

A Lechery of Martyrs

by Gus Knox

A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy, by Thomas Reeves (N.Y.: Free Press, 1991), 508 pp., index.

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down, by Ralph Abernathy (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1989), 638 pp., index.

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The sixties produced two liberal saints, John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. To the faithful, they stand as icons of the decade's youth and civil rights movements. Assassins's bullets transformed the duo into martyrs, silenced their critics, and made their legacies and characters irreproachable.

A generation usually passes before the public is ready for serious examination of fallen heroes. Recent biographies have offered reexaminations of both Kennedy and King. Most fascinating (given the nature of the scandals dogging “Slick Willie” during the recent election) is the examination of their private lives and the lurid revelations about the morality and integrity of the two.

Thomas Reeves's *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* is a critical biography measuring Kennedy's moral character. As the title suggests, it finds him lacking.

It all began with “family values”. Joe Kennedy, a devious business mogul and inveterate womanizer, spawned an ethically dysfunctional clan. The result was a veritable bogtrotter circus of lewd and grasping paddies possessed of their father's adulterous proclivities. With such a beginning, it is small wonder that the boys turned out to be moral sewage.

Kennedy family history is also tragic. The clan is remarkably adept at crashing planes, smashing boats, and splashing cars. Two of the clan died in plane crashes—one while serving in World War II. Two boys were assassinated in the middle of their political careers. The mentally-handicapped eldest daughter was secretly lobotomized by her father, left a vegetable, and quietly institutionalized. And then there is Ted. From Chappaquiddik to Washington's La Brassierre Restaurant to Au Bar in West Palm Beach, the nation has observed the public degeneration of the clan's sole surviving male member,

as Ted careened from one drunken escapade to the next.

Joe Kennedy's driving ambition was political and he carefully groomed his boys for national office. Because of this patriarchal manipulation, it is difficult to separate the true substance of the boys' character from their carefully crafted personæ.

An example is JFK's "literary" reputation. During a very mediocre Harvard career he wrote "Why England Slept", a thesis on foreign affairs. This prosaic "mishmash" brought JFK fame later only because it was totally reworked by one of his father's staff writers and published with clan cash. JFK's Pulitzer prize-winning "Profiles in Courage" was secretly authored by his speech writer, Ted Sorenson, whose contribution was not acknowledged. Papa Joe made the ghost-written piece an instant "best-seller" by buying up extra copies. Presto—JFK the intellectual!

JFK's military career was transformed in the same fashion. After a shady beginning (as a freshly minted officer, JFK had an affair with a suspected Nazi spy), Kennedy took command of a patrol boat in the Philippines. Largely through his negligence, or incompetence, the boat was run over by a Japanese destroyer. Kennedy avoided a complete disaster—and probably a court martial as well—only because he valiantly rescued drowning mates. (Not all Kennedys would do as much.) The family quickly put the right "spin" on the incident. Using his connections with the Hearst papers, Papa Joe carefully orchestrated press treatment of the war record during Jack's 1948 Congressional campaign. As JFK put it: "my story about the collision is getting better all the time. Now I've got a Jew and a nigger in the story, and with me being Catholic, that's great." Presto—JFK the war hero!

Less favorable stories were carefully covered up, edited, or given a correct slant. The clan shrewdly concealed information about JFK's Addison's disease, a debilitating illness that potentially left Kennedy incapable of discharging his duties as president. They also concealed Kennedy's close relationship with fellow Roman Catholic Joe McCarthy. (The next time a liberal beslobbers the legacy of Camelot, mention Kennedy's friendship with McCarthy and watch him turn red!)

Especially concealed were stories about the steady stream of Mafia floozies, Hollywood starlets, and assorted bimbos that flowed through Kennedy's bedroom. Just before his first debate with Nixon, Kennedy had an "interview" with a call girl. Because the debate went so well, he made similar arrangements before the other debates. Kennedy's excuse for his innumerable liaisons was that he couldn't relax if he didn't have sex.

This behavior continued in the White House. In fact, his first adulterous adventure as President came on Inauguration night. He also enjoyed swimming naked in the White House pool with female guests. Sometimes his paramours were outside girlfriends, sometimes they were young female assistants, such as two nicknamed "Fiddle" and "Faddle". So that Jackie wouldn't catch on, staffers rounded up hairpins and other alien paraphernalia from Camelot's boudoir. Sometimes they overlooked items. Jackie "once

discovered a woman's undergarment tucked in a pillowcase and coldly presented it to Jack. She delicately held it out to her husband between thumb and forefinger—about the way you hold a worm—saying, 'Would you please shop around and see who these belong to? They're not my size?'"¹

Some affairs were dangerous and politically compromising. One was with Judith Campbell, the main squeeze of Mafia boss, Sam Giancana. (As a general rule, it is not prudent to date gangster girlfriends.) Campbell, whose affair with Kennedy began before 1960, made some twenty trips to the White House. Giancana, who helped Kennedy get elected and directed assassination attempts on Castro, liked having this access to the White House. Kennedy eventually killed the affair after J. Edgar Hoover persuaded him of its danger. Campbell committed suicide.

The most notorious Kennedy girlfriend was Marilyn Monroe. Their most famous joint appearance was at John Kennedy's forty-fifth birthday party at Madison Square Garden in 1962, where the amoral Monroe (she had thirteen abortions by age thirty), dazed, drunken, and literally sewn into her dress, sang "Happy Birthday" to a leering menagerie of Democrats (the televised event was a Democratic fundraiser). Jackie did not attend the party. Bobby, who did attend, was quite stricken with Monroe and started an affair with her, perhaps beguiling the starlet with a promise of marriage (a favorite Kennedy ploy). He was apparently with Monroe on the day of her death. Information about the suicide is confused, since Kennedy brother-in-law, Peter Lawford, was the last one to talk to Monroe, was first one to get to her apartment, and could easily have purloined compromising documents. Joe DiMaggio, the most loyal of Monroe's ex-husbands, was so angry about Kennedy involvement that he refused to admit any of the clan to the funeral. The Monroe affair raises questions of character about both John Kennedy and "his conscience", brother Robert.²

Lawford was a key figure in clan infidelities. He provided access to starlets and to drugs. Often, things got kinky (Kennedy was fond of the *manage a trois*). Once, President Kennedy was eager to try some "poppers", a drug that was supposed to enhance sexual pleasure. Lawford, recognizing the danger to the President's health, talked him out of it; instead, they experimented with one of the staff concubines (either Fiddle or Faddle).

(Lawford's relationship with Papa Joe is reflective of the warped ethics in the Kennedy household. Before Lawford's married Katherine Kennedy, Joe heard troubling rumors that Lawford was bisexual and had J. Edgar Hoover check out the potential son-in-law. When

1 Reeves, *A Question of Character*, p. 241.

2 Reeves, *A Question of Character*, pp. 317-327. The section on Kennedy's affairs is especially interesting. For other good books on clan frolics, see Nigel Hamilton, *JFK: Reckless Youth* (New York: Random House, 1992); and Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Kennedys: An American Drama* (New York: Summit Books, 1984). Teddy Kennedy has spawned a whole bibliography of scandal books: Marcia Chellis, *Living with the Kennedys: The Joan Kennedy Story* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1985); Leo Damore, *Senatorial Privilege: The Chappaquiddick Coverup* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1988); and the recent bestseller, Richard Burke, *The Senator* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

Hoover reported that the actor had a fondness for prostitutes, Kennedy was delighted, for it was proof that Lawford was a red-blooded American male and a fit husband for his daughter.)³

The shocking thing about Kennedy's affairs is their wholesale and blatant character. Such casual rutting reflects poorly upon the man's character. It is reminiscent of William Alexander Percy's comment on the "new morality"—"its just an excuse to fornicate like white trash." (Only the Kennedys weren't ordinary trash.) One has to wonder about the judgment of a president who persistently exposed himself to such risks, had so little self-control, and was seemingly without moral convictions. There is something frightening about a national leader and Commander-in-Chief who is willing to sacrifice his honor, his marriage, and his career for brief snatches of anonymous sex with women he considered chattel. But such was Camelot.

(Camelot ii will also be interesting. Besides the rumors about Slick Willie's affairs and indiscretions, there are his coy answers as well. Clinton's experimentation with drugs in England was finally revealed despite his long insistence that he had "never broken the laws of the country." Someone joked that in response to the adultery question, Clinton might say that he had "never broken the laws of Utah!" Mindful that the president-elect justified his drug experimentation by saying he "never inhaled", someone else quipped that Clinton might eventually confess his adultery by saying "I cheated on my wife...but I didn't enjoy it." At least Bill's affairs were heterosexual; current Washington rumors about Hillary's affections have a different twist.)

Also interesting is the complicity of journalists and historians in perpetuating the Kennedy myth. The all-male press corps knew about Kennedy's immoral behavior but remained quiet—in part because they hated Richard Nixon and did not want to harm Kennedy's candidacy. Court historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. won a Pulitzer Prize for his *A Thousand Days*, a fawning and hagiographical treatment of Kennedy's presidency. Yet puff-history from the "Camelot school" has remained the party line.

Even worse is the way Christians were deceived by the Kennedy mystique. In the 1960 election, Kennedy scored points with the religion issue. (The Republican Party tried to downplay it.) Contending that he was the victim of religious bigotry, Kennedy used the Catholic issue to bamboozle the Baptists and gain sympathy votes from the electorate. He was arguably the first candidate to use "victimization" as a winning political issue.

Reeves's book, while overargued, is an excellent treatment of Kennedy's character. It is a worthy topic. Nothing from the 1988 election is more memorable than Lloyd Bentson's jab at Dan Quayle in the Vice Presidential debate: "I knew Kennedy; he was a friend of mine; and Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy!" Would that Quayle had responded: "Only by the grace of God."

³ James Spada, *Peter Lawford: The Man Who Kept the Secrets* (New York: Bantam, 1991), p. 186.

As a Baptist minister, Martin Luther King was ostensibly more familiar with the grace of God than Kennedy. *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down* is Ralph Abernathy's sympathetic and moving treatment of the civil rights movement, much of it focusing on King. Abernathy was a Baptist minister, civil rights leader, and King's closest friend and right-hand man.

The book is worth getting for its insights on Jesse Jackson. It depicts Jackson as an ambitious, power-hungry, and attention-starved young politico. Abernathy is clearly annoyed that Jackson told the national media: "I was the last person [King] spoke to as I was cradling him in my arms." (After the gunshots, Jackson hid under a car while Abernathy held his dying friend.) Then Jackson materialized before the Chicago city council with a shirt that, he claimed, was soaked with King's blood. Struggling to understand Jackson's actions, a dubious Abernathy suggests that perhaps he "was somehow in shock, reliving the whole scene in his mind, and acting out what he might have wished to do, during those last seconds." Abernathy's book helps explain how Jackson got his start as America's biggest windbag.

Despite their friendship, King's illicit affairs concerned Abernathy. At one point Abernathy confronted King about this, charging that it was wrong—especially for a Baptist minister. Abernathy also realized that such promiscuous behavior was politically imprudent, especially with Hoover's men "hiding under every bed". (Hoover's men were active; they had the goods on King and had even informed Mrs. King about her husband's extra-curricular activities.) King responded firmly that he did not care what Hoover thought; he wasn't going to cut off his relationships. Abernathy said he was disappointed, but understood: "At this particular time, he was bearing a lion's share of the burden, and he felt he couldn't do so with this source of strength."

As it turns out, King had many "sources of strength". In the twenty-four hours preceding his death, King was with three women, apparently fornicating with two and beating up the third. In April, 1968 King was in Memphis to show solidarity with striking garbage workers. King and Abernathy were invited to a home for dinner with a couple of unattached women. Claiming to be an "exhausted" and "happily married man", Abernathy explained that he was "not particularly interested in developing a closer relationship" with his companion and drifted off to sleep in the living room. He woke up around 1:00 a.m., just in time to see King and his new "friend" emerge from the bedroom.

The civil rights leaders then returned to the motel where, Abernathy says, King's energy-level "would again be tested". King left with another woman and did not return to the room he shared with Abernathy until 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. A third woman, furious that King had stayed out all night and that Abernathy had tried to cover for him, came to their room that morning spoiling for a fight. Says Abernathy: "I don't know what he told her—maybe that he had gone to bed early (which was technically true). Whatever he said, she knew better and told him so." Abernathy observed how this argument, on the morning of King's murder, escalated to the point of violence:

Suddenly Martin lost his temper. “Don't you say a goddamn thing about Ralph,” he shouted and knocked her across the bed. It was more of a shove than a real blow, but for a short man, Martin had prodigious strength that always surprised me. She leaped up to fight back, and for a moment they were engaged in a full-blown fight, with Martin clearly winning. Then it was all over. They glared at one another, eyes flashing, breathing heavily. Then she rushed past him and out the door. He watched dumbly for a second, then shouted, “Don't go! Don't go!” But she was gone, on her way to the airport, headed home. The next thing she knew for certain about Martin Luther King was that he had been shot and killed. It must have been doubly bitter for her, remembering those last few hours, knowing that they had parted in anger.⁴

Abernathy's revelations in *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down* prompted a storm. While few questioned the veracity of his story, they were indignant that he had told it. Abernathy insists that he wanted to tell the full story, including even the less flattering elements.

Of course, the “happily married” Abernathy did not include *everything*. His 600+ page biography strangely omits one of the most interesting escapades of the early Civil Rights movement. This incident might explain Abernathy's willingness to reveal King's transgressions. A leading Civil Rights historian explains it this way:

Late on the afternoon of Friday, August 29, 1958, Abernathy was working in his basement office at First Baptist when the husband of one of his church members walked in unannounced. “I guess you know why I have come”, said Edward Davis. “I have come to kill you.” With that, he pulled a small hatchet from his shirt and struck Abernathy with the handle. Terrified, Abernathy reached for the phone during the struggle that followed. Davis then stuck a pistol into his back, but when he hesitated to fire, either by plan or because inhibitions still checked his rage, Abernathy bolted out of the office screaming, “He wants to kill me!” He ran past his secretary, Alfreda Brown, up the stairs, and out the door.

Davis was right behind him, brandishing the hatchet high in the air as he chased Abernathy down the middle of Columbus Avenue for two blocks. Among the astonished witnesses were two officers in a Montgomery police cruiser, who managed to catch Davis before he overtook Abernathy. Davis threw the hatchet when he saw them coming. There were conflicting reports as to whether he threw it down to get rid of it, or at Abernathy in a final burst of anger, but there was no doubting the pandemonium and shock. Davis, still almost berserk, flung his pistol out of the back of the police car. It went off when it hit the pavement, frightening and then enraging the policemen, who

4 Ralph Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*. For the record, Abernathy says that King did not prefer white women.

had been sloppy in their arrest procedure. At the station, Davis gave them an even bigger surprise by declaring that he had attacked Abernathy because the preacher had been having a sexual affair with his wife since she was fifteen years old. This stunning accusation against the second most important civil rights leader in Montgomery soon led to the interrogation of Vivian McCoy Davis, who, mortified by the news of what her husband had done and said, pitched such a fit of indignation that the police arrested her too, on a charge of disorderly conduct.⁵

All this, of course, was bad publicity. A black Baptist leader reprimanded the budding civil rights celebrities about their conduct and warned them about a host of dangers: plots, tax scandals, violence, and especially the “damning influence” of women, who “often delight in the satisfaction they get out of affairs with men of unusual prominence. You must be vigilant indeed.” King did not heed the advice.

King's womanizing, and the callousness and duplicity that accompanied it, apparently began early. While in seminary he had an affair with the daughter of a German immigrant woman who was the cook in the schoolcafeteria. But because she was poor and because his career demanded that he have a black wife, he dumped her. King then sought a wife who would enhance his status, position, and power within the black community. In short, the disgusting womanizing Abernathy describes appears to have characterized King's entire adult life.⁶

Abernathy omits another serious character question, plagiarism. Rumors about King's plagiarism had circulated for years, but the commission working on King's papers steadfastly denied them. In 1990 it was shown that King plagiarized substantial portions of his doctoral dissertation. It now appears that King was a career plagiarist. He started at age fifteen. His practice of plagiarism grew worse as he continued in college and graduate school. King scholars are red-faced over the affair and have tried to excuse the practice by restyling plagiarism as “unattributed appropriations”, “reverberations”, “echoings”, and “intertextualization”. It is curious that scholars are so surprised by King's plagiarism: if someone cheats on his wife, there is no reason he would not cheat on his teachers.⁷

Scholars and biographers are also reluctant to explain King's relationship to Communists and homosexuals. Several of King's associates were Marxists with connections to Communist and Communist-front groups. Most notorious was Bayard Rustin, a one-time member of the CPUSA with highly publicized (and bi-racial) sodomy convictions. King insisted that Rustin be kept away from alcohol during one march, for if he drank he would “grab a little brother”! Yet despite the damaging publicity and FBI scrutiny, Rev. King refused to distance himself from such riff-raff.

5 Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters* (N.Y.: Simon and Shuster, 1988), pp. 237-38, 242.

6 Branch, pp. 88-90.

7 For treatment of King's plagiarism, see *Chronicles* (January, 1990) and (November 1992) and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 21, 1990).

According to the official line, King was the *good* civil rights leader who was interested in racial harmony, peace, and a “color blind” society. (The release of *Malcolm X* will probably enhance King's reputation as a moderate.) It has even become popular for Christians, especially those in the pro-life movement, to claim King's mantle. They should be more careful about baptizing the King legacy. Planned Parenthood gave him their Margaret Sanger Award in 1966 in recognition of his service to their cause. King's unapologetic ties to Communists and homosexuals raise questions about how moderate and Christian “Uncle Martin” really was.

Though King's assassination was tragic, it was, as in Kennedy's case, good for his reputation, since it muted all negative discussions of his character. It also revived his popularity. (His influence had greatly waned in the five years preceding his death; radical Black Power groups had seized national attention and had become the new focus of black activism, while King's career faded.) The assassination made him an instant hero. He became a national martyr and *the* representative of his race, who by public consensus was treated with awed reverence. In a spoof on King's birthday a few years ago, a radio disk jockey joked that he was going to celebrate “James Earl Ray Day” with fried chicken, turnip greens, and watermelon. Though D.J.s can usually get away with saying *anything* on the air, the man was promptly fired. He had violated something that, to Americans, was sacred.

The assassinations of both men have much in common. Though according to official reports both men were killed by lone gunmen, many rumors of conspiracy and cover-up remain. Unanswered questions about Lee Harvey Oswald, who was quickly silenced by Jack Ruby, were raised by Oliver Stone's atrocious film, *J.F.K.* James Earl Ray, the two-bit crook convicted of the King killing, still maintains his innocence and claims that he was set up.

By their dramatic, public, and controversial deaths, both men became martyred heroes and icons of Sixties activism. In essence, they were canonized as liberal saints. It is no wonder that Bill Clinton names Kennedy and King as his greatest heroes.

There are signs that this will change. Reeves book will help destroy the myths of Camelot. New revelations about King's plagiarism will scorch his sacred, teflon reputation. (While liberal journalists knew all along the things reported here, the public did not.) Some say that we live in a world without heroes because we no longer exalt the heroic and noble. Perhaps that is true. But the real problem isn't that we lack heroes, but that we have exalted and ennobled base ones. Such were Kennedy and King.⁸

Recently Arizona made King's birthday a state holiday. Only New Hampshire holds out, resolutely resisting this silly trend. And chances are, New Hampshire would also refuse to observe a holiday for Kennedy.⁹ Perhaps those stalwart Yankees know something the rest

8 George Roche, *A World Without Heroes: The Modern Tragedy* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 1987).

9 Since this review was written New Hampshire began observance of the King holiday through executive

of the nation does not know—or has chosen to ignore. It has something to do with character.

order of the Governor.