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# John F. Kennedy and the building of a myth: with History the Final Judge of our Deeds

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**Pierre Court**

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# John F. Kennedy and the Building of a Myth: With History the Final Judge of our Deeds

*“With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.”*

Pierre COURT

A Master's Thesis  
submitted in the partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree

*Master Arts – Lettres – Langues*  
*Mention : Langues, Littératures et Civilisation Etrangères et Régionales*  
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Université Jean Moulin Lyon III

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Under the supervision of Professor Steven Sarson



Excerpt taken from John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address. Speech given in Washington D.C., United States, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1961. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address>



*L'Amérique n'est ni un rêve, ni une réalité, c'est une hyperréalité. C'est une hyperréalité parce que c'est une utopie qui dès le début s'est vécue comme réalisée.<sup>1</sup>*

- Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique* (1986)

*It's best to keep America just like that, always in the background, a sort of picture post card which you look at in a weak moment. Like that, you imagine it's always there waiting for you, unchanged, unspoiled, a big patriotic open space with cows and sheep and tenderhearted men ready to bugger everything in sight, man, woman or beast. It doesn't exist, America. It's a name you give to an abstract idea...<sup>2</sup>*

- Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (1934)

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique*, Le livre de poche Biblio essais 4080 (Paris: Grasset, 1986), 32.  
“America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved.” Translated by Chris Turner.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (London: Grafton Books, 1990), 210.





I am particularly grateful for Professor Steven Sarson, for the time, devotion, and support he provided me with during this year.

To Ailsa, my first reader.



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## Introduction

Lawrence O'Brien, an American statesman appointed director of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's 1960 Presidential campaign, recalled JFK as having "an aura around him."<sup>3</sup> The astounding resonance of his aura and reputation brought not only scholars but also non-specialists to bear an infinity of judgement regarding the man, the President. Words used to qualify John F. Kennedy – both by his contemporaries and later generations – often revolve around the idea of picturing him as a multi-faceted man. Portrayed as witty, determined, and charismatic at times, egocentric, hypocritical and impulsive at others, "Jack" Kennedy never really left anyone indifferent. Abhorring or venerating JFK did not matter as much as simply having heard of him. If the name – or the brand one might say – "John F. Kennedy" still evokes a plethora of feelings among today's audiences, it is because his image managed to transcend time and successive epochs. He abruptly left us in the autumn of 1963, but his 'aura' never did.

Interestingly, when evoking JFK, Americans tend to have feelings for the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Some might remember him for what he did, the various projects he undertook and the numerous causes he fought for whether it be the New Frontier, the Peace Corps or Civil Rights, but most remember how times were under the Kennedy administration, how carefree, lively and prosperous most Americans were. In a 2013 survey conducted by the renowned polling agency Gallup, Kennedy was ranked as the most appreciated modern President<sup>4</sup> with 74% of the voters calling him an "astounding/above average" president, 19% an "average" president and only 3% a "below average/poor" president. Behind him came Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, respectively second and third.<sup>5</sup> Without any great surprise, President Nixon came last.<sup>6</sup> Kennedy also scored the highest when it came to the "on the job" rating. While in office, Kennedy scored an average public approval

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3 W. J. Rorabaugh, *Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 220.

4 In total, eleven American presidents were included in this poll, starting with President Eisenhower, and ending with President Obama.

5 Andrew Dugan and Frank Newport, 'Americans Rate JFK as Top Modern President', Gallup.com, 15 November 2013, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/165902/americans-rate-jfk-top-modern-president.aspx>.

6 Gallup Inc, 'Presidential Approval Ratings -- Donald Trump', Gallup.com, 16 November 2016, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/203198/presidential-approval-ratings-donald-trump.aspx>. Although as of 2021 – marking the end of President Trump's mandate – the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States overtook Richard Nixon as the most disapproved American president in modern history, with an average approval rating of 41% (2017-2021).

of 70%. Then came Eisenhower with 65% and George H.W. Bush with 61%. President Carter came last with 46%. To this day, Kennedy's performance still remains the highest approval percentage ever recorded in a Gallup poll for a serving US President; a true feat knowing his shortened presidency – having only lasted “A Thousand Days”<sup>7</sup> – ranks him as the 38<sup>th</sup> US President in terms of time spent in office.

If Nixon's Watergate scandal and mishandling of the Vietnam war and Carter's poor management of the 1973 oil crisis' economic aftermath would explain their poor ranking, how is it that Kennedy seems to be untouchable? It is all the more striking bearing in mind that his brief presidency was witness to several crises that would have damaged any other president's appeal and reputation: the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the failure to properly address the Civil Rights question early enough... Yet, John F. Kennedy is still revered in American contemporary politics. Not mentioning Kennedy during contemporary campaigns – whether candidates be Democrats or Republicans – would be a tremendous mistake. Invoking Kennedy acts as a standard for any American politician willing to emulate a sense of duty, patriotism, and determination among his or her people. Similar to Charles de Gaulle in France and Winston Churchill in the United Kingdom, the figure of John F. Kennedy acts as a unifying agent for an entire nation. Those three men's times in power are often embroidered by biographers and – on the whole – remain synonymous with greatness and spark. Overall, de Gaulle, Churchill and JFK all seem to be remembered for what their respective countries used to stand for. For countless fervent nostalgic voters, they embody an era long gone. As of 2021, it is all the more tempting to regard JFK's time in office and his legacy as the symbol of a “it was better back then” sort of slogan. The successive 2016 and 2020 Presidential elections have come across as some of the most divisive democratic manifestations in the country's recent history. As time passes, and as US politics becomes increasingly polarised, a certain longing for an embellished past American greatness is a success among baby-boomers – aged 10 to 20 during JFK's presidency. Interestingly – at the far end of the spectrum – JFK's popularity among younger generations reaches levels never attained before. In the same 2013 Gallup poll mentioned previously, JFK scores the highest among people aged 18 to 29 with 83% ranking him as an “outstanding/above average” president, and the lowest among people over 65 with “only” 67% ranking him as such.<sup>8</sup> How

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7 The « A Thousand Days » slogan came into popular culture after Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. published his eponymous JFK biography in 1965. The evocation of a thousand days is often used to illustrate the shortness and the uniqueness of JFK's time in office.

8 Dugan and Newport, ‘Americans Rate JFK as Top Modern President’.

does one explain the ongoing appeal for JFK? His popularity has paradoxically never been higher among generations who never lived under his presidency.

The enduring “Kennedy effect” is depicted as the heyday of post-1945 American politics and is being reinforced as time goes on. A moral consensus has emerged around the image of Kennedy throughout the last six decades. Being both loved and loveable, decades without Jack Kennedy have made his image shift from an *above average* president to a mythical entity, an icon – both an image, an *eikon*, and an object of uncritical devotion, a modern deity. JFK’s image is similar to the one of a younger brother who left too soon. More than anything, posterity, and what was said about John F. Kennedy rather than what he had done in his lifetime seem to have provoked that shift. As said in Theodore H. White’s groundbreaking work for presidential studies, *The Making of a President, 1960*: “History is always best written generations after the event, when cloud, fact and memory have all fused into what can be accepted as truth, whether it be so or not.”<sup>9</sup>

This combination of facts, feelings and memories is fertile ground for the building of myths which, by essence, cannot be entirely factual nor complete works of fiction. It is a mixture of both, whether it be true or not as rightly mentioned by White. Attempting to draw conclusions from JFK’s life and his presidency based solely on one of them is destined to fail. As a matter of fact, if JFK is still hailed as the best modern American President by the people, professionals – among them, scholars and journalists – would tend to disagree. As mentioned by Robert Dallek in his exhaustive JFK biography *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*:

In 1988, seventy-five historians and journalists described JFK as “the most overrated public figure in American history.” An October 2000 survey of seventy-eight scholars in history, politics, and law, which gave considerable weight to length of presidential service, ranked Kennedy number eighteen, at the bottom of the above-average category.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to this, multiple muckraking books have been published about JFK. Among them, Victor Lasky’s 1963 *J.F.K.: The Man and the Myth* remains a striking example of how journalists voiced their dissenting opinions on the idolatry and myth surrounding JFK. What rapidly became noticeable was the chasm between the opinions of the people and the ones shared by academics. While numerous discrediting books had been published on JFK’s

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<sup>9</sup> Theodore H White, *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York; Enfield: HarperPerennial ; Publishers Group UK [distributor, 2010), 172.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2003), 700.

private life, they did not influence the public in the way one might have expected. Robert Dallek explains: “The muckraking about Kennedy’s private life has had no significant impact on public admiration for his presidential record. Most Americans set his health problems, sexual escapades, and dealings with [Sam] Giancana down to unproven gossip that had no demonstrable effect on his official duties.”<sup>11</sup> The fact of the matter is, had Kennedy gone down as a poor president, his affairs and his personal weaknesses would have been outlined by the mob. Dallek seems to insist on the fact that “Kennedy’s personal magnetism has had more enduring appeal than allegations of deceitfulness and immoral behaviour.”<sup>12</sup> Victor Lasky’s book was the first of a long series about JFK. Even as of today, though most Americans are now aware of Jack Kennedy’s darker side, the general public does not hold him accountable for his mistakes and misbehaviours. Already popular in his lifetime, he became even more so after his passing, as Lawrence Freedman stated in *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam*:

While he lived, with the aid of Jacqueline, whom he had married in 1953, Kennedy’s life invited adjectives invoking charm, charisma, gaiety, vigor, glamour, and culture. After he died a picture emerged completely at odds with the renaissance man of legend: the happy family man who was a serial adulterer, the energetic man of action who was physically incapacitated, the refined intellectual whose language was coarse and whose favourite reading was spy novels. Over time a more intriguing personality was identified, shaped by a powerful father, a tough war, constant pain, and a fast political advance.<sup>13</sup>

Instead of turning the masses away from Kennedy, critical books drew them even closer towards him. This process was accelerated by JFK’s sudden and tragic death. Americans could not accept this sense of “lost future” provoked by his passing. Instead, whatever information they could obtain on their late leader would be deemed as a boon. Within a few years, multiple biographies were published. Among them, Theodore Sorensen’s 1965 *Kennedy* and Arthur Schlesinger’s 1965 *A Thousand Days* remain classics. Before the end of the twentieth century, hundreds of works had been written on JFK. Paradoxically, the more information was available, the more it tended to hide who JFK really was. The overload of resources and the rapidity with which they were first published following the President’s death, though initially attempting to unveil the Kennedy legacy, only managed to obscure it. This paradox manifests itself in the inability of the American people – though the long-time bearer and diffuser of the Kennedy myth – to really pinpoint the specific reasons as to why

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11 Dallek, 700–701.

12 Dallek, 701.

13 Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*, Paperback ed (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 3–4.

JFK became part, in a sense, of American mythology. Was it because of his apparent perfection, his service in WW2 or his publications? Usually mentioned are symbolical descriptions of what Kennedy represented; among them were the Promise of the 1960s, and the death of a martyr. This form of unconscious historical and cultural awareness is at the heart of myths. At most, the American people remember anecdotes about President Kennedy, wrongfully giving the impression of knowing the deepest intricacies of his personality. However, anecdotes – while part of history – inevitably form a façade and draw everyone away from the narrative, thus contributing to the establishment of a myth.

Paradoxically, myths similarly act as concepts fully ingrained in a nation's collective memory, and yet lack factual explanations as to why certain myths came into being. They are both pervasive and precarious. JFK himself had realised this when, on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1961, the day of his inauguration as 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, he declared that history be “the final judge of our deeds.”<sup>14</sup> If time and history prevail, it is then logical to witness elements having been taken out and others having been added in. In this regard, the JFK myth is the perfect example of an ongoing mythical figure that keeps being talked and written about, biography after biography, scholarly article after scholarly article, conference after conference, and yet remains unchanged in people's minds. Powers of myths usually remain inexplicable, but the causes that led to their formations are not always hidden.

At the crossroads between history, folkloric studies, philosophy and psychology, myths keep fascinating civilisations, generation after generation. In the case of ancient Greek and Christian myths for instance, it is common for them to be part of people's collective memory, even today. First spoken and then written for the most part, they constitute figurative and literal scriptures in their respective civilisations. They are cultural cornerstones as they have been ingrained in people's memories for so long, they give the impression of having been present forever, passed from generation to generation almost naturally. Everyone knows about Oedipus – whether it is through films, psychoanalytical theories, or the original Greek drama play – without having watched Pasolini's film, read Freud's works or Sophocles' magnum opus. In daily life, these myths remain testimonies to salient human traits; they enable civilisations to link past and present so as to form the future, thus developing a sort of archaeology of knowledge. As a result, myths work as a tool to prevent humans from being

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14 John F Kennedy, 'Inaugural Address | JFK Library', accessed 18 September 2020, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address>.



“uprooted”<sup>15</sup>. Paradoxically, though seemingly appearing esoteric and fabricated, myths also serve as cultural anchor, deeply rooted in human experience and practices. On top of this esoteric/material divide, myths are also entangled in a humanities/hard sciences binary opposition, as mentioned by Patricia R. Felkins and Irvin Goldman in their 1993 article “Political Myth as Subjective Narrative: Some Interpretations and Understandings of John F. Kennedy”:

The discussion and research related to defining myth and interpreting mythic experience are the subject of continuing debate. On one hand, the so-called objective sciences challenge myth as lacking in validity and truth, while humanistic studies celebrate myth as central to culture and self.<sup>16</sup>

For that matter, the Kennedy myth remains elusive. Its significance and development cannot be precisely and entirely quantified nor could they be the sole result of metaphorical and arcane interpretations. Furthermore, though most scholars, journalists, and regular Americans refer to it as being the “(John F.) Kennedy myth” – considering it to be merely the product of JFK, the man – it would be inherently reductive and uninteresting for the aura built around him stemmed from various places and fed itself – and in a sense still does – from diverse, and influential individuals, organisations, and events.

The first decade following Kennedy’s passing was marked by predominantly laudatory publications on the man and then only after came the more reproachful, divisive, and antagonistic works. The rest of the 1960s was marked by the assassination of both Martin Luther King and JFK’s younger brother and Presidential candidate, Robert F. Kennedy, deepening the country’s sorrow and extending the nation’s longing for racial equality and social stability, now appearing as unreachable. Rising discontent and distrust aimed at the elite manifested itself as the multiples crises and scandals were unleashed. The Battle of Hamburger Hill<sup>17</sup>, the Mỹ Lai Massacre<sup>18</sup> and the Vietnam War more generally reinforced that

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15 Patricia K. Felkins and Irvin Goldman, ‘Political Myth as Subjective Narrative: Some Interpretations and Understandings of John F. Kennedy’, *Political Psychology* 14, no. 3 (1993): 451, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3791707>.

16 Felkins and Goldman, 448.

17 To this day, the Battle of Hamburger Hill – which took place in May 1969 in South Vietnam – remains one of the most (in)famous battles in US military history. US Armed Forces’ objective was to capture a mount named “Hill 937”. Though of little strategic value, American forces led a frontal attack on the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in order to gain control of Hill 937. More than seventy American soldiers were killed in under a week. Outrage burst among American public opinion when Hill 937 was abandoned soon after, revealing the absurdity of the armed conflict in Vietnam.

18 Having taken place on 16th March 1968, this massacre involved the killing of three-hundred and forty-seven Vietnamese civilians by US Army infantrymen. This event, largely reported among American media, showing the atrocities of war, remains a major turning-point in shifting American public opinion from being pro-war or neutral to being anti-war.

sentiment. Finally, the Watergate scandal was the straw that broke the camel's back: Americans felt the need to look back on their past leaders with a more critical and distanced eye. Though some kept wearing blinkers, others – mostly scholars – started digging into JFK's past, thus revealing unglorified and unwanted – maybe repressed – views about JFK to the American public. Sixty years on, it becomes all the more interesting to study the figure of John F. Kennedy, as both “pro-JFK” and “anti-JFK” periods – as caricatural as they seem – are now over. Time has now come to study the Kennedy myth with an approach being as well-rounded and all-encompassing as possible.

Although grounds for Presidential studies – and the study of President Kennedy in particular – have never been better, a mystery remains as to why President Kennedy is still unconditionally – almost to an unsound level – revered by the American people. In effect, the Kennedy myth has always been a work in progress. It found its source among the Kennedy family, then expanded among close and regional political circles, national politics and then the world. The Kennedy figure as we know it did not emerge in one day and yet, in the eyes of the American public, President Kennedy entered American mythology the moment he was assassinated. The Kennedy myth paradoxically bears a profound dazzling origin combined with a long-term development, having a lasting impact in time. In fact, the myth surrounding Kennedy does not need to appear or to disappear, it is there. The myth takes on its mythical characteristics precisely when it stops being revered as such, when it is completely integrated in the individual's mind and in the nation's culture. Ideologies and myths are powerful and pervasive precisely because they are no longer experienced as such. Slavoj Žižek's following quote from his 2002 *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on 11 September and Related Dates* summarises this idea but in regard to the notion of freedom: “[W]e ‘feel free’ because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom.”<sup>19</sup> As a figure who is at once remembered as an open book and an integral part of American mythos, and yet simultaneously as an enigmatic, puzzling and intriguing figure, the former president remains a source of never-ending discussions. This paper will therefore examine the extent of John F. Kennedy's power as a mythical entity.

First and foremost, we shall see how John F. Kennedy was a product of his time and did not attain the Presidency nor enter American mythology in the blink of an eye. Kennedy's upbringing played an essential role in shaping the future President, endowing him with as

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19 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on 11 September and Related Dates* (London ; New York: Verso, 2002), 2.

many assets as drawbacks. As we shall see, the history of both the Kennedys and the Fitzgeralds as well as Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. – the patriarch – were of paramount importance in the formation of young Jack. Raised in a Catholic Irish American household, both his ethnic origins and his faith divided the American people, for Catholics' and Irish Americans' status remained synonymous with defiance and sectarianism to most Americans. Wealth and ambition constituted two major pillars at the Kennedys and though, as we will see, John faced criticism for being well-born, it enabled him to build a certain status and limited aura at first. Whether it was his general lack of experience in politics or his poor health, we shall see how although they presented themselves as liabilities for Kennedy – which they were – they served as warnings to a man who would need to shift from familial, local and regional recognition to a national and worldwide appreciation.

Similar to a coming-of-age story, Kennedy's growth rested on building an appealing image, both from a physical and intellectual point of view. His deeds in the Pacific during World War Two as a lieutenant and his prestigious university background paired with a few official written publications only managed to forge a more complete image of the young Jack Kennedy. Which educated writer and war veteran – in addition to being influential, good-looking, and rich – would decline a career in politics? Not John F. Kennedy. Starting his journey into politics necessarily meant becoming familiar with the media and developing his media image. We shall then focus on the 1960 Presidential campaign, and more specifically look at the persisting religious issues Kennedy encountered, as well as the televised debates against Nixon. The latter simultaneously formed a historical milestone in the history of both media and presidential campaigns, and considerably amplified Kennedy's public image.

Last but not least, we shall centre on Kennedy's thousand-day presidency, during which he not only became a memorable president, but a central character in the American mythos. From his position as guarantor of the free world to his assassination and the controversies around it by way of a sense of apparent perfection provided by his wife Jacqueline, Kennedy left an unprecedented mark in American history, becoming one with Americana. The mark of his assassination, most of all, never left America's collective memory: it was a realised myth.

# Chapter I: Kennedy's Milieu: Assets and Liabilities

## Section 1: The JFK Family

### *1 – From Ireland to America*

As mentioned in the introduction, believing JFK owes his reputation and his aura thanks only to his personal deeds would be false and reductive. Behind every historical figure can be found certain familial and sociological elements that either drew them closer or further from their goals. Although not being *tabula rasa* entirely shaped by society, people are heavily influenced by their surroundings; their upbringing giving abundant directions as to where their future generations should aim later in life. In the decades preceding Jack Kennedy's birth, social mobility in America had been at its highest in the country's history. With the rise of capitalism through the means of the industrial revolution, paired with the westward conquest and the goldrush, nineteenth-century America had become exponentially wealthier. A patriarch could turn over the financial situation of his family within the span of a few decades or even years, and each future generation could see a better life ahead than the one their elders had lived through. It was the time of the first oil and banking magnates. To this day, names such as J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller remain associated with this era.

Having become wealthier, America was also a land progressively becoming more and more appealing to immigrants of all nations in search of better prospects. If the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had witnessed large quantities of immigrants moving to America for religious reasons, the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a more pecuniary-based immigration system. After the mainly British, German, French, Swedish and Dutch waves of immigration from the seventeenth and eighteenth century came a period of relatively low immigration to the United States, especially from the end of the eighteenth century till the 1830s. Throughout the 1840s and the 1850s, it would be the turn of the Irish to emigrate *en masse* to America. After centuries of domination and religious persecutions perpetrated by the English and having progressively been deprived of their lands; the Irish, already in bad shape, suffered even more when a potato famine struck the isle, thus forcing them to leave their native land in search of better prospects. As detailed in André Kaspi's 2020 *John F. Kennedy*:

*une famille, un président, un mythe*, between 1847 and 1854, 1,200,000 Irish immigrants travelled to America, that being 45% of immigrants during that period.<sup>20</sup>

Among these immigrants could be found some of JFK's ancestors. Both of John F. Kennedy's great-grandfathers – the two men who laid the foundations for the Kennedy-Fitzgerald families – were the first generation to emigrate to America. One arrived in the late 1840s and the other in 1854.<sup>21</sup> Patrick Kennedy, who arrived in the late 1840s, had settled in East Boston, which was to become the unofficial American capital for Irish immigrants, and Massachusetts its state. The father of four made his living as a cooper, making wagon staves and whisky barrels. Jack's great-grandfather on his mother's side, Thomas Fitzgerald, had settled in Boston as well, in a North End Irish ghetto.<sup>22</sup> Thomas first "prospered as a street peddler of household wares and then in a grocery business, which doubled as a North End tavern in the evenings."<sup>23</sup> Thomas Fitzgerald also prospered family-wise since he had twelve children in total, nine of whom reached maturity, which was – as described by Robert Dallek – "an amazing survival rate in a time when infant mortality was a common event."<sup>24</sup> At first glance, mentioning these elements might seem superficial; yet they illuminate the importance of JFK's ancestors as well as their individuality. They were born Irish and would remain so. Whether it was by the number of children they had, typical of large Irish families, their forced departure in the wake of the Potato Famine, their family names, the fact that they married other Irish immigrants or by their respective occupations as tavern owner and cooper making whisky barrels, they remained quintessentially Irish. Although their lives seemed rich in emotion and experiences, their accounts seem to have been lost in time.

As a matter of fact, John F. Kennedy himself did not know much about his ancestors, nor did his future biographers. Robert Dallek goes as far to say that "the limits of Jack's knowledge about his Irish relatives was partly the result of his parents' upward mobility and their eagerness to replace their 'Irishness' with an American identity."<sup>25</sup> It is true that apart from a 1963 Presidential trip he made to Ireland, John F. Kennedy never created or maintained strong links with the country of his ancestors. The very idea of putting aside one's origins was meant to give young John Kennedy the best start in life, and not to be held back by his Irish heritage. Now, if Kennedy's parents sought to hide their Irish heritage in order to

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20 André Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy: une famille, un président, un mythe*, 2020, 44.

21 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 6.

22 Dallek, 6.

23 Dallek, 6–7.

24 Dallek, 6.

25 Dallek, 7.

have their children behave as “true Americans”, this process found its roots in Kennedy’s grandfathers rather than among his parents. Indeed, although remaining attached to their country of origin, they were the first generation which started to progressively become American. The Fitzgerald-Kennedy sense of family memory began with John’s grandfathers. As Robert Dallek explained: “What vivid sense of family history there was began with Jack’s two grandfathers – Patrick Joseph Kennedy and John F. Fitzgerald, both impressively successful men who achieved local fame and gave their children the wherewithal to enjoy comfortable lives.”<sup>26</sup> As Theodore Sorensen summarised it in his 1965 biography entitled *Kennedy*: “His two grandfathers, the sons of Irish immigrants, had both been prominent and successful politicians in their native Boston.”<sup>27</sup> Born in 1858, Patrick Joseph Kennedy first prospered as a saloon owner, buying his first establishment with the “money he had saved from his modest earnings”<sup>28</sup>, to then buy two others as time went on. He then saw the various opportunities the world of politics had to offer and rapidly established himself as one of the main Democratic leaders in Boston. As the son of an Irish immigrant in Massachusetts, not joining the Democratic Party was similar to shooting oneself in the foot.<sup>29</sup>

John F. Kennedy’s maternal grandfather, John F. Fitzgerald, born in 1863, had a greater influence on his grandson’s life than grandfather Kennedy and also benefited from a greater popularity in his native Boston than he did. Nicknamed “Honey Fitz” by Bostonians because of his warmth of character, his charm and his ability to speak well and convince anybody thanks to the sweetness of his words, grandfather Fitzgerald quickly climbed the rungs of the social ladder and became a prominent figure in his hometown.<sup>30</sup> Fitzgerald’s growing popularity mainly rested on his ability to have citizens feel close to him. As recalled by Robert Dallek, Honey Fitz – charming and impish – was said to be a natural born politician. Having perfected the “Irish switch” which consisted in chatting with one person while simultaneously shaking hands with a second one and gazing fondly at a third, John F. Fitzgerald ought to become a prominent local figure at least.<sup>31</sup> Progressively, Fitzgerald’s stock-in-trade became politics. As time went on, he won a seat in the Massachusetts State

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26 Dallek, 7.

27 Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 1st Harper Perennial Political Classics ed (New York: Harper Perennial Political Classics, 2009), 17.

28 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 8.

29 Interestingly, all subsequent Fitzgerald-Kennedy heirs who entered the world of politics were affiliated with the Democratic Party. As sons, grandsons and great-grandsons of Irish immigrants, the Democratic Party became for Irish Americans – as it did for most other ethnic minorities in America – a sort of refuge as well as a foil.

30 Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 45.

31 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 9.

House where he remained in office for three terms. Consistently voting in favour of unrestricted immigration and measures generally improving the lives of local people, he became an emblem of successful sons of immigrants and one of the popular figures of Boston.<sup>32</sup> But Fitzgerald's hobby horse was to become mayor of Boston. After stepping down from his position in Congress, he remained in the public sphere by becoming a rising publisher at a local newspaper, waiting for a propitious moment to run. Finally, in 1906, he was elected mayor of Boston.

According to French historian André Kaspi, the success JFK's grandfathers had found was due to the fact that they had managed to keep the best of both worlds. On the one hand, they took advantage of the American system, understood the concept now known as "American Dream" and gradually dominated their opponents. Unlike any nation on earth at the time, the United States was a land where everything was supposed to be for everybody, but reality said otherwise. On the other hand, they kept their Irish roots, flair, and know-how to create strong, reliable networks of associates and most of all, understood that politics was a promising sector in which to accumulate wealth, power, and build a reputation:

Participer activement aux activités paroissiales, donner aux œuvres de bienfaisance, être une puissance au milieu de ses coreligionnaires, ce sont des nécessités ou des devoirs que les Irlandais d'Amérique s'imposent. Mais ce qu'ils souhaitent, c'est grimper les barreaux de l'échelle sociale. Le meilleur moyen d'ascension, c'est la politique. Les Irlandais comprennent vite le fonctionnement du régime, les subtilités des campagnes électorales et les astuces indispensables pour « mettre en condition » les électeurs. Avec leurs talents d'organiseurs, leur goût des contacts personnels, ils s'adaptent fort bien et deviennent sans peine des leaders au niveau des quartiers, des villes et des Etats.<sup>33</sup>

If the Irish adapted quite rapidly to life in America, they also initially started from the bottom of society. To a certain extent, the Irish community itself experienced a certain mythical arrival and period of settlement in America. The lives of thousands of Irish families were in various ways similar to the hardships endured by ancient tragic heroes. From the horrendous situation they left behind in Ireland to the struggles they encountered in a

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32 Dallek, 10.

33 Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 47–48. "Actively taking part in parochial activities, donating money to charity and being a central figure among one's coreligionists were necessities and duties that Irish Americans felt compelled to do. But what they wanted was to climb the rungs of the social ladder. The best way to the top was through politics. The Irish rapidly understood its functioning, the subtleties of electoral campaigns and the vital tricks to be used in order to have the electors "ready to vote". With their talent for organising events and their taste for close connections, they easily adapted themselves to this new milieu and effortlessly became local, city and State leaders." Author's translation.

completely new country by way of the crossing itself, Irish Americans bore in their tumultuous history the marks of a certain mythical fate.

Overall, despite John F. Kennedy not being alive during those times, he surely inherited his community's and his family's sense for entrepreneurship – as well as astronomical sums of money – to subsequently help him build his own empire in twentieth-century Massachusetts and then America. As we can see, JFK's heritage speaks for itself and shows that despite being distant, it paradoxically played a role of paramount importance in his life. It is only when a family's history is distant that it can be used by the descendants as they think best. The lack of clear information is fertile ground for the building of extraordinary stories and legends. Furthermore, we can also witness the complexity revolving around the formation of myths; several generations culminated in the coming of one individual. One man in particular played a key role in JFK's life: Joseph P. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy's father.

## *2 – Paternal Figure, Wealth, and Ambition*



*Figure 1.* (From left to right) Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., and John F Kennedy arriving at Southampton, England. 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1938. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. PC 79. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/media-galleries/jfk-youth>



On a symbolical level, the photograph above [Figure 1.] perfectly exemplifies what being part of the Kennedy family represented. With their upswept hair, their distinctive hand positions, outfits, and their recognisable grins, the Kennedys – here JFK, his father Joseph Sr., and his elder brother Joseph Jr. – all bear an uncanny resemblance. To this day, few American families are as recognisable and evocative as the Kennedys. The four brothers themselves look identical, giving off a certain clannish image, even. Such an image necessarily gave off the feeling of a strict and demanding household. Large families behaving, dressing, and looking the same way undoubtedly implied the need to strive for conformity. In addition to being required in society at large, conformity was also expected within their household. As well as being almost identical physically, all men from the Kennedy dynasty – some, as André Kaspi and H el ene Harter noted in their 2018 work, might call it a “clan”<sup>34</sup> – were supposed to conform to the expectations of their patriarch: Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. To this day, the Kennedy paternal figure still remains one of the most central members of the Kennedy family. If the surname “Kennedy” is more often associated with JFK and RFK, the starting point of the modern Kennedys as we know them begins with the patriarch. As we will see, although often forgotten from generic discussion on the family, Joseph P. Kennedy played an essential role for his children to thrive and conquer America. Not only did he manage to shape his offspring in his own image, but he also succeeded in instilling some values and objectives that changed the course of the family forever. Knowing that – as the grandson of an Irish immigrant – he had poor chances of one day becoming President of the United States, he instead put his faith into his sons, transforming them into future spokesmen of the people and steering them towards politics so that, one day, one of them would become the most powerful man in the world. But to focus on his progeny first necessitates to take a look at Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. himself.

Raised in an already comfortable household, Joseph Patrick Kennedy nourished ambitions to become a wealthy, renowned man from a young age. Born in 1888, Joseph grew up at the same time oil, industry, and bank magnates reached new heights. If his parents and grandparents had benefited from the American dream; this time, Joseph would not only rise in society but become synonymous with the American dream itself. As rightly mentioned by Robert Dallek, the upper-middle class household Joe came from only helped him identify with men such as Carnegie, Rockefeller and Morgan; practically all of whom had come from

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34 Andr e Kaspi and H el ene Harter, *Les Pr sidents Am ricains: De George Washington   Donald Trump*, 2018, 145. « En un mot, John Kennedy est l’h ritier d’une dynastie – les plus m chants diront : d’un clan. » “To put it briefly, John Kennedy is the heir to a dynasty; the most critical ones will say a clan.” Author’s translation.

middle-class milieu before becoming the richest, most powerful and well-known men in the world. Following the prevailing doxa of his time, Joe rapidly adopted an extremely competitive mindset, the same mindset at the root of rampant capitalism.<sup>35</sup> Robert Dallek wrote:

Never mind that many were left behind in the rush to affluence: the social Darwinian code of the time, by which Joe was guided throughout his life, gave legitimacy to the view that the innately talented and virtuous succeeded while the less deserving made only modest gains or fell by the wayside.<sup>36</sup>

In his younger days, similar to all American children, one of Joe's objectives was to make money. However, when most of his friends would sell newspapers and do other menial tasks, Joe found a bolder but also more fruitful way to start a business. As Dallek recalled:

At the age of fifteen, he organized a neighbourhood baseball team, the Assumptions. As the team's business manager, coach, and first baseman, he bought uniforms, rented a ball field, scheduled the games, and collected enough money from spectators to make a profit. When some of his teammates complained that he was too domineering and that they had no say about anything, Joe made it clear he didn't care. There could be only one boss, and he would settle for nothing else.<sup>37</sup>

Being as competitive as he could be, Joseph's ambition did not stop with making money out of odd jobs. His aspirations were not only financial ones but also academic ones. He indeed later went to Harvard, where he graduated in 1912. He then "decided on a career in banking, the 'basic profession' on which all other businesses depended", as he liked to put it.<sup>38</sup> Joe Kennedy then progressively worked his way up the hierarchy and at the young age of twenty-five, became the president of Columbia; one of the youngest bank presidents in history. Getting into the world of banking only made him even more greedy. His long-term objective was now to become a millionaire by the age of thirty-five.<sup>39</sup> Joseph Kennedy's obsession was to ensure his future as well as the one of his sons. Not only did he want to maintain the financial situation the Kennedys were in, but he aimed to exponentially increase it. Such a mindset inevitably had a major influence on his ideological positions later in life: "He understood world problems not on moral or political grounds but rather on how he felt they might inhibit his entrepreneurial ventures and, worse, hurt his life or, later, that of his sons. These personal fears would make him a lifelong isolationist."<sup>40</sup> Being an isolationist

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35 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 15. Joseph's personal philosophy could be summed up with this sentence he once said to his sister: "If you can't be captain, don't play."

36 Dallek, 14.

37 Dallek, 15.

38 Dallek, 17.

39 Dallek, 18.

40 Dallek, 21.

willing to preserve his family circle, he also did so by keeping up with the tradition of building a large family. Similar to his parents and to his in-laws, Joseph and his wife Rose continued the Irish tradition of large households. Having nine children in total, Dallek recalls that it “distinguished them in an era when most upwardly mobile families had abandoned the tradition of having many children.”<sup>41</sup> Inevitably, for Joseph, building an empire also meant having enough heirs to ensure the legacy of the Kennedy dynasty. Gastón Espinosa perfectly summarised the situation Joseph Sr. was facing in his 2011 work entitled *Religion and the American Presidency: George Washington to George W. Bush*:

Joe, while refusing to abandon his Catholic roots, wanted desperately to live an American success story culminating in material power and wealth. [...] While Rose Kennedy cultivated a Catholic worldview in her children, especially her daughters, Joe nurtured the American dream of political power in his sons.<sup>42</sup>

Eventually, Joseph’s obsession with money would cause him to leave his position at the bank to accept a job as an assistant general manager of a shipbuilding plant.<sup>43</sup> Although he was earning fifteen thousand dollars a year, it was still not enough to become a millionaire by thirty-five as he had intended. Foreseeing that the best possibility to accumulate wealth would be in stock-markets, Joseph dedicated most of his time to trading stocks throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>44</sup> By the late 1930s, having become one of the richest men in America, Joseph would also be appointed as the American ambassador to Britain, “America’s most prestigious diplomatic post”.<sup>45</sup> If Joseph Sr. sought money, he also sought power. To him, succeeding was more synonymous with political power than simply owning large sums of money. These two years as ambassador to the United Kingdom – from 1938 to 1940 – would constitute the apex of his political and professional life. Like grandfather John “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald reached his peak decades before by becoming mayor of Boston, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. would reach his becoming ambassador to Britain prior to the Second World War. His greediness, perseverance and networks had finally paid off.

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41 Dallek, 22.

42 Gastón Espinosa, ed., *Religion and the American Presidency: George Washington to George W. Bush*, The Columbia Series on Religion and Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 287.

43 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 21.

44 Kaspí, *John F. Kennedy*, 55. « Tout pourrait s’écrouler avec la crise de 1929. Kennedy a senti pointer la catastrophe. Peu avant les terribles journées d’octobre, il a retiré ses fonds des spéculations dans lesquelles il s’était engagé. » “Everything could collapse with the 1929 stock market crash. Kennedy saw the coming disaster. Shortly before the terrible month of October, he pulled his money out of the speculations he had initially invested in.” Author’s translation

45 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 53.

However, Joseph was not satisfied. He was a patriarch who did not want his children to pursue their own dreams, but rather conform to and achieve their father's objective. Joe Kennedy did not simply want to influence his offspring, he wanted to live vicariously through them: "All too often, his understanding about their desires ... were fruits of *his* experience and *his* dreams, not necessarily theirs."<sup>46</sup> Knowing the presidency was out of his reach, he moved heaven and earth to make sure it would not be so for his children. And as in any influential patriarch of his time, and as it had been for centuries in Western civilisation, men – preferably the firstborn – were supposed to carry out the heavy burden of ensuring the clan's legacy and survival.

It was no surprise then, to witness Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. put his faith in his eldest and eponymous son Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Joseph Jr., born in 1915, two years prior to John, was the eldest Kennedy child. Joseph Sr. saw in his firstborn the perpetuation of a dynasty. John, on the other hand, rapidly realised that the rest of his life would be spent in the background. As new generations came along, both the Kennedys and the Fitzgeralds progressively put a more and more intense faith into their offspring. If some mythical individuals and families seem to present themselves as historical epiphanies, the building of the Kennedy myth, on the other hand, matured over various decades and several generations. It was not only the work of a lifetime, but of successive generations. Each elder considered his progeny to be predestined. Each new generation should live more fruitfully than the previous one because it had always been so; it was the "natural" way. Myths intrinsically rest on this idea of an ongoing process developing across time – being eternal, embodying an intemporal reality, as if they had always been present. But more than timelessness, they also seem to feed themselves from the idea of being outside the realm of time; in this case, atemporality. Furthermore, there is, in a sense, a certain Pygmalion effect to the way the myth formed around both John F. Kennedy and the rest of his family. Although reading about the Kennedys and the Fitzgeralds provides the audience with a factual and detailed account of their rise in society and to power in general, some elements still seem inexplicable to this day. One of the ways in which the two families have risen above the masses seems to reside in their constant ability to perpetuate the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy across generations. To this day, Honey Fitz's words on the birth of Joseph Jr. – the first of nine children – still resonate as prophetic and deeply foreshadowing of the family's future:

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46 Dallek, 36.

Despite Honey Fitz's disappointment at not having his grandson named after him, he expected the boy to have an extraordinary future: "He is going to be President of the United States," the ex-mayor told a reporter, "his mother and father have already decided he is going to Harvard, where he will play on the football and baseball teams and incidentally take all the scholastic honors. Then he's going to be a captain of industry until it's time for him to be president for two or three terms. Further than that has not been decided. He may act as mayor of Boston and governor of Massachusetts for a while on his way to the presidential chair."<sup>47</sup>

As (un)surprising as it may seem, Joseph Jr. actually studied government at Harvard and while attending one of the most prestigious universities in the world, also became one of the best players on the football team. In 1940, he also became a Massachusetts delegate to the Democratic National Convention and had planned to run for the Massachusetts 11<sup>th</sup> congressional district. Honey Fitz's clairvoyance on the "scholastic honors" also became true since, as noted in Robert Dallek's *An Unfinished Life*, Joe "won the school's coveted Harvard Trophy at his graduation in 1933, an award to the student who best combined scholarship and sportsmanship."<sup>48</sup> Both intelligent and physically able, his versatility enabled him to enlist in the US Navy in which he served from 1941 till 1944 and obtained the rank of lieutenant.

On 12<sup>th</sup> August 1944, the first major tragedy hit the Kennedy clan. Taking part in a night-time mission above Germany, Joe was killed in action after the explosives being carried on his plane detonated. Although a wave of desperation and mourning hit the Kennedy family, Joseph Sr. – almost similar to an ancient king or emperor and having seen his most promising son's dreams as well as his dreams being shattered into pieces – resolutely put his faith in his second son: John F. Kennedy. John was indeed his father's second choice: "Joe Jr., with a robust constitution a temperament much like his father's, and a readiness to follow his lead, was Joe's favorite."<sup>49</sup> Throughout his entire life, Joseph Jr. had been perfectly tailored for each project he – and his father – had undertaken over the years. Joseph Sr. could not have dreamt of a better son to pick up the torch. Joe Jr's life and prospects had suddenly ended; his younger brother would meet a similar fate almost twenty years later. The expected torchbearer was gone. But as for any caricatural representation of imperialistic, conquering, and omnipotent families, Joseph Sr. opted for the second oldest son as Espinosa recalls:

When Jack's older brother Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. died in combat, father Joe consciously plotted JFK's road map to the presidency. If Joe Kennedy Sr.

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47 Dallek, 20.

48 Dallek, 36.

49 Dallek, 36.

could not himself reach the White House, he wanted his son in the Oval Office. Soon after returning from the war, Jack began a career in politics.<sup>50</sup>

On paper, Jack was not able to live up to his father's dreams and to fill in the void left by his late brother. Both siblings maintained a relationship based on rivalry almost all their lives. Joe was the first born, the daring one on whom the entire future reputation of the Kennedy clan would rest, whereas Jack, the second-born, was to be the listener. In their youths, Joe was always described as being more charismatic, attractive, and successful. Joe was stronger than Jack and the latter's health problems did not help in any way. Both would often get into fights but, as Dallek noted: "Joe Jr., bigger and stronger than Jack, bullied him, fights between the two – often fierce wrestling matches – terrified younger brother Bobby and their sisters."<sup>51</sup> Joe was the leader when Jack was the follower. Jack's only objective was to surpass his sibling in everything he undertook. Both went to Harvard, like their father did. Although being tall, Jack remained extremely frail, but still decided to follow his brother's path by enrolling in the football team in college, like his brother. Dallek pointed out that

Joe Jr.'s success on the playing fields and in the classroom took its toll on Jack. A tall, skinny boy of fourteen, whom his classmates called Rat Face because of his thin, narrow visage, Jack was too slight to gain distinction in athletics, which he badly wanted.<sup>52</sup>

At Harvard, the *coup de grâce* was delivered when Joe won the previously mentioned Harvard Trophy for having combined sportsmanship and scholarship. When he won it, "it confirmed in Jack the feeling that he could never win the degree of approval of his parents."<sup>53</sup> Living in Joe's shadow slowly affected his self-confidence, thinking that no matter what he could achieve in life, he would never equal his late sibling. Living in the shadow of a deceased sibling is a fight lost in advance. The tragic character of Joe's passing, at the young age of twenty-nine while on mission to fight the Nazis in what was later deemed as "the last good war"<sup>54</sup> – only underlined the inability of John to equal his brother. John even told close and lifelong friend of the Kennedys, Kirk LeMoyne Billings, that "he believed he was as intelligent as his brother, and probably even as good an athlete, but he had little confidence that his family would ever see him as surpassing Joe Jr."<sup>55</sup>

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50 Espinosa, *Religion and the American Presidency*, 287–88.

51 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 28.

52 Dallek, 36.

53 Dallek, 36.

54 Bruce W. Nelan, '1939-1948 War: The Last Good War', *Time*, 9 March 1998,

<http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,987924,00.html>.

55 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 36.

In every aspect of his life, John did the same as Joe, but never as successfully. He imitated him but never seemed to equal him. Overall, John's life was far from being terrible, but living in the shadow of his brother seems to have provoked something in him, a sort of higher desire to remain ambitious and to succeed. Furthermore, having been through numerous hardships related to his mentally disabled sister, his father's constant infidelity, his health problems – issues among others that will later be addressed in this study – John quickly understood that having a privileged life did not mean it was perfect. Theodore Sorensen noted:

Under that seemingly fortunate and gay exterior lay an acute awareness of the most sobering kinds of tragedy. He lived with the memory of a much admired older brother killed in the war and the memory of a sister killed in a plane crash overseas. Add to this a history of illness, pain and injury since childhood, and the fact that another sister was confined to a home for the mentally retarded, and one understands his human sensitivity.<sup>56</sup>

Having simultaneously been – directly or not – pushed into the background by his peers and having been instilled with a strong ambitious mindset during his youth, John F. Kennedy never really stopped striving for a successful future. The Kennedy upbringing would leave him no choice anyway: “The overt message, especially from his father, was ‘second best will never do.’”<sup>57</sup>, thus inculcating in John's spirit this “must-win mentality”. As he was now the eldest son, he would automatically have to score first in every task he undertook. He would have to become President of the United States or nothing.

The fact of the matter was that John F. Kennedy studied the presidency. His accession to the highest office in the world would not appear as a revelation, as it did for Ronald Reagan for example, who, after having been a B movie actor in his youth, became president with a limited political background – although having been Governor of California for eight years – and had practically no clue of how to run the most powerful country in the world. If JFK studied the presidency, it is mainly because on top of having an extremely advantageous network, he and his family possessed two crucial resources: time and money. Having accumulated wealth for years in the world of banks and stocks and having built himself a certain notoriety and a network while ambassador to the United Kingdom, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. would make good use of them for John to be rapidly promoted among the highest spheres. In that sense, John F. Kennedy would become a “political politician”. He did not come from nowhere and his family seemed crucial in achieving more.

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<sup>56</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 36.

Although in appearance the Kennedys resembled a perfect “nuclear family” archetype, their wealth as well as the image of the patriarch was a double-edged sword. On the one hand it improved their image. On the other hand, it damaged their reputation. The featuring, in Robert Dallek’s *An Unfinished Life*, of one anecdote about the wealth of the Kennedys is telling:

In 1960, when *Time* journalist Hugh Sidney asked Jack, “What do you remember about the Great Depression,” he replied, “I have no first-hand knowledge of the depression. My family had one of the great fortunes of the world and it was worth more than ever then. We had bigger houses, more servants, we traveled more. About the only thing that I saw directly was when my father hired some extra gardeners just to give them a job so they could eat. I really did not learn about the depression until I read about it at Harvard.”<sup>58</sup>

Their wealth was so abundant that – as mentioned by Dallek – “Jack came to his maturity with an almost studied indifference to money. He never carried much, if any, cash. Why would someone so well-off need currency to pay for anything?”<sup>59</sup> The Kennedy offspring even publicly expressed a certain ostentatious self-indulgence. For instance, they would get off the boat at Hyannis Port pier – where the Kennedys had an estate – and wait for other people to pick up their clothes from the ground after they had dropped them.<sup>60</sup> If the children’s behaviour could provoke revulsion and dislike, the way they acted as a clan, as a unit, also left some completely awestruck. One of John’s closest childhood friends, Charles Spalding, who had been invited to spend weekends and holidays with the Kennedys, recalls:

“You watched these people go through their lives and just had a feeling that they existed outside the usual laws of nature; that there was no other group so handsome, so engaged. There was endless action ... endless talk ... endless competition, people drawing each other out and pushing each other to great lengths. It was as simple as this: the Kennedys had a feeling of being heightened and it rubbed off on the people who came in contact with them. They were a unit. I remember thinking to myself that there couldn’t be another group quite like this one.”<sup>61</sup>

Whether one liked them or not, one could not stay indifferent to the Kennedys as a whole, nor to the patriarch. In fact, Joseph Sr.’s image was improved thanks to his nine children:

And if Joe Kennedy were ever to become president, *Life* magazine said in 1938, his appealing children would have played a significant part. “His

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58 Dallek, 30–31.

59 Dallek, 31–32.

60 Dallek, 32.

61 Dallek, 31.



bouncing offspring make the most politically ingratiating family since Theodore Roosevelt's."<sup>62</sup>

While Joseph's reputation enjoyed a boost from his children, the opposite remained equivocal, especially for John, the new President-to-be. On the one hand, John's image benefited immensely from his father, and most specifically from his father's wealth, public image, and network. On the other hand, Joseph's reputation also preceded him and thus could easily harm John's in return. Although Joseph's goal was to see one of his sons become president, he could reveal himself to be a major flaw in JFK's ascension to the White House:

The most serious issue he faced, at least during his journey to the presidency, concerned not so much his own personality but that of his father. Joe Kennedy's darker side was well known and led to reluctance by many, especially on the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, to associate with his progeny. [...] Joe was an instinctive isolationist and had been castigated for his readiness to appease Hitler and his defeatist attitude toward Britain's prospects while he was in London.<sup>63</sup>

Paradoxically, Joseph simultaneously had the ability to make and unmake his son's entire career. He was both a liability and one reason of his success. The fact of the matter is, such discrepancy plays an essential role in the building of myths. Inevitably, a chasm between the various objectives before they have actually had the chance to be fulfilled contributes to the making of numerous intertwined possible outcomes, thus shaping a sort of mythical-like story in and of itself before it has even the chance of becoming an actual myth. This process happened several times in the life of John F. Kennedy. One of the most striking and memorable examples remains the question of Kennedy's faith and origins. Thanks to the power of the radio and the newspapers as well as to the rapid and sustained emergence of television, never before had a candidacy led by an Irish American Catholic been so controversial, and publicised. As mentioned above, the sharing of speculations regarding Kennedy's stance on Catholicism and Irishness in America during the 1960 Presidential campaign would thus end up obliging him to give his opinion in return. But in order to be able to address such issues in more detail later in this analysis, we first need to study John F. Kennedy, not as any American, but as an Irish American Catholic. This analysis will first consist of an account of the history of Irish American Catholics in America, the way they lived and the several steps that led to their integration. It shall then centre on John F. Kennedy's personal relationship with his origins and his faith. Finally, it shall look at the way John F. Kennedy used Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of "civil religion" – later theorised by

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62 Dallek, 26.

63 Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 4–5.

modern day American sociologist Robert N. Bellah – and the way in which the use of a theme dear to most Americans brought him one step closer to entering American mythology.

## Section 2: Catholicism and Irishness

### *1 – Irish American Catholics: A Brief Account*

Nowadays, it has generally been accepted that British America and later the United States were founded on three core pillars: slavery, freedom of commerce and freedom of religion. Although the first two – and especially the first one – remain quite overlooked by the public at large, the third one is generally considered to have played the most predominant role in the creation of the United States. In collective memory, it is also deemed to be the first one, religious freedom being hailed as the initial reason as to why settlers first emigrated to Northern America. History and dates say otherwise. While the first Puritans berthed the Mayflower in 1620, slaves were first brought to America in 1619 and even earlier than that, the Virginia Bay Company set foot in America as early as 1607.

Despite having come last, the religious motif is still significantly important in American consciousness and slavery and freedom of commerce are generally overlooked. Remembering one's ancestors for having fled religious persecutions and the "barbaric" continent that was Europe inevitably appears as a more noble goal in one's memory than shipping and enslaving Africans or practising commercial wars. As mentioned by André Kaspi in his 2006 work *La civilisation américaine*: « L'Amérique s'est bâtie en tant que Terre promise. »<sup>64</sup> The myth further solidified when English Puritan John Winthrop gave his famous "City Upon a Hill Speech" before embarking on the *Arbella* with his crew and crossing the Atlantic to settle in Boston. His objective was to make of this yet unsettled colony, a "model of Christianity" because, he said, "the eyes of all people are upon us". This God-given mission would constitute the heart of the American myth of discovery. With it came the idea of America as a *vacuum domicilium*, a land supposedly deprived of any owners. Settlers considered this land did not belong to Native Americans because it remained uncharted. As explained by Kaspi, their vision of property rested on exploiting one's land in order to prove it was not abandoned: « La présence d'Indiens, impies, légitime de même la conquête de l'espace par les chrétiens britanniques, selon la théorie du *vacuum domicilium*, qui veut que la terre doit être cultivée par l'homme et son labour concourir ainsi à l'exaltation de l'œuvre

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64 André Kaspi, *La civilisation américaine* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2006), 228. "America first built itself as a Promised land." Author's translation.

divine.»<sup>65</sup> According to their definition, Native Americans were in fact not Americans. If settlers seemed to know what Americans were not, did they know what they actually were?

More than one hundred and fifty-years after the first English and later British settlements, Franco-American writer J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur asked himself a question that never really left the mind of American consciousness: what is an American? In his famous 1782 work *Letters from an American Farmer*, he asks:

What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations.<sup>66</sup>

The first immigration waves to America were mainly constituted of British, German, French and Dutch people. Supposedly and according to Crèvecoeur, an American is all of these combined. He is the embodiment of all nations coming into one to form America; he is at the heart of the “melting pot”. But if Crèvecoeur’s theory of all cultures merging into one in harmony seems plausible, practice and decades of American history give a more contrasted view of this issue. J. Joseph Huthmacher argues in his 1977 *A Nation of Newcomers: Ethnic Minorities in American History*:

In short, the identification of a minority group is a relative matter – relative to time, place, and circumstance. But because America is such a large country, and one which has been settled by peoples of many different origins and backgrounds, she has always had minorities and minority problems.<sup>67</sup>

In the end, different races and cultures did not merge into one utopian community as expected. Instead, Americans were subdivided into various ethnic, social, and religious groups. It was the nature of America to be an assemblage, a mosaic of people. Nevertheless, being predominantly populated by White Anglo-Saxon Protestants – WASPs – America also witnessed other ethnic groups being relegated to the background. This became overt as immigrants from the nineteenth and twentieth century arrived in the United States. The

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65 Kaspi, 229. “The presence of impious Indians automatically legitimises the conquest of land by British Christians, and this according to the *vacuum domicilium* theory which implies that to be owned, land must be cultivated by man and his toil to contribute to the exaltation of the divine.” Author’s translation.

66 J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, ‘Letters from an American Farmer, Describing Certain Provincial Situations, Manners, and Customs, and Conveying Some Idea of the State of the People of North America. Written to a Friend in England by J. Hector St. John, a Farmer in Pennsylvania.’, 1782, 45, <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/gdc/lhbtdn/00543/00543.pdf>.

67 J. Joseph Huthmacher, *A Nation of Newcomers: Ethnic Minorities in American History* (New York: Dell, 1977), 9.

discrepancy between them and “pure breed” – often descendants of English settlers – Americans seemed wider. Among them, Irish Catholics, as mentioned in section one, had a hard time finding their place in America: Irish immigration was indeed based on a set of hardships. From the horrendous situation they had left in Ireland to the crossing itself, Irish immigrants were already prepared for the various struggles they would find in America. The first hurdle, Huthmacher explained, was a linguistic one:

It should be remembered, too, that many of them at first spoke only Gaelic and knew no English. [...] Penniless and stranded, most of them found it impossible to purchase farms and thus disperse themselves across the countryside. Instead, they congregated in the cities.<sup>68</sup>

If Irish immigrants had work and the same rights as other Americans officially, in reality they were heavily discriminated against – as shown by André Kaspi – mainly for their religion and the sole fact of being Irish:

Du travail, des droits égaux à ceux des autres citoyens du pays, oui. Les Irlandais ont obtenu cela dès qu'ils sont descendus du navire qui les a transportés dans le Nouveau Monde. Mais si la conscience de classe est fort diffuse dans les Etats-Unis du XIXème siècle, il reste, vivace et puissante, la conscience ethnique.<sup>69</sup>

Rapidly, the Irish became victims of xenophobia. Discriminatory acts were perpetrated by Americans of old stock against Irish Americans for their ethnicity and their Catholic faith. Generally, the Irish were deemed as suspicious by the rest of the population. In *Les Américains*, Kaspi wrote: « Les Américains de vieille souche se méfient des Américains d'origine irlandaise, quand ils ne les méprisent pas. Dans un pays à majorité protestante, les catholiques sont fort mal vus. »<sup>70</sup>

Throughout the years, Irish Americans would progressively merge within the broader American culture. Irish Americans started mingling with other categories of the population. As mentioned in section one, they managed to climb the rungs of the social ladder thanks to their creativity, their adaptability, and their innate sense of networks. Inevitably, searching for the American dream and better prospects also meant turning away from one's heritage. This is one of the reasons why, the richer and the more integrated Irish Americans became, the more

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68 Huthmacher, 16.

69 Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 46–47. “Yes, the Irish had work and the same rights as other citizens did. The Irish got hold of these as soon as they disembarked from the ships that brought them to the New World. Although class consciousness is widely diffuse in nineteenth century America, ethnic consciousness remains enduring and powerful.” Author's translation.

70 André Kaspi, *Les Américains*. 2, 2, (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2008), 436. “When they do not despise them, Americans of old stock are at least wary of Irish Americans. In a predominantly Protestant country, Catholics are poorly regarded.” Author's translation.

American they felt and thus the less Irish they considered themselves to be. In order to succeed in the United States, it is easier to become American. But can Americanness and “being American” truly be defined? What makes America has always been and still is embodied by its astounding multiplicity of ethnicities, faiths, political views and yet, Americanness as we know it seems to be about rejecting a part of oneself. Becoming American is mostly about leaving behind a core segment of one’s identity for something that will paradoxically never fill the void since American identity is everything and nothing combined. Americans *de facto* appear as incomplete and yet fully complete. The Kennedys were the living incarnation of this dichotomy. Across several decades, the Kennedys – at times deliberately, and other times not – became more and more American and less and less Irish. The first two generations were quintessentially Irish while the third – mostly under Joseph Sr.’s impulse – Americanised itself. Although Joseph P. Kennedy quickly became one of the most important men in America, he nonetheless remained Irish. His nomination as US ambassador to Britain – although symbolising the peak of his career and metaphorically making him American enough in the eyes of the US government – only contributed to him being reminded of his origins: “By choosing a self-made Irish American as his envoy, Roosevelt assumed that he would not become a captive of England’s conservative government and its appeasement policy toward Hitler’s Germany.”<sup>71</sup>

Throughout his political but also personal life, Joseph Sr. knew too well that having Irish heritage in America would constitute too much of a disadvantage for his offspring, especially since he believed his children’s future should be synonymous with grandeur and success. In order to do so, he deliberately educated his sons so that they would be as American as possible. John’s limited knowledge of his ancestors’ lives remains a flagrant case of “Americanisation” of the Kennedys. If Joseph Sr.’s Irishness really remained part of his public image, his son’s faded away. Nevertheless, John still grew up in a Christian household, and more specifically a Catholic one. If the only thing that testified to John’s ethnicity and origins was his surname, his faith, however, remained a central theme in his existence, from his youth till he was elected President. Throughout his life, JFK managed to juggle the various significations and implications of his Catholic faith, at times making him more appealing to the public because his unique positioning would make him an advocate for freedom of speech and at others his faith would draw criticism from his opponents – mostly Protestants – seeing in him the envoy of the Pope in the United States and not the defender of American

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<sup>71</sup> Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 53.

constitutional values. All in all, John F. Kennedy's faith, while symbolising one of the only remnants from his family heritage, paradoxically made him even more American, thus positioning him at a crossroads. JFK's mythical aura was only emphasised by his ability to simultaneously maintain tradition while being able to build a new momentum through religion.

## ***2 – JFK and Religion***

Religion becomes all the more fascinating when a particular faith does not constitute a state religion. When enforced – or at least promoted by a state, religion becomes normalised and thus commonplace. There are only as many religions as there are believers. Furthermore, since the said belief comes from a personal choice and not a state-implemented policy, faith appears as sounder and considered. Although being home to more than one thousand three hundred religions, as mentioned by American historian Eric Foner in his 2000 work *The Story of American Freedom*<sup>72</sup>, the United States – one of the most religious countries in the world – is deeply keen on not monitoring faith and freedom of expression from a legal point of view. In America, every single citizen is entitled to his or her own personal approach to religion and freedom of speech: both are complete. Monitoring, however, is visible within the framework of the community. In effect, America has always been and remains an extremely tribal country in the literal sense. The community – and not the state – holds the final judgement over what is moral and appropriate and what is not. This inherently American cultural specificity thus gives way to countless possible ways of approaching life in general as well as relationships between different creeds. This process becomes all the more interesting when these relations and inner mechanisms are brought into the public sphere. Public space in America naturally gives rise to ideological confrontations that can make or unmake a man, a movement, or an ideology.

Being part of a religious minority himself, John F. Kennedy was well aware that one's religion – although his was in no way discriminated against by the federal government – could work as a marvellous asset as much as a drawback in the eyes of other Americans and other "tribes". Born and raised in Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy was surrounded by Irish Roman Catholics from when he was born. The Kennedys – as all good Irish Americans would have

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<sup>72</sup> Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (London: Papermac, 2000), 28.

been at that time – were Roman Catholics. For the Kennedys, religion did not constitute a mere set of beliefs nor a superstitious trend, but a way of life. Following the ancient tradition perpetrated by Irish people and then Irish Americans, both the Kennedys and the Fitzgeralds were Catholic. If the Fitzgeralds – through Honey Fitz – had a substantial influence on JFK’s interest in politics and public affairs, his mother’s side also played a significant role in his approach to religion.

Of his parents, his mother Rose – born Fitzgerald – was undoubtedly the more devout of the two. Dallek wrote: “Young Jack regularly took morning walks with Rose and one or two of his siblings to the local shopping area, the five-and-ten, and the parish church, which Rose explained was not only for Sunday or special holidays but part of a good Catholic’s life daily life.”<sup>73</sup> Having been enrolled in Boston’s Convent of the Sacred Heart, an elite Catholic school, Rose received “instruction in deportment and feminine virtues promising to make her a model wife and mother.”<sup>74</sup> As a matter of fact, Rose’s life followed this trajectory since she never practiced a professional activity. When most Americans went to work every day, Rose went to church. Her occupation centred around remaining a lifelong mother devoted to her nine children, teaching them the proper way to behave in society, mostly through the use of religious principles and rigorous education. At the Kennedys, religion was synonymous with moral rectitude and integrity. To be a good man and a good Kennedy, one had to be a good Catholic first. Being embedded in the “lace curtain” Irish community in Boston – a label attributed to well-off Irish Catholics, opposed to “shanty curtain” Irish Catholics being the poorest ones – Rose Fitzgerald knew the importance of social standing and good manners. Through a combination of care and discipline, Rose’s objective was to have her offspring be as devout and as clear-headed about their faith as possible, for them to become model figures in society. As written in Dallek’s biography of JFK:

“[She] organized and supervised the large family with the institutional efficiency she had learned from the Ursuline nuns of Sacred Heart Academy. She insisted on strict adherence to domestic routines and an idealistic dedication to the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.” Lem Billings remembered her as “a tough, constant, minute disciplinarian with a fetish for neatness and order and decorum.”<sup>75</sup>

This constant pressure to keep up with decorum and good manners created tension at home between Jack and his mother. If anything, this state of tension was not the product of a careless mother but the one of an over-committed and extremely demanding matriarch, to the

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73 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 27.

74 Dallek, 13.

75 Dallek, 70.



point where she would consider it a profession.<sup>76</sup> This situation would weigh upon Jack who, in private, would complain about his mother, saying she was “terribly religious” and “a little removed”.<sup>77</sup> In private, Jack also complained of the fact that his mother never told him she loved him. On this issue, Jacqueline Kennedy – John’s future wife – would later tell American journalist Theodore H. White that “His mother really didn’t love him” and that “History made him what he was.”<sup>78</sup> Overall, the relationship John had with religion showed some sort of intermediate position in terms of the intensity of his devotion. Jack showed enough to be deemed as religious – a thing generally seen as positive to most Americans – but not too much either so he would not be targeted for being ideologically cloistered. This middle-ground position, as recalled by his lifelong friend LeMoyne Billing in Gastón Espinosa’s work, enabled John to remain deeply embedded within the family’s tradition while keeping his own sense of individuality, a vital combination in forming mythical figures:

“I don’t think he was a dedicated Catholic like his mother and his sisters, but he was a good Catholic.” In Billing’s view, Kennedy showed private devotion and surrounded himself in the church’s sacramental life: “I cannot remember in my life when Jack Kennedy didn’t go to Church on Sunday.... I never, never, never remember in my life Jack’s missing his prayers at night on his knees. He always went to confession when he was supposed to. But I know he just wasn’t as tied up with religion as the girls and his family were.” After a Harvard friend challenged Kennedy to explain why he bothered to attend mass on a holy day, he “got this odd, hard look on his face” prior to saying, “This is one of the things I do for my father. The rest I do for myself.”<sup>79</sup>

Although not being the most fervent believer in the family, John surely had an extremely peculiar encounter with religion very early on in his life. As Espinosa noted, John F. Kennedy’s first encounter with religion was all the more distinct:

Most Catholics enter the church community through baptism prior to choosing it for themselves. Yet young Jack contracted yellow fever at the tender age of two, the Kennedy family asked a priest to bless and anoint their son, who appeared near death. Jack thus shared some of the most intimate and emotional portions of his early life with Catholic symbols and priests.<sup>80</sup>

Jack being given the last rites helped to consolidate his aura. His very young age at the time helped shape a unique relationship between Jack and religion. He embodied innocence and religion appeared as his saviour, as if, from then on, he would always need faith, and faith would always need him. Whether or not the actual blessing was useful in Jack’s recovery; this

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76 Dallek, 71.

77 Dallek, 70.

78 Dallek, 70.

79 Espinosa, *Religion and the American Presidency*, 286.

80 Espinosa, 284.

event held a powerful symbolical significance as it could be interpreted as a form of resurrection, a parable for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ to a certain extent. Over the course of his life, John was given the last rites three times, and three times he survived. From a religious perspective, being anointed so often in just over forty years cannot derive from a series of coincidences. He appeared as being undoubtedly endowed with some god-like abilities or at the very least, was under the protection of godly actions. Such events become even more significant when one knows that in those days, the last rites were only ever given to individuals on the brink of death. John's health problems, which will be discussed in more detail later, contributed immensely to a certain mythical presence around John. Overcoming poor health helped present the image of a tenacious and robust man. Although caricatural, this idea that the strongest individual is the one who managed to get back up after falling rather than the one who never fell in the first place is verifiable with John.

Not only did these dramatic events turn into a boon for the Kennedys, but they also reinforced their faith. Their religious beliefs grew stronger as John encountered new medical hardships later in life. Overall, it shaped their religiosity in a way that they attached importance to religion in times of crisis. As mentioned by Espinosa: "Joseph Kennedy, Jack's father, encouraged both his son's nominal Catholicism and independence from theological restraints. Similar to his wife, Joe relied on religious faith in times of crisis."<sup>81</sup>

Although Rose and Joseph both relied on religion in dire straits, they did not come to the same conclusions regarding religion as a concept. Rose would not seek anything more through her faith. Joseph, however, saw the potential religion could have in the building of one's image. Less demanding with himself and with others on religious matters, he saw religion more as a tool than anything else. When Jack was given extreme unction for contracting yellow fever, Joseph prayed and

[P]romised God that he would donate 50 percent of his wealth to charity if his son survived. Upon Jack's recovery, Joe wrote a \$3,750 check for a Catholic organization. While this figure may not have accurately represented half of this precocious young banker's substantial cash reserves, Joe made the gesture to honor his pledge.<sup>82</sup>

Donating to charity using the religious cause was also a way for him to be seen as an altruistic individual. He was simultaneously being philanthropic, humane – two religious principles – and improving his own image. But beyond appearances, Joseph was far from being a model of Christianity, notably because of his multiple sexual affairs and accusations

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81 Espinosa, 286.

82 Espinosa, 286.

of anti-Semitism.<sup>83</sup> If Joseph's religious ethics were fickle when it came to sexual affairs, he also showed a certain inconsistency when it came to the world of business. Having thrived in banking and trade, Joseph knew the importance of building one's network. In the world of banks and trade companies, religious, ethnic, and social divisions are often put aside in an attempt to build one's career. In choosing to cooperate with non-Irish Americans and non-Catholics, Joseph wanted to maximise his chances of building an efficient network for himself, but also for his son John. As mentioned by Espinosa: "Joe's choice of compromising with non-Catholic elites rather than showing tribal ethnic and religious loyalty to [1928 Democratic presidential nominee Alfred E.] Smith provided Jack with access to policy makers at home and abroad."<sup>84</sup> Unlike his father and his father-in-law who appealed directly to Irish American and Catholic audiences to build their respective networks, Joseph did not hesitate to turn away from Irish Catholic tribalism in order to secure his, but also his family's opportunities. Knowing he would want John to become President, building a solid yet varied network was key. John would need to befriend influential people as ideologically diverse as possible, so as to have them in his pocket. To put it simply, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. would constitute the pivotal generation in the Kennedy's rise to the highest spheres.

In order to become President of the United States, one must be able to juggle several tasks at once. If each candidate belonged to a specific ethnic, religious and social background; their primary objective in running for the Presidency was to – literally and figuratively – appeal to the majority of the people, to be as inclusive and likeable as possible in order for voters to be able to see themselves in their candidate. In order for JFK to even think about winning the presidency, he would first need to surround himself with several ideologically different people, to break the inner-Irish Catholic tradition and create his own identity. Reaching out to other communities was not a common practice among Irish Americans. Togetherness remained the norm and with it came a certain sense of isolation. If Irish American Catholics slowly but surely rose politically and economically at local and regional levels, a glass ceiling systematically prevented them of reaching for the White House. Irishness and most specifically Catholicism remained a major handicap in being nominated to the federal government or even in becoming President. Although being both white and Christians – the two most common demographics in the United States – Irish Americans were unable to rise to federal level governance. In this respect, John F. Kennedy appeared

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83 Espinosa, 286. "The New York Times columnist and Kennedy family friend Arthur Krock portrayed Joe as "amoral," adding "I think only a Roman Catholic could possibly describe how you could be amoral and still religious."

84 Espinosa, 287.

American enough to run for the House of Representatives and the Senate but not enough to become President.

During his political debut in 1947 as Member of the House of Representatives from Massachusetts' 11<sup>th</sup> district<sup>85</sup> – where his late brother, Joseph Jr, had initially planned on running – John F. Kennedy faced various criticisms for his religious affiliations. Being a Catholic representing a heavily Catholic district, he witnessed a surge in discriminatory remarks on the part of his opponents, accusing him of directly helping parochial schools. John F. Kennedy obviously did not approve of these *ad hominem* attacks but would always answer appropriately, as mentioned in Robert Dallek's biography of JFK:

The anti-Catholic bias on the issue angered and frustrated him. In 1947, a representative of the Freemasons testifying at a subcommittee hearing on educational aid sounded familiar clichés about Catholic loyalty to Church over country. “Now you don't mean the Catholics in America are legal subjects of the Pope?” Kennedy sharply asked the witness. “I am not a legal subject of the Pope.” When the man cited canon law overriding all secular rules, Kennedy replied, “There is an old saying in Boston that we get our religion from Rome and our politics from home.”<sup>86</sup>

John F. Kennedy, like most American Catholics, thought “legislation forbidding any aid to religious schools was discriminatory and un-constitutional.”<sup>87</sup> In that sense, Kennedy was on the same wavelength as the Supreme Court which “had ruled in a 1947 New Jersey case, *Everson v. Board of Education*, that public monies could be used to reimburse private-school students for bus transportation.”<sup>88</sup> Although the Supreme Court had ruled this very specific case in his favour, Kennedy knew the people's general opinion differed sharply.

In order to solve this problem, JFK's objective was clear. It consisted in slowly but surely climbing the political hierarchy so that he would build a solid regional base, acting as the starting point for bigger projects. To do so, he would need to do better than his grandfathers. Already being a Member of the House of Representatives, he would now need to win a seat as Senator. Naturally, JFK ran in Massachusetts – his home state – and won the

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85 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 122. In fact, although this district was technically unavailable for Jack, Joseph Sr. – through money and influence – managed to lay hands on this historical district: “But Joe and Jack preferred a congressional campaign that could send Jack to Washington, where he could have national visibility. There was one problem, however: Which district? To this end, Joe secretly persuaded James Michael Curley to leave his Eleventh Congressional District seat for another run as Boston's mayor. A fraud conviction and additional legal actions had put Curley in substantial debt, and he welcomed Joe's hush-hush proposal to help him pay off what he owed and to finance his mayoral campaign.”

86 Dallek, 146.

87 Dallek, 146.

88 Dallek, 146–47.

election in 1952. With his election as Senator, Kennedy had sent a message of hope to all ethnic minorities in America. If his religion still prevented him from accessing the White House, his ethnicity no longer appeared as a flaw in the eyes of the public. On the contrary, he became a source of admiration, showing that an Irish American could become Senator – a rank none of his grandfathers nor his father had attained – and that his accession to the Senate was only the beginning of something greater. Robert Dallek explained the symbolical significance of Kennedy’s accession to the Senate as follows:

Jack’s success rested on something more than being the “First Irish Brahmin”; he was the first American Brahmin elevated from the ranks of the millions and millions of European immigrants who had flooded into the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. [...] In voting for Jack, the minorities were not simply putting one of their own in the high reaches of government – they had been doing that for a number of years – but were saying that he and they had arrived at the center of American life and no longer had to feel self-conscious about their status as citizens of the Great Republic. Jack’s election to the Senate opened way to a romance between Jack Kennedy and millions of Americans. It would be one of the great American love affairs, and in his election day grin, it was just possible to imagine that Jack himself knew the match had been made.<sup>89</sup>

Kennedy was now the most prototypical representative of Massachusetts, a state home to millions of Irish Americans. However, it remained a single state among dozens of very different ones. Would he be able to change people’s opinions of him in order to win the White House? For the Presidency, Kennedy applied the same *modus operandi* he had used for the House of Representatives and the Senate. He approached it willing to be hard-working but also very pragmatic and serene. In fact, Kennedy was not necessarily obsessed with the White House. He did not fantasise about it; as Theodore Sorensen noted in his biography *Kennedy*: “John F. Kennedy wanted someday to be President of the United States. This wish did not suddenly seize him at some particular time. It was not an obsession to which all other interests were subordinated.”<sup>90</sup> With this mindset, Kennedy appeared as cool-headed and not greedy in any way. The Presidency required a calm, confident, long-term approach. This institution would only welcome exceptional individuals. The Presidency could not be rushed. To him, becoming President represented a logical step in the pursuit of greatness. His approach to politics was based on continuity:

John Kennedy wanted to be President simply because, as he told a newsman early in 1956 when he had no specific intention toward the office, “I suppose anybody in politics would like to be President” – because, as he said so often

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89 Dallek, 175–76.

90 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 95.

in 1960, “that is the center of action, the mainspring, the wellspring of the American system”.<sup>91</sup>

Kennedy progressed in politics in a careful manner. His progression was slow but clear and consistent. JFK’s pragmatism allowed him to see his strengths but also his possible weaknesses with great accuracy. His ability to judge the ins and outs of a problem made him extremely conscious of others, but also of himself. Knowing his worth, the man who never lost an election in his life was able to assess with great precision the two main liabilities he would encounter in the race to become President. Theodore Sorensen, JFK’s personal aide during his term as Senator and later as White House Counsel, recalled:

He was as objective about his liabilities as he was about his assets. Often, to the incredulity of the newsmen and to the dismay of his followers, he would objectively list those liabilities in public. He knew that no Catholic had ever been elected President of the United States, where church membership was more than two to one Protestant – that no forty-three-year-old had ever been elected President – and that for these reasons in particular his party was unlikely to pick him.<sup>92</sup>

Being fully conscious of the challenges ahead, Kennedy knew, from the nature of his two major liabilities, that he could not expect to win the Presidency as easily as most candidates had in the past. Even more importantly, he realised candidates like him must seek the presidency, rather than the reverse. Myths must be challenged of and shaped by the mythical figures themselves:

Jack Kennedy did not accept – or publicly pretend to profess – the familiar fiction that this office seeks the man. “Nobody is going to hand me the nomination,” he told a reporter in 1957. “If I were governor of a large state, Protestant and fifty-five, I could sit back and let it come to me.”<sup>93</sup>

During his mandates as Member of the House of Representatives and as Senator, remarks were made against Kennedy’s faith, but they remained tolerable. However, Kennedy encountered much stronger opposition when running for President. Being the underdog, Kennedy was well aware of the need to be clear on where he stood ideologically, but without offending public opinion:

To end those suspicions, and to end the tradition against a Catholic President, he knew he had to answer not only all reasonable questions but many unreasonable questions as well. He knew he could not afford to be defensive, angry, impatient or silent, no matter how many times he heard the same insulting, foolish or discriminatory questions.<sup>94</sup>

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91 Sorensen, 95.

92 Sorensen, 97.

93 Sorensen, 97.

94 Sorensen, 110.

John F. Kennedy had the particular idea, unlike numerous politicians, to never make his faith an issue. He remained quite discreet about religion and would usually only speak about it when asked. Being the outsider, Kennedy knew he would need to remain cool-headed in order to progress carefully. Even once elected President and unable to hide his faith from the public, Kennedy attached great importance to remaining as neutral as possible. For instance, he made sure to carefully consider the religion of his advisers before appointing them to federal government, for fear of backlash. As Espinosa put it:

Although Shriver, an active Catholic, managed the president-elect's appointments, Kennedy vigilantly ensured that Catholics received no favoritism. In fact, Shriver responded enthusiastically upon discovering that auto executive Robert McNamara, whom Kennedy considered for secretary of defense, had recently read *The Phenomenon of Man*, a theological work by Jesuit scholar Teilhard de Chardin. Yet Kennedy would not permit the nomination process to continue without knowing McNamara's religious affiliation. With an Irish-sounding name, McNamara might be Catholic. "There mustn't be too many in the cabinet, the first Catholic President said," recalled Shriver's assistant Harris Wofford. After searching through *Who's Who*, Shriver and Wofford confirmed that McNamara was not Catholic, and Kennedy endorsed the nomination.<sup>95</sup>

After the fact, McNamara's faith would probably have had little influence on his policy-making ability or his political ideology but from Kennedy's point of view, paying attention to these details was of paramount importance for the good conduct of the term, and to avoid hurting his own image. Kennedy grasped the utility – necessity even – of sending broad and significant messages to the American people by only using extremely specific and niche symbols. Among them was President-Elect Kennedy's farewell address to Massachusetts as he was to leave his position as Senator and become President. The speech, entitled "The City Upon a Hill Speech" – not without remembering another City Upon a Hill Speech given by John Winthrop in 1630 as he was about to embark for America on the *Arabella* – struck the audience by its unique tone and implication. Delivered on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1961 – eleven days before his Inaugural Address – it was supposed to be a farewell speech from a politician looking for new horizons; speeches America had seen countless times in the past.

Kennedy's speech differed from previous ones for two specific reasons. On that day, Kennedy dug out from America's short but intense history one of its founding documents, brought it back to life and applied it to contemporary politics. Secondly, Kennedy initiated a cooperation between Catholics and Protestants that seemed unachievable a few years before.

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<sup>95</sup> Espinosa, *Religion and the American Presidency*, 300.

John F. Kennedy, the Irish American Catholic, was inspired by Puritan John Winthrop's farewell address to England delivered more than three hundred years before. Interestingly, this text had sunk into oblivion for centuries to the point where the Founding Fathers themselves made no reference to it. Espinosa wrote:

One hundred and fifty years later, Revolutionary War-era founders such as Jefferson and Madison drafted an American Constitution in 1787 that made no explicit reference to "City upon a hill" or a Christian nation. They sought to keep church and state separate in order to protect the integrity of both and to guarantee religious liberty to all. They did, however, recognize and respect the church establishments maintained in the colonies.<sup>96</sup>

In a sense, Kennedy's homonymous address filled the gap left by the Founding Fathers' forgetting to refer to one of the most defining American texts. Drawing on more than three hundred years of American history, JFK's eloquent, humble, and relevant parallel with the politics of his time almost seemed too real to be true:

But I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arbella* [*sic*] three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. "We must always consider," he said, "that we shall be as a city upon a hill--the eyes of all people are upon us." Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us--and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill--constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities. For we are setting out upon a voyage in 1961 no less hazardous than that undertaken by the *Arabella* [*sic*] in 1630. We are committing ourselves to tasks of statecraft no less awesome than that of governing the Massachusetts Bay Colony, beset as it was then by terror without and disorder within. History will not judge our endeavors--and a government cannot be selected--merely on the basis of color or creed or even party affiliation. Neither will competence and loyalty and stature, while essential to the utmost, suffice in times such as these.<sup>97</sup>

With this speech, Kennedy showed his country the ideas evoked in Winthrop's address had always been in full view of Americans and yet unknown to most of them. The second City Upon a Hill Speech became reminiscent of an ideal Americans were all aware of but had forgotten about. Why? Because the values shared by Winthrop – the idea of making America a “beacon of hope” for the world and “a model of Christian charity” – had been embedded so deeply and for so long in American consciousness that it became at one with the American

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96 Espinosa, 5.

97 John F Kennedy, 'The City Upon a Hill Speech | JFK Library', 9 January 1961, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/the-city-upon-a-hill-speech>. On a more symbolic note, the stillborn baby John and Jacqueline Kennedy had in 1955 would later officiously be named *Arabella*, as the name does not appear on any official document.



mind and the American people. To a certain extent, Winthrop's departure for America sowed the seeds of the old principle of the Frontier developed in the nineteenth century. The very same principle would be reworked by John F. Kennedy and coined under the name "New Frontier" during his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1960, also known as the "New Frontier Speech".

With his City Upon a Hill Speech, Kennedy performed a real tour de force as he, as a twentieth century Catholic Irish American, became part of American mythology and subtly spoke for all other religious or ethnic minorities in America. On the one hand, he managed to express his strong attachment to what he considers his home – Massachusetts – from which his grandparents originated from and the place where he hopes the later Kennedy generations would be born.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, he showed a sheer willingness to talk to all Americans through the evocation of God. With this speech, Kennedy bids farewell to his Bay Staters and welcomed the entirety of the American people through the evocation of religion:

And these are the qualities which, with God's help, this son of Massachusetts hopes will characterize our government's conduct in the four stormy years that lie ahead. Humbly I ask His help in that undertaking--but aware that on earth His will is worked by men. I ask for your help and your prayers, as I embark on this new and solemn journey.<sup>99</sup>

Kennedy's astounding ability to penetrate American religious spirit rested on the power of intertextuality. In order to include himself within the long American tradition, President-Elect Kennedy drew from American consciousness one of the most evocative American principles: religion. Having been elected President, John F. Kennedy still remained the first Catholic President in the history of the United States. Huthmacher noted:

Yet Al Smith lost the election of 1928, and some aspects of his defeat indicated that prejudice against the Catholic Irish was still strong in many parts of the country. Not until thirty-two years later – when John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960 – could the Catholic Irish feel certain that all of America's rewards, even the highest office in the land, were open to them on a basis of full equality with "native" Americans. When Kennedy was

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98 Kennedy. "For forty-three years--whether I was in London, Washington, the South Pacific, or elsewhere--this has been my home; and, God willing, wherever I serve this shall remain my home. It was here my grandparents were born--it is here I hope my grandchildren will be born."

99 Kennedy. "Humbly I ask His help in that undertaking--but aware that on earth His will is worked by men." is not without reminding the last sentence of JFK's Inaugural Address, given eleven days later, 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1961: "[A]sking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own." If JFK's City Upon a Hill Speech helped him in the making of his own Inaugural Address, it also influenced several American politicians over the next decades; among them, President Reagan and Barack Obama as senator.

elected, according to some writers, the Irish-Americans' position as a minority group in the United States officially ended.<sup>100</sup>

Yet, his election did not mark the end of a fight for acknowledgment, but the beginning of a new era for ethnic and religious minorities as well as for America as a whole. Kennedy's rise to power was as impressive and powerful as it was fragile. John F. Kennedy was not only the President of Catholic Irish Americans but the President of all Americans. He worked for himself but for his fellow citizens. In order to first solidify and then maintain his reputation, this study shall see the extent to which John F. Kennedy made use of "civil religion"; a concept central to American folklore, at once instilled in the American people and yet not clearly defined by most of the country.

### ***3 – Civil Religion***

Although often mistakenly attributed to contemporary American sociologist Robert Bellah, the concept of "civil religion" dates back to the times of Franco-Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau; a concept he coined in his magnum opus *The Social Contract*, originally published in 1762. Theorising this concept, Rousseau meant to describe the moral and religious conditions under which a modern society could emerge. According to him, "civil religion" should act as a binding element between the people, the ruler and religion, so as to ensure a stable society. Rousseau's typology contains four main points, as summarised by Robert Bellah:

In Chapter 8, Book 4, of *The Social Contract*, he outlines the simple dogmas of the civil religion: the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance. All other religious opinions are outside the cognizance of the state and may be freely held by citizens.<sup>101</sup>

Since Rousseau's time, the concept has changed. While civil religion progressively disappeared in France, it rapidly gained ground in the United States at the time of the American Revolution. According to Robert Bellah, contrary to what might be believed, civil religion is not anti-Christian or anticlerical. On the contrary, civil religion borrowed from Christian tradition and other religious dogmas so that no American would find the two contradictory.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, if the French experienced a brutal confrontation between its state

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100 Huthmacher, *A Nation of Newcomers*, 25.

101 Robert N. Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20028013>.

102 Espinosa, *Religion and the American Presidency*, 17.

and its clergy, with a secular society trying to establish an anti-Christian government in the wake of the French Revolution, Americans did not draw the same conclusion from theirs. Espinosa noted: “[M]any of the dissenting Protestant and Catholic churches and leaders sided with the American revolutionaries rather than the English monarchy.”<sup>103</sup> As a result, it appeared more logical for Americans to trust their religious bodies and to let religion and government live in harmony. This sense of peace was possible not through the government’s attempt at legislating on the status of religion, but by the nature of civil religion itself.

The particularity of American civil religion is that it enjoys an intermediate status in the hierarchy of religions. It is more significant than a folkloric religion, as it exerts an influence on the whole of society and yet is not as prevalent as a state religion – some might say an established religion – as it does not rely on a specific clergy, itself being highly hierarchised. The middle-ground status of civil religion allows it to be extremely malleable. It is the epitome of a floating signifier. Its malleability thus enables almost anyone to make use of this concept, even when one lacks proper religious education and knowledge. Most of the time – and especially in the United States – civil religion is practised by political leaders in order to give a religious tone to their speeches and public appearances as well as to convey a spiritual message.

Overall, civil religion covers all religious matters in America. For instance, in President Kennedy’s Inaugural Address, religion was advocated as a means to fight the Communists during the Cold War.<sup>104</sup> He suggested that believing in God distinguished Americans from Communists because if Communists received their freedom from Man, Americans, on the other hand, received it from God: “And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.”<sup>105</sup>

The ease with which civil religion can be evoked in American politics makes it appear as a trope in the eyes of the public and yet it remains an unofficial prerequisite to succeed in politics. Robert Bellah stated: “A cynical observer might even say that an American president has to mention God or risk losing votes.”<sup>106</sup> For decades, American politicians have become aware of the necessity to allude to this concept. The United States is home to countless

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103 Espinosa, 17.

104 Espinosa, 299. “Echoing the idea of America’s manifest destiny to propagate freedom abroad, Kennedy presented religion as integral to the nation’s Cold War mission to resist communist tyranny.”

105 John F Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address | JFK Library’, 20 January 1961, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address>.

106 Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’, 41.

ethnicities and religions, and using civil religion is the most effective way to simultaneously speak to anyone and everyone. Inevitably, with the multiplicity of audiences comes the need to compromise. This constitutes one major reason why civil religion is always seen as extremely moderate as it lures politicians into adopting a fairly all-encompassing point of view. As mentioned by Espinosa:

American politicians are aware of the religious demography of the nation and the collateral benefits religious affiliation can afford their candidacies provided that they are associated with a respectable Christian or Jewish religious tradition. While Americans have always rejected candidates who practiced extreme forms of Christianity, they nonetheless expect their politicians to recognize and affirm the value of religion in general and Judeo-Christian values in particular. They hold this conviction because they believe (however naively) that candidates who affirm such beliefs are more likely to be moral, virtuous, honest, and less hostile to their own religious beliefs and practices than candidates who are atheist or agnostic.<sup>107</sup>

In addition to presenting fairly moderate positions on religion, contemporary politicians evoking religion in their speeches also generally make sure to employ terms that appear as neutral as possible:

Presidents have utilized religion along a sliding scale between separationism and accommodationism according to their cultural, political, and religious contexts. Despite this movement, the general tendency throughout the twentieth century has been to cast their rhetoric and framework along the lines of an accommodationist approach. They did this by invoking the language of civil religion as exemplified by more “generic” references to God such as “the Almighty,” “Providence,” or “the Benign Being that Governs the Universe.”<sup>108</sup>

In the use of generic and neutral lexicon rests the strength of civil religion. Simple vocabulary and unchallenging political stances have the ability to dissipate any possible confusion. The simpler a speech is, the simpler an audience’s thought-process will become. The lack of complexity unveils meaning; due to its simplicity, nothing is imperceptible. Yet, it also has the capacity to halt the emergence of any possible form of critical judgement as every citizen will tend to accept arguments at face value, thinking they only concern them and their personal faith. Furthermore, the location of the spoken words and arguments within the text can have a significant impact on the audience. President Kennedy understood the power of civil religion the day he became President. Robert Bellah proposed an analysis of civil religion in President Kennedy’s Inaugural Address:

Let us consider first the placing of the three references. They occur in the two opening paragraphs and in the closing paragraph, thus providing a sort

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107 Espinosa, *Religion and the American Presidency*, 19–21.

108 Espinosa, 17.

of frame for the more concrete remarks that form the middle part of the speech. Looking beyond this particular speech, we would find that similar references to God are almost invariably to be found in the pronouncements of American presidents on solemn occasions, though usually not in the working messages that the president sends to Congress on various concrete issues.<sup>109</sup>

Why did Kennedy's mention of religion in his speech not spark outrage from the public opinion? Robert Bellah argued the way President Kennedy referred to religion constituted an "empty sign" – similar to the aforementioned "floating signifier". President Kennedy chose to remain generic in order to speak to everybody:

He did not refer to any religion in particular. He did not refer to Jesus Christ, or to Moses, or to the Christian church; certainly he did not refer to the Catholic church. In fact, his only reference was to the concept of God, a word which almost all Americans can accept but which means so many different things to so many different people that it is almost an empty sign.<sup>110</sup>

JFK's ingenuity rested in having the only three references to religion in his speech to be the overly neutral and generic term "God". By addressing himself to everybody, he would not risk offending anyone. Furthermore, by addressing himself to all Americans, he spoke directly on behalf of a long American tradition. If French people would have thought inappropriate – to say the least – the mention of religion in a Presidential Address, Americans did not. As a matter of fact, and despite being a secular nation, the United States has – since its establishment – nurtured and developed a peculiar relationship between public matters and religion:

Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion. The inauguration of a president is an important ceremonial event in this religion. It reaffirms, among other things, the religious legitimation of the lightest political authority.<sup>111</sup>

Similar to missionaries with the Pope, Americans maintain an almost sacred and dogmatic relationship with their President. Not mentioning religion in an Inaugural Address in the United States would seem more abnormal than anything. President Kennedy did not fail to fulfil his obligations and did so very adroitly. By placing references to God at the start and at the very end of his speech, he managed to frame his address as a plea in favour of American

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109 Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', 41.

110 Bellah, 41–42.

111 Bellah, 42.

tradition. The last one especially, asking for “His blessing” and “His help” so that “here on earth God’s work must truly be our own” exemplified the reason why the United States flourished in the first place. America, this new continent, was supposed to be led by great men, ready to shape their existence around the spirit of God. As mentioned by Robert Bellah:

The whole address can be understood as only the most recent statement of a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth. This was the motivating spirit of those who founded America, and it has been present in every generation since.<sup>112</sup>

By adopting the same type of rhetoric that shaped the United States centuries before, President Kennedy managed to directly include himself within the deep tradition initiated by the Founding Fathers. Although they never mentioned “Christ” in their Inaugural Addresses, they never failed to include “God”. As mentioned by Robert Bellah:

The words and acts of the founding fathers, especially the first few presidents, shaped the form and tone of the civil religion as it has been maintained ever since. Though much is selectively derived from Christianity, this religion is clearly not itself Christianity. For one thing, neither Washington nor Adams nor Jefferson mentions Christ in his inaugural address; nor do any of the subsequent presidents, although not one of them fails to mention God.<sup>113</sup>

Indeed, the Founding Fathers’ allusions to God in their Inaugural Addresses remained remarkably vague. George Washington referred to God as “that Almighty Being who rules the universe”. John Adams used the terms “Providence” and “Patron of Order” while Thomas Jefferson opted for “that Being in whose hands we are”. It is no surprise then, to see that the Declaration of Independence contains the same elusive religious references: “Nature’s God”, “Divine Providence”. From the American Revolution onwards and the establishment of the First Amendment to the American Constitution, religion – civil religion specifically – was a core element of Americanness and a significant unifying trope.<sup>114</sup> Civil religion played with images and appearances in order to bring people together. The proselyte nature of civil religion remains complex and continuously intertwined with American politics. President Kennedy largely benefited from this knotty situation as it enabled him to kill two birds with one stone. Firstly, he managed to convince his audience that he was a worthy heir to a great

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112 Bellah, 43.

113 Bellah, 45.

114 Philadelphia Convention, ‘U.S. Senate: Constitution of the United States’, accessed 21 March 2021, [https://www.senate.gov/civics/constitution\\_item/constitution.htm](https://www.senate.gov/civics/constitution_item/constitution.htm). “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

lineage of American presidents. Using civil religion allowed him to play with appearances, letting Americans think he was necessarily knowledgeable of American tradition and history, thus playing his part in the building of American mythology. JFK was now part of two American myths. On the one hand the Irish Catholic immigration, from which he was actually descended. On the other hand, his belonging – through civil religion – to the first waves of American settlers dating back to the seventeenth century. Kennedy was now a perfect synthesis of what being an American citizen meant at the time, combining real and appropriated heritage. Secondly, President Kennedy benefited immensely from the use of a generic and plain religious discourse. It enabled him to polish the image a subsequent part of Americans had of him and to dispel the various anti-Catholic arguments that had emerged over the years preceding his election. Kennedy was no longer deemed a Catholic President, but as the American President. John F. Kennedy was therefore a Catholic man but a secular President.

Overcoming the religious issue did not mean Kennedy's image did not suffer in any other ways. In order to appear of presidential material, one strives for perfection in every way and despite having had a golden youth, financially speaking, and having built an impressive network from a young age, John F. Kennedy's milieu did not always play in his favour. Kennedy had money, networks, intelligence, and looks, but these did not make up for some of his issues. Some of the handicaps he had followed him for years. Among them, John F. Kennedy was considered to be too young to run for President and was said to be lacking in experience. Although his overall youth presented him as vigorous and lively, Kennedy suffered from terrible health problems his entire life, damaging his image.

## **Section 3: Apparent Liabilities**

### ***1 – Lack of Experience***

Officially, the US Constitution requires only three “basic” requirements in order to become President. The candidate must be a natural-born US citizen, at least thirty-five years of age and needs to have been a US resident for at least fourteen years. If, in theory, numerous demographics could elect one of theirs as President, in effect, very few did. Indeed, up until the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, all Presidents had been middle-aged males at the very least, and all of them had been Protestants. As mentioned previously, Kennedy himself said that had he been governor of a large state, Protestant and fifty-five, he would have sat back and let the presidency come to him. Unfortunately for him and as mentioned in considerable detail previously, Kennedy was no Protestant. Despite his faith, Kennedy was, to all appearances, no different from any other typical politician wanting to run for President. However, as of the late 1950s, John F. Kennedy was not the governor of a large state nor fifty-five.

If in many fields, young, brisk, and daring individuals tended to be favoured; US politics was an exception. Within the span of almost two hundred years, this boys club had predominantly always welcomed men over the age of fifty. These men were what would usually be called “statesmen”. Being both experienced and known by the people, they had usually been in politics – or a related field – their whole lives. If these men finally managed to get elected, it was also due to the various networks they had been building for years. When becoming an elected official, one had to acknowledge the numerous other individuals who assisted him or her in the electoral campaign. In a country like the United States, where ethnic, religious, and social subdivisions are endless, one often hears the phrase “the ... vote” used to appeal to any demographic. Overall, the US Presidential election is more of a strategic display of money and influence than anything else. The candidate who appeals to the largest number of communities wins.

Unfortunately for Kennedy, the said problem did not lie in his inability to attract more groups, but in his inability to convince the American people as a whole. This time, his problem was not an ethnic, a social or a religious one anymore, but a generational one. No matter how loudly he would make himself heard to as many communities as possible, his age



seemed to catch the people's attention. Apart from President Theodore Roosevelt, having been the youngest person to assume the Presidency – not to be directly elected President – after President McKinley was assassinated, no American President under the age of fifty-one had been directly elected in the twentieth century. It generally remained accepted that no man under the age of fifty should run for President. Only at around this age should a candidate generally have enough experience in holding public offices. If Lyndon B. Johnson – JFK's Vice President-to-be – had been a Democratic Party Leader and Richard Nixon had been President Eisenhower's Vice-President; John F. Kennedy, on the other hand, had achieved very little in comparison. As mentioned by Lewis L. Gould in his 2003 work *The Modern American Presidency*: “John F. Kennedy became president in January 1961 with one of the thinnest policy backgrounds of any chief executive in the twentieth century.”<sup>115</sup>

Having served in Congress for “only” thirteen years – six as a Member of the House of Representatives and seven as Senator – John F. Kennedy paled in comparison to other, more established politicians. In addition to being young and seemingly inexperienced, Kennedy did not manage to establish himself as an eminent politician. Theodore Sorensen – JFK's personal aide during his time in the Senate – recalls: “John Kennedy was not one of the Senate's great leaders.”<sup>116</sup> According to Robert Dallek, “his Senate career had produced no major legislation that contributed substantially to the national well-being.”<sup>117</sup> As a matter of fact, Kennedy himself stated in 1960 that the life of a legislator was much less satisfying than that of a chief executive precisely because a President could bring down a senator's and a congressman's efforts and laws in no time.<sup>118</sup> Despite his relative inexperience and his youth, Kennedy realised that in order to shape America the way he wanted to, he would need to access the highest spheres as rapidly as possible.

When becoming President at the young age of forty-three years old, John F. Kennedy did not hide his youthfulness. Instead, he took pride in showing the world that he, and by extension the United States, would appear youthful, determined, and full of life at the start of this new decade, not to show off any kind of superiority, but instead to prove that even a young country – literally and figuratively – could rise to the challenges of the 1960s:

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success  
or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of

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115 Lewis L. Gould, *The Modern American Presidency* (Lawrence, Kan: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2003), 125.

116 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 43.

117 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 226.

118 Dallek, 226.

Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe. Now the trumpet summons us again--not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need--not as a call to battle, though embattled we are-- but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation"--a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.<sup>119</sup>

Being the first American President born in the twentieth century, Kennedy knew the important role the new generations had to play in order to make the most out of the coming decade. According to him, the image one gave of oneself was of paramount importance in the fulfilment of one's objectives. Similar to countless heads of states, Kennedy wanted his team to share his perspectives on various issues. A striking example from the Kennedy days remains the way in which he would project his own image onto his administration members. Lawrence Freedman noted: "His appointments were young – the average age of the most senior group was under fifty. There were more professors than businessmen, and a number of lawyers. Many were neophytes, without much experience in foreign policy or a grasp of its nuances."<sup>120</sup>

In addition to giving off a youthful image, Kennedy also had a definite taste for what came to be called "task forces". From then on, the President's style of governing would be based on limited groups of closely related advisors supposed to make the best decisions as fast as possible. In other words, the key word was "efficiency". Furthermore, this innovative style of governing was in sharp contrast with the previous administration. The conservative 1950s and "Ike's" eight years in power were now over and Kennedy would only help moving on to the 1960s at an even faster pace.<sup>121</sup> As mentioned by André Kaspi in *Les 1000 Jours d'un Président*:

Les innovations portent sur la forme plus que sur le fond. Il faut, en effet, mettre la présidence en parallèle avec celle d'Eisenhower. La Maison Blanche devient, à partir de Janvier 1961, un entre de rayonnement. Le président sera plus accessible. [...] Il ne veut pas davantage du modèle laissé par son prédécesseur : trop rigide avec un chef d'état-major baptisé l'Assistant du président, trop de décisions préparées par des experts sans participation réelle du président. Kennedy préfère les *task forces*, ces groupes de travail éphémères qui ont pour mission de préparer un rapport sur un problème. Autour de lui, il rassemble des généralistes.<sup>122</sup>

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119 Kennedy, 'Inaugural Address | JFK Library', 20 January 1961.

120 Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 39.

121 Furthermore, Kennedy's relative youthful image benefited from other core elements of the 1950s: the rise of greasers, rock and roll and youth culture.

122 André Kaspi, *Kennedy: Les 1000 Jours d'un Président*, Biographies (Paris: A. Colin, 1993), 284–85. « Innovations are more centred on the form rather than the substance. It is indeed necessary to put Kennedy's presidency side by side with Eisenhower's. From January 1961 onwards, the White House

Overall, task forces were mostly about pretending and appearing rather than actually doing. The mere evocation of the term “task force” – more often used to talk about secret missions led by armed forces than discussions led by politicians – simultaneously bears a relatively obvious and yet mysterious connotation. Everyone knows what it should consist of, but no one seems to be aware of its actual intricacies. The term suggests that a precise “task” needs to be addressed and yet no one really knows the subject of these sessions. The name itself necessarily implies the need to answer a question, solve a problem, but never seems to provide any answer as to why such questions and problems appeared in the first place. If task forces might have been useful for Kennedy and his cabinet to solve actual dilemmas, they were also used as communication tools so that the objective was not to have people interested in the actual subjects being dealt with but to have them talk about the mere fact that they were taking place. In the end, task forces revealed as much as they hid, simultaneously adding clarity and confusion to Kennedy’s persona.

The Kennedy administration played on appearances rather than on substance. This new managerial style of governing would enable him to distance himself from old technocratic politicians who had been dominating politics for decades. Kennedy would simultaneously manage to appear closer to the American people, choosing to work with smaller groups made of non-specialists – supposedly more rational and pragmatic individuals – and yet maintain a mythical Presidential aura and immunity around him since these managerial methods had first been developed under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency. Lewis L. Gould wrote:

The advice that he received about organizing the White House played down Eisenhower’s arrangements and looked to a return to the practices and techniques of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Kennedy and his men believed that the staffing arrangements under Eisenhower had been too formal and too structured. The result had been that the president, in their opinion, had been insulated from new ideas and fresh thinking.<sup>123</sup>

The 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States might have been young and innovative, but he also knew how to draw information from his country’s mythology in order to build his own myth. Kennedy’s ingenuity came from his ability to convoke the methods from one of the most illustrious and beloved American Presidents in history – who took the country through

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became a shining light. The President shall be more approachable. [...] He does not approve of the style of governing left by his predecessor: too rigid, a Chief of Staff nicknamed “the President’s Assistant” and too many decisions being made by experts without any real say from the President. Kennedy prefers task forces, these short-lived workgroups with one objective: writing a report on a problem. Kennedy gathered general individuals around him.” Author’s translation.

123 Gould, *The Modern American Presidency*, 126.

its greatest economic crisis and its greatest military conflict – and to use his youthfulness and the start of a new decade as an opportunity to prove to the world his determination, and by extension, his country’s determination, as seen in his Inaugural Address:

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it--and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.<sup>124</sup>

Always looking dynamic, determined, and busy, in order to bring his country to the edge of the New Frontier, John F. Kennedy found in the presidency a way to overcome the tenacious reputation for boyishness and inexperience that had been given to him. The administration’s strategy revolved around the predominance of images and appearances over actual events. By adapting methods from the FDR days, JFK adroitly included himself in a clearly defined historical timeline. Despite his age and his thin political background, he too could use his country’s history intelligently and breathe new life into established techniques that had already been used in the past. Doing so, he paradoxically displayed youthfulness in order to minimise the impact of his young age. The more he presented himself as such the more pervading the myth would become. This hammering technique, paired with an overabundance of images and simulacra, thus blurred the lines between pretence and reality, and also allowed John F. Kennedy to transform one of his lifelong struggles into a strength: his poor health.

## ***2 – Health***

“For all his vitality and endurance, John Kennedy had suffered since childhood from a multitude of physical ailments.”<sup>125</sup> Written by Theodore Sorensen in his biographical work *Kennedy*, this sentence alone could summarise the lifelong relationship John F. Kennedy maintained with his health. In fact, this concise and yet evasive sentence contains an obvious paradox. How is it possible to describe Kennedy both as a lively and energetic individual, with incredible stamina, and yet point out his numerous health problems? Moreover, to what extent did his poor health affect his presidency and his life in general? And what impact did it have on his legacy?

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124 Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address | JFK Library’, 20 January 1961.

125 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 38–39.

Ever since he was born, John F. Kennedy came close to death several times due to his poor health. As aforementioned, he was administered the extreme unction three times over the course of his life, and one at the young age of two. As a child – being frailer than his elder brother Joseph Jr. – he was often injured while engaging in a brawl with him or while practising sports. Over the course of his life, John Kennedy suffered from countless physical impairments and illnesses: Addison’s disease, colitis, malaria, osteoporosis, appendicitis, scarlet fever, and severe back pains to cite a few. Although being fairly tall – about six feet – and deemed quite handsome, John realised the image he showed to the rest of society only remained a façade in comparison to his actual physical condition. He also realised some of his health problems were permanent and that he would have to live with them.

Not necessarily emphasising or minimising Jack’s illnesses and conditions, the Kennedy household – and his mother in particular – adopted a balanced approach to deal with his state. As mentioned by Espinosa: “While Jack’s poor health as a young man earned him medical attention and sympathy, his mother, Rose Kennedy, also encouraged prayer in all her children as a stabilising force amid such suffering. Rose modelled and encouraged a stoic response to hardship.”<sup>126</sup> This stoic approach allowed John to adopt a relatively forward-looking character. From then on, John Kennedy could not dismiss his health problems, but at least not let them overwhelm him. Through his mother’s stoic approach, he learnt to distance himself from his illnesses and conditions. John understood the nuance between lying about one’s condition and concealing it. He progressively learnt not to dissociate himself from his pain, but to dissociate himself from the image his pain rendered. This is the main reason as to why John F. Kennedy could be seen as both vigorous and yet physically limited. In order to succeed in politics, he would need to demonstrate constant vitality and energy and transform what was a major liability into an asset. His lifelong physical problems obliged him not to shape his image to suit his persona, but to shape who he actually was to conform to the image he meant to present.

From a metaphorical perspective, a President is always the reflection of his or her people and vice versa. If the President appears to be strong, so will the nation. In practice, Kennedy did his utmost to always portray himself as a man of action, always on the move, ready to lead the country towards its New Frontier. Kennedy paid close attention to always appear in his best light. Theodore Sorensen recalled that although his eyes required glasses for heavy reading, he rarely wore them for published pictures and never during public

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126 Espinosa, *Religion and the American Presidency*, 285.

appearances.<sup>127</sup> As young as he was, wearing glasses would have hampered his reputation and his credibility. Older Presidents could wear glasses without being criticised. President Kennedy, on the other hand, could not afford to make himself look more limited than he already was.

This alone demanded anything related to the President's health to be discussed in private. If the check-ups undergone by American Presidents nowadays are made public, it was not the case at the time. President Kennedy's personal physician, Dr. Max Jacobson – nicknamed "Dr. Feelgood" by the President – worked behind the scenes to provide John Kennedy with tailored treatments. At the time, only unproven rumours regarding Kennedy's poor health had emerged in public discourse, and this before the 1960 Presidential election. Only several decades after his death did Kennedy's conditions and illnesses were revealed to the American public, mainly through biographical works. Against all odds, these revelations did not compromise Kennedy's legacy. On the contrary, the thirst Americans had for anecdotes on JFK's life was only amplified with the increasing amount of publications. Not only did Americans seek to know the ins and outs of JFK's health, but they kept being fascinated with the man, as shown in the following Gallup article, "Americans Rate JFK as Top Modern President": "As recently as 2010, 85% said they approved of the way Kennedy handled his job as president, the highest retrospective job approval rating of any president measured, and his posthumous approval rating fell no lower than 76% in Gallup polls from 1990 to 2010."<sup>128</sup>

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127 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 41.

128 Dugan and Newport, 'Americans Rate JFK as Top Modern President'.  
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/165902/americans-rate-jfk-top-modern-president.aspx>

### Approval of President Kennedy's Presidency

From what you have heard, read, or remember about some of our past presidents, please tell me if you approve or disapprove of the way each of the following handled their job as president. How about John F. Kennedy?

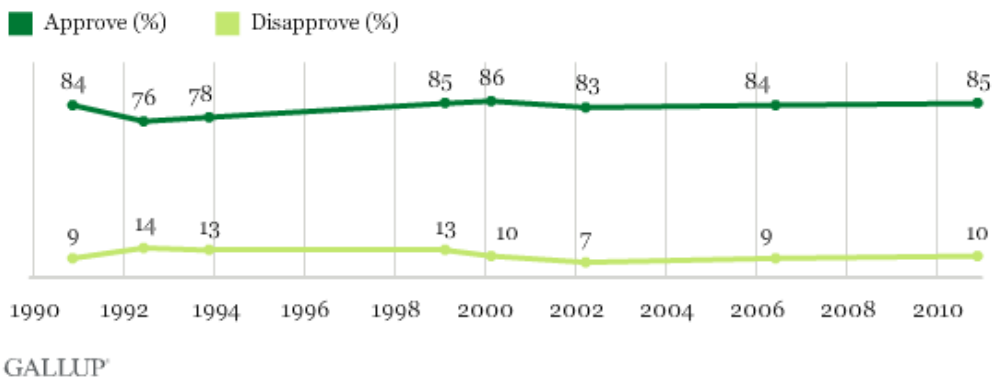


Figure 2. Approval of President Kennedy's Presidency. "Americans Rate JFK as Top Modern President", November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013, GALLUP. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/165902/americans-rate-jfk-top-modern-president.aspx>

Instead of condemning him for having concealed his actual state from the public for all these years, Kennedy was revered by future generations and became an untouchable entity. Americans did not feel betrayed in any way by their government, but instead remained in awe at Kennedy's and his administration's ability to keep such information secret. Furthermore, Americans' admiration for Kennedy only reinforced their pre-conceived ideas about him. Depicted as an even-stronger willed individual than he was at the time since he combined heavy medical treatments and physical pain during the Presidency, the memory of President Kennedy in American consciousness had become so prevalent that fiction and reality had become indistinguishable. The President's physical limitations did not deconstruct the Kennedy myth, but only contributed to its making. In the end, Kennedy had not only managed to hide his health problems, but to completely erase their existence from collective memory. Kennedy had become his own reflection and one could not dissociate truth from pretence anymore, they were one single mythical entity. The discrepancy between Kennedy's actual state and the image he reflected became non-existent. Kennedy simultaneously was a prisoner of his image and its guard, becoming his own reflection. He became his own simulacrum, but instead of being a mere simulation of reality, it became reality itself.

Over the years, adapting reality as they wished had become a common practice for the Kennedys. Since their arrival in the United States, the Kennedys had embraced the American Dream. From tavern owners and whisky brewers to US Ambassador to the United Kingdom by way of Mayor of Boston, the Kennedys had slowly but surely become one of the most

influential families in the country, becoming part of American mythos as they went. All successive generations had planned on climbing the rungs of the social ladder hoping one day they would witness one of theirs become President of the United States. The torch having been passed from Joseph Jr. to John, the presidency remained the family's first objective. Despite having been in the public sphere for decades, the Kennedys suffered from their image as descendants from Irish Catholic Immigrants. John felt American and not Irish and he actively shaped his political image so as to act as an advocate for freedom of speech and freedom of creed, thus including himself within a long and quintessentially American tradition. With their ethnicity and their faith also came their wealth. Having started from scratch to then find themselves one of the most affluent families in America, the Kennedys had everything to be the perfect embodiment of immigrants having embraced Americanness and American mythology. However, in times such as the ones of the 1930s and the 1940s, bankers and traders like Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. – and by extension the Kennedys as a whole – were not well-regarded. Kennedy's milieu simultaneously was his greatest ally and his most destructive foe. Torn between success and popularity on the one hand, and scornful observers and familial tragedies on the other, the Kennedy dynasty bore within its roots the traces of a mythical family. This dichotomy had been instilled in John since his birth. Charming, intelligent, and charismatic, John was also physically weak, immature, and deemed inexperienced by other politicians to become President. In a sense, the upbringing, the formation, and the younger years of John F. Kennedy showed a certain sense of spectacular and tragic. Yet, John did not yield.

In order to become President, John Kennedy would not only need to put up with the previously mentioned remarks and attacks, but also to develop a public image of his own: the objective was to become active rather than passive. Slowly, John F. Kennedy would become a public figure. He would use his World War Two combat experience as well as the publication of several of his books to build a solid reputation. Similar to an all-rounded ancient hero or a Renaissance Man, John Kennedy's assertiveness during the 1960 Presidential Campaign would enable him not only to dismiss attacks directed at his faith, but to defeat Republican nominee and Vice President Richard Nixon. JFK, once the underdog, was now the favourite and at last, the winner. As we will see, Kennedy won against Nixon, but he also won against himself and his own image. Through means of communication and television especially, he used the media to his greatest advantage. Kennedy had now mastered Daniel Boorstin's concept of "pseudo-event" and had become a President on his way to American mythology.



## Chapter II: The Building of an Image

### Section 1: Brains and Brawn

#### 1 – “*The Last Good War*”

Many Americans who lived through what was the most destructive war in history still refer to it as "the last good war." Not that any war is good and not that there weren't terrible sacrifices, but World War II, as *TIME* dubbed it, was a war that had to be fought and won. This was an unambiguous struggle between good and evil. It was not just about national interests but also about values.<sup>129</sup>

“The last good war”, this was the unofficial name given to the Second World War in American collective memory, as mentioned by Bruce W. Nelan in this 1998 *TIME* article. In post-1945 America, having served in World War II was self-explanatory. Although being an armed conflict that produced millions of casualties, the Second World War was in itself idealised, as were its veterans. Within a few years, the US military had gone from less than two million servicemen and servicewomen to more than twelve million by the end of the war. Never before in the history of the country had so many Americans taken part in an armed conflict and never before had the US Armed Forces been so influential. Among them, many had been called to bear arms, but the vast majority of them were lower to middle-class Americans who did not have much choice anyway. The Kennedys, however, an already rich and influential family at the time, saw the potential in taking part in the war. Joseph Sr., the patriarch, knew that by involving his sons in the war, he would ensure the building of a solid public reputation for his offspring, thus helping them in their quest for the Presidency and in becoming part of American mythos.

Jack himself had adopted this mindset. He volunteered in the war to help his country, but most of all, to support his older brother Joe Jr. in his quest for the Presidency. In his work *An Unfinished Life*, Robert Dallek mentioned some of the arguments Jack had told his mother, Rose, soon after starting his training in Melville, Rhode Island:

Rose told her other children that Jack’s presence at Melville had changed “his whole attitude about the war.... He is quite ready to die for the U.S.A in order to keep the Japanese and the Germans from becoming the dominant people on their respective continents.... He also thinks it would be good for

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129 Nelan, ‘1939-1948 War’.

Joe [Jr.]’s political career if he [Jack] died for the grand old flag, although I don’t believe he feels that is absolutely necessary.” Rose and Joe were relieved that he didn’t think it “absolutely necessary” to give his life, but they found nothing funny in Jack’s flippant remark about sacrificing himself for his brother’s ambitions.<sup>130</sup>

By a strange twist of fate, Jack would end up surviving the war but not his brother Joe. Jack would become the first heir to the dynasty after having been arbitrarily chosen by fate to ensure the future of the family.

Paradoxically, the Kennedys’ will to secure – and even improve – their status, prosperity, and security, would necessitate going to war. Jack had internalised this idea and although he initially meant to support his brother, he also had other incentives for enlisting in the military. He became aware of the necessity to work for his own future, – although he did not have any precise idea of what he wanted – as well as to look good in the eyes of the Kennedy family and to challenge his preferred brother Joe. Robert Dallek wrote:

But Jack wanted to serve. “This draft had caused me a bit of concern,” he wrote Billings. “They will never take me into the army – and yet if I don’t [serve], it will look quite bad.” He wanted to keep his medical problems as quiet as possible, and failing to qualify for service would subject his difficulties to public discussion. In addition, it would add to the criticism already levelled against his father for being adamantly opposed to American involvement in the war. There was also the fact that he remained uncertain about a career. Thoughts of attending law school did not excite him. A stint in the military seemed like a challenging alternative, especially alongside a desire not to let Joe Jr., who was becoming a navy pilot, outshine him.<sup>131</sup>

If Joe had been attracted to planes, John had had his heart set on boats, and more especially the motor torpedo boats of the Navy. These little boats definitely did not constitute the cornerstone of the Navy’s armada, but they reflected a particularly appealing image and were deemed as glamorous. As mentioned by Dallek, being associated with prestige and impressive feats of arms, these boats held Jack’s attention:

Jack’s ambition was to command a motor torpedo boat, one of the PTs (for “patrol-torpedo”), as they were popularly known. The papers were full of stories about the heroic work of these small crafts and their foremost spokesman, Lieutenant Commander John Bulkeley, who had won a Congressional Medal of Honor for transporting General Douglas MacArthur from the Philippines through five hundred miles of enemy controlled waters to Australia. Bulkeley was a great promoter of these crafts and had convinced President Roosevelt of their worth.<sup>132</sup>

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130 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 88.

131 Dallek, 81–82.

132 Dallek, 87.

As recalled by Dallek, Jack's presentiment about his health was right, since in 1941 he had failed the physical exams for both the army's and then the navy's officer candidate schools. However, John would make sure to qualify for service through his father's string-pulling. Dallek wrote:

Although he followed an exercise routine all summer to prepare himself for another physical, no program of calisthenics was going to bring him up to the standards required for induction into either service. Only a denial of his medical history would allow him to pass muster, and he was able to ensure this through Captain Alan Kirk, his father's former naval attaché at the American embassy in London and current head of the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) in Washington, D.C. Kirk had arranged for Joe Jr. to enter the navy as an officer in the spring of 1941, and now at Joe Sr.'s request he did the same for Jack that summer.<sup>133</sup>

The development of the Kennedys' military background, and by extension their future military glory and legacy was not so much built but fabricated. After his father came his grandfather – “Honey Fitz” – with the usual influence and string-pulling in order to help his grandson see some actual combat. Joseph Sr.'s anxiety had initially made him keep Jack in Rhode Island “for six months to a year as a torpedo boat instructor”<sup>134</sup> before going to war but the young Kennedy thought otherwise, and asked his locally influential grandfather to help him:

Jack, distrusting his father's willingness to help, went to this grandfather, Honey Fitz, who arranged a meeting with Massachusetts senator David Walsh, the chairman of the Naval Affairs Committee. Walsh, who was very favorably impressed with Jack, wrote a letter to the Navy Department urging his transfer to a war zone.<sup>135</sup>

Most of all, if John insisted so much to get where he wanted, it was because he knew about the prestige the military could offer him. As of the early 1940s, John was known for being a Harvard graduate, but not for other feats. John knew that if he wanted to advance in life, he would have to hedge his bets and perform well both academically as well as in the military. Well-rounded political figures are usually approved by Americans and various US Presidents have left a mark on history by also serving in the American military. Similar to having religious candidates, it is commonly accepted that a veteran generally holds a set of values that a civilian does not. Associated with rectitude, sense of duty, discipline, patriotism, and an acute ability to command, the military is generally seen as a moral guarantor and a barometer Americans can count on. Although veterans exist in almost every country, veterans

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133 Dallek, 82.

134 Dallek, 89.

135 Dallek, 89.

in the United States are part of American folklore and form their own special class. As a result, an American veteran entering the world of politics maximises his or her chances of being elected. Furthermore, veterans seem to enjoy a certain indisputable right to brandish their military background as foils that no one can go against, putting them in the limelight and transforming them into great storytellers or even celebrities. The fact of the matter was, whether he wanted it or not and whether it was justified or not, John Kennedy would be looked up to by the media and the American people after his military service in the Pacific.

Judged too inexperienced to go to war, no one really seemed to understand Jack's motivations at the time, as written by Robert Dallek: "Jack's eagerness to put himself at risk cries out for explanation."<sup>136</sup> Having completed his training, Lieutenant Kennedy was made a PT commander and sent to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. He would remain there for seventeen months. On 1<sup>st</sup> August 1943, Jack's boat, PT 109, "was one of fifteen PTs sent to Blackett Strait southwest of Kolombangara to intercept a Japanese convoy that had escaped detection by six U.S. destroyers posted north of the island. The fifteen were the largest concentration of PTs to that point in the Solomons campaign."<sup>137</sup> as noted by Dallek. However, it also proved itself to be one of the most disastrous uses of PT boats in the history of US Navy. Although easily outnumbering the Japanese, the PTs' combined strength remained insufficient. Their critical lack of coordination did the rest.

With only half the boats having fired torpedoes and without causing any damage to the Japanese, American forces were rapidly overwhelmed. For Jack, consequences were even worse than simply losing a battle, as told by Dallek: "Worse yet, Jack's boat was sliced in half by one of the Japanese destroyers, killing two of the crew members and casting the other eleven, including Jack, adrift."<sup>138</sup> The failure was not entirely Jack's fault, but was mainly due to the general lack of organisation between all the PTs. Since only four out of the fifteen boats had radars and since the mission took place at night, it became impossible for Americans to coordinate their efforts.

After clinging to the hull of his boat for hours, Jack – lieutenant and PT commander – organised his squad into two five-men groups to swim "to a seventy-yard-wide deserted speck of land".<sup>139</sup> The swim took five long hours and by then Kennedy had not slept in thirty-six hours. After two days on the island, the crew were discovered by two native islanders. Similar

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136 Dallek, 90.

137 Dallek, 95.

138 Dallek, 95.

139 Dallek, 96.

to a Hollywood actor in an adventure film, Kennedy scratched a rescue message onto a coconut he had found and asked the natives to take it to the PT's main base, Rendova, to which they agreed. The message read "'NAURO ISL...COMMANDER...NATIVE KNOWS POSIT...HE CAN PILOT...11 ALIVE...NEED SMALL BOAT...KENNEDY". Two days had passed, and Jack and his crew were brought back to civilisation.

Not only were they brought back to society, but to a society with a grand media system and its strong desire to honour each of the sailors who had taken part in this mission. As mentioned by Robert Dallek: "In human affairs,' President Franklin Roosevelt had told the uncooperative Free French leader Charles de Gaulle at the Casablanca Conference the previous January, 'the public must be offered a drama.' Particularly in time of war, he might have added."<sup>140</sup> The new land of mass media and excessive consumption that was America would not miss this opportunity. Correspondents for the Associated Press and the United Press covering the Solomons campaign saw the potential this event had to offer, even on a national scale, noted Dallek.<sup>141</sup> Within no time, Kennedy found himself being praised by his crew and the base commanders, emphasising his courage and his extraordinary sense of duty in order to protect his men. After Navy Department censors had done their job, national newspapers took the reins and astoundingly laudatory headlines could be seen all over the country. *The New York Times* ran as a headline "KENNEDY'S SON IS HERO IN PACIFIC AS DESTROYER SPLITS HIS PT BOAT", while the *Boston Globe* announced that "KENNEDY'S SON SAVES 10 IN PACIFIC; KENNEDY'S SON IS HERO IN THE PACIFIC". First of all, one can observe the affirmative tone used by the two newspapers. What had happened made clear as to who Kennedy was: he was a hero. Kennedy became a hero simply because he was told so: it was a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the American people would approve of it. Secondly, in both headlines, John was referred to as [Joseph Sr.] Kennedy's son, not as "John F. Kennedy". The way the news was reported presented a paradox: John was the main protagonist yet was not being referred to directly. As a matter of fact, this would mark the beginning of John's transitional phase from being someone's son to becoming a unique individual. John was no longer a rich banker and former diplomat's son but would progressively be seen as a man with his own uniqueness, building his own image. The rise of a certain individuality entailed the rise of his mythic aura.

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140 Dallek, 97.

141 Dallek, 97.

Yet, the building of a myth also came with Jack's story blending in with the unlimited number of other stories from the war. Jack and his story also drew their force from their commonness. Jack represented at once himself and every American, all of America and none of it at the same time. His story could have been the one of any American soldier, but the fact that "KENNEDY'S SON" had been involved appeared as a striking example of what Robert Dallek called "American egalitarianism", a concept dear to the American people:

Jack became the centre of the journalists' accounts, though not simply because he was a hero – there were many other stories of individual heroism that did not resonate as strongly as Jack's. Nor was his family's prominence entirely responsible for the newspaper headlines. Instead, Jack's heroism spoke to larger national mores: he was a unifying example of American egalitarianism. His presence in the war zone and behavior told the country that it was not only ordinary G.I.s from local byways risking their lives for national survival and values but also the privileged son of a wealthy, influential father who had voluntarily placed himself in harm's way and did the country proud.<sup>142</sup>

The idea surrounding Kennedy's fate is deeply American in a way that it considers people to be simultaneously powerful and invincible as well as extremely vulnerable. Kennedy's reinvention as a model citizen after having been criticised for being the privileged son of a rich banker and diplomat evoked a deeply American tradition: forgiveness. Americans struck French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville with their tendency to give second chances to each other as well as their ability for introspection. As mentioned by Tocqueville in *De la démocratie en Amérique* : « Le grand privilège des Américains n'est donc pas seulement d'être plus éclairés que d'autres, mais d'avoir la faculté de faire des fautes réparables. »<sup>143</sup>

Moreover, one can notice the way in which both headlines managed to transform what was initially a failure into a heroic deed. Kennedy had not managed to intercept and neutralise the Japanese fleet and yet was made into a hero. The fact of the matter was, the American public did not care about the intricacies of what had happened to Kennedy and his crew, but was keen to grasp the bigger picture. What caught the public's attention was the symbolic relevance of what had happened that day. Furthermore – and whether they realised it or not – Americans thought they knew Kennedy when actually they did not. They only had knowledge of the stories that had been reported and written about the event; they remained secondary

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142 Dallek, 98.

143 Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique, I*, Collection folio / Histoire 12 (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 339. "The great privilege of the Americans is therefore not only to be more enlightened than others, but to have the ability to make repairable mistakes." Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop.

sources. Yet, nothing else was needed to start building a mythical aura around him. The more information was brought back from the war by reporters, the more mysterious the shipwreck remained and the more believable the story was. The people needed not to see themselves in Kennedy, but to see themselves in his representation, in his feats and deeds. They identified with the icon, not with the actual individual.

Kennedy's image as a war hero had now entered collective memory. From then on, it would remain unchanged, for American myths are extremely difficult to debunk or even criticise. The need for powerful, everlasting myths is due to the country's relatively recent establishment. American identity is still being built on these mythical stories even nowadays. This is why Kennedy was not a mere war hero, but an American hero, speaking for the entire country. He was now part of American folklore. Endless and hyperbolic stories would be told for decades to come about these few days he had spent in the Pacific in August 1943.

If the perpetuation of Kennedy's heroic representation in American memory made use of oral stories and newspapers, it also utilised objects and artistic means. Among them was the scratched coconut shell Kennedy had used trying to have his crew rescued. Almost fictional-looking and to a certain extent romantic, Kennedy's Robinson Crusoe-like story was to take on another meaning the moment the shell was made into an artefact. The coconut shell was kept by Kennedy and later encased in plastic and put on a wood base by Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. As mentioned on the JFK Library website, the shell would then serve as a paperweight and would remain next to John Kennedy's medals on his desk in the Oval Office.<sup>144</sup> This object not only became a reminder of what Kennedy had been through, but it also showed the pride he took in his military service. As mentioned by Theodore Sorensen:

Clearly, he was proud of his military service, his Purple Heart and his Navy and Marine Corps Medal. As a constant reminder of that brush with death, he kept on his desk preserved in plastic the coconut shell on which he had scratched his message of rescue from that far-off Pacific island.<sup>145</sup>

Being encased in a wooden and plastic structure, the shell would never be a "living" object anymore, similar to an artefact being on display in a museum. It was to be a testimony to the past, an immovable proof of Kennedy's courage and devotion as a military man. Medals reflected the official and institutional side of war, while the coconut shell represented the mythical and almost esoteric part of Kennedy's days in the Pacific: it was almost too extraordinary to be true.

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144 'MO63.4852 Coconut Shell Paperweight with PT109 Rescue Message | JFK Library', accessed 11 March 2021, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/media/8256>.

145 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 18.

Less on a materialistic level and more on an artistic one, Kennedy's time in the Pacific also resonated in the world of cinematography. In June 1963, the first ever film about a sitting US President was released. Initially inspired by Robert Donovan's book, *PT 109: John F. Kennedy in World War II*, the film – *PT-109* – secured Kennedy's feats on a long-term footing in American history. Kennedy's military past had become surreal. Its cinematographic adaptation – itself being adapted from a book – seemed more real than the events that took place in August 1943.

Overall, the shipwreck of PT-109 largely helped Kennedy build his public image. In the eyes of most Americans, he no longer appeared as a rich boy who had not faced the hardships of life, but as a trustworthy American. Despite having lost its eldest son, Joseph Jr., the Kennedy clan could count on the second-born, John, who had won his spurs. Naturally, John and his family harnessed the powerful and symbolical significance of his deeds in the Pacific, as mentioned by Mark White in his 2013 article “Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy”:

Pulitzer-Prize-winning author John Hersey penned a panegyric on the episode for the *New Yorker*, which was abbreviated and reprinted for the *Reader's Digest*. In Kennedy's congressional campaign in 1946, hundreds of thousands of copies of Hersey's *Reader's Digest* article were distributed. From the beginning of his political career, Kennedy's status as a military hero was an important part of his appeal.<sup>146</sup>

Kennedy's World War II service contributed immensely to the development of his public image. He was now identified as a man of action. However, through his Harvard education, he understood the necessity of appearing as a man of letters, thus polishing, and balancing his persona. Kennedy figured that in politics, the power of words would prevail. In order to win the Presidency, he would not only be remembered in American history for his deeds, but also for what he had said and written.

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146 Mark White, ‘Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy’, 2013, 229, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24429654>.



## 2 – Publications

Often remembered as an embodiment of ‘Camelot’ by most Americans, the figure of John F. Kennedy has long been associated with literature. Remembered as a man of letters by some, and as a brilliant student by others, factual examination of John’s literary and academic background indicates otherwise. At Choate – the prestigious Connecticut private school he attended – Kennedy was not necessarily known as a hardworking individual or a particularly clever and high-scoring student. Often times, Joseph Sr. would ask his eldest son Joseph Jr. “to help in any way he could to encourage Jack’s commitment to his work.”<sup>147</sup> as Robert Dallek noted. In the summer and fall of 1935, John was sent to the London School of Economics by his father to attend courses given by eminent professor, economist, and political theorist Harold Laski. Conscious of the need to shape his sons’ networks and public images, it meant more for Joseph Kennedy Sr. to know his sons were being seen at Laski’s lectures rather than actually learning from them. As mentioned by André Kaspi, everything seemed to be about pretending: « Au milieu des années 1930, l’un et l’autre sont expédiés à Londres pour suivre les cours de Harold Laski, et ce qui compte n’est pas qu’ils suivent vraiment les cours du maître, mais qu’ils soient rangés parmi ses disciples. »<sup>148</sup>

After Kennedy’s stay in London was interrupted due to health problems, he considered studying at the same university his father and his brother Joe had attended. Although graduating from Choate ranked sixty-fifth out of a hundred and ten students, he still managed to get a place at Harvard: connections and string-pulling maybe, as noted by Dallek<sup>149</sup>. For the first two years, young Jack largely kept the same pattern he had developed at Choate. He remained an average student. Dallek wrote: “His academic record was unimpressive: a B-minus in government the first year and a B in English the second were offset by grades of C and C-plus in French, history, and a second government course, his major interest.”<sup>150</sup> Indeed,

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147 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 38.

148 Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 468. “In the mid-1930s, both John and Joe were sent to London to attend Harold Laski’s lectures. What really mattered was not to actually attend the lectures given by the master, but to be counted among his disciples.” Author’s translation.

149 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 41. “In 1935, as the son of so prominent an alumnus, with an elder brother in good standing at the university, and Harry Hopkins, FDR’s welfare administrator, and Herbert Bayard Swope, the prominent journalist/editor, listed as nonacademic references, Jack had few doubts about his admission.”

150 Dallek, 42.

“economics, English, history, and government courses formed the core of his first two-year curriculum.”<sup>151</sup>

Eventually, John would write his 148 page-thesis on the failure of the United Kingdom to strengthen its military forces in the years leading up to World War II. Titled “Appeasement at Munich”, Kennedy’s work was “written in about two months with predictable writing and organizational problems and inconsistent focus.”<sup>152</sup> as mentioned by Dallek. Still, it was rated magna cum laude, the second-highest possible rating. However, it is generally claimed that had Kennedy never become president, his thesis would have been little remembered. In fact, the thesis took on its importance precisely because it gave information on the way Kennedy approached politics, not because of the thesis itself. Dallek wrote: “[I]t gives clues to the development of his interest and understanding of foreign affairs, it has become a much discussed text.”<sup>153</sup>

In fact, Kennedy’s thesis owes its laudatory reputation and continuing legacy to the fact that it was published as a book in 1940: *Why England Slept*.<sup>154</sup> Not being the most revolutionary or remarkable thesis at the time, Kennedy’s work was first and foremost published so that it could benefit his image. Moreover, it was said to have been reworked and rewritten by Arthur Krock – renowned *New York Times* columnist and Pulitzer Prize winner – thus questioning the authenticity of Kennedy’s work and thought.

But this did not matter; John wrote his undergraduate thesis in a crucial historical period, the late 1930s. As mentioned by Robert Dallek: “The exploding world crisis encouraged Jack to turn his thesis into a book. It was not common for a Harvard undergraduate to instantly convert his honor’s paper into a major publication.”<sup>155</sup> Harold Laski himself was conscious of how irrelevant John’s work was compared to other academic works, saying that “in a good university, half a hundred seniors do books like this as part of their normal work in their final year” and that, according to him, publishers would not have considered this book had Joseph not been ambassador.<sup>156</sup> Joseph was ambassador to the

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151 Dallek, 44.

152 Dallek, 62.

153 Dallek, 63.

154 In fact, the title was a clear reference to Winston Churchill’s 1938 *While England Slept*. Although vowing a lifelong admiration for Churchill, Kennedy was not at the origin of the title. Instead, Arthur Krock – who helped Kennedy working on his thesis – was.

155 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 64.

156 Dallek, 64.

United Kingdom, but he was also extremely wealthy. This is why he personally funded the publication, distribution, and circulation of his son's book, which sold by the thousand. Lewis L. Gould marvellously summarised the approach Joseph Sr. had regarding the future of his son by borrowing words from Theodore H. White – notable American journalist and author of major works on US Presidential elections: “In many respects, John F. Kennedy was not so much made the president, in Theodore H. White's phrase, as marketed as one.”<sup>157</sup> In total, eighty thousand copies were sold in the United Kingdom, thus clearly improving John's standing.

This first publication would eventually lead him to have a reputation as an ‘expert’ on foreign affairs. Dallek wrote that – in April 1945 and in response to a suggestion from his father – John Kennedy was invited by the Hearst's *Chicago Herald-American* to cover the United Nations conference in San Francisco. Thanks to his newly established prominence and vast network, John's presence would suffice in establishing him as part of the public debates. Dallek noted:

As the author of a successful book on foreign affairs, someone with access to significant American and British officials – including the ambassador to Moscow, Averell Harriman; Soviet expert Charles E. Bohlen; and British foreign secretary Anthony Eden – and a navy hero who could speak “from a serviceman's point of view,” Jack had credibility with his editors and reading audience as an expert on postwar international affairs.<sup>158</sup>

Although Kennedy developed an impressively bulging address book, he did not necessarily align with other liberal ideals or with the image other politicians reflected. Most of all, what Kennedy desired was to build his own persona, his own legend, even if it meant going against some dogmatic ideas and his own political allies. Soon after he started sitting at the upper house, Kennedy became aware of the reality of his work and the corruption and avidity surrounding him. Dallek explained the following:

In 1954, after a year in the Senate, when someone asked Jack, “What's it like to be a United States senator?” he said after a moment, “It's the most corrupting job in the world.” He saw senators as all too ready to cut deals and court campaign contributors to ensure their political futures. Jack also enjoyed the famous comment of Senate Chaplain Edward Everett: “Do you pray for the senators, Dr. Hale?” “No,” he replied, “I look at the senators and I pray for the country.”<sup>159</sup>

Kennedy progressively became more critical of his colleagues and developed an interest in ideas such as moral duty, political courage, and mavericks in politics, and he started

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157 Gould, *The Modern American Presidency*, 136.

158 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 115.

159 Dallek, 177–78.

to consider writing a book on the subject. Having faced several personal and familial challenges in his life, his sense of human understanding and human tragedy helped him progress in life. In writing this book, Kennedy's objective was to simultaneously pay tribute to the great American men he admired, but also to forge his image as a nonconformist and respectable politician, proving that he too could be one of those unique politicians. Early in 1954, Kennedy asked his aide Theodore Sorensen to help him find examples of senators "defying constituent pressures". Dallek noted that "feelings about conforming to his father's wishes and acting on his own judgement were surely also part of the interest that drew Kennedy to the problem."<sup>160</sup> The book, eventually titled *Profiles in Courage* published in 1956, was written by Kennedy in hospital during the mid-1950s due to his back problems. The book recounted the careers of eight senators from both *antebellum* and *postbellum* America: John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Thomas Hart Benton, Sam Houston, Edmund G. Ross, Lucius Lamar, George W. Norris, and Robert Taft, "all of whom had shown uncommon courage in risking their political careers by taking unpopular stands that put them at odds with majorities in their parties, states, and regions" as written by Dallek.<sup>161</sup>

This work was a boon for both Kennedy and the nation. In a period of uncertainty and rising tensions provoked by the expansion of communism, Americans positively welcomed his book.<sup>162</sup> As recalled by Theodore Sorensen, "the book was an instant and consistent best-seller."<sup>163</sup> More than seven hundred thousand copies were sold in the span of three years, Kaspi explained.<sup>164</sup> Overall, this publication helped solidify Kennedy's public image: he was no longer a freshly arrived Senator. Similar to the reports of his deeds in the Pacific published in the *Reader's Digest* thirteen years before, most of the book's chapters were reprinted in mass circulation magazines and newspapers. Book luncheons invited Kennedy to speak and, as recalled by Sorensen, "a rain of honorary degrees began to fall."<sup>165</sup> Not only was Kennedy becoming a major public figure, but also a notable author as his work was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1957. Sorensen himself said that of all honours John had received in his life,

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160 Dallek, 198.

161 Dallek, 198.

162 Dallek, 210. "The Pulitzer was largely a case of good timing: In a period of national challenge and peril, when self-indulgence was a national watchword, Jack's book was seen as a rallying cry to put public needs above private concerns."

163 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 68.

164 Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 107–8.

165 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 68.

“none would make him more happy than his receipt in 1957 of the Pulitzer Prize for biography.”<sup>166</sup>

But one question remained: how did a busy Senator with numerous health problems find time to write a book, good enough to be Pulitzer Prize material? If some rumours implied the book had been entirely ghost-written by Sorensen, the general consensus was that Kennedy had at least received some outsiders’ help. Dallek pointed out that

Sorensen and Professor Jules Davids of Georgetown University, with whom Jackie had taken courses, gathered materials for the book and drafted chapters, but the final product was essentially Jack’s. He edited what Sorensen and Davids gave him and then dictated the final chapter drafts for a secretary to type. The tapes of these dictations, which are available at the John F. Kennedy Library, provide conclusive evidence of Jack’s involvement.<sup>167</sup>

As argued by André Kaspi, other rumours regarding Kennedy’s legitimacy as Pulitzer Prize winner started being spread around as other candidates for the “biography” category had been well-versed and accomplished historians. The influence of Joseph Sr. might have played a role.<sup>168</sup> In the end, Jack had not been the “author” of his book the way one usually imagines it, but he had not delegated the entirety of the work to his aide.

With this publication, Kennedy firstly meant to identify himself with the men he had written about. Secondly, he hoped it would help him enter the American audio-visual landscape, and by extension the minds of millions of Americans. Dallek wrote: “Jack certainly hoped that *Profiles* would identify him with uncompromising political responses to national dangers. He yearned for a challenge that would give him an opportunity to act like a political hero.”<sup>169</sup> After being regarded as a war hero, Kennedy aspired to become an intellectual hero. Progressively, Americans’ perception of him changed as he started to appear as a familiar figure. After he won the Pulitzer Prize, some direct parallels were made between him and former Presidents. André Kaspi pointed out the following:

L’Amérique entend parler, une fois de plus, de John Kennedy en termes flatteurs. Il n’est décidément pas un politicien comme les autres. Il pense. C’est un intellectuel, un peu à la manière de Wilson, beaucoup à la manière

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166 Sorensen, 68.

167 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 199.

168 Kaspi, *Kennedy: Les 1000 Jours d’un Président*, 281. Among his rivals were notable public figures and historians such as James McGregor Burns, Alpheus Mason, Irving Brandt, Samuel Flagg Bemis and William N. Chambers.

169 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 199.

de Théodore Roosevelt, qui joint au goût de la réflexion celui de l'action.  
Les sondages témoignent, eux aussi, de sa popularité croissante.<sup>170</sup>

At last, John F. Kennedy's public image had been shaped the way he and his entourage intended. He had finally built a prestigious reputation of his own. From a wider perspective, one can observe two *a priori* contradictory movements that paradoxically combined perfectly in the building of Kennedy's mythical image. On the one hand, it rested on untold stories, secrets, and barely believable feats. Among American public opinion, simple questions could be raised as to how he had managed to enlist in the navy in the first place, how the events of August 1943 really took place, why a failure had been transformed into a heroic deed but also the extent to which he deserved his Pulitzer Prize. On the other hand, the overabundance of public appearances, the overexposure to the media, and the process of "starification" considerably helped Kennedy appear as a lettered and distinguished individual. He not only built his own image but also drew from those of illustrious American political figures.

Now both a man of action and a man of letters, he nourished other ambitions than the Senate. As Kennedy's popularity grew, so did his desire to become President. Now a well-established politician, he would progressively keep advertising his image in the media and in the public sphere throughout the 1950s so as to pervade American minds. As recalled by Ted Sorensen:

As 1957 became 1958 and then 1959, the Senator gave speeches, speeches and more speeches. We continually searched for new topics, themes and writers. "I can't afford to sound just like any Senator," he said. We prepared a large number of "speech sections" on different subjects, put mimeographed stacks of each on his plane and put together new combinations and cover sheets for each stop. In addition to his travels and Senate duties, he became a prolific source and subject of magazine articles. His by-line appeared on articles in more than three dozen magazines, ranging from *Foreign Affairs Quarterly* ("A Democrat Looks at Foreign Policy") to *Living for Young Homemakers* ("Young Men in Politics") to *Life* ("Where the Democrats Should Go from Here") to the *Progressive* ("If India Falls"). His face became familiar through a dozen cover stories.<sup>171</sup>

Kennedy now felt mature enough to run in one the most stressful and yet vivifying moments of a politician on a national scale: the Presidential election. We will first look at the portrayal of JFK's faith in the public sphere to then examine the way in which Kennedy dealt with this hurdle to further improve his image. Secondly, we will focus on the televised debates

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170 Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 108. "Once again America heard of John Kennedy in glowing terms. He definitely is not an ordinary politician. He is a brainy one. In a certain way similar to Wilson and in more ways to Theodore Roosevelt, he is an intellectual who likes to combine his passion for thought and action. Polls as well further confirmed Kennedy's growing popularity." Author's translation.

171 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 105–6.

with Republican candidate Richard Nixon – one of the most defining and crucial moments of the Presidential campaign for Kennedy – and see the extent to which Kennedy’s appearance, the use of both radio and television as well as the nature of the debate itself – being a “pseudo-event” in Daniel Boorstin’s sense – contributed to the development of the Kennedy myth in American society.

## Section 2: The Presidential Campaign

### *1 – The Persistent Religious Issue*

In many ways, John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign embodied the souring of the modern presidency. Mostly notable for its televised presidential debates, the 1960 presidential election is also renowned for Kennedy's iconic campaign advertisement. Although preceded by Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1952 "Eisenhower Answers America" and his "I like Ike" slogan, John F. Kennedy's campaign advertisement "Kennedy for Me" sounded more polished and forward-looking. It also contained several references to Kennedy's past experiences, reminding the voters of who he was and what he embodied. Some sentences simultaneously played on Kennedy's relative youthfulness and on his subsequent Congressional experience as well as the causes he fought for: "A man who's old enough to know and young enough to do. [...] A man whose record shows that he will fight for what is right." Others referred to his past experience as a serviceman in the navy during the Second World War, showing his determination and patriotism: "Do you want a man with spirit who is not afraid to fight." Conscious of his strengths but also of some of his weaknesses, the Kennedy campaign team paid attention to ingenuously evoke faith – Kennedy's major liability – and to turn it in his favour: "And do you deny to any man, the right he's guaranteed, to be elected President, not matter what his creed? It's promised in the Bill of Rights, to which we must be true."<sup>172</sup>

As a matter of fact, Catholics were still being discriminated against in 1960s America. Having already been the victim of religious discriminations in the first half of his political career, Kennedy and his team invoked sacred American principles and values that would supposedly veto any anti-Catholic vote. These two sentences meant to convey both morally and legally superior incentives, calling on Americans to respect the Democratic candidate's faith. Infringing on Kennedy's ability to become President solely because of his religious creed would mean infringing on inherently American rights.

When launching his Presidential campaign, Kennedy came to realise that the American myth which consisted in saying that anyone could be elected President – no matter the demographic – indeed remained a myth. His aide Theodore Sorensen recalled:

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<sup>172</sup> David Von Pein's JFK Channel, *JFK FOR PRESIDENT! (1960 CAMPAIGN AD)*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYkpPITKR8E&list=PLL4fBWIG5Di8qGEnXoDTMRyS4rzTuTOmT&index=19>.



He discovered a widely and deeply held belief that the United States, because it is predominantly Protestant in church membership, is traditionally and even semiofficially a Protestant nation – and that the President, as spokesman, symbol and leader of the nation, is expected to attend a Protestant church.<sup>173</sup>

Although Catholics had never been completely ostracised from politics, they had traditionally been deprived of the Presidency:

Catholics and Jews had long served with distinction as members of the Cabinet and the Congress, in a growing number of governors' mansions, and even on that arbiter of the Constitution, the Supreme Court. But the White House was "For Protestants Only," and mere consideration of a Catholic for President revived old fears and passions in states which had elected Catholics to other offices without blinking.<sup>174</sup>

To further his political career, Kennedy needed to confront the religious issue head on, knowing a Catholic would not access the White House while resting on his laurels. Although being aware of the need to act, Kennedy also became conscious of the double-edged character of defending his position on this issue. On the one hand, such vindications could draw more voters to his side, seeing in Kennedy's action the projection of quintessential American values. On the other hand, such an ideological stance could also turn a large part of the population away from him; Americans seeing in Kennedy an envoy from the Pope rather than a politician ready to serve his country.

However, Kennedy did not see it this way. To him, he was first and foremost an American, and then a Catholic. As mentioned by Theodore Sorensen quoting Kennedy himself: "I am not the Catholic candidate for President, I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President who happens also to be a Catholic." Although he had never emphasised his religious beliefs, they were still being held against him by a substantial part of the population. Having worked on his image over the years, trying to make himself appear as American as he could, he often did not expand on religion. Although he knew it could become one in his rise to power, he did not think it should be a liability in the first place. To a certain extent, Kennedy seemed to refuse what today's society would call "identity politics". He rejected religious divisions, clannish politics, and the systematic opposition directed towards American Catholics running for President. This idea is summarised by Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Eric Schmidt in their 2004 work *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today*:

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173 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 110.

174 Sorensen, 110.

He also argued, as had Alfred Smith before him, that he wished no votes cast for him just because he was a Catholic and no votes cast against him for that reason alone. And he noted that Roman Catholics had served in every other conceivable civil capacity without questions concerning their religion being raised. “Little or no attention was paid to my religion,” Kennedy noted, “when I took the oath as senator in 1953 – as a congressman in 1947 – or as a naval officer in 1941. Members of my faith abound in public office at every level except the White House.”<sup>175</sup>

As explained by Espinosa, ever since Kennedy had become a public figure, he had desperately tried to shatter the apparent glass-ceiling Catholic Irish Americans faced in the United States: “Citing his service as a senator, congressman, and veteran of World War II, Kennedy challenged voters to see him as an individual, not a representative of his church.”<sup>176</sup>

His sin was not to be a Catholic *per se* – meaning a believer among other millions of followers – but to have his faith inevitably associated with Catholicism as an ideologically driven movement. What bothered Americans was not so much his personal faith than what it represented. They feared not the faith itself, but what it implied for 1960s America in view of the country’s history. Espinosa noted: “In the view of American liberals at the time, the Vatican’s hierarchical, authoritarian tradition clashed with the experimental, scientific method of empirical observation and pragmatism characteristic of U.S. philosophers.”<sup>177</sup> However, as surprising as it might seem, criticisms directed towards Kennedy’s faith did not come from Richard Nixon and his campaign crew, although they had been advised to do so by some religious groups. Fearing some sort of backlash and judging it to be dishonest, the Republican nominee preferred to stay away from any controversy. Espinosa wrote:

The Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham privately encouraged Nixon to ignore Catholics and to cultivate a Protestant voting bloc. [...] Despite Graham’s counsel, Nixon refused to confront the religious issue while Kennedy’s campaign actively managed the public’s perception of his Catholicism. [...] Warning campaign staff against contact with any individual or group that offered support on religious grounds, Nixon’s campaign banned jokes and any allusions to Kennedy’s religion: “staff and volunteer workers should avoid discussing the ‘religious issue’ either informally or casually since this might be construed as some kind of deliberate campaign.” Fearing a Catholic backlash against prejudice, Nixon exercised extreme caution to avoid any association with anti-Catholicism.<sup>178</sup>

Richard Nixon had everything to lose in trying to harm Kennedy’s campaign by demonising his faith. Some religious groups, however, had everything to gain from it. As

175 Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today*, Rev. ed., 1. Harper Collins pbk. ed (San Francisco, California: Harper San Francisco, 2004), 344.

176 Espinosa, *Religion and the American Presidency*, 294.

177 Espinosa, 293.

178 Espinosa, 295–96.

explained by Sorensen, these religious groups made it clear that whatever Kennedy's answer might be, his religion would still make him unsuitable for the Presidency.<sup>179</sup> Among the anti-Catholic spokesmen was Protestant Reverend Norman Vincent Peale, a prominent Republican clergyman from New York. Furthermore, Peale was also a lecturer and a best-selling author, and was friends with President Eisenhower and Vice-President and Republican nominee, Richard Nixon. On 7<sup>th</sup> September 1960, Peale was invited to serve as chairman to the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom. Initially supposed to be about religious freedom, Sorensen noted that no Catholics, Jews, or liberal Protestants had been invited to the meeting.<sup>180</sup> There, Peale harangued the already staunch Protestant audience by publicly condemning Kennedy's campaign on the basis of his religious beliefs. As noted by Sorensen, Peale had been overheard saying, "Our American culture is at stake. I don't say it won't survive [Kennedy's election], but it won't be what it was."<sup>181</sup>

Sorensen expanded on this by saying that the members of the "Peale Group" – as it was thereafter called – were not the only ones trying to discredit Kennedy, but they were the most publicised ones. For that reason, they invited Kennedy to respond to the provocations:

The Peale publicly helped set the stage for Kennedy's major response to his attackers. He agreed, with considerable reluctance, to accept an invitation to appear before the Houston, Texas, Ministerial Association to discuss the religious issue on the evening of Monday, September 12. Nixon had declined a similar invitation from the same group.<sup>182</sup>

Although being perfectly aware of the political risks it represented, Kennedy also knew he could not turn his back on this, as he was not in a position to negotiate.<sup>183</sup> He was the one under pressure and needed to confront his objectors. Being perfectly aware of the possible outcome of this conference, Sorensen said: "We can win or lose the election right there in Houston on Monday night."<sup>184</sup>

In order to bolster his image, Kennedy meant to "state his position so clearly and comprehensively that no reasonable man could doubt his adherence to the Constitution."<sup>185</sup>

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179 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 188.

180 Sorensen, 188.

181 Sorensen, 188.

182 Sorensen, 189.

183 As a New Englander, and what is more a Catholic Irish American, Kennedy knew the South – and especially a large state like Texas – would be decisive in winning the election. Kennedy's pick for Vice-President being Lyndon B. Johnson – Senator from Texas at the time – he thought he would increase his chances of reaping enough votes in Southern States.

184 Mark Stephen Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice*, New ed. (New York, N.Y: Crossroad Pub, 2005), 81.

185 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 190.

Sorensen – although biased – *a posteriori* described Kennedy’s speech as his second best speech after his Inaugural Address. With his address, Kennedy presented himself as an honest man, willing to include himself within this great American tradition of religious freedom:

But because I am a Catholic, and no Catholic has ever been elected president, the real issues in this campaign have been obscured — perhaps deliberately, in some quarters less responsible than this. So it is apparently necessary for me to state once again not what kind of church I believe in — for that should be important only to me — but what kind of America I believe in. I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference; and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.<sup>186</sup>

Kennedy did not speak for his church, and neither did his church speak for him.<sup>187</sup> Kennedy believed a president should not be constrained by his faith, but if that faith infringed on government sovereignty, he should resign.<sup>188</sup> He was an American before being a Catholic:

This is the kind of America I believe in, and this is the kind I fought for in the South Pacific, and the kind my brother died for in Europe. No one suggested then that we may have a "divided loyalty," that we did "not believe in liberty," or that we belonged to a disloyal group that threatened the "freedoms for which our forefathers died."<sup>189</sup>

By placing his Americanness above his Catholic faith, Kennedy did not fall into Peale’s trap of having communities confronting each other but instead promoted unity and underlined the importance of religious freedom and freedom of speech. He paradoxically managed to deconstruct the concept of the community – a core American concept – by accepting all the communities:

Finally, I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end; where all men and all churches are treated as equal; where every man has the same right to attend or not attend the church of his choice; where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind; and where Catholics, Protestants and Jews, at both the lay and pastoral level, will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which have so often marred their works in the past, and promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood.<sup>190</sup>

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186 John F Kennedy, ‘Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association’, NPR.org, 12 September 1960, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>.

187 Kennedy.

188 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 191. “In the most controversial paragraph of the speech, Kennedy said he would resign his office rather than violate the national interest in order to avoid violating his conscience.”

189 Kennedy, ‘Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association’.

190 Kennedy.

Eventually, Kennedy managed to reach his goal. Although elected by a historically thin margin when it came to the popular vote, he had managed to “promote the American ideal of brotherhood”:

In the 1960 election, the Democrats successfully created an electoral coalition of Catholic, Jewish and African Americans. Seventy percent of African Americans supported the Democratic nominee. Jewish Americans voted for Kennedy in larger percentages than American Catholics. Four of five Jews, and more than seven of ten Catholics, endorsed the Catholic candidate. The Democrats’ efforts to frame the election around an antibigotry theme succeeded.<sup>191</sup>

If the 1960 election proved to be revolutionary in terms of ideas and concepts, it also showed major changes in the way Americans pictured their political representatives as it was the first time in the history of presidential campaigns that live televised debates were broadcast for all Americans to see. Being eloquent, extremely photogenic, and confident, Kennedy was the perfect candidate to prove the unlimited power television could have on the population, thus helping him not to only enter the minds of Americans, but also their homes, and by extension, American history and mythology. Similar to the radio for Franklin D. Roosevelt, and later on the internet for Barack Obama, television was Kennedy’s best ally in the race for entering American mythology.

## ***2 – The Televised Debates***

FDR had radio, and JFK had television. Ever since he entered the world of politics, JFK understood that in order to succeed, one must focus on appearance and public perception. André Kaspi wrote: « Depuis le jour où il entre dans la vie politique, il ne cesse plus d’être en représentation permanente. A tel point qu’on se demande si chez lui le paraître ne fait pas partie de l’être. »<sup>192</sup> In an era of never-ending technological improvements, he grasped the usefulness – one could say the necessity – of television as well as the impact it would have on the American people. He knew it would not only contribute to his image but would surely allow him to enter any American household. As recalled by Theodore H. White in his work *1960: The Making of a President*, only 11% of American households possessed a TV set in

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<sup>191</sup> Espinosa, *Religion and the American Presidency*, 297–98.

<sup>192</sup> Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 468. “Ever since the day he entered politics, JFK’s persona constantly consisted in a set of appearances, to a point where one could argue ‘appearing’ was part of his ‘being’.” Author’s translation.

1950, when 88% had one in 1960.<sup>193</sup> Increasing from just over four million households to more than forty-four million in the span of ten years, the lightning-fast expansion of the new technology of television was unprecedented in American history but also in the Western world.<sup>194</sup> Never before had a medium of mass communication and entertainment spread out across the country so effortlessly and rapidly. As written by White, “The change that came about with this stampede is almost immeasurable.”<sup>195</sup> as shown by the fact that by the summer of 1960 – a few months before the election took place – television was watched for four to five hours each day by each American family. Not only did Americans find a new extremely time-consuming pastime, but it also shifted the way they approached life, information and leisure through the use of television: “Within a single decade the medium has exploded to a dimension in shaping the American mind that rivals that of America’s schools and churches.”<sup>196</sup> If White’s assertion might have appeared surprising as of the early 1960s, time has shown us that it was not far from reality, with Kennedy playing a central role in this paradigm shift.

Ever since he started his political career, JFK was keen on understanding and, to a certain extent, playing with the media, knowing how important it was for a rising politician to grasp its nuances and its implications. Although unable to understand what every single American thought of him individually, Kennedy realised quickly enough he could use the media as a buffer between him and the American people. Media organisations would, by extension, allow young Kennedy to sound out how the American public perceived him. Indeed, if Kennedy’s campaigns for the House of Representatives and the Senate had been kick started early on, the official start for his presidential campaign was traditionally whilst still benefitting from media-related momentum. As explained by Dallek: “On Saturday, January 2, 1960, Kennedy formally announced his candidacy before an audience of three hundred supporters in the Senate Caucus Room. In choosing a slow news day after the New Year’s holiday, he assured himself extensive press coverage.”<sup>197</sup> Having been a fine tactician simultaneously managing to stand out from other candidates while remaining consensual in

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193 White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 279.

194 Laurent Martin, *Culture, médias, pouvoirs: États-Unis et Europe occidentale : 1945-1991*, 2019, 293. « En effet, le cas américain est tout à fait particulier car, avec plusieurs décennies d’avance sur l’Europe occidentale, la télévision s’impose comme un élément-clé de la culture et des médias de masse. » ”Indeed, America’s relationship with television was very distinct from Western Europe’s for television in America was established as a core element of American culture and mass media decades before it did in Western Europe.” Author’s translation.

195 White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 279.

196 White, 280.

197 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 243.

his announcement, Kennedy understood how media worked, and soon the media – joined by the American people – would understand Kennedy too.

He became familiar with media so intensely and so rapidly that some feared it would in fact harm his campaign. As early as 1957, Kennedy's public and press appearances – in addition to increasingly reassuring polls – were on a steady rise, to the point where some thought it would be detrimental to his image. Sorensen recalled: "More than one columnist said Kennedy would not be ready for the Presidency in 1960 in terms of age and maturity and would do better to 'slow down.' Public relations experts warned of overexposure in the press."<sup>198</sup> Having been criticised for thinking he would become President in 1960, Kennedy's objective in becoming a media figure was also to silence critics who said he would be better off running for Vice President rather than for President. To such remarks, Kennedy answered in a classically Kennedy manner: "Let's not talk so much about vice. I'm against vice in any form."<sup>199</sup>

Republican nominee and Vice President Richard Nixon also seemed to share the pundits' opinions. After watching Kennedy's acceptance speech – the "New Frontier Speech" – at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles in July 1960, Richard Nixon thought Kennedy was not in the same league. He expressed overconfidence regarding the upcoming confrontation:

The Vice-President offered the observation that he thought it a poor performance, way over people's heads, too fast. He could take this man on TV – so he felt. [...] The Vice-President, according to those who discussed with him, was now unworried by the tired image on the screen before him that night; he could not foresee what time, illness and strain would do to his own image on such a screen in the fall; he looked forward to the meeting.<sup>200</sup>

As a matter of fact, if both candidates seemed to believe in their strength – Nixon as the favourite and Kennedy as the ambitious underdog – both also seemed to agree on the necessity to organise televised debates in order to provide the American people with the rawest form of political content. Across the 1950s, Americans had shifted their way of approaching information and election campaigns. Both sides understood that television was now a decisive medium in winning the election. Television was now as predominant in the public space as newspapers and radio were twenty to thirty years before. Sorensen recalled: "He [Kennedy] had seen surveys showing twice as many Americans citing television as their

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198 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 108.

199 Sorensen, 108.

200 White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 178.

primary source of campaign information as those citing press and periodicals.”<sup>201</sup> Kennedy now understood that he needed to be known for something other than his religion, as Sorensen noted.<sup>202</sup>

Although both sides agreed on the nature of the event, their views diverged when it came to the format. Nixon’s team – convinced of their candidate’s astounding oral skills and trusting their protégé would defeat Kennedy – intended to set up as few debates as possible, for they were persuaded one fatal blow from Nixon would be enough: “The Nixon negotiators fought to restrict the number of debates – their man, they felt, was the master of the form and one ‘sudden-death’ debate could eliminate Kennedy with a roundhouse swing.”<sup>203</sup> Republicans viewed Kennedy’s team’s insistence to set up as many debates as possible as a sign of weakness.

Being the underdog, Kennedy would logically need more time to convince the American public that he was the more appealing candidate than Nixon, the latter being already firmly established and needing no introduction. The Kennedy team knew the importance of constant and repeated exposure, not only to instil a certain hammering effect on the audience, but, slowly but surely, to hamper Nixon’s image and popularity: “The Kennedy negotiators insisted on at least five debates, then let themselves be whittled to four. (‘Every time we get those two fellows on the screen side by side,’ said J. Leonard Reinsch, Kennedy’s TV maestro, ‘we’re going to gain and he’s going to lose.’)”<sup>204</sup> As a matter of fact, being the underdog paradoxically benefited Kennedy as the successive debates would enable him to show steady progression, underplay aforementioned liabilities, and present an improved version of himself through the use of storytelling, a concept dear to most Americans. Overall, visibility is always an asset for the outsider, for even when debates seem equal – as the Kennedy-Nixon debates potentially were – the outsider may benefit if they show perseverance and improvement. Kennedy entered the American mind.

As mentioned by White, Nixon’s first mistake was to address himself to Kennedy directly as if no one else was around, while Kennedy addressed himself to the nation:

Nixon was addressing himself to Kennedy – but Kennedy was addressing himself to the audience that was the nation. In these debates, before this audience, there could be no appeal to the past or to the origins of any ethnic

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201 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 195.

202 Sorensen, 195.

203 White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 283.

204 White, 283.



group – there could only be an appeal, across the board, to all Americans and to the future.<sup>205</sup>

Although he was a good speaker, Nixon failed to understand the implications of television. This new medium provided him with an unprecedented opportunity to address himself to the nation, but he missed his chance. Kennedy, on the other hand, grasped the necessity to forget Nixon and to speak directly to the television screen as if he were in front of a real-life audience. He invited himself into the homes of millions of Americans and instead of directly debating Nixon, he lured the nation in a unilateral discussion. Furthermore, Kennedy clearly announced the projects he intended to undertake once elected president, stating precisely his party's objective for the nation and the decade to come. Nixon, on the other hand, tended to agree with most of what Kennedy had to say, but only disagreed on the means employed to achieve their goals. Nixon remained focused on Kennedy while his opponent was thinking outside the box. Kennedy was able to project his future administration as well as his own image in the future while Nixon was not:

Nixon was not addressing himself to his central theme; he was offering no vision of the future that the Republican Party might offer Americans – he was concerned with the cool and undisturbed man who sat across the platform from him, with the personal adversary in the studio, not with the mind of America.<sup>206</sup>

As mentioned by White, Nixon incurred the wrath of the Republican Party for his “me-too” debating style which never really threatened Kennedy during the debates.<sup>207</sup> Nixon was a man of the fifties and could not compete with Kennedy, a man of the sixties. Nixon symbolised the past, barely able to provide meaningful arguments and he never managed to make himself heard the way he should. Nixon did not embody anything more than what he had done during his eight years in government: he was still Vice-President and his experience – an asset on paper – worked to his disadvantage.

Not only did the first televised debates revolutionise the favourite-outsider dichotomy, as America witnessed Kennedy coming out as the winner of this series of debates, but television also provided Kennedy – and by extension the world of politics – with a brand-new approach to elections and campaigning as well as the people's relationship with their elected officials. Theodore H. White argued this revolution did not come from the candidates themselves, but from the nature of television itself:

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205 White, 288.

206 White, 288.

207 White, 291.

It was a revolution born of the ceaseless American genius in technology; its sole agent and organizer had been the common American television set. Tonight it was to permit the simultaneous gathering of all the tribes of America to ponder their choice between two chieftains in the largest political convocation in the history of man.<sup>208</sup>

Television allowed the emergence of a sort of electoral tribalism, of which Kennedy would eventually become the chieftain. Televised debates managed to generalise this sense of tribal gathering and participation to the point where what mattered was not what the candidates had to say or how they behaved but – to quote White – “how many of the candidates’ fellow Americans gave up their evening hours to ponder the choice between the two.”<sup>209</sup> Although mentioning tribalism may seem inappropriate or too simplistic, the essence of a presidential election is not far from a tribalistic action. Clear primitive and gregarious elements remain in the choosing of a President, even in twentieth-century America. This coming together acts as a binding element for the realisation of a myth. In that sense, TV became part of “mass media”, not in the sense of having the largest number of people watching it, but in the sense Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan defined it in his 1964 ground-breaking work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*: “They are an indication, not of the size of their audiences, but of the fact that everybody becomes involved in them at the same time.”<sup>210</sup> Similar to a clan, the whole of America gathered in a ritual ceremony to choose their new chieftain.

In addition to extolling the marvels of American technology, the revolution Theodore H. White wrote about would also largely benefit JFK in a way that – as never before in history – it allowed the public to literally *idolise* the political figures of their country. Perhaps today’s audience would find White’s book irrelevant. Social media has surpassed any other media thanks to its instantaneous quality, and revelations of politicians’ lives, from their favourite ice-cream flavour to their least favourite film. White’s 1960s analysis of television shone a light on the symbolical significance of increasing “starification” of politicians in post-war America. Initially born in Hollywood a few decades before, this glorification of the well-known also spread to politics. Actors had cinema; politicians had television.

Similar to cinema, only the most eloquent, good-looking, charming, and well-dressed individuals would succeed in the televised world. Their popularity mostly rested on superficial characteristics. Jason Mittell provided concise remarks on this topic in his 2009

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208 White, 279.

209 White, 293.

210 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 7. print (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 349.

work *Television & American Culture*: “Television’s medium bias benefits public figures with charisma and strong emotional presence, and hurts those whose appearance or tone is less engaging.”<sup>211</sup> Kennedy himself perfectly embodied what it took for an individual to benefit from television. The debates in particular would be of great importance in the shaping of the Kennedy myth. Having progressively built his public image through other media and countless public appearance, the Kennedy imagery would reach its climax in the presidential televised debates. Kennedy was now his own image, and both were indistinguishable. He depended on television in order to remain relevant and television welcomed him as it depended on popular and ‘spectacular’ figures – in the sense Guy Debord defined it in his magnum opus *La Société du Spectacle*.

If TV had participated in the making of JFK, it had also greatly contributed to the downfall of Nixon. As noted by White, his first mistake lay in his clothing style: “Against this background Nixon, in his light suit, faded into a fuzzed outline, while Kennedy in his dark suit had the crisp picture edge of contrast.”<sup>212</sup> Kennedy’s black outfit was clear and caught the viewer’s attention. Moreover, Nixon’s makeup for the first debate was called “Lazy Shave”. Supposedly, it was to hide his emerging stubble. In practice, Nixon’s makeup did not work on his skin, and the result was a disaster. Already tired, Nixon now stood even less of a chance against his rival. White recalled what happened on that night:

Normally and in private, Kennedy under tension flutters his hands – he adjusts his necktie, slaps his knee, stokes his face. Tonight he was calm and nerveless in appearance. The Vice-President, by contrast, was tense, almost frightened, at turns glowering and, occasionally, haggard-looking to the point of sickness.<sup>213</sup>

Knowing the makeup he had used would not only fail at making him look more presentable and less tired but also less sweaty, Nixon only asked a single favour to the producer on that night: “not to be on camera if he happened to be mopping sweat from his face.”<sup>214</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, the Kennedy staff members had made no specific request. White noted that “they seemed as cocky and confident as their chief.”<sup>215</sup> This short but meaningful series of events took the debate to another level. In the days that followed it, what had been discussed was not the actual content of the debate, but these (in)significant

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211 Jason Mittell, *Television & American Culture* (New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2009), 142.

212 White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 289.

213 White, 288–89.

214 White, 286.

215 White, 286.

events. As argued by Daniel Boorstin in his 1962 ground-breaking work *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*: “The greatest opportunity in American history to educate the voters by debating the large issues of the campaign failed.”<sup>216</sup> As a matter of fact, instead of addressing the central issues, these four debates were remarkably successful in reducing national matters to trivial dimensions. According to Boorstin, these debates represented the essence of what he came to define as “pseudo-event”, meaning an event that has been tailored, manufactured – most of the time a press conference or a debate – that makes the audience focus on insignificant details rather than the important issues. The debates came to be discussed for reasons that defied everything both teams and journalists had anticipated. In fact, Boorstin argues that the “Great Debates” between Kennedy and Nixon were the application of a quiz show format to real life:

A perfect example of how pseudo-events can dominate is the recent popularity of the quiz show format. Its original appeal came less from the fact that such shows were tests of intelligence (or of dissimulation) than from the fact that the situations were elaborately contrived – with isolation booths, armed bank guards, and all the rest – and they purported to inform the public.<sup>217</sup>

As further explained by Boorstin, pseudo-events appeal to our duty and desire to be educated.<sup>218</sup>

Although these confrontations had been set-up and manufactured, they inevitably encountered difficulties in the course of the debates. If these confrontations became so well known for the “wrong” reasons, it is also due to the nature of television itself. As mentioned by Theodore White: “The nature of both TV and radio is that they abhor silence and “dead time”. All TV and radio discussion programs are compelled to snap question and answer back and forth as if the contestants were adversaries in an intellectual tennis match.”<sup>219</sup> Because a thirty-second pause on TV seems interminable, the nature of the medium obliges the debaters to constantly fill in the blanks. As a result, both contestants and the audience are deprived of any ability to think and are thus reduced to remain on the surface of ideas. Despite wanting to sound intellectual, the debates remained mere “pseudo-intellectual” events. Sorensen himself had also come to realise the nature of the debates, in a sense that they did not provide enough factual substance but only gave the impression of doing so. These pseudo-events were created

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216 Daniel Joseph Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 43.

217 Boorstin, 41.

218 Boorstin, 34.

219 White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 292.

by television itself: “They rarely had continuity in a single debate but became repetitious in the course of all four. Nor did two-and-a-half-minute answers permit any real debating.”<sup>220</sup>

As a matter of fact, television favouring style over substance is what enabled Kennedy’s aura to take shape. Sorensen pointed out Kennedy’s ability to appear more relaxed, incisive, and forceful as the debates went on, mentioning his rapid-style delivery as being more efficient than Nixon’s approach.<sup>221</sup> The longer Kennedy remained on air, the greater his aura grew. Kennedy was made for television and, in return, television enhanced his image and popularity. For the first time in the history of the United States, candidates running for the White House were being shown to the entire nation on live television. JFK was the first man of a new era. Americans had no points of comparison and the Democratic nominee logically became a standard for what later came to be expected on television. Similar to a lodestar for candidates to come, he did not actually enter American mythology, but his image did.

Unlike radio – where people focus on what is being said – TV has the power to blur the frontier between form and content. To a certain extent, television acts similarly to a vortex, sucking the viewer into an endless, passive contemplation of the form rather than the actual content. Mesmerised by the image of Kennedy rather than by Kennedy himself, the contrary perceptions of those Americans who had listened to it on the radio, rather than watched the televised debates, were surprising. As mentioned by White:

Those who heard the debates on radio, according to sample surveys, believed that the two candidates came off almost equal. Yet every survey of those who watched the debates on television indicated that the Vice-President had come off poorly and, in the opinion of many, very poorly. It was the picture image that had done it – and it 1960, television had won the nation away from sound to images, and that was that.<sup>222</sup>

The audience had *consumed* television and, in return, the audience itself had been *consumed* by television. These four debates became historic as they had managed to gather 115,000,000 to 120,000,000 people. As of 1960 and as White put it: “[N]o larger assembly of human beings, their minds focused on one problem, has ever happened in history.”<sup>223</sup> By gathering huge amounts of people, the image had proved its power and efficiency: nothing would ever surpass it and it would become Kennedy’s stock in trade. Indeed, JFK’s handsomeness acted as a communication tool during the debates – in the short-term – but allowed him to become extremely pervasive in the long-run, penetrating the minds of millions

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220 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 200.

221 Sorensen, 200.

222 White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 290.

223 White, 293.

of Americans. He was an enigmatic creation and at the same time was rooted in the American people. Thanks to his appearance, eloquence, and youthfulness, he embodied the values and characteristics the United States was longing for in the midst of the Cold War.

Overall, Kennedy seemed to embody a certain universally American character. From his younger days he had worked towards conforming to the American tradition while building his own image. From his service in the military, which not only made him a war hero but an American hero, to the well-marketed books he published over the years, Kennedy's credibility was now established and his image as both a man of action and a man of letters – while actively building a public image - would propel him to the world of politics.

Notwithstanding the troubles he faced, JFK had managed to turn his religion to an advantage over the course of his political career. Firstly, by dismissing the attacks made on his faith, then, by his success in including himself within the perennial American tradition of religious freedom. Both made Kennedy's aspirations for the Presidency more and more realistic. He was now a legitimate candidate. Finally, in debating with Nixon, Kennedy seized the implications of television, the “pseudo-intellectual” character of it, and used his appearance to embrace the “paraître” instead of the “être”. As argued by Marshall McLuhan: “TV is a medium that rejects the sharp personality and favors the presentation of processes rather than of products.”<sup>224</sup> A shift had occurred: the sign was no longer meaningful *per se*; only its mythical representation. Kennedy had been the right man, at the right time, with the right medium. As a result, JFK was only appearing on ‘stage’, letting his image act for him. He was performing in front of viewers – and not watchers – an audience simply contemplating the spectacle, remaining in absolute passivity, and hanging on Kennedy's every word. He appeared as a god-like presence in all American homes but instead of a drawing or a painting being hung on the wall, he was a real, life-size human – speaking and moving – in a television set, paradoxically appearing so close to every home and yet so far away.

The debates made their contribution in maximising Kennedy's popularity and considerably increasing his chances of becoming President. They were the first of a long series of public appearances that would not only maintain his constant exposure to the American people and the media but allow him to transcend the presidency. Presenting himself as the guarantor of the free world from the very start of his presidency, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1961 – the same image he would portray for the rest of his presidency – John F. Kennedy showed America and the world the values he embodied were universal and unchallengeable. Ideas did

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224 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 309.

not emanate from Kennedy, but President Kennedy's image seemed to emanate from his principles. Both Kennedy and his convictions merged into a symbolical ideal that had to be reached. Slowly, the evanescent character of Kennedy made him untouchable, and a perfect sentiment of completeness would be felt among Americans until November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963. The assassination of John F. Kennedy would bear witness to the mourning for an icon, the passing of "Camelot" and a grave sense of "lost future". Fuelled by repeated media interventions – simultaneously actualising Kennedy's passing and acknowledging his revival – as well as endless conspiracy theories, the assassination propelled John F. Kennedy to American mythology. Although gone, the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States never truly left. He entered the realm of Americana; he was America.

## Chapter III: From a President to a Mythical Entity

### Section 1: The Guarantor of the Free World

#### *1 – A Sense of Déjà Vu*

From the start of his Presidency, Kennedy had stressed the importance of change and the necessity to let America follow its own course. A memorable sentence from his Inaugural Address went as follows: “Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans.”<sup>225</sup> The 1950s were now over and, as mentioned by Lawrence Freedman, “The junior officers of the Second World War were taking over from the generals.”<sup>226</sup> President Eisenhower had now left office and it was time for a new era to begin. As mentioned by André Kaspi, this change seemed theatrical, almost caricatural:

A la grisaille des années Eisenhower succèdent l’intelligence, la franche gaieté, l’euphorie, la beauté des années Kennedy. C’est un changement de décor comme on en voit sur les scènes de théâtre. Subitement, les acteurs font régner une animation joyeuse qui gagne la salle.<sup>227</sup>

As a matter of fact, although Kennedy’s short presidency was shaken by and peppered with multiple, now historical events, historian Christopher Lasch argued in his 1979 groundbreaking work *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* that no other event could eclipse President Kennedy’s Inaugural Address: “In many ways the most important event of the Kennedy administration, however – its high point, from which everything else was a decline – was the inaugural, a spectacle that solidified the myth of Camelot before Camelot had even come into being.”<sup>228</sup> Although his presidency had just begun, JFK’s Inaugural Address constituted the apex of his time in office precisely because his speech was the embodiment of America. His strength not only resided in his ability to constitute a pastiche of American themes and values, but to evoke reliable, timeless

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225 Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address | JFK Library’, 20 January 1961.

226 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 7.

227 Kaspi, *Kennedy: Les 1000 Jours d’un Président*, 274–75. “After the drabness of the Eisenhower years came the intelligence, gaiety, euphoria and beauty of the Kennedy years. It is a change of setting as seen on theatre stages. Actors suddenly establish a joyful atmosphere that takes over the entire room.” Author’s translation.

228 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 98.



principles, and project them to contemporary America. Kennedy's speech was a paradox between a sense of déjà vu and novelty.

Among these themes was the American myth of the Frontier. Paired with the notion of "Manifest Destiny" – coined by journalist John O' Sullivan in 1845 – the notion of the Frontier was used to describe the progressive westward conquest of America and the advent of "civilisation" in western territories. Later defined as the birth of American democracy by historian Frederick Jackson Turner, the Frontier remains – to this day – a core and stable American ideal and a pillar of American identity. As for Kennedy, the "New Frontier" – a term coined and first used in his "Acceptance of Democratic Nomination for President" given on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1961, also known as "The New Frontier Speech" – signified change for 1960s America. His objective was to instil a sentiment of renewal in the country, asking his people to look towards the future while embracing traditional American values:

For I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. [...] They were determined to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from without and within. Today some would say that those struggles are all over--that all the horizons have been explored--that all the battles have been won-- that there is no longer an American frontier. But I trust that no one in this vast assemblage will agree with those sentiments. For the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won--and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier--the frontier of the 1960's--a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils-- a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.<sup>229</sup>

Promoting himself as the guarantor of that New Frontier, meant it was his turn to lead his people and leave his mark in American history, similar to what other great Americans had done in the past. Entrepreneurship, discipline, unifying the nation and placing the national interest above everything else were all sentiments Kennedy later included in his speeches as President.

Describing in his Inaugural Address his generation as having been "tempered by war" and disciplined by a "hard and bitter peace", Kennedy evoked the necessity to face the problems that countless generations had faced before, similar to a cycle repeating itself, era after era. The image of the New Frontier was used to show that "under his leadership the

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229 John F Kennedy, "The New Frontier," Acceptance Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy, Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960 | JFK Library', accessed 20 January 2021, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKSEN/0910/JFKSEN-0910-015>.

United States could ride the tide of change rather than be swept along by it.”<sup>230</sup> The set of challenges Kennedy intended to overcome exemplified American freedom while asking his people to abide by certain rules. In Christopher Lasch’s words: “In these words Kennedy invoked his preoccupation with discipline, testing, and tempering on behalf of a whole generation’s beliefs – so soon shattered – that it stood poised on the brink of greatness.”<sup>231</sup> The Kennedy years would abruptly end soon after the start of this new era, not without remembering similarities with another American President – himself admired by Kennedy and who influenced his presidency – Abraham Lincoln.

As a matter of fact, Kennedy was fairly gifted at invoking powerful American myths in his speeches. He often drew famous phrases from illustrious American men and would intelligently quote them verbatim or reformulate them to adapt his language to the 1960s. In doing so, he automatically created parallels between different periods of American history and would thus associate his image with those of late great American figures. This idea was underlined by Patricia K. Felkins and Irvin Goldman in their 1993 article “Political Myth as Subjective Narrative: Some Interpretations and Understandings of John F. Kennedy”:

Kennedy invoked the power and identification with "good" myths, especially those associated with the political, spiritual, and artistic development of the United States. He also used strategic rhetorical references to presidents who have taken on mythic proportions—Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Franklin Roosevelt. John Kennedy's speeches and public statements contain links to mythic archetypes.<sup>232</sup>

The level of intertextuality present in JFK’s speeches – especially in his Inaugural Address - became synonymous with patriotism and bridge-building across different periods of American history. JFK’s allusions to President Lincoln’s oratory became all the more relevant as JFK also intended – like Lincoln – to present himself as the guarantor of the free world. Times had changed, the 1860s had become the 1960s but some issues still divided the American nation. Having been progressively established as a champion for civil rights, John F. Kennedy was often compared to Abraham Lincoln. Indeed, both men fought for civil rights during their presidency. Kennedy admired Lincoln, and he knew that few other presidents would ensure his credibility as much as drawing quotes from Lincoln did.

Similar to Lincoln’s, Kennedy’s ‘60s was to be a real test for the unity of the nation. If Kennedy’s image later took on the one of a twentieth-century abolitionist thanks to his

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230 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 37.

231 Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, 98.

232 Felkins and Goldman, ‘Political Myth as Subjective Narrative’, 449.

activism in favour of civil rights, he first and foremost meant to protect his country from communism and the danger it represented to American ideals at the time. Similar to Lincoln – whose objective was to reunify the nation – Kennedy meant to inform the nation of the need to bind together in order to defeat communism. Although Lincoln meant to defeat an internal threat to the stability of the nation – slavery – and Kennedy an external one – both Presidents were willing to warn their people of the uncertain times that were to come. President Kennedy did so by bringing his Inaugural Address to a close by paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln’s second Inaugural Address. President Kennedy’s “With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds.”<sup>233</sup> constituted a clever reference to the words Lincoln pronounced almost a century before while bringing his own speech to an end – only a few months before his assassination – as he meant to inspire a moral and legal revolution to erase one of America’s first sins, slavery: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right.”<sup>234</sup>

Both Kennedy and Lincoln ended their speeches on a note of redemption and reconciliation. With the Civil War for Lincoln and the Cold War for Kennedy, themes such as collective responsibility, devotion to one’s country, sacrifice and rebirth peppered their Inaugural Addresses and thus entered American discourse. These themes would later be fully realised in Lincoln’s and Kennedy’s assassinations. Symbolically, they both embodied the ability of two men to pursue their ideas and to assert themselves as the guarantors of freedom, at whatever cost.

Kennedy pursued his ideas but also promoted a general form of ideal – the American ideal – by including himself in Lincoln’s heritage and continuity. Kennedy not only used the same eternal principles and themes his predecessor had employed but applied them to a distinct context, a century after Lincoln had entered American mythology. The 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States did not build his mythical aura from scratch but borrowed it from the 16<sup>th</sup> President. To a certain extent, conforming to the standards Lincoln had set a century before constituted a more impressive feat than merely attempting to create one’s own, for equalling Lincoln seemed almost impossible.

Kennedy’s paraphrasing of Lincoln contained the most enduring principle a speech possesses: the ability to state something bold and innovative and yet timeless. Whether it was

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233 Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address | JFK Library’, 20 January 1961.

234 Abraham Lincoln, ‘Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address - Lincoln Memorial (U.S. National Park Service)’, 4 March 1865, <https://www.nps.gov/linc/learn/historyculture/lincoln-second-inaugural.htm>.

his farewell address to the state of Massachusetts – his own version of Winthrop’s “City Upon a Hill Speech” – the “New Frontier Speech” or his Inaugural Address, Kennedy always seemed to connect himself to American history. He was conscious of the malleability and yet rigidity of his country’s past. Similar to a *camera obscura*, Kennedy touched the core of the American mind and spirit by reflecting the idea of a free nation onto his people through the scope of Lincoln. Kennedy embraced the idea that answers can be found in history.

Knowing his ideas would resonate with future generations of Americans as Lincoln’s did, Kennedy also became aware of the necessity to address himself to the rest of the world. If the challenges faced by Lincoln were mostly Americentric, Kennedy’s, on the other hand, were to be projected on a global scale. If Kennedy meant to preserve freedom at home, he would also need to ensure it abroad and fight communism. While Lincoln and Kennedy both fought for the freedom of Americans, the latter also meant to dedicate his presidency to the freedom of man: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.”<sup>235</sup>

## ***2 – Foreign Policy***

John F. Kennedy had always been fond of foreign affairs. Although deeply attached to his country, he was always aware of current global events. His father having been the US ambassador to the United Kingdom – giving his son the ability to form relationships with high-ranking individuals – JFK’s passion for foreign affairs did not appear overnight and was established before his Presidency. While Sorensen’s interests were mainly domestic, he recalled Senator Kennedy’s chief interest was foreign affairs:

He asked me one day in 1953 – long before national politics was on our horizon – what Cabinet posts would interest me most, if I ever had a choice; and I replied, ‘Justice, Labor and Health-Education-Welfare.’ ‘I wouldn’t any interest in any of those,’ he said emphatically, ‘only Secretary of State or Defense.’<sup>236</sup>

As of 1957, Senator Kennedy was appointed to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Dallek noted it helped “his standing as a party spokesman on foreign affairs.”<sup>237</sup>

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235 Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address | JFK Library’, 20 January 1961.

236 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 17–18.

237 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 221.

As a matter of fact, Kennedy's passion for foreign topics became so prevalent that, once elected President, he intended to leave little room for his Foreign Secretary. Lawrence Freedman wrote: "The logic of Kennedy's determination to be a foreign policy president meant that he was expecting to take the lead himself on most of the major issues. [...] The prospect of a weak secretary of state did not bother him."<sup>238</sup> Almost a providential President, Kennedy thought himself capable of solving America's entire foreign policy issues.

In that respect, Kennedy's views on foreign policy were the projection of key American principles onto the rest of the world. Kennedy's objective to let the world be enlightened and led by his country was based on the creation of the United States itself. Born out of a revolution opposing the 'virtuous' settlers to their 'tyrannical' motherland, the United States provided the world with the first declaration of rights for its citizens as well as guaranteed individual rights. First founded and later developed through multiple waves of immigration originating in various countries, it was in America's roots to see itself as the microcosm of the world. In its early days, the United States saw in itself a certain sentiment of universality: the American cause was applicable to the rest of the world. As of 1960, the cause of all humanity was the one of America and JFK's objective was to defend his vision of freedom everywhere it had to be defended. On the day of his inauguration, Kennedy said: "My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man. Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you."<sup>239</sup>

Long before becoming President, Kennedy knew the importance of conducting appropriate foreign policies in order to ensure the future of his country. Well aware of the Truman Doctrine – also known as 'containment' – which consisted of trying to limit the expansion of communism across the world, President Kennedy was a firm believer in the 'Domino Theory'; the idea that a country falling under communist ideology would inevitably bring its neighbouring states into the same political mindset, thus propagating Soviet idealism at incredible speed. As recalled by Sorensen, most of Kennedy's Joint Chiefs and advisers accepted without reservation the 'falling domino' theory.<sup>240</sup>

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238 Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 37.

239 Kennedy, 'Inaugural Address | JFK Library', 20 January 1961.

240 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 644.

To Kennedy, communism meant the death of freedom. As explained by André Kaspi, his simple reasoning consisted of arguing that poverty led to communism, itself destroying liberties, and thus putting an end to democracy.<sup>241</sup> Being the spokesman of the largest democracy in the world at the time, President Kennedy knew adopting a ‘freedom for all’ principle would benefit the image of his country as well as his own. If democracy and rights died, so would his aura. Were he to succeed in his quest, Kennedy would forever be deemed as a ‘freedom guru’, giving (his own perception of) freedom to the rest of the world.

Well aware of the dangers of direct confrontations with the Soviets, JFK relied heavily on the use of soft power in order to conduct his policy and, as early as March 1961, the Peace Corps became one of the major components of Kennedy’s Administration’s plan to bring freedom and peace to the world. The Peace Corps was made to bring knowledge, services, and goods to developing countries, in order for them to find in the United States – and by extension President Kennedy – a reliable ally. Aimed at recruiting young Americans, the Peace Corps’ mission was to send thousands of volunteers to countless developing countries so that they would provide the locals with support of all types, teaching them new agricultural and technical methods as well as languages.

In effect, the Peace Corps resembled the practical application of the American character. Often portrayed as always being on the move, eager to conquer new uncharted territories – both literally and metaphorically – Americans saw in the Peace Corps the possibility to contribute to Kennedy’s New Frontier while embracing one of its defining characteristics. Often talked about from a historical perspective, this American quality is also deeply rooted in American literature. Although this notably American trait can be found throughout illustrious novelist John Steinbeck’s entire work, it is clearly depicted in his 1962 work *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*. Published during Kennedy’s Presidency, this book was Steinbeck’s account of his 1960 road trip across America, accompanied by his dog Charley. There, he re-discovered what it meant to be American at the dawn of a new decade:

Under the big oak trees of my place at Sag Harbor sat Rocinante, handsome and self-contained, and neighbors came to visit, some neighbors we didn’t even know we had. I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over in every part of the nation—a burning desire to go, to move, to get under

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241 Kaspi, *Kennedy: Les 1000 Jours d’un Président*, 65. « On pourrait résumer sa pensée en quelques mots. La pauvreté mène au communisme qui détruit les libertés, donc la démocratie. » « One could summarise his reasoning in a few words. Poverty leads to communism, itself supressing liberties and thus democracy.” Author’s translation.

way, any-place, away from any Here. They spoke quietly of how they wanted to go someday, to move about, free and unanchored, not toward something but away from something. I saw this look and heard this yearning everywhere in every state I visited. Nearly every American hungers to move.<sup>242</sup>

Overall, the Peace Corps was extending geographical but also intellectual and moral frontiers. If Americans were to participate in this great endeavour, then President Kennedy would act as their lodestar. He would act as a guide for Americans, but also for any country willing to reject communism. He would welcome them the way he welcomed newly independent countries – freed from the yoke of colonial power – “to the ranks of the free”.<sup>243</sup>

Overall, although the Peace Corps improved the lives of some people in developing countries, it held a highly symbolical significance. This subversive war on communism disguised as a war on poverty and illiteracy allowed Americans and Kennedy to champion their cultural imperialism as a noble cause, thus improving the image of the President. The sugar-coated propaganda promoted through the Peace Corps allowed JFK to gain the moral high ground over Khrushchev and the Soviets. As pointed out by André Kaspi, this programme was a way for Americans to kindle a desire for a certain American idealism: « Ils ne toucheront pas de salaires mirobolants. Leur vie sera celle des populations dans lesquelles ils vivront. Ces jeunes Américains témoigneront à leur manière de la solidarité du monde industrialisé à l'égard du tiers monde. Une cause noble et généreuse qui stimule l'idéalisme de beaucoup. »<sup>244</sup>

JFK's project turned out to be a successful gamble since in late 1962, more than three thousand volunteers were already stationed in twelve countries across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and South-East Asia. A year later, it comprised more than seven thousand Americans in forty-six countries.<sup>245</sup> Not only did this project turn out to be revolutionary at the time but it also enjoyed a lasting reputation, as it still operates today decades after the end

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242 John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 10.

243 Kennedy, 'Inaugural Address | JFK Library', 20 January 1961. "To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom-- and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside."

244 Kaspi, *Kennedy: Les 1000 Jours d'un Président*, 67. "They will not earn stupendous salaries. Their lives will be the ones of the local populations. These young Americans, coming from the industrialised world, will help the Third World their own way. This noble and generous cause kindled a feeling of idealism for many." Author's translation.

245 Kaspi, 67.

of the Cold War. Kennedy's gamble on the future proved to be successful as young Americans are still volunteering to be part of the Peace Corps. Through this programme they perpetuate Kennedy's memory, making sure that "the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans."<sup>246</sup> In the minds of these young Americans, Kennedy still exists through the Peace Corps, as a symbol of freedom and peace, combined with a President who believed improving the life of his people should also be about improving the lives of others. A firm believer in universalism, he thought some matters of peace and freedom could not be fought alone. Among them was the struggle against nuclear power.

Aware of the fact that countless American Presidents had faced tremendous hardships while governing the country, Kennedy knew the way he needed to manage his presidency would be unprecedented in American history for both the United States and the Soviet Union had several thousand nuclear warheads in their possession. As Kennedy stated in his Inaugural Address: "The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life."<sup>247</sup> Although freshly elected, Kennedy had already devised a strategy to deal with the Soviet Union in order to then advance his interests when it came to nuclear matters. He did not intend to demonise the Soviet Union or engage in direct confrontations with them for he believed peace would be more easily obtained through negotiations and treaties. He intended to play the Soviets by the rules in order to ensure freedom for his people and the rest of the world. He considered the Soviet Union to be closer to an adversary than an enemy, the definition of which can be found in the following 2013 article published by Michael Ignatieff in *The New York Times*:

An adversary is someone you want to defeat. An enemy is someone you have to destroy. With adversaries, compromise is honorable: Today's adversary could be tomorrow's ally. With enemies, on the other hand, compromise is appeasement. Between adversaries, trust is possible. They will beat you if they can, but they will accept the verdict of a fair fight. This, and a willingness to play by the rules, is what good-faith democracy demands. Between enemies, trust is impossible. They do not play by the rules (or if they do, only as a means to an end) and if they win, they will try to rewrite the rules, so that they can never be beaten again.<sup>248</sup>

As summarised by Lawrence Freedman, Kennedy's objective was to diminish the possibility of nuclear warfare between the two countries, for he knew that would not only take the world past its point of no return, but that his image would forever be associated with the

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246 Kennedy, 'Inaugural Address | JFK Library', 20 January 1961.

247 Kennedy.

248 Michael Ignatieff, 'Opinion | Enemies vs. Adversaries - The New York Times', October 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/opinion/enemies-vs-adversaries.html>.



one of a President who destroyed America, and his aura with it: “He did come to office with a strategy for the conduct of the cold war that he then tried to implement. At its core was a respect for the Soviet Union as a competitor for international influence, and a belief that deals could be struck with Moscow to render this competition less dangerous.”<sup>249</sup>

Kennedy showed great concern about the Soviet Union itself, but also feared nuclear proliferation perpetrated by countries like France; a country powerful enough to produce its own nuclear warheads but a lightweight against the two world superpowers. Kennedy believed de Gaulle’s independent line on the matter could precipitate a global nuclear conflict, triggered by France’s overdeveloped ego and inferiority complex: “He [Kennedy] was concerned about the French “force de frappe” not only because it might provide Germany with a pretext to move in the same direction, but because it gave Paris an independent capacity to turn a conventional battle in Europe into a general nuclear war.”<sup>250</sup>

With the progressive nuclear proliferation and the ever-increasing number of warheads being produced, President Kennedy considered the legal and diplomatic ways to be his best options. Having proved himself in the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was in a position to reach out to Khrushchev and negotiate with him. Both countries had reached a point where they could go no further in the nuclear escalation. Winston Churchill’s “We arm to parley” had never been so relevant than under Kennedy’s mandate. Ingenuous as he was, President Kennedy knew the power words had in convincing a country of what mattered. Kennedy knew his project granted him the moral high ground and would better his image, were he to succeed. Having witnessed the power of speeches on his Inauguration Day and later on during the Cuban Missile Crisis, he thought it necessary to win ‘hearts and minds’ before even trying to pass any laws in Congress.

Given on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1963, President Kennedy’s *Commencement Address at American University* – also known as “The Peace Speech” – intended to convince Americans and Congress of the righteousness of a nuclear test ban treaty, surprisingly did not have the expected effect. As explained by Lawrence Freedman: “The speech hardly electrified the American people. It received barely a mention in the press, and the White House mailbag failed to bulge.”<sup>251</sup> By a twist of fate, the largest defence budget in the history of the United States was passed by Congress on the very same day.

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249 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 417.

250 Freedman, 262.

251 Freedman, 268.

Although ignored when first given, the Peace Speech earned its reputation through time. With it, Kennedy appeared as a prophet in the eyes of Americans as he committed to sign the first treaty on restricting the use of nuclear weapons and banning detonations in the open. Interestingly, and as mentioned by Dallek: ““Like Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Kennedy’s peace speech did not have much initial resonance.”<sup>252</sup> Once again, Kennedy walked in Lincoln’s footsteps and appeared as a prophet, knowing any inaction would foreshadow much greater dangers in the future. The speech gained significance through time and at last, became “one of the great state papers of any twentieth-century American presidency.”, Dallek argued.<sup>253</sup> And for good reason, since Kennedy’s Peace Speech was peppered with some of the most iconic phrases ever uttered by a President in American history:

What kind of peace do I mean? What kind of peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children--not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women--not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.<sup>254</sup>

Refusing peace in death or death in peace, Kennedy bore the entire responsibility for the project. As often in his life, he did not think his ideal of peace should be the result of a miracle but should instead be the final conclusion to a long series of efforts: he would build his own aura. By refusing ‘the peace of the grave’ and ‘the security of the slave’, President Kennedy went further than former Presidents and refused to remain caught between two disastrous outcomes:

In that one brief sentence, he dismissed both the kind of peace that would follow a cataclysmic nuclear war, which “hard-liners” in Moscow, Peking and Washington seemed ready to fight, and the sort of peace a generation reared on memories of appeasement feared might come out of negotiations limiting American armaments.<sup>255</sup>

In other words, Kennedy rejected the “hard and bitter peace” he and his elders had been through up until that moment.<sup>256</sup> In a sense, Kennedy knew of the necessity to pass such

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252 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 621.

253 Dallek, 619.

254 John F Kennedy, ‘Commencement Address at American University, Washington, D.C., June 10, 1963 | JFK Library’, accessed 10 January 2021, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610>.

255 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 619–20.

256 Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address | JFK Library’, 20 January 1961.

a law, not for his generation, but for the ones to come. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1963, the Test Ban Treaty officially came into force.

Sorensen himself recalled that “Nothing gave him [Kennedy] greater satisfaction in the White House than signing the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.”<sup>257</sup> Less than fifty days after the treaty came into effect, John F. Kennedy was gone, but his legacy would live on. At times when a Third World War seemed unavoidable, America witnessed its President act as the spokesman of the free world. JFK forged its reputation not by shrinking from his responsibility as President, but by welcoming it. He instilled a sense of duty in American collective consciousness and set himself up as the guarantor of the free world, where freedom and peace should always work together. Working towards an ideal made him realise he was not alone, and that peace could not be attained without cooperation and support. He realised his image was not only the result of his actions, but also depended on the outside world. It was not how he perceived himself that mattered, but how others perceived him. The key to the building of a myth also resided in those around him. Among them was his wife and lifelong supporter: Jaqueline Kennedy.

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257 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 26.

## Section 2: Apparent Perfection

### *1 – Jackie Kennedy: A Natural Political Asset*

The Kennedys' biggest contribution to the modern presidency was glamour and celebrity. [...] With Kennedy, the culture of celebrity, which had been an element on the fringes of the White House for most of the century, became a central element in how the president was to be portrayed.<sup>258</sup>

Lewis L. Gould's words on the Kennedys seem not to have aged at all. Sixty years on, the Kennedys are still perceived as one of the most elegant and glamorous couples America has ever known. If John owed some of his reputation to his looks and his eloquence, he also benefited from his wife and companion on his life's journey: Jacqueline Kennedy. Remembered as one of the most elegant and attractive First Ladies in the history of the country, Jackie Kennedy – unlike many other First Ladies – was not overshadowed by her husband. On the contrary, she even became a celebrity in her own right, thus contributing to her husband's reputation and public image. Even more, she was an integral part of the myth that surrounded JFK.

Nicknamed “Jack and Jackie” after their arrival at the White House, the couple seemed inseparable. Both gave the impression of perfection to the American people. At only thirty-one, Jackie was the third youngest First Lady in history and her husband the youngest President ever elected. Both embodied youthfulness and both knew they could complement each other's image. Although she was not involved in political matters, Jackie improved her husband's image in other ways. Sorensen recalled: “Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, on the other hand, was not a natural politician – but, exquisitely beautiful, highly intelligent and irresistibly charming, she was a natural political asset.”<sup>259</sup> With her husband and their two children – one daughter and one son – they formed the perfect-looking, nuclear American family. Their image was timeless. They represented what every American and every foreigner pictured in their minds when thinking of the perfect American couple. Always heavily photographed during their time in Office, the Kennedys also found an astounding number of family and private pictures were published in national magazines and newspapers. They became the first ‘Presidential celebrities’ and their time in the White House contributed heavily to the ‘starification’ of political figures as well as the blurring line between public and

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258 Gould, *The Modern American Presidency*, 135–36.

259 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 37.

private. Kaspi wrote: « Jacqueline, jolie et timide, discrète et insaisissable, pose aux côtés de son mari. John navigue à la barre de son voilier ou bien bavarde avec sa fille Caroline. [...] Toujours, c'est l'image de la jeunesse, de la gaieté, de l'élégance et de la responsabilité. Gouverner est un bonheur. »<sup>260</sup>



*Figure 3.* President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy pose for a portrait with their children, Caroline Kennedy and John F. Kennedy Jr., on a porch in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1962. Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. ST-22-1-62.

<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/media-galleries/the-first-family>

Her maiden name being ‘Bouvier’, Jackie’s French origins and poise rapidly became synonymous with elegance, refinement, and *savoir-vivre*. Having spent a year in Paris as a

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<sup>260</sup> Kaspi, *Kennedy: Les 1000 Jours d'un Président*, 270–71. “Jacqueline, beautiful and shy, discreet and elusive, poses with her husband. John is at the helm of his sailing boat or chats with his daughter Caroline. [...] The image of a youthful, gay, elegant, and responsible couple always seems to prevail. To govern is a blessing.” Author’s translation.

student when she was younger, she perfected her French and developed her taste for French history, literature, and more generally French culture. Having a keen interest in art, she would – over the course of her husband’s presidency – promote arts and culture at the White House and become a particularly efficient tool in the establishment of her husband as a man of culture. In 1963, after talks with France and its Minister of Cultural Affairs André Malraux, Jacqueline Kennedy and the Kennedy Administration were lent da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* for a pre-determined time. Made possible thanks to a special loan by the French Republic to the United States, more than 1.5 million Americans saw it at the National Gallery of Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. John F. Kennedy was now perceived as more cultured than any other President in modern America, all thanks to his wife’s interest in arts and culture. As the painting arrived on January 8, 1963 – aware of the significance of this loan and the assured improvement of his image the painting would grant him – Kennedy gave a speech in which he publicly declared both arts and politics were similar. Under the pretext of complimenting André Malraux, Kennedy declared:

For M. Malraux has revived for our own age the Renaissance ideal of the many-sided man. In his own life as a writer, a philosopher, a statesman, and a soldier, he has again demonstrated that politics and art, the life of action and the life of thought, the world of events, and the world of imagination, are one.<sup>261</sup>

As mentioned by Mark White in ‘Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy’, the *Mona Lisa* exhibition “strengthened the idea that Kennedy was a leader who occupied not only the grubby and at times morally compromising terrain of American politics but also the loftier, edifying realm of artistic appreciation and the life of the mind.”<sup>262</sup> President Kennedy defied the common stereotype directed against Americans of not being sufficiently cultured. This time France – the country of arts, culture, and excellence – could not look down on Americans but only welcome their sudden interest in high arts.

If Jackie had managed to make her husband even more lovable by cooperating with a foreign ally, she would also greatly improve his image by drawing her attention – as well as those of millions of Americans – to one of the most celebrated buildings in American history: the White House. Indeed, less than a year after arriving at the White House, Jackie meant to show her appreciation for the building as she admired it as much as the rest of the nation. Well aware of the need to restore it while not altering it, she included herself within the great

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261 John F Kennedy, ‘Remarks at Mona Lisa Exhibition, National Gallery of Art, 8 January 1963 | JFK Library’, January 1963, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKPOF/042/JFKPOF-042-017>.

262 White, ‘Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy’, 234.

tradition of American Presidential couples, going forward while remaining attached to tradition: “Everything in the White House must have a reason for being there. It would be sacrilege merely to redecorate it—a word I hate. It must be restored, and that has nothing to do with decoration. That is a question of scholarship.”<sup>263</sup> After several months of hard work, it was decided Americans deserved to witness the results of a two-million-dollar restoration. On Valentine’s Day, 1962, *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy* was broadcast on television. This documentary starred First Lady Jackie Kennedy and journalist Charles Collingwood and was meant to show the public the refurbished White House. Paradoxically appearing as an open book due to their constant exposure in the media and yet remaining a very secretive couple, part of a dynasty, the image the Kennedys projected had always seemed both realistic and yet part of the American imagination. Within the span of a few hours, Americans thus had the opportunity to learn more – or at least have the impression – about the Presidential couple. Americans would not only dive into the Kennedy’s household but also to the heart of American history. Broadcast on CBS, the programme was viewed by 80 million people – President Kennedy’s Inaugural Address was seen by 120 million people at most – and “embellished the Kennedys’ reputation as cultural gurus”.<sup>264</sup>

The fact that it was presented by the refined Jackie Kennedy only added to the fascination Americans expressed for the Presidential couple. This tour, being the first of its kind, struck the nation as being an emblematic prerequisite for Presidential couples from then on, similar to her husband’s Presidential debates which were the first ones ever broadcast on television. The Kennedys were both pioneers and a respectable couple including itself in the great American tradition. Often deemed as the first royal Presidential couple, Jackie Kennedy’s tour of the White House inspired multiple royals and celebrities to do the same. Among them were Sophia Loren’s *The World of Sophia Loren*, Elizabeth Taylor’s *Elizabeth Taylor in London*, and Princess Grace Kelly’s *A Look at Monaco*. Jackie was not only on the same level as other worldwide figures, but she actively influenced them. In addition to being a fashion, artistic and cultural icon, she was also an avant-garde symbol and a key asset to her husband’s image outside the White House.

Indeed, during their 1961 official trip to France, the Kennedys made an astounding impression on President de Gaulle and the rest of the nation. Initially supposed to make the

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263 ‘The White House Restoration | JFK Library’, accessed 31 March 2021, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/the-white-house-restoration>.  
264 ‘The White House Restoration | JFK Library’.

trip on his own, his instinct to bring his wife turned out, once more, to be a wonderful opportunity to develop his aura, once more. As stated by Robert Dallek:

Her command of the French language and expressions of regard for French culture and taste made her an instant hit with the French, who lined up by the thousands to catch a glimpse of her passing automobile or arrivals at and departures from well-publicized ceremonies. Dazzled by her beauty and knowledge of French history and art, de Gaulle publicly spoke of Jackie's "charm." The French press, thrilled by her appearance in a white silk Givenchy gown, anointed her "a queen" and described the Kennedy-de Gaulle dinner as an "Apotheosis at Versailles."<sup>265</sup>

Although the whole of France only had eyes for Jackie, John was not outdone thanks to one of his famous remarks: "I do not think it altogether inappropriate to introduce myself to this audience. I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it."<sup>266</sup>

Over the thousand days she spent in the White House, Jackie proved herself to be a particularly central element to the building of her husband's image. From her looks to her knowledge of arts by way of her French heritage, First Lady Jackie Kennedy gave the impression of a flawless Kennedy member, in an apparently flawless Kennedy dynasty. In the eyes of the American people, her image was the one of a discreet and secretive woman part of the American imagination, similar to an entity one could never stand alongside and yet extremely close to the people, inviting them into her home as well as bringing an artistic renewal to the citizens of her country. She was both an open book and an enigma, and so was her husband. By late 1963, President Kennedy and his wife had become one of the most beloved couples in American history. The Kennedys' seemingly perfect image they projected on the nation was even more significant on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963, the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. The events that took place on that day did not shatter Kennedy's image but instead reinforced the sense of myth around him. The Kennedy myth paradoxically reached its climax the moment he died. The myth had crystallised itself; time had stopped, and the vision Americans had of their president would remain untouched forever. Like a fallen king, his death symbolised the passing of the torch to a new generation of Americans, to new heirs, but Americans were not able to replace the memory of John F. Kennedy and a sense of lost future would eternally be associated with the death of Camelot.

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265 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 399.

266 John F Kennedy, 'News Conference 12, June 2, 1961 | JFK Library. Palais Chaillot, Paris, France.', accessed 4 February 2021, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-press-conferences/news-conference-12>.



## Section 3: November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963

### *1 – A Sense of Lost Future*

“November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963” needs no explanation as it has become part of American collective memory. The date – in other words, the signifier – inevitably entails the same reaction and the same meaning – also known as the signified. JFK’s death was, of course, the passing of a man, but was remembered first and foremost in American consciousness as the loss of a symbol, the loss of a part of America’s soul. Although having already happened in the past with Presidents Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley respectively, it is in Americans’ nature to never let the memory of their former presidents vanish from the nation’s consciousness, for each president occupies a special place in every American’s heart and mind. As stated by Theodore H. White: “The Presidency hovers over the popular American imagination almost as a sacerdotal office, a priestly role for which normal political standards are invalid. The President – any President – is part of history, something that Americans however mute they may remain, take very seriously.”<sup>267</sup> Because they vow fidelity and adoration to their presidents, it is the feeling of incomprehension that first struck Americans after Kennedy’s passing. All of them remember what they were doing, where they were and who they were with when they learned about this tragedy, but none of them are able to recall any sense of clarity on the situation. The most powerful nation in the world had been shaken as it had rarely been in its history. As argued by Robert Dallek: “Kennedy’s death shocked the country more than any other event since the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.”<sup>268</sup>

Kennedy’s passing not only left the nation in shock, but also made Americans realise one the most promising presidents had been taken away from them. Told verbatim in Dallek’s biography of Kennedy, Sorensen’s words on the symbolism associated with the passing of Kennedy – a man he had stood shoulder to shoulder with for more than ten years – remains extremely evocative of what the nation felt at the time:

Countless individuals have noted that the President’s death affected them even more deeply than the death of their own parents. The reason, I believe, is that the latter situation most often represented a loss of the past, while the assassination of President Kennedy represented an incalculable loss of the future.<sup>269</sup>

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267 White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 64.

268 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 694.

269 Dallek, 630.

The death of Kennedy also represented the death of a promise; the promise of the 1960's. Never before in modern American history had a President been elected on the idea of a promise. All politicians are elected based on a programme, but few are elected on a 'Promise' with a capital P. Whether it was his dedication for worldwide freedom, the fight for Civil Rights or the New Frontier, Kennedy was the manifestation of a quintessential American trait. Being one of the youngest nations in the Western world, America always seemed to be longing for an ideal. As a matter of fact, one could say the United States was born out of a promise, the promise of freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the promise of better prospects. With the death of Kennedy, the spirit and the drive that had been running through many Americans for decades seemed to have come to an end. As explained by Felkins and Goldman, the Kennedy myth, on the other hand, had just begun: "It is in his death that Kennedy is assured a place in the American mythos, not as much the man himself, but what he represented to many people – a rebirth of hope, a promise of youthful possibilities, and of individual commitment to create a better world."<sup>270</sup>

If Kennedy's passing felt like an even greater tragedy in the eyes of Americans than the death of Lincoln, it is because Kennedy had everything to live for. Dallek argued: "However traumatic Lincoln's assassination, the four years of Civil War bloodletting, which took 620,000 lives, somewhat muted the horror of losing the nation's leader. It was as if Lincoln's demise was fore-ordained – the culmination of a four-year catastrophe that tested the nation's capacity to survive."<sup>271</sup> To a certain extent, the death of Lincoln symbolised a new era of possibility and renewal. Symbolically speaking, his death was the price to pay for the Civil War to end and the Reconstruction era to begin. The passing of Kennedy, on the other hand, symbolised doom, a feeling of despair and the idea that from then on, American politics and America in general would only go downhill. This tragic event shook the entire nation's faith in a better future as well as the values that made America. Rose Kennedy – JFK's mother – shared similar feelings: "He had everything to live for.... Everything – the culmination of all his efforts, abilities, dedication to good and to the future – lay boundlessly before him. Everything and I wondered why."<sup>272</sup> Rose Kennedy's declaration perfectly embodied the various emotions felt by the whole of America. His tragic and sudden death had Americans experience a feeling of total powerlessness, and even guilt to a certain extent. Indeed, the particularity of this incident rested in the combination of both youthfulness and death; two

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270 Felkins and Goldman, 'Political Myth as Subjective Narrative', 449.

271 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 694.

272 Dallek, 697.

images that usually do not go together. It was the story of an idealistic and youthful leader being struck down in his prime, with Americans being split between feelings of admiration, hope, and inspiration on the one hand, and self-delusion and despair on the other. This dichotomy was at the origin of a double entrance for Kennedy in American mythology. He became mythical because he was admired by an entire nation, but also because having been caught mid-air, he crystallised every American's feelings of sadness. In fact, President Kennedy's death after a thousand days in office arrived just in time for the myth to become complete. Indeed, and as mentioned by André Kaspi, experts on the presidency tend to associate the first two years with apprenticeship when the fourth is about seeking re-election. Kennedy only benefited from the third year but showed impressive maturity as well as great progress made regarding both domestic and international affairs, thus letting Americans think their President would maintain this momentum steadily.<sup>273</sup> Having been assassinated on the brink of succeeding in every issue he meant to tackle, Kennedy's image became synonymous with that of a martyr and a heroic figure; it was unchallengeable.

As Kennedy was deemed as a hero, his assassination inspired and gave faith to his people as much as it instilled a sentiment of hopelessness and nihilism. Felkins and Goldman wrote: "This heroic vision, contrasted with Kennedy's tragic death, completes the mythic drama."<sup>274</sup> Indeed, heroes in America have always thrived thanks to the nature of the country itself, and in reverse, America has always benefited from heroic figures, for they were – and still are – the ones who complete the American myth. The United States needs mythical figures to build its stature and its history. Eventually, these myths must outshine history itself; they must become greater than the four centuries of modern American history. The myth must become atemporal and replace history. They are not what dreams and stories are made of, but the actual dreams and the stories themselves. In that sense, America only exists through its representations and the endless reproductions of mythical entities. In that respect, although being the most powerful country in the world in 1960, America – like Kennedy – paradoxically seemed to embody the future and modernity as much as the past and antiquity. As a matter of fact, the United States, as described by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard in his 1986 essay *Amérique*, is the last 'primitive society' still in existence. America forms a primitive society for it holds onto its myths so intensely that the myths themselves become reality:

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273 Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 501–2.

274 Felkins and Goldman, 'Political Myth as Subjective Narrative', 450.

Au fond les Etats-Unis, avec leur espace, leur raffinement technologique, leur bonne conscience brutale, y compris dans les espaces qu'ils ouvrent à la simulation, sont *la seule société primitive actuelle*. Et la fascination est de les parcourir comme la société primitive de l'avenir, celle de la complexité, de la mixité et de la promiscuité la plus grande, celle d'un rituel féroce, mais beau dans sa diversité superficielle, celle d'un fait métasocial total aux conséquences imprévisibles, dont l'immanence nous ravit, mais sans passé pour la réfléchir, donc fondamentalement primitive...<sup>275</sup>

Kennedy's place in American consciousness was now a collection of representations. They were embedded in every American and yet remained extremely fleeting, similar to myths in primitive and ancient societies. Kennedy's existence would now only be maintained through recollections and stories, told over and over. The myth itself was not Kennedy's death, but the representation that the American society made of it. From the way the President's death was announced to the people to the burial itself, by way of Jackie's interview where she spoke of her husband as Camelot, the media played an essential role in simultaneously actualising Kennedy's death while reviving his memory.

## ***2 – The Media: The Other Killer or the Saviour?***

If television had made Kennedy reach astounding levels of popularity in his lifetime, it would also maintain – and even expand – his aura after his passing. The peculiar context of mass media in which the assassination took place would hold a lasting influence on the way Kennedy entered American mythology. Never before in American history had a president's assassination been covered on television, and all the more so on live television. Americans who turned on their television sets on that day of November 1963 would eventually contribute to mythmaking itself. Contrary to previous Presidents' assassinations, the killing of Kennedy was crystallised by television. As argued by Marshall McLuhan: "The Kennedy assassination gave people an immediate sense of the television power to create depth involvement, on the one hand, and a numbing effect as deep as grief, itself, on the other hand. Most people were amazed at the depth of meaning which the event communicated to them."<sup>276</sup> Not only was

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<sup>275</sup> Baudrillard, *Amérique*, 12–13. "Deep down, the US, with its space, its technological refinement, its bluff good conscience, even in those spaces which it opens up for simulation, is the *only remaining primitive society*. The fascinating thing is to travel through it as though it were the primitive society of the future, a society of complexity, hybridity, and the greatest intermingling, of a ritualism that is ferocious but whose superficial diversity lends it beauty, a society inhabited by a total metasocial fact with unforeseeable consequences, whose immanence is breathtaking, yet lacking a past through which to reflect on this, and therefore fundamentally primitive." Translated by Chris Turner.

<sup>276</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 335–36.

television the catalyst for all human emotions on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963, but it is the medium which first announced to millions of Americans the tragedy that had just happened. It is the medium which first shaped the narrative around JFK's death as well as the one with which Americans associated their first memories of that day. Indeed, never before had Americans mourned their president through a media event. Whether it was in terms of the number of people all involved at once or the technological implications of such live coverage, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963, was unprecedented in media history. In *Television & American Culture*, Jason Mittell argued: "In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, networks pre-empted nearly all programming to provide live information, tributes, and commentaries for four days leading to the funeral, an enormous technological hurdle in the days before satellite feeds."<sup>277</sup> With this unforeseen situation came surprising and striking images. On that day, Walter Cronkite – CBS news anchor – made history for having delivered the most historical and iconic news bulletin in the history of television, announcing President Kennedy's death. Jason Mittell wrote: "The combination of audio and visuals allowed for a profound emotional and human connection, with one of the signature images of Cronkite removing his glasses to wipe away tears in a rare moment of lost composure, a gesture that encapsulated the shock and grief of the nation."<sup>278</sup> Only one newsflash was necessary for an entire nation to come together, as it encapsulated the sentiment every American felt at the time. Television had never served its purpose so well as for such a tragic moment. The United States was now mourning as one individual; Kennedy had been both celebrated and eulogised before the actual burial. He was Camelot before being Camelot. For that reason, Mittell argues "The Kennedy assassination stands as the defining television media event."<sup>279</sup> Indeed, over the days that followed President Kennedy's death, television's character of simultaneity came into being when 90% of all TV sets in America were once turned on at the same time; the communion had taken place, the converts had gathered to honour their fallen leader.<sup>280</sup>

In addition to being heavily covered by television, the Kennedy assassination also had the particularity of being filmed by passers-by as Kennedy's 'Lincoln' limousine was parading down Dealey Plaza in downtown Dallas, Texas. Among them was the now famous *Zapruder Film*, a twenty-six second film which captured the assassination. Taken by Abraham

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277 Mittell, *Television & American Culture*, 131–32.

278 Mittell, 132.

279 Mittell, 132.

280 Mittell, 132. "The simultaneous nature of live broadcasting could be seen in the clustering of viewers around their television sets, with a peak audience of over 90 percent of televisions tuned in to coverage at a given moment."

Zapruder, the film – although not unique – is described as being the most complete footage authorities have on the matter. Although most people have only seen it a couple of times at most, this footage is ingrained in the minds of Americans. This amateur footage was extremely graphic and emphasised the feeling of pathos Americans felt for Kennedy. The existence of such a source instantly made the assassination publicly accessible. It could now be seen over and over, shared not only in America but also in the rest of the world, thus giving a certain theatrical dimension to the killing of Kennedy. If witnesses of Lincoln's killing were crucial in the establishment of a certain duty of remembrance, they remained in the background when it came to Kennedy's. This time, video footage took centre stage to the point where the event itself did not interest Americans, but the representation of it did. The *Zapruder Film* became so pervasive that it became the first image which came to the minds of Americans when thinking of the assassination, and so was John F. Kennedy Jr. "John-John" – JFK's son – at his father's funeral a few days later. Every American has in mind the famous picture of John-John saluting his father's casket as he was just three years old or the one of Jackie, John-John and Caroline walking down the steps of the Capitol. Both the *Zapruder Film* and images from the funeral have become so ingrained in collective memory that it would be unnecessary to even include them in this analysis. The Kennedy assassination and the myth surrounding it is so pervasive one needs no pictorial representations: the myth is being carried through every individual directly or indirectly related to the assassination. It has become mythical precisely because it needs no description anymore.

The burial itself, through the memorable and historic images it provided, acted as a way to perpetuate the memory of President Kennedy. The ceremony was similar to a gathering of subjects honouring their sovereign. The burial of Kennedy was closer to a tribute given to a king or a Pope rather than that of a President. Marshall McLuhan's words from 1964 on the ceremony still sound relevant to this day:

Perhaps it was the Kennedy funeral that most strongly impressed the audience with the power of TV to invest an occasion with the character of corporate participation. No national event except in sports has ever had such coverage or such an audience. [...] The Kennedy funeral, in short, manifested the power of TV to involve an entire population in a ritual process. By comparison, press, movie and even radio are mere packaging devices for consumers.<sup>281</sup>

While radio affects people individually, television – through the combination of sound, moving images, and varied contexts – affects people as a tribe, making viewers aware they are

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281 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 337.

not alone in such dark times. Television allowed every single American household to memorise the same images at the same time, with the same comments from the journalists in the background. Television acted as a marvellously unifying tool in the wake of Kennedy's assassination – creating both emotional and political unity as well as an unprecedented uniformity of thought regarding the events that had just happened. Even after his death, JFK managed to penetrate the minds of Americans. In effect, the funeral was the perfect pseudo-event. As written by Boorstin: “In the democracy of pseudo-events, anyone can become a celebrity, if only he can get into the news and stay there.”<sup>282</sup> Kennedy not only provided that exposition in the news, but also enjoyed a lasting presence in people's minds. Television allowed Americans to feel closer to their President although he was being taken away from them. The nature of the event – combined with intense television coverage – made it appear surreal in the eyes of Americans. A significant part of the people did not want to believe what had happened. This traumatic event shattered America's idealism into pieces and left the nation desperate for answers as to why Kennedy had been killed. With the killing of Lee Harvey Oswald two days after his arrest – Kennedy's assassin according to the Warren Commission – every opportunity to learn more about the question seemed to have come to an end, at least in theory. Although being unable to find the reasons as to why exactly Kennedy was killed, Americans would try to find who they thought had *really* killed their president. The unbelievable character of the assassination sparked far-fetched interpretations among the American people. For the first time in history, unofficial interpretations of the Kennedy assassination contrary to the deliberations from the Warren Commission would be deemed as “conspiracy theories.” Soon, there were as many truths as there were Americans. Every personal truth would become ‘the truth’, considerably accelerating the building of a myth around John F. Kennedy.

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282 Boorstin, *The Image*, 60.

## Section 4: Myth Realised

### 1 – Conspiracy Theories for an Everlasting Myth

The Kennedy assassination was not only one of the most significant American events of the twentieth century, but also constituted a watershed when it came to the relationship the people maintain with the authorities and the government. Never before in the history of the United States had Americans been so wary of their own representatives and the official version of what had happened to Kennedy. As stated by Robert Dallek, as early as December 1963 and “even before the commission published its findings, 52 percent of the country saw ‘some group or element’ behind the assassination.”<sup>283</sup> Even today, as countless enquiries have been led to shine a light on the Kennedy assassination, no official version seems to satisfy those who believe their President was not killed by Lee Harvey Oswald alone and his old bolt action Carcano rifle. As shown in a 2013 Gallup article “Majority in U.S. Still Believe JFK Killed in a Conspiracy”, 61% of Americans as of 2013 did not believe in the “lone gunman” theory and were instead convinced others had been involved in the Kennedy assassination.<sup>284</sup> Although at its lowest in decades, a clear majority of Americans still expressed distrust in the official version given by the Warren Commission.

#### *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963*

Do you think that one man was responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy, or do you think that others were involved in a conspiracy?

■ % One man    ■ % Others involved



GALLUP

Figure 4. The Assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. "Majority in U.S. Still Believe JFK Killed in a Conspiracy", November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013, GALLUP. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/165893/majority-believe-jfk-killed-conspiracy.aspx>

283 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 698.

284 Art Swift, 'Majority in U.S. Still Believe JFK Killed in a Conspiracy', Gallup.com, 15 November 2013, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/165893/majority-believe-jfk-killed-conspiracy.aspx>.



Interestingly, the more the Warren Commission and officials tried to push in favour of the official version, the more Americans seemed to reject it. To the latter, their illustrious President should not have been killed in the first place but especially could not have been killed in such a gory, tragic, and brutal manner. As explained by Dallek, Americans' growing concerns regarding the conclusions drawn from the Warren Commission did not reside in the people's inability to distinguish truth from fiction, but in the successive mistakes committed by the commission itself: "[T]he commission's failure to ferret out and disclose CIA assassination plots against Castro or to reveal and condemn the FBI for inattentiveness to Oswald raised questions later about the reliability of its evidence and judgement."<sup>285</sup> For the 61% who believed an 'other' had taken part in the assassination, mafias and gangsters came first with 13%, equally ranked with the US Federal Government at 13% and then came the CIA with 7%. What is even more striking is that among the 61% who disagreed with the 'lone gunman theory', the top three only made up for 33% of the votes. As a matter of fact, at the bottom of the chart can be found a category titled 'no opinion', which comprised 40% of the votes – more significant than the top three categories put together.<sup>286</sup> For this part of the population, the murderers could be everybody and nobody at the same time.

With so many options to choose from, the question for the American people was not about who had killed Kennedy, but who had not. Over the years, Americans became so fed up with finding answers that they even stopped trying. Lance deHaven-Smith wrote the following in his work *Conspiracy Theory in America*: "Today, people are not only uncertain, they have given up ever learning the truth."<sup>287</sup> Americans seem to have given up on learning 'the truth' but not 'their truth'. Being so determined to shine a light on the circumstances in which Kennedy was killed, they did not attach importance to the validity of their arguments, since they simply wished to contradict the official version. Dallek wrote: "The fact that none of the conspiracy theorists have been able to offer convincing evidence of their suspicions does not seem to trouble many people."<sup>288</sup> Inaccuracies, exaggeration, and embellishments are not only beneficial to the building of the Kennedy myth but vital. According to Americans, such an illustrious and revered President could not have been assassinated by a lone and lonely ex-Marine who had turned to communism after his service. If the assassination of Kennedy sparked unity all over the country regarding the mourning of the crime itself, it also

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285 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 698.

286 Swift, 'Majority in U.S. Still Believe JFK Killed in a Conspiracy'.

287 Lance deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 26.

288 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 699.

divided it over who or what had taken away their president. Robert Kennedy himself – despite serving as Attorney General at the time – even “gave lip service to the single-gunman explanation” the Warren Commission concluded.<sup>289</sup>

Americans deemed the official version from the Warren Commission to be too simplistic from a technical point of view – thinking it remained self-explanatory and thus too obvious to be true – but also from a moral point of view. No one was convinced the most powerful man in the world – in addition to being smart and successful in most of the tasks he undertook – could succumb to such a trivial, caricatural and almost theatrical assassination. In that sense, the Kennedy shooting resembled a stereotypical assassination: a lone gunman set up on the top floor of a building with an obsolete rifle; a cheering crowd, a moving target on a sunny day and more precisely, a statesman campaigning in his Vice President’s state for re-election. However, is the Kennedy assassination deemed as cliché by nature, or did it become so because of repeated exposure in books, films, as well as in the media? Are the elements listed above stereotypical by nature – whether it is the election campaign or the lone gunman shooting a revered politician from a building – or is it because the *Zapruder Film* was played so many times that it itself became a ‘standard for assassinations’? It seems the answer remains elusive to this day.

However, what can be undoubtedly asserted is the fact that the circumstances in which Kennedy was assassinated sparked disillusion among Americans, towards themselves but also towards their own government. In that sense, the death of their president was a catalyst for a revival of deeply American traits and values. Americans having their president killed as he was campaigning for his re-election in his Vice-President’s state remained symbolically powerful. A sense of fate became associated with the death of Kennedy; the idea he did not deserve to die, and especially in those conditions. Furthermore, Americans – through the endless conspiracy theories that emanated from popular consciousness – manifested the distrust they had in their authorities and elected officials. Having established their country after waves of distrust towards British rule which ended in a revolution, it was in every American’s blood to question every single move made by their authorities and especially by the US Federal Government. As explained by Lance deHaven-Smith, in 1963, killing the President of the United States was not yet a federal crime.<sup>290</sup> What should have been dealt with by Texas authorities, under Texas laws, was not. In the hours that followed the shooting,

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289 Dallek, 698.

290 deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, 48. “[A] federal law was enacted in 1965 and signed by President Johnson making it a federal crime to assassinate a president or vice president.”

Kennedy was hastily brought back to Washington and the procedures following the assassination were orchestrated by Secret Service agents and the Federal Government. DeHaven Smith argued that Kennedy was not only removed from Texas law but was also symbolically stolen from his people: “The Secret Service agents did not merely violate protocol, act irresponsibly, and break the law, they robbed Americans of confidence in the investigation of the assassination and hence also in their political institutions and leaders.”<sup>291</sup> As a consequence, Kennedy *de facto* became a symbol of resistance, freedom and civil distrust for the American people towards their representatives.

Contrary to some previous tragedies that had occurred in American history and for which most people lack information, the Kennedy assassination was characterised by a surplus of information. The Kennedy myth draws its pervasiveness and its power precisely from the fact that there seemed to be a lack of information as to why he was killed and who did it when in fact, too many books, films, documentaries, testimonies, files and reports were available on the topic. For instance, the Warren Commission report alone is 888 pages long.<sup>292</sup> Although several questions remain unanswered to this day, what happened on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963 was the catalyst for a never-ending list of interpretations, theories, and testimonies trying to shine a light on one of the most controversial events in American history. Kennedy had died, but his memory – in one way or another – lived on. As it happened for every tragic historical event, everyone knew what they were doing when they learned about the shooting. The fact that the *Zapruder Film* showed Kennedy in the moments before, during and after he was hit, allowed the public to immortalise the event, frame by frame, and draw hasty conclusions of the event. Kennedy would always be there, in his people’s minds, and Americans would never stop dwelling on the assassination.

What could have revealed itself to be a drawback in the establishment of Kennedy as a mythical entity transpired to be benefiting the Kennedy cause. The excessive number of interpretations which emerged – and still continue to do so – regarding the Kennedy assassination have become its most characteristic trait. Not only would the killing plunge an entire nation into mourning, but it would mark the first occurrence of the term “conspiracy theory” in the public debates, as explained by deHaven-Smith.<sup>293</sup> From then on, the Kennedy

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291 deHaven-Smith, 44.

292 ‘Warren Commission Report: Table of Contents’, National Archives, 15 August 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/research/jfk/warren-commission-report>.

293 deHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, 3. “The term ‘conspiracy theory’ did not exist as a phrase in everyday American conversation before 1964. The conspiracy-theory label entered the American lexicon of political speech as a catchall for criticisms of the Warren Commission’s

shooting would act as a point of reference and a standard in terms of conspiracy theories and tragic historical events. Overall, the myth did not crumble upon itself because of controversies around JFK's death, but instead took its power from it, to the point where Kennedy became a symbol of American popular culture. His assassination was the appropriate time for Americans to draw conclusions from his time in office and his life in general. Never before had Americans been so interested in Kennedy's life than after he died. Having left the American people at the height of his fame, it seemed logical for Americans to establish him as a cultural entity in the country, whether it was through the remembrance and celebration of his humour, as well as his presence in various musical, literary, and cinematic works; all contributed to the furthering of the Kennedy myth. Kennedy was his own *modus operandi*; his aura spoke for itself.

## ***2 – JFK and Popular Culture***

If Kennedy's presidency had him enter the life of every American, his death had him enter every American's mind. With his death, the American people lost a President, but gained a cultural icon. Kennedy was no longer present physically but remained inherently part of the American imagination. Like a revered cultural pillar and an ideal to be reached, Kennedy's name became associated with some of the feats he had achieved in his political life. As mentioned by Robert Dallek in the NPR article "How JFK Fathered The Modern Presidential Campaign", Americans remembered him for having shaped the modern presidency and modern political campaigns like no other:

Dallek says it's a very simple exercise: Look at the successful presidential campaigns since Kennedy in 1960, and see candidate after candidate taking inspiration from JFK, no matter their politics and personal style. Dallek says no one has yet created a new template the way Kennedy did.<sup>294</sup>

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conclusion that President Kennedy was assassinated by a lone gunman with no assistance from, or foreknowledge by, any element of the United States government. Since then, the term's prevalence and range of application have exploded. In 1964, the year the Warren Commission issued its report, the *New York Times* published five stories in which 'conspiracy theory' appeared. In recent years, the phrase has occurred in over 140 *New York Times* stories annually."

294 Don Gonyea, 'How JFK Fathered The Modern Presidential Campaign', NPR.org, accessed 17 March 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2013/11/16/245550528/jfk-wrote-the-book-on-modern-presidential-campaigns>.

Indeed, Kennedy made perfect use of new media such as private polls and television. He established the modern presidency and set a model almost all future presidents would adopt. As of 2013, Dallek said:

‘Of course, the Obama campaign apparently used the modern technology and things like Facebook and Twitter to reach out to the public and a mass electorate,’ he says. ‘But these are just variations on the kinds of things that Kennedy innovated in 1960. So recent and current candidates can look at the technology, but what they're doing is, in a sense, taking a page from Kennedy's book.’<sup>295</sup>

From the television debates, to the cult of personality by way of having his wife Jackie memorise a speech in Spanish so he could appeal to Hispano Americans, Kennedy fathered the modern presidency. Despite his youth, Kennedy welcomed his role as a political pioneer. His name remained synonymous with innovation, improvement, and a forward-looking attitude. His limited time in office still allowed him to present himself as a champion for social justice as well as diplomatic and military appeasement. Having fought for the Détente, the Space Programme and Civil Rights, he gave the image of a moral president aware of the problems of his time. If Americans remember him as a man willing to solve the struggles his administration faced through legal and diplomatic ways – thus giving the image of a serious president with broad shoulders – Kennedy also had a way with words and a sense of humour.

Contrary to his predecessor, President Kennedy understood the world his elders had grown up in had changed, and that politics had been revolutionised by the emergence of television, mass media, and a popular desire for generalised entertainment. In fact, André Kaspi argued the Second World War played a defining role in the rhetorical shift between Eisenhower and Kennedy: « Pour ces ‘jeunes officiers de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale parvenus aux responsabilités’, la rhétorique, les grandes phrases ont perdu leur sens face aux dures réalités du combat. »<sup>296</sup> To Kennedy, humour appeared as a way to overcome the difficulties his generation had been through. Being fond of opening jokes at the start of press conferences and speeches, he was able to break the ice with his audiences. His humorous interventions made up for the previous lack of closeness between politicians and their people. Kennedy had in fact adopted this approach before becoming President, and even before entering the world of politics. As stated by Dallek, when a sceptic asked how Kennedy

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295 Gonyea.

296 Kaspi, *Kennedy: Les 1000 Jours d'un Président*, 275. “For these ‘young WW2 officers who reached the highest ranks in politics’, rhetoric and great sentences lost their meaning to the rough reality they had faced on the ground.” Author’s translation.

became a hero in the Pacific, he replied: “It was easy. They cut my PT boat in half.”<sup>297</sup> Kennedy made fun of himself, but also knew how to poke fun at his peers and even his closest allies. Vice-President Johnson was ironically nicknamed ‘Landslide’ after he won the 1949 Senate elections in Texas by less than a hundred votes. In the same style, Kennedy also used humour during one of the 1960 televised debates against Vice-President Nixon. When both were asked what each of them thought of President Truman’s tendency to speak crudely, Nixon said every President should learn to maintain a certain sense of composure and represent a feeling of morality which can be heard by young people. Kennedy sarcastically pointed out the only person capable of doing something about it was President Truman’s wife.<sup>298</sup>

Kennedy’s ability to simultaneously joke about himself and politicians around him – people the President was supposed not to offend – proved to the American people he was closer to them than previous Presidents. He thus portrayed himself as the opposite of a ‘political politician’. André Kaspi wrote: « En plaisantant, Kennedy se détache du monde des experts et des platitudes de la vie politique. »<sup>299</sup> As a result, Kennedy was not only a political entity, but slowly making his way into the cultural realm. He embodied vigour, vitality, a sense of restlessness and most of all, youthfulness. He was old enough to be taken seriously yet young enough to become aware of the importance of humour in modern politics. Kennedy realised humour not only acted as entertainment – itself improving his image to the people – but that it fulfilled its role as a guarantor of honesty and truthfulness. In America, a President who laughs – at others but also at himself – is inevitably perceived as a trustworthy individual. He gave the image of a self-assured President who spoke his mind and told the truth. Indeed, Dallek underlined that

In an era of public cynicism about politicians as poseurs who are stage-managed and often insincere, Kennedy’s remembered forthrightness strengthens his current appeal. These attributes have encouraged a belief that had he lived, the United States would have avoided many of the problems it suffered under Johnson and Nixon during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>300</sup>

This impression of Kennedy standing out from other politicians persisted not only in how JFK made fun of himself and others but also in the way he was made fun of. For the first time, comedians would appear on television and perform skits in front of live audiences. Among them was impressionist Vaughn Meader, known for having released a comedy record

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297 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 98.

298 Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 477.

299 Kaspi, 277. “Through the use of comedy, Kennedy’s image became less associated with the ones of experts and the banalities of political life.” Author’s translation.

300 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 701.

in autumn 1962 about the Kennedy family. Entitled *The First Family*, this album was aimed at imitating Kennedy and portraying him as both a president and a family man, a patriarch. By the time the sequel came out in Spring 1963, 7.5 million copies had already been sold, which was unprecedented, especially for a comedy album. Rapidly, the album became a classic production of comedy culture in America. It did so because not only did Kennedy not condemn the skits or try to shut the comedy shows down, but he even took pleasure in listening to them and laughing at them. What was a comic parody of JFK – intended to ridicule or at least make fun of him, had the opposite effect, and proved JFK had a sharp sense of humour. To Americans, JFK was as comical in real life as *he* was in the album. After Kennedy's passing, the albums symbolised a fleeting memory, a moment of innocence and comedy in a world where the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States no longer existed. He lived on through cultural representations and had himself become a cultural entity.

Similar to a fallen king, Kennedy had also become part of the American mythos for he embodied characteristics akin to a monarch. From his upbringing and his emergence in politics to his rise to power, Kennedy's entire life seemed to bear monarchical signs. The Kennedys were closer to a couple of royals than a Presidential couple. For three years they appeared as the single most aristocratic and dignified couple in America. They were the heirs to the Kennedy dynasty and inspired a certain longing for greatness and grandeur among the American people: "Then and now, they share dreams realized by the Kennedy's of becoming American aristocrats."<sup>301</sup> As mentioned by Dallek: "The Kennedys, with all their strengths and weaknesses, seem to fulfil an American longing for a royal family – perhaps like the one in Britain which is the object of both reverence and criticism."<sup>302</sup> The Kennedy couple became the cultural embodiment of what it meant to be the first American 'royal' family. From the courage Kennedy had shown in the Pacific to the refurbishment of the White House, almost into a *château* thanks to Jackie's penchant for French elegance. Despite having been founded on the rejection of monarchy, the United States found in the Kennedys the folkloric character of royalty, a superb display of sophistication and refinement but without the often-autocratic rule of a monarch. They were cultural sovereigns, not political ones.

As if he were predestined, Kennedy had always had a strong taste for adventures, legends, and mythical stories ever since he was a child. Dallek wrote:

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301 Dallek, 702.

302 Dallek, 704.

Jack was also drawn to the stories of adventure and chivalry in Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels, to biographies of prominent characters, and to histories, 'so long as they had flair, action, and color,' Rose recalled. He read and reread *King Arthur and the Round Table*.<sup>303</sup>

Kennedy's interest in such stories seemed to foretell his epic journey into politics as well as his tragically premature death. It was no surprise to learn he was posthumously nicknamed 'Camelot' by his wife Jackie. According to her, other great presidents would come but there would never be another Camelot. For three years, the Kennedy presidency instilled a sense of grandeur in the long line of American presidents. Grandeur in the President's rise in popularity and in his multiple successes and paradoxically, grandeur in his fall. Kennedy's death was the death of an ancient hero at the end of an epic journey. His death turned him into a martyr in popular consciousness, and so would most of Kennedy's depictions in popular culture. Among them was Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK*, which tried to shine a light on the Kennedy assassination by refuting the Warren Commission's conclusion and was inspired by the real trial led by Jim Garrison, District Attorney for New Orleans at the time. Stone's romanticised account argued Kennedy had not been assassinated by a lone gunman but by a conspiracy involving the CIA, the FBI and the US Federal Government in an attempted coup. Twenty-eight years after Kennedy had been taken from his people and the Warren Commission had failed to dismiss alternate theories, *JFK* contained answers for which the American people had longed. The film seemed to unfold like a prophecy to the American people. Similar to a fable, it had a nostalgic character to it, providing exactly what Americans had been wanting to hear for the previous three decades. Once and for all, the film convinced Americans their former president had been the victim of a conspiracy. Kennedy had become a martyr in popular consciousness, and nothing would ever alter his legacy. Not only was he part of collective memory and popular culture – whether he was remembered for his humour or as a martyr – but Kennedy also started being interwoven with America itself through the prism of Americana. On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963, John F. Kennedy had been dispossessed of his own identity. His name, his life, his successes, his failures, as well as his values and principles now belonged to the American people. The myth was now complete, for the name 'John F. Kennedy' had no referent in the real world, but now it referred only to a symbolical, mythical entity.

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303 Dallek, 27.



### 3 – *Americana and Legacy*

Much of the context of the Kennedy narrative has faded or disappeared completely. Yet the content is both implicitly and explicitly constituted as an aspect of American popular culture. The Promise is safely in the realm of myth, which transcends Kennedy the man.<sup>304</sup>

As argued by Felkins and Goldman, the name ‘Kennedy’ does not refer to the man anymore, but to a concept. ‘Kennedy’ is meaningful as a symbol that transcends the man himself. He is an image, an *icon*, which, through the years, became synonymous with the concept of Americana. Being first and foremost a cultural concept, Americana is usually used to depict artefacts and imagery associated with American history and folklore. Objects such as a bottle of Coca-Cola, Levi’s blue jeans or the Statue of Liberty are accurate symbols of Americana. Although lists of artefacts and entities can theoretically be made to give a complete definition of ‘Americana’, it seems to remain a fluid concept; an idea which can be understood but never entirely grasped, as explained in the *Widewalls* article ‘Americana – The Cultural Phenomenon’:

The questions one asks while attempting to understand what Americana is in most cases remain rhetorical ones... The answers might be found deep down in the heart, in that small part that explains the love for the country and the need to preserve its identity and history. This cultural phenomenon needs to be viewed as a vehicle bringing forward the cultural identity filled up with different metaphors and memorabilia that speaks about the path of America’s history and all the amazing, beautiful, both low- and highbrow things the entire world recognizes and loves.<sup>305</sup>

Americana is cultural. For that reason, it does not have one definite meaning, nor do the objects and concepts defining it. As a matter of fact, Americana is a floating signifier, itself being constituted of several floating signifiers. The Star-Spangled Banner is an indication of the associated geographical nation and also a signifier of American patriotism and liberty while evoking the history of the country through its thirteen stripes and fifty stars. Depending on the situation, it can either be positive or pejorative. Similar to the American flag, the legacy of JFK constituted a floating signifier. He entered Americana because he could not be fully understood by Americans themselves. To some he was the guarantor of the free world, to others he was a family man and a martyr, all of which were American traits and values at their core. As a matter of fact, Jackie herself understood the necessity to orchestrate her husband’s legacy. Despite acknowledging “that no one was going to forget him”, she also

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304 Felkins and Goldman, ‘Political Myth as Subjective Narrative’, 460.

305 P Silka et al., ‘Americana - The Cultural Phenomenon | Widewalls’, July 2016, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/americana-art-artists-history-music-collectibles>.

knew what mattered the most was “how the world would remember him.”<sup>306</sup> For that reason, Jackie insisted on her husband being buried in Arlington Cemetery – a military cemetery – despite some family members choosing Brookline, Massachusetts, Kennedy’s hometown. In a similar manner to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris honouring the Unknown Soldier of the First World War, an eternal flame was to mark Kennedy’s grave. In addition to that, Jackie “also asked that the ceremony resemble Lincoln’s, the most revered of the country’s martyred presidents.”<sup>307</sup> Indeed, a procession from the White House to the Roman Catholic St. Matthew’s Cathedral consisted of Jackie, her two children, Bobby, Ted, the Johnsons, some Kennedy associates as well as representatives of ninety-two countries, including French President Charles de Gaulle.<sup>308</sup> At the crossroads between a fallen soldier, a dead ‘king’, and a deity, Kennedy’s funeral expressed solemnity and remembrance for a President who was now the standard-bearer for multiple American values and an emblem of Americana. The process through which Kennedy was lionised transformed the name ‘Kennedy’ into a concept in which Americana could prosper. Kennedy’s life in general was a testimony of Americana. He had been the perfect embodiment of the American Dream, coming from a family of immigrants which had progressively climbed the social ladder. In that sense, John F. Kennedy made use of Americana in order for him to be part of it. The Kennedy prophecy is a self-fulfilling one.

Practically all Kennedy family members have a familiar name – Jack, Bobby, Ted, Joe, Jackie – conferring a certain feeling of closeness. With the media overexposure, the life of the Kennedys resembled a saga. The lives led by the Kennedy dynasty could have had their place on a television show. It was a life-size series Americans followed assiduously for years. In the land of entertainment, cinema and television, the Kennedys crystallised the American longing for a certain ideal, for the “spectacle”, where reality and fiction would become indistinguishable. Kennedy’s life simultaneously seemed too perfect to be true and yet too tragic to even seem believable. The pervasiveness of the Kennedy myth rests in this apparent dichotomy. Handsomeness, wealth, success, influence, and power are all terms used to define the Kennedy myth, and so are the tragedies which smote the Kennedy clan. Being at a crossroads between a celebrity and a hero, Kennedy illustrates Daniel Boorstin’s definitions perfectly:

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306 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 696.

307 Dallek, 696.

308 Dallek, 696.

The hero was always somehow ranked among the ancients. The celebrity, on the contrary, is always a contemporary. The hero is made by folklore, sacred texts, and history books, but the celebrity is the creature of gossip, of public opinion, of magazines, newspapers, and the ephemeral images of movie and television screen. The passage of time, which creates and establishes the hero, destroys the celebrity.<sup>309</sup>

From a celebrity – “a person known for well-knownness” according to Boorstin<sup>310</sup> – Kennedy became a hero – a ‘modern ancient hero’. He is one of the few ‘ancient heroes’ of America, on the edge of the Western frontier. He is worshipped by Americans because – similar to other national heroes – Kennedy’s death opened a path to introspection. Boorstin argued:

Our most admired national heroes – Franklin, Washington, and Lincoln – are generally supposed to possess the “common touch.” We revere them, not because they possess charisma, divine favor, a grace or talent granted them by God, but because they embody popular virtues. We admire them, not because they reveal God, but because they reveal and elevate ourselves.<sup>311</sup>

Like a guide, Kennedy also showed the tragic side to the figure of the hero. By doing so, he revealed the sense of tragic present in every American. André Kaspi expanded on the issue:

La vie de John Kennedy ressemble à une tragédie classique. Le héros accède à la puissance par ses propres efforts. Il franchit l’un après l’autre les obstacles qui parsèment sa route. Sa famille et ses amis lui apportent leur concours sans rechigner. Il entreprend une œuvre primordiale qui transforme le pays. Il hait la violence et, dans la mesure du possible, recourt au dialogue. Il exalte les vertus de ses concitoyens. Sa jeunesse et sa vigueur lui permettent de surmonter toutes les difficultés. [...] Et soudain, la mort stupide, injuste, insupportable, arrête net la marche vers le triomphe. Le monde est orphelin.<sup>312</sup>

At the heart of the Kennedy legacy lies something similar to an ancient tragedy. To a certain extent, John F. Kennedy followed the traditional path usually undertaken by every mythical hero. Entitled the ‘monomyth’ and theorised by American literature and comparative

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309 Boorstin, *The Image*, 63.

310 Boorstin, 57–58. “*The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness. His qualities – or rather his lack of qualities – illustrate our peculiar problems. He is neither good nor bad, great nor petty. He is the human pseudo-event. He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness.*”

311 Boorstin, 50.

312 Kaspi, *Kennedy: Les 1000 Jours d’un Président*, 274. « The life of John Kennedy looked like a classical tragedy. The hero reached power through his own means. He overcame every hurdle one after another. His friends and his family made their contribution to him without objecting to do so. He undertook a great project to transform his country. He hated violence and resorted to dialogue as much as possible. He glorified his people’s virtue. His youthfulness and his vigour allowed him to overcome every difficulty. [...] And suddenly, a stupid, unjust, and unbearable death stops the walk to triumph. The world is fatherless.” Author’s translation.

mythology professor Joseph Campbell in his 1949 magnum opus *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the monomyth is defined as succession of rites of passage through which each archetypal ancient mythical hero must go through: “The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation – initiation – return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.”<sup>313</sup> Every hero’s journey is thus divided into three formative steps. The hero must depart from his original state, engage in the first steps that will punctuate his journey – whether they are moral, physical, or spiritual – and finally return to the starting point. Campbell makes his definition explicit by giving the following examples:

Prometheus ascended to the heavens, stole the fire from the gods, and descended. Jason sailed through the Clashing Rocks into a sea of marvels, circumvented the dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece, and returned with the fleece and the power to wrest his rightful throne from a usurper.<sup>314</sup>

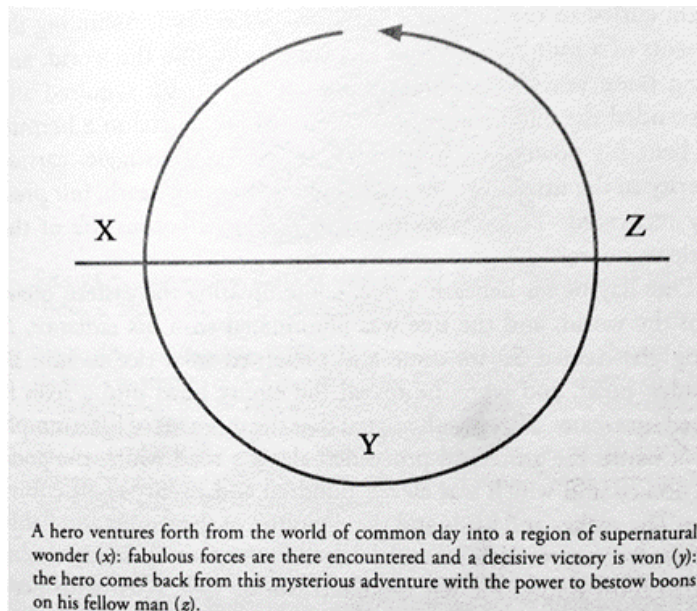


Figure 5. The Hero's Journey. "MythBlast | Separation, Initiation, and Return", April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Joseph Campbell Foundation. <https://www.jcf.org/mythblast-separation-initiation-and-return/>

If John F. Kennedy assuredly did not steal the fire from the Gods to give to his people, he nevertheless engaged in a similar journey throughout his life, a political and human journey. Leaving his comfortable and yet challenging household, he took part in a quest to bring freedom, justice, and the prospects of a better life to his people. The Holy Grail had

313 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3. ed, Bollingen Series 17 (Novato, California: New World Library, 2008), 23.

314 Campbell, 23.

been reached on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1961 and soon his 'reign' would tragically end. But "one shall not let it be forgot that once there was a spot, which, for one brief shining moment, was known as Camelot." With the reign ending, the legend could finally begin. Kennedy had returned as a symbol of Americana. He returned as America itself. The President came back, not as a living celebrity or even a hero, but as a mythical entity, transcending the life of his country. John F. Kennedy was gone, but he never truly left.

## Conclusion

President Kennedy has never stopped fascinating the American people. He remains an integral part of American mythos with his charismatic, enigmatic, puzzling yet intriguing persona. This analysis has examined the Kennedy myth, its formation, and endurance through to the present day. In order to understand the Kennedy myth, one must first understand where he came from and how he lived. Indeed, at the start of the Kennedy myth was his upbringing and the Kennedy family as a whole. Later qualified as a clan, over the years the Kennedys became the real-life embodiment of the American Dream. John F. Kennedy's grandparents had fled from famine-stricken Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century, in hope of finding better prospects in America. Within a few decades, both the Kennedys and the Fitzgeralds established themselves as prominent local figures in Massachusetts. From brewing businesses to politics, grandfather Fitzgerald and grandfather Kennedy climbed the social ladder and became well-established in their communities. They both took advantage of their Irish origins as well as the specificities of Irish communities in the United States – among these were a strong capacity to adapt, and a taste for entrepreneurship and networks – to progressively build their empire and eventually hand it down to future generations.

This is what happened with Joseph Patrick Kennedy Sr. – John F. Kennedy's father – who, being the son of an immigrant, had no other objective but to achieve the American Dream. Wanting to increase the family's image, Joseph studied at Harvard, worked to become a successful bank director and businessman, to then enter the world of politics. Not only did Joseph Sr. walk in his father's footsteps, but he surpassed him since in 1938, he became US ambassador to the United Kingdom under the Roosevelt administration, a position which helped Joseph considerably in drawing his own son towards politics. Indeed, if Joseph's objective was to embrace the American Dream, so would his sons. As a strong paternal figure, he wished for one of his sons to become President of the United States. Although the eldest son Joseph Jr. was supposed to take on this responsibility, everything changed when he died in combat during the Second World War. John, the second son, would pick up the torch, whether he wanted it or not. Indeed, Joseph Sr., a respected patriarch, always insisted that his sons ought to be ambitious in life. Joseph Sr.'s role in his sons' development was of paramount importance. From their younger years and even into their adulthood, he orchestrated their rise in society in order to reach the highest political spheres. As underlined by French historian

André Kaspi: “Il a privilégié l’image sur la réalité et mis en scène leur triomphe annoncé.”<sup>315</sup> Constantly blurring the lines between reality and fiction, visible and invisible, John F. Kennedy also used his father’s considerable wealth to rapidly improve his image and give the impression of a hard-working young man, ready to free himself from the ‘always second’ position he had been in until his brother’s death. If money remained an asset for Kennedy, it also was a preoccupying liability as Americans thought he remained unaware of the harsh reality of the country.

Similar to wealth, Kennedy’s faith as well as his ethnicity also played a peculiar role in his life as they acted as double-edged swords. Raised in an Irish American Catholic family, John F. Kennedy was aware of his people’s history but nonetheless remained quite distant from his Irish heritage. He was not the most devoted Catholic nor the proudest Irish American but was still labelled as a typical Irish American Catholic by most people. Progressively, Kennedy learned to juggle different identities. As a member of an ethnic and religious minority in the United States, he became well aware of the need to make use of the codes associated with his background. In a country like United States – described as being a melting pot of cultures and origins – it became necessary for Kennedy to adopt a moderate position. On the one hand, embracing the myth of America as a land of immigration was necessary in order to include himself within this great tradition. Indeed, Americans attach importance to their representatives’ background and the idea of the community, as they are testimonies to the American identity. On the other hand, Kennedy would need to preserve his public reputation. As an individual wanting to run for public office in a secular country, he could not allow himself to be seen as a power-grabbing Catholic who would take his orders from the Pope and abide by the Bible rather than the American Constitution; arguments often used by his critics. To do so, Kennedy committed himself to use what came to be called ‘civil religion’, a deeply American concept which consisted in peppering speeches and other forms of communication with direct religious references while never directly referring to one faith in particular. Having been used by almost all presidents before him, Kennedy realised using simple words such as ‘God’ or ‘holy’ would act as a religious prop. As a result, Kennedy could address himself to each and every American, which eventually allowed him to walk in the footsteps of illustrious American men, entering this lasting American tradition and solidifying his mythical aura.

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315 Kaspi, *John F. Kennedy*, 468. “He opted for image over reality and staged their announced triumph.” Author’s translation.

In order to keep building this aura, John F. Kennedy grasped the need to overcome apparent liabilities. Despite having served as a Congressman for almost fourteen years, he remained heavily targeted for his supposed lack of experience as well as his relative youth. Indeed, at only forty-three years old, Kennedy was to become the youngest American President ever elected. What initially presented itself as damaging to his reputation would eventually turn out in his favour, for he understood the need to use his age as an argument for the coming decade. The Eisenhower years and the conservative 1950s were behind America and a new generation was now in command. In practice, the Kennedy administration largely rested on surface changes rather than substantial ones. Kennedy's watchword as a politician was appearance, and so it was for the man himself. Indeed, having suffered from poor health since childhood – from having a back brace and undergoing multiple operations to Addison's disease and other chronic illnesses – Kennedy always made sure he looked in shape, presentable and in good health even if behind this apparent perfection lay a physically limited President. Having been image-conscious during his Presidency, Kennedy became aware of the necessity to cultivate an appealing public image well before 1960. In fact, he realised it would be a crucial element in his journey to reach the White House.

As a rich young man constantly trying to improve his image, Kennedy adopted an interesting strategy where he aimed to combine both intelligence and physicality. In achieving this, his chances of becoming elected in the future would increase. Kennedy first started by following his elder brother Joseph Jr. in the US Armed Forces by enrolling in the US Navy during the Second World War. Deployed in the Pacific and finally promoted PT commander thanks to some string pulling and influence from both his father and his grandfather, John would prove to be an American war hero. If Kennedy's deeds had been heroic, this was mostly thanks to the media coverage he received when returning home and the way in which they were presented, sometimes leaving out some unflattering details such as the fact Kennedy bore responsibility for what had happened to his men. His return home was celebrated through interviews and even films released in his honour. He had proved that he could serve his country the way he was expected to and that he was not only a pretty face. He had achieved fame, and most of all respect, because his service proved to the American people he was not the privileged son of an ambassador, and that a certain sense of "American egalitarianism" was still operating in the good old land of Uncle Sam. In fighting what became known as "The Last Good War", Kennedy's name became synonymous with a fight for a noble cause. History sometimes looks for myths but, in this case, the myth itself entered



history, thus contributing to the building of Kennedy's public image and a true American fable. In addition to the more heroic and physical side of image-building came Kennedy's publications, endowing him with a growing intellectual aura. From his published Harvard thesis to the Pulitzer Prize he won in 1957 for his work *Profiles in Courage* – retracing the ascension of eight illustrious American politicians – Kennedy progressively developed the image of an educated, smart and influential individual, forging links with officials from the United States and other countries through his father's network. Now as a good-looking, lettered veteran, son of a diplomat and having built a reputation for himself, it was time to follow the destiny every Kennedy ought to follow: politics.

Although his rise was fast and steady – having won his first election as Member of the House of Representatives and a seat in the Senate a few years later – Kennedy faced one of the most difficult issues to overcome in order to become President: religious discrimination. To that, the Democratic nominee convinced the American people of the righteousness of a non-sectarian vote. Rejecting what would be called 'identity politics' today, Kennedy advocated that no votes would be or would not be cast for him on the basis of his religious creed or his ethnicity. Rarely in history had a candidacy been a catalyst for such key American values. Kennedy had managed to convince a large part of the population that religious discrimination did not have its place in the public debate, nor did it have a place in the televised debates where he would be facing Republican nominee Richard Nixon.

These four debates were a defining moment for the building of Kennedy's mythical entity but also as they redefined the way in which American citizens envisioned the world of politics and politicians themselves. Having become aware of the importance of the media in politics, Kennedy occupied centre stage and proved to 120 million Americans he was suited for television but also for the Presidency as he appeared as the more eloquent, charismatic, and composed candidate. Embracing television was embracing modernity. Kennedy entered every American household and every American's mind. Overall, the debates made an astounding contribution to the building of Kennedy's image and with it came the promise of becoming President. These debates were the first of a long series of public appearances that would not only consolidate his image as a President but change the paradigm by allowing him to transcend the Presidency and become a mythical entity. President Kennedy did so by presenting himself as the guarantor of the free world. Sorensen noted:

At times his fervent idealism spellbound his listeners, both spectators, who neglected to applaud, and reporters, who neglected to take notes. 'It is our

obligation and our privilege,' he said over and over, 'to be the defenders of the gate in a time of maximum danger. If we fail, freedom fails. Has any people since Athens had a comparable responsibility and opportunity?'<sup>316</sup>

As the newly elected President of the United States, it was his duty to defend freedom at home, but also across the globe. His strategy was both symbolical and concrete. It was symbolical in a sense that he included himself within the great tradition of American presidents working in favour of freedom. More specifically, President Kennedy's rhetoric drew on President Lincoln's. Often seen as the twentieth-century equivalent of Lincoln when it came to Civil Rights, Kennedy ensured himself a lasting legacy far beyond the few years he spent in power. Similarly, Kennedy also borrowed from the myth of the Frontier – one of the most enduring American concepts – and adapted it to his presidency. Finally, the President's strategy revolved around concrete applications of his programme. From the Peace Corps to the Test Ban Treaty, the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States restored his country's reputation as a firm believer in freedom around the world, but also established himself as a democratic and forward-looking man.

The image Kennedy gave to the public during his time in the White House would have been different were it not for his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy. Her intelligence, elegance, and grace acted as a natural political asset for President Kennedy. From the refurbishment of the White House to the welcoming of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Jackie Kennedy vowed to put the world of arts and culture at the centre of what seemed to be non-political events, at least at first glance. She was her husband's apolitical counterpart. Jack and Jackie gave the image of a perfect couple, before, during and after the Presidency; after President Kennedy was assassinated.

On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963, the world mourned the passing of their president, but contemplated the establishment of a myth. A sentiment of shock and despair struck the American people but above all was a sense of loss. Kennedy was gone, and so were his ideals and projects for the unfolding decade. The death of Kennedy was the death of a symbol, of an idea, of the Promise of the 1960s and, in life as in death, the Kennedy myth took on its power from the media. The brutal assassination of JFK which was public and filmed, contributed to the mourning of a nation for its president, but most of all solidified the image of fallen 'king'. The extensive and live media coverage of the hours and days following the assassination simultaneously acknowledged his passing and affirmed his memory. The Kennedy myth did not crumble upon itself because of the astounding number of alternate theories but instead

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316 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 178.

took its power from it, to the point where the figure of JFK became an inherent part of American popular culture. As noted by Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer in *The American Presidency*, John F. Kennedy became remembered for, and synonymous with, elements from popular culture: “There he is, our JFK, looking back at us from book jackets, movie posters, and Web sites: the upswept hair, the decisive gesture, the buoyant grin. He will always be glancing toward a future that never arrives.”<sup>317</sup>

JFK himself is not remembered as much as his representations are. Whether through films, literature, or comedy records, John F. Kennedy entered every household and mind alike, for he still remains a symbol of Americana. The first ‘royal’ President of the United States reached the status of an ancient hero. His sudden and tragic death crystallised time and the presidency as an institution. Americans believed no President would ever surpass ‘Camelot’ for most of them remained pale imitations of John F. Kennedy: « Les hommes politiques de cette fin de siècle, qu’ils soient sénateurs, gouverneurs, candidats à la présidence ou présidents des Etats-Unis, font référence à Kennedy, imitent ses propos et ses attitudes, expriment la nostalgie d’une époque lointaine. »<sup>318</sup> The Kennedy legacy is immense; the man was considered to have it all. In Sorensen’s words: “Indeed, all his life he was a winner until November, 1963. In battle he became a hero. In literature he won a Pulitzer Prize. In politics he reached the Presidency. His Inaugural, his wife, his children, his policies, his conduct of crises, all reflected his pursuit of excellence.”<sup>319</sup>

Kennedy’s pursuit of perfection drove unprecedented numbers of professors and students to study the myth itself which, in turn, only complicated the issue. Reference works such as Sorensen’s and Schlesinger’s biographies have simultaneously contributed to the making of the myth while paradoxically taking away its mystique. A myth being self-explanatory, trying to shine a light on it paradoxically diminishes its power; it demystifies it. The Kennedy myth remains precisely because it is elusive. The myth endures because of the President’s passing. It is in the absence of Kennedy that the myth’s pervasiveness emerges, for ideas and concepts outlive their own originators, leaving history as the sole and final judge of

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317 Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer, eds., *The American Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2004), 408.

318 Kaspi, *Kennedy: Les 1000 Jours d’un Président*, 283–84. “Whether they were senators, governors, candidates to the Presidency or even Presidents themselves, late twentieth century politicians referred to Kennedy, imitated his behaviour and borrowed from his ideas. They expressed a feeling of nostalgia for an era long gone.” Author’s translation.

319 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 757–58.

one's deeds. Kennedy himself – who thought he had a *rendezvous* with death<sup>320</sup> – knew this more than anyone: “A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on.”<sup>321</sup>

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320 Sorensen, 748. “Simply accepting death as an inevitable fact of life, and simply recognizing assassination as an unavoidable hazard of the Presidency, he refused to worry about his personal safety – not with any bravado or braggadocio but with an almost fatalistic unconcern for danger.”

321 John F Kennedy, ‘Remarks for USIA Transmitter Opening, Greenville, North Carolina, 8 February 1963 | JFK Library’, February 1963, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKPOF/042/JFKPOF-042-038>.

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