ Neither should it be seen as a coincidence that Martin Sheen was chosen by Oliver Stone to provide the un-credited voice over for the introduction to his 1991 movie *JFK*.

Independence Day, *Air Force One* or *The West Wing* are seeking to imply that these fictional presidents are supplicant Kennedys, but that by choosing to cast a *Kennedyesque* actor to portray a *Kennedyesque* character, the perception of JFK as an action hero continues to be perpetuated, something that was exacerbated by the production by Hasbro of a JFK G.I. Joe doll in 2000. These actions “have helped transform JFK from a historical figure into a popular culture icon.”²⁴

As with all efforts to depict Kennedy on screen, even the manner of his passing has been fictionalised. The controversy surrounding Kennedy’s assassination has been retold in a number of ways, some directly, but often in an oblique fashion. Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991) is only the most direct in a series of films that argue for the case of a conspiracy. *Ruby* (1992) and *Executive Action* (1973) deal directly with the events in Dallas, while *The Parallax View* (1974) and *Winter Kills* (1979) change the names of the protagonists to make the case for a wider conspiracy. In all cases JFK is portrayed as a martyr to liberalism and the victim of darker forces.

The ultimate Kennedy fantasy involves saving the president from assassination in Dallas. This plot device has appeared in a variety of films and television shows around the world. In the 1986 *Twilight Zone* episode ‘Profile in Silver’ JFK is saved by a time travelling Harvard professor. When this causes problems in the space-time continuum, Kennedy volunteers to return to Dallas and die in order to save the future. However, the professor takes his place in the motorcade, allowing JFK to take his place in the future! The episode highlights some of the strongest themes of the Kennedy myth. His death is portrayed as Christ-like martyrdom, as he sacrifices himself to save humanity; the historian’s willingness to trade roles with Kennedy allows the viewer to fantasise whether they would take a bullet to save the president for the apparent betterment of humanity. “In the end the docudrama reaffirms Kennedy’s goodness and rescues him from death. He is alive and well and living in the future.”²⁵

In addition to the *Twilight Zone*, JFK’s assassination is interrupted, altered or prevented in *Running Against Time* (1990), *Quantum Leap* (1992), *Red Dwarf* (1997) and *Timequest* (2002). Even *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry sought on numerous occasions to have the crew of the Enterprise rescue Kennedy in Dallas. Whenever a film sequel was being discussed Roddenberry would suggest this storyline, only to be vetoed by Paramount Pictures. When the Enterprise did eventually journey in time it was to save the life of a whale rather than a president. However, when considering fictional interpretations of President Kennedy, one need look no further than Captain Kirk to see JFK in space. In *Star Trek*, the New Frontier has become the Final Frontier; the youngest elected president has become the youngest captain in Starfleet history; John F. Kennedy has become James T. Kirk. Both are at the heart of the action throughout, both are self-deprecating, and both always get the girl.²⁶

In film and television, romanticised images of Kennedy continue to blur the line between fact and fiction, further altering our appreciation of the Kennedy legacy. This

²⁴ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion*, 174 PLUS.

²⁵ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion*, 174, *Twilight Zone*, “Profile in Silver,” CBS, directed by John Hancock, written by J. Neil Schulman, September 12, 1986.

²⁶ William Shatner, *Star Trek Movie Memories: The Inside Story of the Classic Movies*, London: Harper Collins, 1994, 108.

effort to elevate the late president to mythical stature can be seen in murals, songs and in the effort to re-christen everything from Cape Canaveral to Idelwild Airport in honour of Kennedy in the aftermath of his assassination. Such efforts challenge the reality of history, creating ironies that continue to cause upset, most notably between the legacies of JFK and his successor, Lyndon Johnson. It may have been LBJ who passed the Civil Rights legislation of 1964 and 1965, but “pictures of Kennedy, not Johnson, grace the walls of many black families, and it is JFK who is recalled in Dick Horder’s song *Abraham, Martin and John* as one of the heroic liberators of black America.”²⁷ In the struggle between reality and romanticism, the latter has clearly triumphed in the historical remembrances of President Kennedy.

The Kennedy Legacy in Reality

The influence of the Kennedy legacy and its assorted imagery has certainly not been restricted to fictional candidates for high office. In an age when actors have become presidents, some politicians appear to be aspiring actors, as they seek to imitate and impersonate President Kennedy. A whole spectrum of candidates has attempted to gain office in the reflected glory of JFK, as Republicans and Democrats have manipulated their image to fit the Kennedy mould, or else have sought to redefine the Kennedy legacy to suit their own political ambitions.

Few have been as personally impacted by this as Robert Kennedy. From the moment of the assassination in Dallas until his own murder five years later, RFK became keeper of the Kennedy flame as well as a politician in his own right, an onerous responsibility that caused great conflicts for the former Attorney General. “As the heir apparent, he symbolised hope to those who yearned for the restoration of the Kennedy presidency.”²⁸ Despite his fears that his supporters were merely casting their vote for the absentee Kennedy, Robert Kennedy was not beyond reminding voters of his fallen brother; he opened his campaign for the presidency in the Senate Caucus room where JFK had announced his candidacy eight years before, wore his brother’s leather jacket and developed a similar speaking style as he sought to merge his brother’s imagery with his own. RFK “quoted him frequently...it was good politics to use the same staccato phrasing, the mass of statistics, the self-deprecating humour, the stabbing finger, and soaring idealism.”²⁹

Robert Kennedy’s appreciation of the power that his fallen brother still held over the country was apparent when discussing his advantage over his political rivals in 1968: Hubert Humphrey, Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson could be elected president, but “they can’t be President Kennedy.”³⁰ That RFK met the same fate as his brother only served to highlight the tragic appeal of the legacy and cast a darker shadow over those who would seek to follow in their footsteps.

If Robert Kennedy was in a unique position due to his family ties, then his nemesis, Lyndon Johnson, was equally challenged by having to follow in JFK’s wake, a challenge that would have been difficult under the best of circumstances and for which he was singularly ill equipped. Johnson was overshadowed by the Kennedy

²⁷ Brown, *JFK: History of an Image*, 24.

²⁸ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion*, 43.

²⁹ Theodore C. Sorensen, *The Kennedy Legacy*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969, 161

³⁰ J. Pilger, ‘Bobby’; ‘A Nobel Cause,’ in his *Heroes*, London: Pan Books, 1986, 126.

legacy from the first moment of his presidency; stylistically his image was wrong and to many, he personified an old style of politics that Kennedy had sought to challenge. Johnson's dilemma was compounded by uncertainty over whether he should embrace or reject a Kennedy legacy. Initially, he sought to invoke the fallen president as a means of asserting his own legitimacy and to aid passage of civil rights legislation. However, the mystique that was already emerging around the Kennedy family proved to be a double edged sword for Johnson, and his references to Kennedy's heavenly presence unwittingly positioned himself in JFK's shadow. A Johnson aide lamented, "I think President Kennedy will be regarded for many years as the Pericles of a Golden Age. He wasn't Pericles and the age wasn't golden, but that doesn't matter, it's caught hold."³¹ In seeking passage of legislation that would secure his place in history, Lyndon Johnson was as responsible as anyone for fostering this image; his statements alluded to Kennedy's greatness and the impact of his loss, while Johnson's lewd behaviour only highlighted the seeming grace and dignity of his predecessor. To observers in the media "LBJ seemed to represent a reversion to the past after cosmopolitanism and modernity of the Kennedy years."³²

White House correspondents were quick to note the change in tone as Johnson put his stamp on the executive mansion. Gone were the New England images of sailing, wayfarers and rocking chairs, replaced by horseback riding, Marlboros, barbecues and ten-gallon hats. As a result, a popular refrain developed; from Kennedy to Johnson – from culture to corn.³³ The sudden shift in tone and style did much to enhance the Kennedy legacy and diminish Johnson, even as he sought to emulate JFK in his own inimitable style, which backfired amid mutterings of poor taste and crassness. This was exemplified by Johnson's plans to travel through Dealy Plaza in Kennedy's limousine and his photo shoot for *GQ* magazine, dressed in an Ivy League suit rather than in Western style clothing. "When he imitated Kennedy he seemed forced and artificial, but when he revealed his more authentic qualities he inspired lament for a bygone era."³⁴ In an age when the most popular television show was *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Johnson was likened to the show's character Jed Clampett, a man suddenly thrust into a situation for which he lacked the proper refinement.³⁵

President Johnson acknowledged "those who look backward to the past will surely lose their future,"³⁶ but was unable to escape Kennedy's shadow. Accordingly he became the first in a growing list of politicians whose careers would be blighted by comparisons to the exceptional ideal that was the Kennedy presidency. Any such list would surely include Richard Nixon who spent his entire career in Kennedy's shadow. As early as 1946, the *Los Angeles Times* noted, "Kennedy was the Nixon that Nixon longed to be."³⁷ Nixon was only four years older than Kennedy, but he appeared to be from an earlier generation. Nixon had an older wife and children, who lacked the glamour that Jackie Kennedy exuded, he dressed conservatively and by

³¹ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion*, 49 PLUS.

³² Brown, *JFK: History of an Image*, 24.

³³ *U.S. News and World Report*, February 17, 1964, 60-63.

³⁴ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion*, 33.

³⁵ Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography*, New York: Putnam's, 1980, 342-346.

³⁶ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion*, 38.

³⁷ Wright, "Nixon," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6 1946, B2, quoted in Herbert S. Parmet, *Richard Nixon and his America*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1990, 117.

becoming Eisenhower's vice president, had aligned himself with an older generation. By choice and design Nixon can be regarded as the *anti-Kennedy*.

However, while Nixon disparaged Kennedy's emphasis on style, he sought to embody some of the same qualities that made his opponent so attractive. As a former naval officer and owner of a beachfront property, Nixon determined that he should benefit from *Kennedyesque* imagery invoking the ocean and with it youthful vitality. In a scene more reminiscent of Johnson than Kennedy, Nixon posed for reporters on a beach in San Clemente, California. While the Kennedys had frolicked in the surf, barefoot and striped to the waist, Nixon posed in leather shoes, a windcheater and suit trousers, looking stilted and ill at ease. Once more he continued to be the living embodiment of the anti-Kennedy, utterly failing in his efforts to replicate his fallen adversary.³⁸ Despite the references to 'the new Nixon' he continued to be haunted by Kennedy. His 1969 inaugural was referred to as "a hand-me-down speech from the New Frontier"³⁹ and his visit to Berlin would become only the first in a long line of presidential visits to that city that would be contrasted unfavourably to Kennedy's.⁴⁰

In the decades that have passed since his time in office, JFK has become accessible to politicians of all ages and ideologies; practically any candidate can find some element of Kennedy's legacy that could be interpreted to endorse his or her candidacy. On the 1980 campaign trail, Governor Reagan repeatedly drew on Kennedy's memory and cited Kennedy on 133 occasions during his first term.⁴¹ By 1984 Reagan had referenced Kennedy so often that Paul D. Erickson pronounced him, "a conservative reincarnation"⁴² of JFK. Those who protested Reagan's invocations failed to appreciate that the substance of Kennedy no longer existed, that his emotional appeal could now be drawn upon from both sides of the political spectrum. In the election of 1984, President Reagan, Senator Gary Hart, Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro each claimed to be the true embodiment of the Kennedy legacy, an indication of "how universal, if not empty, the Kennedy legacy had become...Like Lincoln and FDR, Kennedy had become an icon, deeply enmeshed in the American psyche. He had become part of the useable past, as accessible as apple pie or the American flag."⁴³

Twenty-five years after JFK's death, the Democrats nominated another son of Massachusetts, one that was happy, even eager to play the Kennedy card. Governor Michael Dukakis took the Kennedy image and ran with it all the way to electoral oblivion in November of 1988. The lengths that Dukakis went to in his effort to imitate the Kennedy style were remarkable and singularly unable to affect the

³⁸ Dan Rather and Gary Paul Gates, *The Palace Guard*, New York: Warner Books, 1974, 243-245.

³⁹ Gary Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self Made Man*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970, 368-9.

⁴⁰ Following Nixon's visit to Berlin in February 1969, presidential visits to the divided city were made by Jimmy Carter in July 1978, President Reagan in June 1982 and June 1987 and by President Clinton in July 1994, May 1998, June 2000, and President George W. Bush in May 2002. Senator Obama visited the city and addressed a crowd of 200,000 in July 2008.

⁴¹ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion*, 180, Paul D. Erickson, "The Once and Future President," *John F. Kennedy: The Promise Revisited*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1988, 313.

⁴² Paul D. Erickson, "The Once and Future President: John F. Kennedy in the Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan," Forth Annual Presidential Conference, John F. Kennedy: The Promise Revisited, March 30, 1985.

⁴³ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion*, 172, 215, Paul D. Erickson, "The Once and Future President," *John F. Kennedy: The Promise Revisited*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1988, 313-320, Michael Kimmelman, "Horror Unforgotten: The Politics of Memory," *New York Times*, March 11, 1994, B1.

outcome. Dukakis took to wearing clothing that was reminiscent of Kennedy and even selected Lloyd Bentsen of Texas as his running mate to replicate the Boston/Austin axis of 1960. But Dukakis failed to recognise the shifting political dynamics of the country and the fact that the south was now virtually un-winnable for any Democratic presidential candidate. Dukakis' use of Ted Kennedy to stump for him appeared to overshadow his own candidacy and both the crowds and the press recognised this for what it was. Dukakis was yet another politician who sought to imitate Kennedy's style while not recognising that times had changed. What was contemporary in 1960 was dated in 1988 and attempts to replicate a bygone age fell flat when attempted by someone who so singularly lacked Kennedy's panache and charm.

When Bill Clinton ran for the presidency in 1992 it was said that he reminded people of Kennedy, but questions were asked as to whether this referred to John or Ted? As details emerged of Clinton's nocturnal activities one wondered if being described as *Kennedyesque* was intended to flatter or to insult. Clinton put his 1963 meeting with JFK at the heart of his campaign imagery to convey the sentiment that a torch had quite literally been passed from one generation to another. This powerful concept struck a cord not only with the American people, but also with the Kennedy family, who chose to endorse the Clinton campaign in a fashion unheard of at that time. Clinton was happy to exploit JFK's memory as long as it served his campaign for the White House: On the campaign trail he was photographed with cigars, even though he was allergic to smoke. As his campaign progressed he adopted a speaking style that could be described as *Kennedyesque* and on the dawn of his inauguration, he visited the president's gravesite at Arlington, accompanied by JFK Jr. and Ted Kennedy. Once in office he restored the Resolute Desk to the Oval Office and sought to replicate Kennedy's mannerisms in his press conferences. Clinton's use of the myth may not have been an overriding factor in his victory, but it commanded occasional attention and reminded voters of a time of perceived greater promise.⁴⁴

Clinton's flaw, however, was ignorance of where to draw the line and as his presidency continued, he seemed to be content to become a surrogate Kennedy; he holidayed with the family in Martha's Vineyard and spoke at the rededication of the Kennedy Library, greeted warmly by Jackie Kennedy, in sharp contrast to her cool reception of Jimmy Carter at the initial dedication in 1979. Clinton arguably took the idea a step too far in July 1994 when he addressed a crowd in German while speaking at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Some argued he crossed a delicate line between reminding people of Kennedy and inviting unfavourable comparisons.⁴⁵ Clearly Clinton was no Jack Kennedy, but he was a politician who actively sought to exceed expectations of his birth and who openly championed America and its people to better themselves, an aspiration that would be overshadowed by events of the president's own making.

Despite the best efforts of Bill Clinton to embody the Kennedy legacy for a new generation, there would always be those who dreamed of a restoration of the Kennedy presidency. As long as John Fitzgerald Kennedy Jr. was alive Americans could cling to the not-impossible dream that they would awaken one morning to find JFK back in the White House. The president's son recognised the hold that he had over a portion

⁴⁴ See "Bill Clinton Interview," *Rolling Stone*, September 17, 1992, 55.

⁴⁵ See Joel Achenbach, "Jack and Bill Went Up The Hill," *Washington Post*, July 20, 1994, B21 and the political cartoon "Ich Bin Ein Beginner" by Cummuso in *Newsweek*, July 25, 1994.

of the population and at the launch of his magazine *George*, teased the collective media with the revelation “I hope eventually to end up as president...of a very successful publishing venture.”⁴⁶ When JFK Jr. died in 1999, few were aware that the increasingly unlikely dream of ‘JFK’ returning to the White House was still feasible, in the form of Senator John Forbes Kerry.

John Kerry’s background made Bill Clinton look like a country bumpkin who had simply enjoyed a lucky encounter with Kennedy. As a teenager Kerry had moved in the same circles as the president and colour photographs exist of them sailing together. Incredibly, however, these images were singularly under-utilised. Rather than highlighting his initials and experience with the president in the summer of 1963, Kerry instead emulated Al Gore’s approach to victory. Choosing to adopt a self-righteous approach and seeking intellectual independence rather than victory, Kerry lost the opportunity to emulate Clinton’s success and followed Gore to electoral disaster. When considering Kerry’s narrow margin of defeat in the crucial Ohio election, such symbolism may have made a difference. Images of Kennedy sailing off Hyannis Port became synonymous with his time in office. By the time Kerry ran for office his opponents successfully lampooned Kerry’s passion for water sports as being out of touch with mainstream values.

Due to the fluctuating fortunes of the Kennedy family, *Kennedyesque* has become a term that is both sought and avoided by politicians, and it is, interestingly, a term that has been applied to Democrats and Republicans alike. This continued in the 2008 presidential campaign season, which saw both eventual candidates seeking the Kennedy mantle. In March 2008, Senator Joe Lieberman highlighted John McCain’s *Kennedyesque* qualities, stating, “I find among the candidates running this year that the one, in my opinion, closest to...the John F. Kennedy legacy, is John S. McCain.”⁴⁷ Compounding this was the oblique literary reference made by Sarah Palin, who lamented, “Profiles in courage: They can be hard to come by these days. You know, so often we just find them in books. But next week when we nominate John McCain for president, we’re putting one on the ballot.”⁴⁸ This subtle reference to the title of Kennedy’s 1955 Pulitzer Prize winning book sought to reinforce McCain as a man of action and integrity, in keeping with the positive elements associated with being *Kennedyesque*.

The Republicans were always going to struggle to legitimately claim the Kennedy mantle. Not only was their candidate the oldest man to seek the office (in contrast to Kennedy, the youngest to win elected office), but his opponent, Senator Barack Obama, was described as being the ‘black Kennedy.’⁴⁹ This placed Obama in a fascinating position. He did not need to talk about Kennedy and he certainly did not have any past roots that harked back to Camelot. What he had was the president’s youthful vitality, dark haired wife and young family. The symbolism was simply there

⁴⁶ Christopher Anderson, *The Day John Died*, New York: William Morrow, 2000, 223.

⁴⁷ Senator Joe Lieberman in interview with George Stephanopoulos, *ABC This Week*, March 2008, available at <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/03/30/lieberman-likens-mccain-to-jfk/>

⁴⁸ Sarah Palin, *Introduction as VP Candidate*, Dayton Ohio, 29 August, 2008, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/29/AR2008082901882.html?nav=rss_politics

⁴⁹ Peter Hitchens, “The Black Kennedy: But does anyone know the real Barack Obama?” *Daily Mail*, February 2, 2008, available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-511901/The-Black-Kennedy-But-does-know-real-Barack-Obama.html>

and did not need to be dissected. Compounding this was the euphoric endorsement that Obama received from Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, the late president's sole surviving child. While the family had previously endorsed candidates, never before had they been so open in their support. Their snub of Hillary Clinton's campaign was particularly surprising, since the Clintons openly courted the Kennedys throughout the White House years and their support must have been seen as guaranteed.

Senator Obama's willingness to be swathed in the Kennedy aura contributed to a superficial campaign, focused upon the perpetuation of the candidate's image and personality. Not for the first time in presidential politics, serious discussions of issues and policy received short shrift as attention was focused on image and style. Stories appeared lauding the Obamas as the new Kennedys, while comparing Michelle Obama to Jackie Kennedy as a fashion icon for the new millennium. Fact threatened to give way to fantasy as Kennedy's former assistant, Ted Sorensen, moved to endorse the candidate in October 2007.⁵⁰ The fact that Obama went on to win the White House may well be an indication of America's sentimental longing to reincarnate the fallen leader of Camelot.

Kennedy as the Exceptional Ideal

In contrast to other presidents Kennedy was "like a Hemmingway hero," while Jackie came "from a milieu which is familiar to any reader of the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald."⁵¹ This was not therefore, a normal couple in a normal place in a normal time. They were instead, exceptional people in unique circumstances during a tumultuous time. The time period was so dynamic, the events that dominated were so dramatic and the personalities involved so vital, that in retrospect the years seem to stand out from history. For better or for worse, Kennedy introduced the modern political era, with its focus on appearance at the expense of policy, of "media-oriented, televisual, celebrity politics."⁵² Before him, candidates were conservative in appearance, mature in years and purposefully dour. After Kennedy, successful candidates needed to be attractive, youthful, athletic, charismatic and energetic; "shirt sleeves were rolled up, ties were loosened, hair was tousled."⁵³

Clearly sentiment plays a part in this, but *Kennedyesque* is about more than romanticism. "The Kennedy assassination has come to symbolise a rupture in the collective experience of the American people."⁵⁴ By an accident of history, the Kennedy years appear in hindsight to be a golden age that preceded a time dominated by Watergate, Vietnam, Monica and 9/11. Since Dallas, politicians have failed to capture the international imagination in the manner achieved by Kennedy. Despite the fact that no other president has looked or sounded like him, and history has, thus far, been unable to produce another such leader, Kennedy continues to be promoted as the quintessential American ideal. The pretence was not lost on President de Gaulle, who

⁵⁰ John McCormick, 'Ted Sorensen to join Obama in Iowa,' *The Chicago Tribune* October 2, 2007. Available at http://www.barackobama.com/media/2007/10/02/ted_sorensen_to_join_obama_in.php

⁵¹ William Manchester, *Portrait of a President*, London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1967, 75.

⁵² Rorabaugh, *Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties*, 1.

⁵³ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion* .8

⁵⁴ Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1988, 2.

noted at Kennedy's funeral, "This man was the country's mask, but this man Johnson is the country's real face."⁵⁵ It was not a compliment to the Texan, or the country.

Summation

Kennedy's time in office was an exceptional ideal; an era made all the more compelling by its abrupt conclusion, preventing delivery of its aspirations. The Arthurian concept of Camelot has long been associated with the era, which has given rise to claims of sentimentality and superficiality. While every culture needs heroes, perpetuating the Kennedy legend threatens to demean current politicians as they seek to emulate the unachievable. JFK is venerated to a degree that has proved to be detrimental for a successive generation of politicians. "If Kennedy had looked like William Howard Taft, with the personality of Herbert Hoover, his influence on the presidency might have been negligible."⁵⁶ Instead, his thousand days in office continues to cast a shadow over the White House and its occupants, as American politics continues to struggle to come to terms with Kennedy's assassination and its deeper meaning for the American experience.

It would be wrong to blame John F. Kennedy for the steady stream of imitators that have followed in his wake. Nor does it seem particularly instructive to berate those who have sought to emulate JFK, since they were simply following a winning formula. However, a key element of Kennedy's appeal was his originality. At no point did he seek to emulate a presidential predecessor. Quoting Pericles, Kennedy stressed on the eve of his presidency, "we do not imitate—for we are a model to others."⁵⁷ All who have followed in his wake have singularly failed to live up to JFK's own expectations as they have sought merely to emulate and impersonate to one degree or another. The very term, *Kennedyesque*, is therefore a contradiction, conveying a comparison with the past, while implying a lack of originality. As has been amply demonstrated by those who pursue the Kennedy mantle, none can succeed when they merely imitate and those who refuse to be liberated from the past risk being tarnished by it.

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⁵⁵ Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and his Times 1908-1960*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 7.

⁵⁶ Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion*, 95.

⁵⁷ John F. Kennedy, *The City Upon A Hill*, Address to the Massachusetts State Legislature, Boston, Massachusetts, January 9, 1961, reproduced in "Let the word go forth": *The speeches, statements and writings of John F. Kennedy 1947-1963*, Edited by Theodore C. Sorensen, New York: Delacorte Press, 1988, 58.

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