

# The Age of Camelot

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Several historians confirm that John Fitzgerald Kennedy has been dead longer than he lived. Alan Brinkley says, “On the morning of 22 November, 1963, he woke up as President with admirers and detractors, a man with a record- some of it good, some of it not. He became a legend posthumously” (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, 2012). A charismatic Kennedy unveiled an optimistic American dream that captivated the hearts of every American citizen. He used the TV to channel his sentiments about civil rights, communism, and made the United States strong to resist evil in the world. By speaking directly to the national audience, “he made the television more famous than it was” (Gillon, 2019). His presidency is intertwined to the visionary ideal of Camelot (symbolizing idyllic happiness, high hopes, and humanitarianism) that makes his American promise an attractive calling and continues to entice Democrats to emulate his destiny.

*Keywords:* John F. Kennedy, Camelot, television, rhetoric, Jacqueline Kennedy

## Introduction

The name of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis must not be forgotten when we reminisce of President Kennedy. She etched herself as a provocative figure alongside her husband by making sure that his brutal assassination will continue to trigger flashbacks in the minds of every person, so that they never forget November 22, 1963. She is widely celebrated as the reason behind her husband’s heartfelt legacy. By tactfully convincing Theodore White (a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist) to write about President Kennedy’s life, she played the role of a mastermind mesmerist to deliver a narrative that White just couldn’t neglect. She brilliantly invoked the story of King Arthur’s Camelot and constantly repeated the lines that her husband apparently loved- “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot” (Swanson, 2013). James Swanson in ‘*End of Days*’ records that Jackie’s statements were indicative of the unchanging fact that her husband’s presidency was magical and a forever lost moment. Her point vividly resonated that “there will be great presidents again but there will never be a Camelot again” (Swanson, 2013). Despite differing opinions on whether John F. Kennedy was a great president or not, there is no doubt that he used the opportunity to fuel a fresh wave of genuine idealism among the Americans and reinstated a glimmer of hope in his people, that they hold the ability to change the world for good. His words are often repeated: “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” (Kennedy’s inaugural address, 1961). His gifted quality to appeal to crowds helped stretch his revolutionary agenda and inspired people to reinforce his glory, resulting in one senator to say that “Kennedy combined the best qualities of Elvis Presley and Franklin D. Roosevelt” (*Age of Camelot*, 1961-1963, p. 626). While his administration proudly did the job of hiding his perils, critics didn’t stop from associating him with the domestic and international tragedies

that erupted because of his hasty decisions in office. Therefore, this paper makes an attempt to examine the ways that facilitated the social construction of Camelot that helped sustain Kennedy's presidency, even in the midst of multiple controversies that made people question his golden tenure. Examining a rare moment in American history of a dazzling President who ventured out to create his own style and reality, and who artistically painted the vision of a bright future is crucial to understand dignified American politics.

### **The Kennedy Brand**

Image-making came with being President John F. Kennedy. The careful crafting of the "Kennedy Brand" served the purpose of elevating President Kennedy's and the First Lady's popularity to a celebrity status. This status had to be continually enriched to leave a lasting impression on the American public. Large sums of money was spent extravagantly on the making of Jackie's designer clothes, on lavish rave parties, on the redecoration of the White House that recaptured an authentic reminder of the Presidents who lived there and the grandeur of "the American century" (McDonough, 2017) and most importantly on the way President Kennedy presented himself (White, 2013). He was pleasurable to look at because he possessed the most power in American society and to symbolize that power he worked on himself to stay fit, healthy, and robust. This ramped up approval ratings for a young, charming, and energetic leader. Magazines reported wildly about his expensive tastes in fashion—like his fascination for silk ties (he wore a micropattern tie from Christian Dior on the day he was assassinated) and his 14 karat gold cuff links with the seal of the President (Shapira, 2015), all of which reinforced his image as a well-groomed man. This explains how he became Hollywood's idea of the President, as stated by Rick Shenkman. While President Kennedy was busy being King, Jacqueline Kennedy too received exclusive attention for her royal aura. On her visits to India and Pakistan in 1962, some locals referred to her as "Queen of America", indicating that the Kennedys were American royalty (The Administration, 1962, p. 13); dream-like and ripe for iconic admiration. Even before becoming President, his experiences of assisting his navy crew members during World War II bolstered his merit as a military hero, to the extent that G. I. Joe dolls of him in PT uniform were sold in markets (White, 2013). He became a living example of the fictional character—"Superman", one who can overcome anything through the sheer force of will, exterminating every adversity that obstructs his path to reach his rightful destiny.

The illustration of the Kennedy Brand is further examined by Barbara Baker Burrows in "*The Kennedy Mystique*." Several candid shots of John F. Kennedy playing with his kids, laughing with John, and sitting with Jackie and Caroline in the baby's bedroom, epitomized him as a family man (Burrows, Dallek, Baldrige, Goodman, & Hugh, 2006). But in actuality many of these images were staged. For instance, in 1958, when Ed Clark (who was commissioned to photograph the Kennedy family) asked if he could take a picture of Senator Kennedy with his baby daughter, Jackie refused. But John was adamant to take a picture and went up the stairs. When Caroline woke up, John immediately gave a fond smile and the picture was taken (Adams, 2020). This single photograph that became the cover of "*Life Magazine*" went on to portray him as a leader of the next generation. Such deliberate acts were considered necessary by the Kennedy family to depict a visual legacy of irresistible and lasting appeal. All these versions of President Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy were meant to show them as individuals who didn't just derive power from being prominent figures in American political circles, but that they facilitated competency beyond American politics. The virtues of integrity, moral goodness, and love for humankind paved the way for describing the Kennedys, bringing them closer to the American public by bridging the divide between royal standards and common expectations. Therefore, by being experts in

manoeuvring the media, they concealed what they did not want people to see—President Kennedy’s Addison’s disease, his obsession with taking unwanted medications to deal with depression and anxiety, a perfect marriage falling apart due to his infamous infidelities; his affair with Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn came under intense scrutiny (Andersen, 1996, p. 79), President Kennedy’s attempt to assassinate Fidel Castro, his clandestine meetings with mafia bosses who poured in tons of money to fund his 1960 election campaign (Lardner, 1988) were events that were buried under the majestic infrastructure of Camelot. These secrets were like explosive bombs that remained untouched throughout the Kennedy dynasty, the esoteric nature of which added a rosy charm to the Camelot narrative.

### **New Frontier: A Fanciful Invention**

On 29 October, 1960, Senator Kennedy delivered a speech at Valley Forge Country Club. In that he stated “the new frontiers of the 1960s will present us with both dangers and opportunities. Our task is to overcome those dangers and seize those opportunities” (The American Presidency Project, 1960). By highlighting this concept, Kennedy composed a metaphorical landscape which was not too far to reach. This intellectual expression was relentlessly pushed through the hosting of Hickory Hill seminars that became a means to embed an idyllic side of the Kennedy style presidency. The location was of prime importance. They took place at Robert Kennedy’s house (reference to a celebrity-like family that held impeccable social connections) and drew selected people from diverse backgrounds—academia, law, politics, media etc., who promoted the “New Frontier” (Hellman, 1997, p. 120) which later became enmeshed in the Camelot narrative. It was Arthur Schlesinger (special assistant of John Kennedy) who was put in charge of organizing these seminars; although Kennedy didn’t attend them, his wife was present on most occasions. Schlesinger acquiring the centre stage was based on the Kennedy’s presumption that he would be the “torchbearer of history” around the unfolding activities (Schlesinger, 2018/1978, p. 592), thereby laying a firm foundation for the Camelot legacy to triumph. The topics ranged from the American style of diplomacy to the American engineering; connotative of a room full of innovative ideas, critically assessing the existing situation in America, that positively impacted the stature of the New Frontier.

The need to conduct these seminars not only emanated from the desire to hunt for potential sources that would provide intellectual advise to President Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy but also had an informal space where locals and like-minded officials of the government can strike easy and light conversations, thereby playing a key role in expanding a social network outside the Kennedy circle (Thomas, 2000, p. 188). The Hickory Hill seminars enlightened people about Kennedy’s leadership style, enticing political campaigns of Democrat candidates to this day. By intertwining the bulk of literature available on a slain President’s renowned and heroic leadership with popular culture, the New Frontier and Camelot insiders in these seminars gave birth to a fashionable rhetoric that disallowed any dirt of criticisms to be thrown at the Kennedy legacy.

### **Crises Rhetoric: A Grand Master Plan**

International and domestic crises lead to political tensions threatening the efficacy of the governing authority, but what if such crises are handled tactfully?

In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the US administration led by President Kennedy gave the green light to proceed with Operation Mongoose (1961). It was meant to overthrow the regime of Fidel Castro. While the operation didn’t have the intended ending, its beginning was marked with a careful sense of planning i.e. to invoke fear among the people that the world was on the brink of possible destruction, in the midst of which

the United States and its allies were fighting for their survival and security. The fear that loomed large in Kennedy's mind was that of Soviet style communism, flourishing magnificently in Cuba, taking over the fate of Berlin. It was extremely crucial to preserve the balance of the Cold War and prevent violence from flaring up. To achieve this objective, President Kennedy didn't just instill fear about imminent threats to influence public opinion, but also demonstrated himself as the fearless leader who would pull the reigns of spiraling events. His address on 20 January, 1961 reaffirms this—"Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate. Only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger" (Kennedy, 1961).

The use of the "us vs. them" rhetoric complemented Kennedy's strengths for it united the American public to stand against the communist wave that was harming the United States national interests. Public responsibility increased because President Kennedy consistently reminded the general public to hearken his words—"Each day the crises multiply. Each day their solutions grow more difficult. Each day the tide of events has been running out and time has not been our friend" (Gardner, 1962, p. 52). Yet it is interesting to note that while he couldn't emerge victoriously in Cuba with his crises rhetoric playing in the background, his apologetic national confession for the same won him the admiration of the American public, as mentioned by Theodore Sorensen in "*Kennedy*".

Furthermore, questions are also raised on the legacy that President Kennedy would have left in the Vietnam War had he been alive for a second term. Most historians accept that Kennedy would have deepened his commitment in Vietnam (evident in his response to Pendergrass's letter that if Vietnam devours communism, then Southeast Asia will also become communist) purely for "politically motivated reasons" (White House Central Subject files, National Security, n.d.). Firstly, he wanted to retain his iron-steel image, especially after the embarrassments he faced in Cuba. Secondly, he didn't want to appear as somebody who couldn't be trusted on national security matters, so he tried to pacify right wingers to protect himself from this charge; evident in his 1960 campaign, in which he described Eisenhower-Nixon failure to prevent Castro from coming to power as deplorable and "promised to be tough" in taking foreign policy decisions (JFK Library, 1952). However, Kennedy did not face the dilemma of Vietnam; it was Lyndon B. Johnson who was confronted with this critical decision.

Johnson found it extremely difficult to walk in the shoes of a beloved President who set forth an unmatched legacy in American politics. Hence, to not compromise his leadership credibility he argued—"I will not lose in Vietnam" (Henggeler, 1991). Unlike Kennedy who got a chance to redeem his heroic image by averting the Cuban Missile crisis, Johnson found himself in a fragile situation where he did not have space to exercise restraint as the South Vietnamese government was about to fall in the hands of communists. So, the choice was to fight or surrender, for Johnson carried the nightmares of America's tragic defeat in the Vietnam crisis; a single incident that tarnished his presidency and made the public hostile towards him, actually proved to be a boon for protecting John F. Kennedy's honor, because all the blame for pushing the American people into a wake of tragedies was shifted to his successor. Thus, Kennedy's Camelot is not smeared with the bloodshed and cries of civilians involved in the war. Unlike Johnson, President Kennedy mastered the art of maneuvering crises and used them as a potent weapon to mould public perceptions about him, reinforcing that "crisis not only represents danger but also opportunity and innovation" (The American Presidency Project, 1960). This makes the Camelot imagery invoke Kennedy's spectacular presidency filled with good ideals and the worldwide acceptance that his administration reached the pinnacle of achievement. But if one looks at it holistically, the "dark side of Camelot" (Hersh, 1997) too becomes pretty evident. What Jacqueline did not realize was that by establishing Kennedy as a transcendent and superior political figure who could no longer be reached due to his death, the Camelot narrative

would intensify his loss and thwart all liberal dreams that he gave to his people (Spector, n.d.); in other words, the best of times relished in the past could no longer be revived.

### **Resilience of the Camelot**

John F. Kennedy once said that “the true measure of presidential success is concrete achievement” (Crawley, 2020). But immediately after his assassination, he was declared a martyr without much tangible evidence for the same. Kennedy has very less to show on his achievement track record like the establishment of the Peace Corps program, man on the moon program and signing the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviets. While they are notable developments, they do not go on to momentarily define Kennedy as much as his hesitancy to speak on the issue of racial segregation for fear of losing support from Southern Democrats until 1963 (Ruprecht, 2017) and his languished Medicare bill to push for healthcare reforms do. But the strong pillar of Camelot brushes away the downsides of his presidency. The existence of “one brief shining moment” continues as a metaphor for his brief presidency. Camelot romanticizes the Kennedy years as a simpler time; free of any complications and tumultuous incidents. The time after his assassination is characterized by dreary events like Watergate, 9/11 terrorist attacks, forever wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the continuous tussle for power in politics. America’s obsession with the Kennedy legacy grows out of the never seen before goodness and humbleness that he radiated while he casted himself into the role of President. The evil or what Jacqueline liked to call—“bitter people”, cut down the young nobleman’s authority at the apex of his empire (Prochnau, 2013). The conspiracy theories that emanated after his assassination have not been able to dig out any satisfying answer, thereby keeping the interest of John F. Kennedy alive among the younger generation. Till the time speculations about a fallen idol continue to haunt Americans, Kennedy’s Camelot will enjoy its legendary status.

Furthermore, while Americans grieved the shocking death of President Kennedy, they too longed for solace and assistance from another figure with whom they could share their loss and frustrations. Jackie Kennedy emerged as the role model to comfort an entire nation. Although she used the mythical apparatus of Camelot to promote the Kennedy image in its idealistic avatar, her efforts were successful in keeping the people in the dark and providing them with a sense of reassurance that the virtue of innocence will prevail in guiding American democracy. Despite being in pain, Jacqueline stood by her people in grief. The manner in which she orchestrated a televised, Lincoln-like funeral (the first presidential death to trigger a true national mourning) for her husband and added her personal touches to it (McLaurin, 2023) shows her affiliation with history as well as her inner impulse to throw a theatrical funeral for her people, who would always be reminded of a large crowd of 300,000 people mourning John F. Kennedy, Jacqueline and Caroline kneeling down at the casket and placing their hands on the flag, lighting of the eternal flame in the Arlington Cemetery and John’s heart wrenching salute to his father (Lubin, 2013). An unprepared Jacqueline having to take the global stage spurred a national catharsis that will forever remain frozen in time. To this day, all these events act as remnants of holding onto President Kennedy a little longer. These memories inspire people to imbibe courage, dignity, and nationalistic self-sacrifice and reminds the country that better days are ahead of it. By placing her husband on a pedestal in the clouds, much beyond the recognition that he actually deserved, Jacqueline manifested her husband’s legacy as a “too good to be true” presidency. Thus, unlike some Presidents whose immoral acts assault national self-esteem, Kennedy’s Camelot withstands the test of time for it compensates for his limitations in office and lends him a helping hand to emotionally connect to the people, thereby enamoring the American citizens to treasure his rare and exquisite American dream.

## Conclusion

A 1,000-day period in office is a very short period for any President to secure his country, bond with its people, and leave an indelible mark in history so that generations to come remember him/her. John F. Kennedy had so much left in him to give back to his country but a scathing bullet took his life. Although he didn't survive, a mythical social construction (Camelot) associated to his enchanting and remarkable presidency lives to this day. Despite leading a secretive life, President Kennedy gave the people what they aspired for—a young and brilliant statesman with a royal family, an energizing vision that would take America to new heights, and a leader who would not step back, instead confront hostile threats pouring inside American territory. Jacqueline Kennedy kept her husband's dream alive, pushing her personal grief and problems aside. She proved herself as a “woman of substance” beyond mere elegance. While the visible loopholes in Kennedy's administration open up a stage for uncountable criticisms against his tenure, the resilience of the Camelot legacy is not that easy to suppress and is here to stay; evident with numerous articles, journals, books, and movies that are devoted to preserving the aura of the Kennedy family.

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