

# Review of *JFK: Reckless Youth*, by Nigel Hamilton, (New York: Random House, 1993)

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Contra Mundum, No. 8, Summer 1993

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For more than two decades, the Kennedy name struck awe and very nearly sacrosanct feelings in the hearts of many Americans. Oh, there were those few who later campaigned for Goldwater, but they were the outcasts, the underbelly of society, not the velvet uppercloth of Camelot. The shining city on a hill was at last occupied by a good-hearted Arthur with his Lady Guinevere. America was safe at last. We were on our way to the moon, the world had been made safe for Democracy, and the rights of all men everywhere were finally being honored. America no longer appeared as the land of the free or the home of the brave. It was more than this: this was the land flowing with milk and honey. John F. and Jacqueline Kennedy *proved* it by showing us how to turn the spigot on.

It is surely hard for Americans today to imagine a time when a more fawning public or a more pandering press ever so toadied over a political figure, even more than the one who currently occupies the White House. But when John Fitzgerald Kennedy entered the alabaster abode, the press went into hiding; or, it acted with complete and willing complicity, which is the same thing. It even out-Rathered Dan Rather's infamous tribute to President Clinton recently when he opined that he and Connie Chung hoped that they would be "one one-hundredth as successful" as President Billary.

Americans were never treated to the "real" JFK while he lived. Rather we were giving a composite of a man born to be king. And the reality and the dream were as far apart as north is from south. The JFK Americans saw was a suave, sophisticated, progressive, good-looking "hunk" (I borrow the orismology from Eleanor Cliff) from Hyannis Port. What they got, as Hamilton puts it, was a bookish young man, perennially late for meals, guttersnipe in dress, unfocused, nearly expelled from school for gang leadership and irreverence, incessantly ill and nearly dead dozens of times, a failure at Princeton, and dismissed as a playboy at Harvard. *This* man was to be king of Camelot; this was the man often touted as the greatest political figure in the last 100 years.

The chinks in the Kennedy armor that revealed the clay figure began some years ago with the publication of Leo Damore's *Senatorial Privilege: The Chappaquiddick Cover-Up*

(1988), a book that was read widely but ignored by the press. This was followed by Thomas C. Reeves's *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (Free Press, 1991), another book read by many but reviewed by few. More recent is Gerald and Deborah Strober's *Let Us Begin Anew: An Oral History of the Kennedy Presidency* (Harper Collins), in which the Kennedy clan is allowed to speak the evilfare for itself. Even Richard E. Burke's *The Senator: My Ten Years with Ted Kennedy* (St. Martin's, 1992) is a tour de force of corruption and nefariousness that is the Kennedy m.o. This book, too, was not only ignored, but pilloried as often as not for having too few eye-witnesses. This was the strangest of all since it appeared after Kitty Kelley's fictive account of the Reagans, that was touted as sacred history though it had *no* eye witnesses. Not any of these books repeats the mendacity of Theodore White or Arthur Schlesinger's works on the Kennedys. Camelot has crumbled. In fact, what we discover is what only a few could be heard repeating back then: the Kennedys were poison for America.

Nigel Hamilton now weighs in with what can only be described as haymaker, a roundhouse punch. *JFK: Reckless Youth* is the first tome of a scheduled multi-volume work that has the Kennedy clan in a hyperventilating snit—clear evidence that what we find should become a part of our political credenda about the Kennedys.

Hamilton opens with JFK's maternal grandfather, John Francis Fitzgerald, congressman and mayor of Boston. The family feud begins there for Fitzgerald, or “Fitzy” as he was called, fought long and hard against P. J. Kennedy, a corrupt political maven who could not stand to lose and never forgot a grudge. Even though Fitzgerald forgave his arch-enemy who later blocked his renomination in 1900, and named him commissioner of wires, Fitzy could not tolerate the awful fact that his jewel, Rose, had fallen for Kennedy's son, Joseph. Fitzy saw Joe as loud, brash, unprincipled and insensitive. He could not have hit the nail more squarely on the head, as Rose was later ruefully to learn.

Rose should have seen the handwriting on the wall, but that's why love is said to be blind. Even during the courtship, Joe hung around chorus girls, often taking several with him from the Pink Lady. He and *four* of them once ran into Rose during their courtship. Joe merely talked his way out of it and Rose fell for it. Fitzy could not, however, be so easily misled by the persiflage for which Joe was famous. He did everything—really, *everything*, including sending Rose to Europe for a summer—to keep her away from Joe. But Rose was determined, or hell-bent, or both, and she and Joe eventually married, though Rose could not later remember anything about the actual “popping” of the question.

Joe became the youngest bank president in 1913. He had served in his father's bank as an undistinguished clerk. In December of that year he discovered that Columbia Trust Company was about to be taken over by First Ward National. Joe immediately borrowed \$45,000, lined up 51% of the shares, and single-handedly spoiled the take-over bid. The president of Columbia Trust, a proponent of the merger, was forced to resign. Joe took over as president.

This is significant because it points up two attributes of King Joe reigning over the Kennedy estate. He was ruthless, reckless, a risk-taker, and would stop at nothing in his pursuit to win. And win he would. Though he would later fail miserably at Fore River of Bethlehem Steel (causing a strike soon after he arrived) he quickly made up for it by profiting off the war. Still later, Joe turned a dollar into ten by using insider trading on stocks and other moves that would have made Michael Milken's malversations, if they may be called such, look positively legal. In 1923, for example, Joe took out \$24,000 on credit. Using insider information given him by Galen Stone where he then worked, he turned it into \$675,000. Joe learned that it was only by deceit and dishonesty that one could get rich quick. He resigned from Stone where that practice was looked down upon.

But he did not resign himself from his crooked, chrematistic dealings. For example, setting up a ticket-tape in a hotel in New York in 1924, with Rose pregnant again and at home, he saved John Hertz's Yellow Cab Company by manipulating stock prices all over the country. Checker Cab, which was trying to take over Yellow, lost interest. Hertz immediately rewarded Joe with a generous share in the company which Joe immediately dumped into the market. The end result was, of course, to make the price of Yellow plummet. Joe had then "bought in" at the stock's highest level and unloaded leaving everyone else in the lurch. Before the end of the decade, by hook and by crook, Joe Kennedy Sr. was a millionaire.

Rose, meanwhile, had been having children at a rate of one every few years. John F. Kennedy was born May 29, 1917, a few years after Joe, Jr. Rose entered the marriage expecting romance. What she got was money and lots of it. The union was strange, almost eerie. Rose was Puritanical by all accounts, hating even the most timidly off-color joke. Joe was brazen, vulgar and adulterous. So orgulous were Joe's adulteries that Rose walked out on him early in their marriage. But her father stepped in and told her to do her duty. He said, in effect, that this was the bed she defied him to have, so now it was hers in which to lie. And lie is what she did, but in another sense. In order to put up with Joe's crooked dealings, the family's name dragged through the mud in every circle that mattered, and the repeated pregnancies, Rose often left for Europe or elsewhere after she recuperated. The money Joe made, however dishonestly, kept Rose's peace of mind, though it may safely be said to have somewhat deranged those of her children.

Into this strained, strange and evil setting was JFK, future President of the United States, builder of Camelot, brought. It did not take him long to get sick of it. Before he was able to attend kindergarten, JFK fell ill with scarlet fever, and it nearly took his life. Even Joe Sr. took time off to be with his son, time he never took off for his children's births, or later, even to attend the funeral of his own father (he sent Joe Jr. instead). But Joe Sr. could hardly do otherwise. Rose was still recuperating from the birth of Kathleen when "Jack" fell ill.

The illness brought the family closer together, but not for long. The desire to turn a dollar and the wanderlust for the new, sent Joe Sr. packing once again, to make a deal and earn more money. This obsession Joe Sr. had he used to try to make up for his family lack of

blue-blood breeding. What he never really understood was that it is impossible to make a family respectable by earning money in a disreputable manner. But the money covered a multitude of sins, and pretty soon Joe turned the millions to various publicity ventures for the Kennedy name. To Arthur Krock, for example, was turned over (at \$25,000 annually) the arduous and often impossible task of keeping the Kennedy family name in the papers but out of the police blotters.

It's not hard to tell which side of the family JFK took after. While often sick and thus otherwise occupied, JFK made up for lost time whenever well. Throughout much of his checkered academic career, often touted as being superior (not unlike those of another president of the same ticket), Jack spent his time getting into trouble, yet keeping his academic head barely above water. While his father carried on an adulterous affair with the actress Gloria Swanson (Hamilton claims he raped her to begin the lustings), Jack struggled through school, barely staying in one and having to sit out of another owing to illness.

The future President of the United States' letters at this point are a study in billingsgate and sophomoric, even juvenile humor about excretory functions and his own awakening sexuality. Of course these were traumatic times for the young boy, and probably many other boys would have behaved in an identical fashion. But so many letters filled with such revolting language wears on the reader, not to mention Jack's hideous grammar, spelling and convoluted syntax.

Jack's l'assommoir occurred when he organized a gang at Choate called the Muckers. The episode was hardly more than a clever childish prank. But it involved the headmaster who had had his limit. He called Jack's father in on the matter. But the event taught Jack nothing. His father, who screeched at Jack in the meeting with the headmaster, proved Jack's ally when the headmaster left the room for a moment. Said he, "My God, son,...[i]f that crazy Mucker's Club had been mine, you can bet it wouldn't have started with an M!"

Jack's adolescence flowered as he deflowered, so to speak, whenever he got the chance. This predilection, too, he inherited from his father. Kathleen's young friends often complained of having to avoid Joe Sr.'s sexual advances, especially when the lights would go out for film night at the Kennedy's. Jack's letters on sexual matters are even more subterranean than ones relating his illnesses. His descriptions are pornographically crude, and his insensitivity about the women whom he took to bed are outrageous enough to make even Rush Limbaugh a feminist.

None of this, however, was allowed to interfere with the job of making a name for himself, and Jack Kennedy did manage to do that. While Joe Sr. was helping Chamberlain flesh out the appeasement policy, son Jack wrote an editorial for the Harvard *Crimson*, reflecting his own isolationism that was really, in fact, his father's. None of the Kennedy boys ever thought on their own while Joe Sr. was alive. Joe Sr.'s isolationism was really more an opportunism. Being out of the war-profiteer business, Joe Sr. stood to gain nothing and lose a lot if war developed. It was far better for him and his

business dealings to obviate war, even if it meant dragging his country's name through the mud. Small matter that. Jack, somewhat naïvely, reflected the more defensible part of isolationism.

From these humble beginnings emerged *Why England Slept*, a study in Britain's "centuries of isolationism". The book was an apologia for Munich, Chamberlain, and England's war unpreparedness. But more than anything else it was a vindication for his father's views. The book's value cannot be minimized. But it is very difficult to tell where the Jack Kennedy ends and the Krock editing begins. The surviving manuscripts show Jack's bad grammar, faulty syntax and jejune tones still everywhere apparent. The finished text, however, revealed none of these weaknesses.

Even assuming that Krock's contributions were more than minimal, no one was prepared for the storm of interest the book released. The initial printing of 3,500 sold in two *days*. Suddenly Jack was a minor celebrity with calls for 2500-word pieces in *Current History*, spreads in *Life*, and newspaper interviews by the score.

It seemed, however, that keeping the Kennedy name clean was the one thing that the Kennedys themselves could *not* do, regardless of the money. After the hubbub of celebrity died down, Jack eventually entered the service. This was done delicately and with difficulty, given that his medical history had denied him even minimal life insurance. Somehow that same record looked good to war recruiters! Shortly after enlisting, Jack's involvement with Inga Arvad, a married woman on whom the FBI kept tabs, began. Jack would have married her, but father Joe, the FBI, family friends and even Inga herself finally prevailed. This may have been the only woman Jack Kennedy ever genuinely cared for.

Even this turned to gold, however, as Jack took to serving on PT boats. Joe Sr. had political aspirations for his sons, and, according to longtime friend John Bulkeley, entered Jack into the PT regiment for the sole purpose of getting "the veteran's vote [for president] after the war". Jack's fiasco aboard the PTs was parlayed into a book (not covered in this volume) and, much later, a war hero's record. Kennedy's record as a hero may not be as disputed as, say, his later vice-president's, LBJ, could be. But it was not as stellar as former President George Bush's. It was simply enough to get Jack out of the war.

Tragedy, however, began to haunt the Kennedy's and, while it had brushed the family on various occasions, it now slapped them down with a vengeance. After Jack's shipwreck and subsequent hero's welcome home (helped immeasurably by John Hersey's hagiographical rendering of it in *Life* ), Joe Jr. could not get enough of the temerarious life of going gunning for U-boats. On the night of his fatal mission, to knock out the V-3 gun sites (a mission that turned out to have been entirely unnecessary), Joe Jr. ignored two warnings that his plane had electronic difficulties. Twenty minutes after take off, the plane exploded in mid-air. Jack took his convalescence following his welcome home to pen *As We Remember Joe*.

Hamilton's volume ends with Jack's foray into politics. The buying of votes, publicity, news stories and the rest are put on for the spectacle that is the Kennedy name. The story is told with wit, panache and drama. If the rest of the volumes are as interesting and spellbinding as this, then readers will have a veritable arsenal on their shelves with this set and those volumes being completed by Robert Caro on LBJ. Soon, there will be so much evidence against *everything* the liberal left (but I repeat myself) holds dear, that even they will have a hard time keeping a straight face and a stiff upper lip.

As later volumes will show, this is the most unlikely man in America to become the idol of the Democrats, and the most preposterous family to become the icon of American politics. He was adulterous, conniving, willing to stop at nothing, a devout anti-communist, a warlord. He treated women with contempt, used them for sex, and put a nation at risk for his sexual antics more than any president known. He was a plutocrat (the Kennedy boys each got at least ten million in the will), he loathed the Civil Rights movement, and he was forever seeking ways to aggrandize himself at the expense of others. At least Arthur's Camelot had the distinct advantage of being a good idea.

There is so much Potemkin village-building in the lives of the Kennedys that reading it now makes one wonder about the sanity of a public ever to believe such lies in the first place. But reading them afresh provides us with the proper amount of jaundice in the eye never again to fall victim to money, influence, the pandering of schmaltz into political policy, handsome yet adulterous candidates who parade their venalities as mere peccadilloes, all the while making promise after promise that government can do everything for everyone without costing anyone (except the rich) anything. No, reading this biography will make it impossible for American voters ever to fall for such shilly-shallying by politics-mad young couples who lie through their teeth while arraying themselves with the veneer of glitz and glitter that only money and make-believe, Hollywoodesque celebrity can bring.