

Debating JFK's legacy

By William C. Kashatus

Joseph P. Kennedy, a Wall Street power broker turned U.S. ambassador, raised his sons to believe in image above all else. "Can't you get it into your head that it's not important what you really are?" he told his son John shortly after he announced his candidacy for the U.S. Congress in 1946. "The only important thing is what people think you are."

John F. Kennedy followed his father's advice so well that he crafted an image of his New Frontier as the champion of peaceful revolution abroad and civil rights at home. But JFK's actions did not always match this rhetoric.

Fifty years after Kennedy's assassination, historians still find it difficult to reach agreement on his presidency. Widely divergent interpretations of his administration and character suggest that JFK left a mixed legacy.

On one hand, there are those like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Theodore Sorensen, members of Kennedy's inner circle, who emphasize the lofty, idealistic rhetoric of his presidency. These apologists argue that JFK sought to develop struggling Third World countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa through such humanitarian programs as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress. That he threw the weight of the Justice Department behind civil rights leaders in their quest to desegregate public and educational institutions in the South. That he electrified the nation by proposing to put a man on the moon before the end of the 1960s.

They also argue that Kennedy's delicate "carrot-and-stick" maneuvering with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev overcame a Cold War crisis in Berlin. It also allowed JFK



Associated Press

to avert nuclear holocaust during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, and enabled him to reach agreement with the Soviets on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty the following year.

On the other hand, revisionists like Thomas C. Reeves and Garry Wills argue that Kennedy was a "compulsive risk taker" who "lacked a moral center" and was "obsessed with image and style." That his misguided effort to topple Fidel Castro's communist revolution during the Bay of Pigs fiasco triggered a chain reaction that led to a showdown with the Soviets over offensive missiles in Cuba, and alienated the Central Intelligence Agency, which the president could ill afford to do.

They argue that JFK's continuation of the American commitment to South Vietnam and its corrupt leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, escalated U.S. military involvement in that country, embroiling our nation in one of its most unpopular wars. And that Kennedy's character flaws — his scandalous philandering, vindictiveness, and unrestrained ego — jeopardized national security.

No wonder historians have struggled for decades over how to rank JFK among the other 43 U.S. presidents.

The Siena Research Institute conducted surveys of more than 200 historians in 1982, 1990, 1994, 2002, and 2010. Kennedy ranked in the first quartile (either eighth or 10th place) in the first three surveys, but dropped to the second quartile (14th and 11th place) in the last two.

Similar surveys conducted by C-SPAN in 1999 and 2009 ranked Kennedy in the first quartile (eighth and sixth place, respectively). Still another survey by the Wall Street Journal in 2000 dropped Kennedy to the third quartile (18th place).

The only points on which historians agree is that Kennedy's assassination and the conspiracy theories surrounding it resulted in the American people's growing distrust of government, and that JFK hired historian Schlesinger, kept audio-recorded tapes of all Oval Office conversations, and maintained a good relationship with the press in order to cast the best possible light on his administration for the history books.

Interestingly, when Kennedy met the presidential scholar David H. Donald, in 1962, he voiced his resentment for historians who had rated some of his predecessors.

"No one has a right to grade a president," insisted JFK. "Not unless he has sat in this chair, examined the information that comes across this desk, and understands why a president has made the decisions he's made."

Perhaps Kennedy's defensiveness explains why he went to such great lengths to control his place in history, and why historians still find it so difficult to rate his presidency.

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