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cc: S. Trahern ✓

MR. BRIAN Lamb

C-SPAN

400 North Capitol Street, N/W

Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Mr. Lamb,

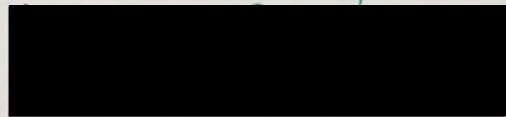
Thank you for blessing our nation with your scrupulously fair, objective, and balanced presentation of events.

One of my favorite C-SPAN programs is Booknotes. There is an old saying that goes, "Truth will out." The authors you have so professionally interviewed gave viewers historical insights and obscured facts that brought the American citizenry much closer to the truth about past and current political, economic, and social events.

A recently released publication, a book entitled A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy by Thomas Reeves, has not been given a fraction of the attention that gossipist Kitty Kelly's book on the Reagans received. Yet, the "Life" book would be considered by many to be highly controversial, and therefore deserves to be widely reviewed.

I would greatly appreciate your consideration of Mr. Thomas C. Reeves as a guest on Booknotes.

Appreciatively,



BOOK REVIEWS

Contemporaries of, say, Herod the Great, Louis XIV, or Napoleon could be forgiven if they hero-worshipped monsters. How could they get access to the truth? Nor was it difficult, in our own century, for Hitler to impose himself on the Germans, and Stalin to present himself to the Russians, as guardians and savior-figures. By contrast, those of us who live in media democracies theoretically know all the facts about our elected leaders and can make informed judgments about their views, capabilities, and characters. In practice, alas, we are as easily deceived as ever; indeed, in some ways the existence of the all-powerful media actually abets the process of deception. The outstanding case of how a great democracy can be misled is that of John F. Kennedy. Thomas C. Reeves, a onetime believer in the Kennedy mythology, has come to see the real Kennedy by closely studying the published evidence. His book is by no means the last word on the subject, for much of the truth still lies concealed in inaccessible portions of the Kennedy Library (and elsewhere), and in the memories and papers of Kennedy loyalists. But it will do to get on with, and the story he tells is disturbing, both in itself and in its implications.

Oddly enough, the man who got it right at the time was that urbane British prime minister Harold Macmillan. After his first visit to the newly elected President, he was asked what it was like in Kennedy's Washington. "Oh," said he, "it's rather like watching the Borgia brothers take over a respectable North Italian city." He grasped the important point that electing a Kennedy was not so much giving office to an individual as handing over power to a family business, a clan, almost a *milieu*—with a set of attitudes about how office was to be acquired and used which at no point coincided with the American public ethic.

These attitudes were first formed by President Kennedy's maternal and paternal grandfathers, but they were honed to a kind of diabolical perfection by his appalling father, Joseph P. Kennedy, who bought an ambassadorship from Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then set himself the task of making his eldest son President. When Joseph Jr. was

Paul Johnson's most recent book is *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830* (HarperCollins).

A QUESTION OF CHARACTER: A LIFE OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

Thomas C. Reeves/The Free Press/510 pp. \$24.95

Paul Johnson

killed in the war, Jack became the crown prince and President-designate. He inherited his father's values in most respects, though they jostled in uneasy counterpoint with his mother's brand of superstitious Catholicism. But Jack never quite had his father's relish for money, power, and corruption. Most of his life he simply did old Joe's bidding. As he put it, ruefully: "I guess Dad has decided he's going to be the ventriloquist, so that leaves me the role of dummy." He became his own man only at the end of his first year as President, when the old monster was disabled by a stroke.

Professor Reeves's book is primarily a study in moral character, rather than politics, and that is the right approach

to the Kennedy problem. The Kennedy family's system of ethics, or rather of anti-ethics, was exceptionally pervasive and it is important to note the ways in which Jack followed it, and also the few instances in which he diverged from it. Both his grandfathers were unscrupulous ward-heeling Boston politicians who well understood the connection between political power and money, though they made their piles in different ways, one through insurance, the other in the liquor trade. It was Joe Sr., however, who saw that to get national power—if not for himself, then for his sons—it was necessary to amass an enormous fortune. That meant breaking out of the narrow Boston ambit and moving to New York. It also meant grabbing opportunities, including criminal ones, as they arose. So Joe created one of the biggest cash piles of the century through banking (or perhaps one should call it money-lending), shipbuilding, Hollywood, stock jobbing, and bootleg liquor, among many other activities. He set up trust funds of \$10 million apiece for his children and squirreled away vast sums for a variety of other purposes, chiefly for buying people, whether politicians, newspaper publishers, or cardinals. His range of contacts and collaborators was enormous, and included the mob leader Frank Costello and Meyer Lansky's lieutenant Doc Stacher. One can't help feeling that old Joe was actually a more interesting personality than his son—certainly a more powerful one—and one would welcome a full exploration of his business career and a detailed account of exactly what happened to his money, during his lifetime and since.

Jack rejected the family tradition in one important respect. Money did not interest him and he never troubled to learn anything about it. It was not that he was extravagant: quite the contrary. As Reeves shows, he was mean. Being a kind of royalty, he never car-



ried money and would borrow it, if necessary, from friends, whom he rarely repaid. He underpaid both domestic servants and staffers. Indeed, parsimony to employees was one of the few characteristics he shared with his wife Jackie. Whereas he remained, in important respects, incorrigibly Boston-Irish—he had absolutely no sense of *noblesse oblige*—she was upper-class. He had gone through the motions at Choate, Princeton, and Harvard, but was basically uneducated and a thorough philistine; she was a culture snob with, on the whole, excellent taste. While he was rich, she was penniless, and, once married, she went on regular spending orgies, which of course continued after she became Mrs. Onassis. In acquiring clothes and shoes she was almost in the Imelda Marcos league. Her other yen was for endless repapering of rooms, which caused particular anguish to Jack, who hated domestic change, especially when he had to pay for it. Indeed, except as subjects for a public relations exercise, the two had virtually nothing in common.

If Jack was not interested in making money, Reeves shows that in most other respects he happily accepted the family philosophy, especially its central tenet: that the laws of God and the Republic, admirable in themselves, do not apply to Kennedys, at any rate male ones. Like his father, he dealt with gangsters when he felt inclined. Throughout his life, he lied fluently and effortlessly, or encouraged others to lie on his behalf. From the start, he was taught by his father that, freely laced with money, bluff—outright mendacity if need be—could solve all problems. The lies centered on certain areas. One was Jack's health. Old Joe had learned many tricks in concealing the true state of his retarded daughter, buried alive in a home, and he used them to gloss over the seriousness of Jack's back problems and the functional disorder eventually diagnosed as Addison's disease. Strictly speaking, Jack was never fit to hold any important office, and Reeves's list of the lies told about his body by the Kennedy camp over many years is formidable. The back pain Jack suffered seems to have increased after he became President, and his White House physician, Dr. Janet Travell, had to give him two or three daily injections of procaine. Jack eventually found this treatment intolerably painful. But he did not fire Travell, fearing that, though she had hitherto been willing to mislead the media about his health, she might now dis-

close his true medical history. Instead, he kept her on the payroll but put himself into the hands of a rogue named Dr. Max Jacobson, who later lost his medical license and was described by his nurse as "absolutely a quack." Known to his celebrity clients as "Dr. Feel-good," because of his willingness to inject amphetamines laced with steroids, animal cells, and other goodies, Jacobson started to shoot powerful drugs into Jack, once, twice, or even three times a week. Although he turned down a request to move into the White House, he had succeeded, by the summer of 1961, in making the President heavily dependent on amphetamines.

The other main area of lying centered on Jack's achievements. In 1940 his thesis was written for him by a number of people, including Arthur Krock of the *New York Times*, and Joe's personal speechwriter, who described it in its original state as "a very sloppy job, mostly magazine and newspaper clippings stuck together." Thus processed, it not only allowed Jack to graduate *cum laude* but also appeared in book form as *Why England Slept*. Old Joe and his men turned it into a "bestseller," partly by using influence with publishers such as Henry Luce, partly by buying 30-40,000 copies, which were secretly stored at Hyannis Port. It was the same story with *Profiles in Courage*, which began as a "disorganized, somewhat incoherent melange from secondary sources," and which was turned by Theodore Sorensen and a team of academic historians and professional writers into a readable book. By 1958 it had sold nearly 125,000 copies, and, after intense lobbying by Joe, Krock, and other Kennedy satraps, it won Jack the Pulitzer Prize for biography. Those who suggested the book was ghostwritten were sued for libel or even, at Joe's request, investigated by the FBI.

Joe's neatest trick was to turn Jack into a war hero. In view of Jack's health, all Joe's skill at manipulation was needed to get him into the Navy, secure him an immediate commission, and advance him in the service, especially since, while a young officer working in naval intelligence, he was spotted by the FBI having an affair with a Danish woman suspected of being a Nazi agent. In charge of a PT boat, Jack allowed it to be rammed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer. By rights he should have been court-martialed for losing his ship; instead, Joe's management got him a medal for rescuing a crew member. The death of Joe Jr. made the father anxious for his second son's safety, so he was promptly plucked out of the Navy by the same means he got into it—*influence*. Maximum use was made of Jack's war career in all his campaigns.

With the peace, Joe set about making Jack first a congressman, then a senator, then President. The young man acquiesced, and gradually his competitive spirit, strong but hitherto devoted to games, was aroused. Jack's political rise, however, was based essentially on money and corruption. It is not always clear to what extent he shared in or was even aware of his father's malpractices. Naturally, he knew of the dishonesty and lies that had made him a war hero and a literary celebrity. But getting him into the House and Senate took enormous sums of money, much of it spent openly but the rest doled out furtively by his father. Reeves lists numerous ways in which Joe made his money work. They included more or less outright bribery: in Jack's first House race, large families were given \$50 in cash "to help out at the polls." As Tip O'Neill later put it, "They were simply buying votes, a few at a time, and fifty bucks was a lot of money." Opponents found they could not get a mention, or even buy space, in papers whose publishers owed Joe a favor. To get Jack into the Senate, Joe diverted one rival into the governorship race by donating a large campaign contribution, gave another to Adlai Stevenson to buy his endorsement, and loaned the editor of the *Boston Post* half a million to secure its support. Jack certainly knew about that one, since he later admitted: "You know, we had to buy that f---ing paper or I'd have been licked."

After the Senate victory Joe set his son's sights higher and, under Sorensen's guidance, a new personality began to emerge, calculated to appeal to liberals, intellectuals, and "civilized people." John MacGregor Burns was employed to manufacture a hagiography called *John F. Kennedy: A Political Profile*. Other writers ghosted a mass of articles signed by Jack and published in everything from *Look*, *Life*, and the *Progressive* to the *Georgetown Law Review*. The willingness, then and later, of intellectuals and academics of high reputation to participate in the Kennedy con-trick is depressing. Self-deception can only go so far: some of them must have known they were involved in one of the biggest frauds in American political history. As Reeves puts it, "No national figure has ever so consistently and unashamedly used others to manufacture a personal reputation as a great thinker and scholar."

Did Jack, or for that matter his even more competitive-minded brother Bobby, who now played an increasing role in the campaigns, have any political convictions? Jack shared his father's reverence for the power that money brings, and the need to hang on to an unearned fortune made him a fierce anti-Communist. His instincts put him in the same camp as Senator Joe McCarthy. At one time he was on friendly terms

with Richard Nixon. Later he learned to make liberal noises on some issues. But essentially he was a half-ambitious, half-reluctant, dutiful son-and-heir following the masterful demands of his father to get to the top by any means available. After all, did the Borgias need political convictions? As Tip O'Neill put it, "Looking back on his Congressional campaign, and on his later campaigns for the Senate and then for the presidency, I'd have to say that [Jack] was only nominally a Democrat. He was a Kennedy, which was more than a family affiliation. It quickly developed into an entire political party, with its own people, its own approach, and its own strategies."

By the time Jack was in the race for the Democratic nomination, then the White House, he was—or rather his people were—developing certain themes, especially the stress on youth, brains, and glamour (cortisone treatment had given him a chunkier, more handsome appearance). But he was still pushed forward primarily by money and skulduggery. His father used the full force of his fortune to break the Hubert Humphrey competition in the West Virginia primary. Cardinal Cushing later admitted that he and Joe had decided which Protestant ministers were to receive "contributions" of \$100 to \$500 to play down the religious issue. The money used for outright bribes came partly from the Kennedy coffers and partly from the Mafia, following a secret meeting between Jack and Sam Giancana, the Chicago godfather. FBI wiretaps and documents show that Ma-

fia money went to pay off key election officials, including local sheriffs, who were handed a total of \$50,000 to get out the Kennedy vote by any means. In return, Joe promised the mobsters assistance in federal investigations. As for the actual presidential campaign against Nixon, it is impossible now to decide whether Jack won the White House honestly. Certainly Joe persuaded Mayor Daley of Chicago to fix the result for his son in Cook County, which officially registered a huge Democrat turnout, thus giving Jack Illinois by 8,858 votes, though Nixon won 93 of the state's 102 counties. When unofficial checks of Cook ballots convinced the Republicans they had been robbed, Daley turned down an official recount. The Mafia had a hand in the vote-rigging, too.

Jack's own platform did not amount to much. Nor did he believe in some of his commitments. After presenting his farm policy to an audience in South Dakota, he said to his aides: "Well, that's over. F—the farmers after November." The so-called New Frontier package had virtually nothing in it. The "missile gap" did not exist, as Jack and his campaign people knew perfectly well. There was, of course, a lot of talk about "moral leadership," a phrase with peculiarly ironic undertones in view of Jack's personal behavior. He had the sexual morals of an alley cat.

Indeed, the one respect in which he followed his father not merely dutifully but with real enthusiasm was in the seduction and exploitation of women. Old Joe pursued women ruthlessly all his life, not hesitating to steal—or rather, use—his sons' girlfriends if he

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could: co-ownership of women by different generations seems to be a feature of Kennedy sex life. Joe had employed his Hollywood power to get himself actresses and starlets, and had even possessed the redoubtable Gloria Swanson until she discovered he was buying her presents with her own money. Jack, in turn, used his political glamour to secure trophies from the movies, including Gene Tierney and Marilyn Monroe, the latter first shared with, then passed on to, Bobby. Reeves's account of the behavior of the Kennedy brothers toward Monroe, and their coverup of the traces after her sudden death, makes gruesome reading. Most of Jack's affairs, however, were brief, often lasting a matter of minutes, and conducted with whoever was available: girls without even first names, stewardesses, secretaries, campaign workers, prostitutes if need be. He claimed he required some kind of sexual encounter, however perfunctory, before he could sleep. He fornicated during the 1960 Democratic convention, throughout the campaign, and even on the night of his inauguration, after Jackie had gone to bed. His tenure at the White House was punctuated by both regular and casual affairs, sometimes in his own room when Jackie was away, sometimes in "safe" apartments, reached by tunnels under New York's Carlyle Hotel to escape observation. His conduct was reckless as well as unconscionable. He was aware that Judith Campbell was also the mistress of Sam Giancana and used her to transmit messages to the Mafia. He did not always trouble to conceal what he was doing. When two officials brought urgent secret cables to the Lincoln Bedroom one afternoon, the President flung the door open, revealing a woman in his bed, read the cables, then resumed his activities. Jackie, on her return, was liable to find strange undergarments under the pillows. Reeves is particularly shocked that on at least one documented occasion, Jack's pastimes led him to be separated from the officer who followed him with the nuclear code-box chained to his wrist. What most people will find rather more shocking is the casual heartlessness with which Jack treated all the women with whom he had dealings, including his wife. He seems to have been incapable of any kind of deep emotion.

To some extent, Jack's sexual antics and his Mafia links made him the prisoner of J. Edgar Hoover. It is impossible not to conclude from Reeves's account that Jack's presidency might well have ended in a grave public scandal rather than assassination, and that his deteriorating health and growing drug dependence could have ruled out a second term. As it was, Jack's record as President was patchy. Having few convictions of any kind and virtually

no program, he reacted to, rather than shaped, events. He was inexperienced and ignorant, sometimes weak and indecisive, often ruthless, even vicious, willing to authorize murder and other illegalities, and to use the formidable powers at his command for unlawful acts of realpolitik. He left the Cuban problem as he found it, unresolved, and the Vietnam quagmire much deeper. Reeves is unable to discern any overriding pattern in his presidency, though he detects a certain growth in stature as it proceeded. That magisterial office, as has so often been demonstrated, can be greater than the human material that occupies it, and raise the man accordingly. But it can also be demeaned and that, in retrospect, is what Jack Kennedy did to it. His career shows that one of the most dangerous kinds of politician is a man who is good at public relations and nothing else. In the end, all the Kennedy presidency consisted of was the myth of Camelot, and that was essentially Jackie's—not Jack's—creation. She even gave it the name.

In view of what we know, it is amazing that Jack Kennedy's heroic reputation should have endured as long as it did—throughout the sixties and well into the seventies, in some respects into the eighties. It was enshrined in school textbooks as well as weighty academic tomes, Kennedy being well served, long after his death as throughout his career, by a legion of pliant, glib, admiring, or corrupt writers, journalists, and academics, ranging from ill-paid hacks to august court historians. The Kennedy family machine, still rich and powerful even today, proved itself ready to twist arms, and if necessary break them, in order to sustain the mythology. Reeves lists many occasions on which material hostile to Jack Kennedy was altered or suppressed. The Kennedy phenomenon is indeed a devastating indictment of the American media's willingness to protect a favorite son and to conceal the truth from the public. It may be that the pendulum is now swinging to the opposite extreme, and there is a certain relentlessness in the way Reeves amasses material unfavorable to his subject. But in general he is fair-minded, and there can be no doubt about the substance of his indictment. The truth is, President Kennedy had no moral character, no real convictions, and no purpose other than the pursuit of power and pleasure. What he stood for was an invention, and when he fell to an assassin's bullet, nothing of significance fell with him. We have long known that, despite much conspiracy theory, his murder was purposeless and inconsequential. We now know that his life was as meaningless as his death. □