

## The Fallen Hero: John F. Kennedy in Cultural Perspective\*

### I.

In the late John Ford-Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, produced in 1962 at the highpoint of the Kennedy Era, a scene at the end of the movie is of particular interest for our topic. After a successful political career, Ransom Stoddard (played by James Stewart) returns to the small western town in which he shot the dreaded outlaw Liberty Valance and paved the way for the arrival of civilization. As we learn in a flashback, Stoddard came to the West as a greenhorn and without any experience in using guns. Hence, his showdown with Liberty Valance was the stuff of which legends are made: Where others had run away cowardly, David had the courage to fight Goliath and was victorious. Stoddard became a living legend, the man who shot Liberty Valance, and his fame helped him to start a successful career as a politician.

With an impressive list of classical Hollywood Westerns John Ford, the director of the movie, had played a crucial role in the popularization of the myth of the American West. In the late stage of his career, however, he began to foreground the cultural mechanisms of myth formation. As it turns out, Stoddard and the residents of the small Western town had never realized that it was not Stoddard who shot Liberty Valance but Stoddard's rival Tom Doniphon (played by John Wayne), who, despite his dislike of Stoddard, could not bear to see the naive greenhorn Stoddard being killed. The legend of the man who shot Liberty Valance was a fabrication based on Doniphon's lie. The arrival of the rule of law in the West was not the result of a courageous stand against unlawful violence but, paradoxically, of another unlawful act of violence.

In the United States, the 1960s were a period in which the so-called founding myths of American society were demystified in rapid succession and with growing radicalism. Life on the frontier was no longer represented as a noble and brave pioneer existence but as steeped in seediness and lawlessness. At

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first sight, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* seems to fit into this pattern. Only at the end do we realize that the contrary is true. Ford does not want to unmask the myth of the West but to justify it on new grounds. After the truth about who really shot Liberty Valance has finally been disclosed, the editor of the local newspaper to whom the story is told, refuses to print the story, saying: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." For Ford, myths may distort historical facts and can thus, strictly speaking, be called fictions or even a tissue of lies; and yet, we need them because they are able to create positive versions of national or regional identity.

In its balancing act between exposure and renewed affirmation, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* can provide a fitting introduction to a discussion of the Kennedy myth from a cultural perspective. The parallels between Ford's movie and the history of the Kennedy myth are striking indeed. Just as Stoddard's fame turns out to be based on a lie, we have come to realize over time that the basis for our admiration of Kennedy was false because Kennedy was in reality not the person he presented in public. We know that crucial information was suppressed during his lifetime, and that his public image was carefully fabricated. The charismatic politician who sported such a youthful and healthy look was disease-ridden from his early childhood on and throughout his life. Because of numerous chronic ailments he needed constant medical attendance and strong medication.<sup>1</sup> His chronic back ailment, which some doctors feared would lead to permanent disability, made it a painful undertaking for him even to look at his manuscript during public speeches, and Kennedy often had to wear a surgical corset sustaining his back and spine.<sup>2</sup> Another chronic ailment was Kennedy's recurring colitis, later combined with gastric

<sup>1</sup> See Robert Dallek's description of Kennedy's various health problems: "After the diagnosis of his Addison's disease in September 1947, he continued to struggle with medical concerns. Over the next six years, headaches, upper respiratory infections, stomach aches, urinary tract discomfort, and almost constant back pain plagued him. He consulted an ear, nose, and throat specialist about his headaches, took medication and applied heat fifteen minutes a day to ease his stomach troubles, consulted urologists about his bladder and prostate discomfort, had DOCA pellets implanted and took daily oral doses of cortisone to control his Addison's disease, and struggled unsuccessfully to find relief from his back miseries. In July 1953, Kennedy entered George Washington University Hospital for back treatment. . . . The pain had become almost unbearable. X rays showed that the fifth lumbar vertebra had collapsed, most likely a consequence of the corticosteroids he was taking for the Addison's disease. He could not bend down to pull a sock on his left foot and he had to climb and descend stairs moving sideways. Beginning in May, he had to rely on crutches to get around" (Dallek 195-6). These health problems were hidden from the public and became known in piecemeal fashion only after Kennedy's death.

<sup>2</sup> Literature on the topic nowadays claims that this "weak spot" contributed to his death, for Kennedy was wearing a surgical corset during his ride through Dallas which prevented him from dodging the third shot: "Were it not for a back brace, which held him erect, a third and fatal shot to the back of the head would not have found its mark" (Dallek 694).

ulcers, which had to be treated with drugs that affected his back ailment negatively. Kennedy frequently spent several weeks in hospitals, enduring torturous and often degrading examinations. Twice in the course of his long medical history, he received the last sacraments. Probably no other American president has been ill so often and for such extended periods of time before and during his presidency. And yet, no other president managed to uphold a youthful and dynamic image in public so consistently and successfully.

The paradox repeats itself in other areas. As Jackie Kennedy's chivalrous companion, Kennedy played the part of a perfect husband and was portrayed in the press as a loving father and family man. In reality, he was excessive and reckless in his sexual escapades and committed adultery on a regular, sometimes daily basis and in almost serial fashion.<sup>3</sup> Although he publicly represented himself as an unwavering freedom fighter and defender of democracy, he supported Joseph McCarthy,<sup>4</sup> authorized the "Bay of Pigs" Invasion,<sup>5</sup> and supported a military coup d'état in South Vietnam that led to

<sup>3</sup> See Dallek about Jacqueline Kennedy's "awakening" after the wedding: "She was not, Lem Billings recalled, prepared for the humiliation she would suffer when she found herself stranded at parties while Jack would suddenly disappear with some pretty young girl. ... Jackie's unhappiness was no inducement to Jack to restrain himself" (Dallek 194-5). Dallek says about the time of the presidency: "Kennedy's womanizing had, of course, always been a form of amusement, but now it also gave him a release from unprecedented daily tensions. Kennedy had affairs with several women, including Pamela Turnure, Jackie's press secretary; Mary Pinchot Meyer, Ben Bradley's sister-in-law; two White House secretaries playfully dubbed Fiddle and Faddle; Judith Campbell Exner, whose connections to mob figures like Sam Giancana made her the object of FBI scrutiny; and a tall, slender, beautiful nineteen-year-old college sophomore and White House intern, who worked in the press office during two summers. (She 'had no skills,' a member of the press staff recalled. 'She couldn't type.') There were also Hollywood stars and starlets and call girls paid by Dave Powers, the court jester and facilitator of Kennedy's indulgences, who arranged trysts in hotels and swimming pools in California, Florida, and at the White House" (Dallek 475-6). Much has been written about Kennedy's affair with Marilyn Monroe as well as about the one with Ellen Rometsch, a GDR citizen, who had once been a secretary in Ulbricht's office and whom the FBI suspected to be a spy (see especially Seymour Hersh's *The Dark Side of Camelot*).

<sup>4</sup> See Dallek: "Like so many others in the country, Jack was partly blind to the political misjudgments and moral failings generated by the anticommunism of the time. Fearful that America was losing the Cold War, supposedly because of disloyal U.S. officials, and that McCarthy was correct in trying to root out government subversives, millions of Americans uncritically accepted unproved allegations that abused the civil liberties of loyal citizens. Unlike Truman, who in March 1950 called McCarthy 'a ballyhoo artist' making 'wild charges,' Jack was all too ready to take McCarthy's accusations about government spies at face value. Overreacting to the events of 1949-50, Jack saw the dangers of communist success compelling the sacrifice of some traditional freedoms" (Dallek 163).

<sup>5</sup> His approval was hotly disputed among the administration and the foreign politics establishment: "Schlesinger peppered JFK with memos and private words about the

the assassination of President Diem, a former American ally. It was Kennedy who paved the way for the Vietnam War and who consented to secret, illegal assassination plans by the CIA.<sup>6</sup> Even in civil rights, he was not the great driving force. In contrast to a later image as a progressive politician, he tried to sit out the issue and became reluctantly engaged only when it was clear that something had to be done.<sup>7</sup>

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injury to U.S. prestige and his presidency; Rusk lodged muted protests; and Fulbright, who as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee had been briefed about the plan, spoke forcefully against U.S. hypocrisy in denouncing Soviet indifference to self-determination and planning an invasion of a country that was more a thorn in the flesh than a dagger in the heart” (Dallek 361-2). Nonetheless, Kennedy decided to follow through with the operation: “In the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Jack rejected moral and legal objections to an invasion; he lied, exhibited an almost macho temperament, became involved with military operations just enough to make them worse, and then blamed others for their failure. He soon approved Operation Mongoose, the clandestine exercise in terrorism and murder. Determined to win in Cuba at any cost, Jack had secret dealings with one of the top mobsters involved in the assassination attempts. This reveals an irresponsibility and lack of judgement bordering on dereliction” (Reeves 416). Kennedy’s brother Robert, attorney general in the Kennedy Administration, played a vital role in all of his decisions. Robert, too, has by now been subject to many disclosures. To give one especially blatant example, taken from a review of Evan Thomas’ *Robert Kennedy. His Life* in the *New York Times Book Review*: “Sometimes Thomas tries to soften the blow: ‘The messy collision of Kennedy’s war on crime with his war on Castro, aggravated by his brother’s poor taste in paramours, is the worst chapter in an otherwise noble career of public service.’ This is a polite way of saying that the attorney general of the United States hesitated to prosecute certain gangsters because his brother, the president, had slept with the mistress of a Mafia don and because with the Kennedys’ approval the C.I.A. had connived with the Mafia to kill Castro” (Michael Lind, “The Candidate” 10).

<sup>6</sup> See Dallek: “Senator Frank Church’s Select Committee investigating alleged assassination plots in 1975 turned up eight schemes to kill Castro hatched between 1960 and 1965, including a contract with mobsters eager to re-establish lost business interests in Cuba. Kennedy himself discussed assassinating Castro. . . . There are additional indications that the president and Bobby [Kennedy] talked in the fall of 1961 about killing the Cuban leader” (Dallek 439). The most detailed and critical representation can be found in Seymour M. Hersh’s book *The Dark Side of Camelot*. There is an additional irony to the fact that one of the women Kennedy had a fling with at the time was the party girl Judith Campbell, who simultaneously had an affair with Mafia don Sam Giancana, who, in turn, had been hired by the CIA to assist in Castro’s assassination: “The agency, as part of its secret effort to topple Fidel Castro, had engaged the mobster to use his gangland connections to assassinate the Cuban leader. Thus it was that the president of the United States was not only sleeping with a Mafia moll, but sharing her with a mob capo engaged by his own intelligence services to murder a foreign leader” (Steel 67-68).

<sup>7</sup> Says Dallek: “Unlike Hubert Humphrey, another rival for the White House, who had a long-standing, visceral commitment to ending segregation, or even L[yndon] B. J[ohnson], whose political actions masked a sincere opposition to segregation, Jack Kennedy’s response to the great civil rights debates of 1957-60 was largely motivated

Yet all of these disclosures have not been able to destroy the Kennedy myth. Nobody has suppressed the evidence, as the newspaper editor does at the end of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. On the contrary, more and more facts have been disclosed, and yet, the Kennedy legend has remained largely intact. We still see him as the charismatic, youthful, and vigorous president who proclaimed a new beginning in politics, acted as a forceful leader of the free world, reinvigorated American political ideals, and became an idol of the young generation.<sup>8</sup> Kennedy's amazing popularity, which has proven immune to demystification and disenchantment, seems to defy rational explanation. This will be my starting point for the following analysis of the Kennedy legend from a cultural perspective.

## II.

In recent years, the concept of "culture" has seen a broadening in meaning and a remarkable boom as an analytical concept. Traditionally, the term culture was used to refer to the major intellectual and artistic achievements of a society. From this perspective, societies or groups can lack culture – a view that not only Europeans but also Americans themselves held of American society for a long time. Would one try to apply this understanding of culture to the phenomenon of Kennedy, the crucial point would be that President Kennedy ostentatiously demonstrated high cultural interests in order to do away with the image of American politicians as uncultured rednecks – and thus with the image of the US as a cultureless nation. During the Kennedy Administration, artists and intellectuals were frequently invited to the White House, so often, in effect, that Kennedy himself is said to have joked once that the White House had been turned into a Parisian Café.

The concept of culture I will use here is broader. It is a notion of culture we encounter when attempts are being made to explain phenomena that supposedly belong to "non-cultural," "cultureless" spheres of reality, such as the economy, politics, or society. In these areas, the concept of culture is often applied today to elucidate aspects of economic or social life that seem to defy rational explanation. Why did market leader IBM miss out on the Personal Computer revolution and was left behind by Apple? Experts argue that it was IBM's company culture which made the company inflexible. Why did Russia have difficulties in introducing a functioning free market economy after the breakdown of communism? Cultural attitudes stemming from the time of the Soviet Union are used to provide an explanation. Why do some

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by self-serving political considerations" (Dallek 215).

<sup>8</sup> Of course, this fascination extends to the whole Kennedy "dynasty:" "Few families loom larger in the American popular imagination than the Kennedys" (Elder 169). The following analysis of the reasons for Kennedy's popularity will have to take into account this "dynastic" aspect.

ethnic groups in the United States manage to improve their economic and social standing in a relatively brief period, while others make little headway? Again, explanations are sought in different cultural attitudes. In all of these cases, culture stands for a system of beliefs, values, and attitudes that appears to shape human behavior more decisively than utilitarian considerations. Apparently, human behavior is not always and not primarily governed by material interests and thus cannot be reduced to rational calculation. The cultural imaginary – in which ideas, values, and emotions find expression in images and symbols, stories and myths, fantasies and phantasms – has more influence on human behavior than the “hard,” empirically-oriented social sciences have been willing to acknowledge.<sup>9</sup> A cultural perspective, then, does not lead us away from those spheres that are considered genuinely relevant, such as economics, politics, or society. Rather, it provides an opportunity to add a new dimension of understanding in describing them.

An analysis of the Kennedy legend can illustrate the usefulness of a cultural perspective for an explanation of political phenomena. By now, the legend has been analyzed repeatedly and exhaustively, and yet one may claim that all of these historical and political analyses do not really get to the core of the matter, namely the worldwide fascination that the Kennedy persona created and that has proven so resistant to all unmasking.<sup>10</sup> A cultural approach to the Kennedy legend is thus not primarily interested in the role culture played during the Kennedy presidency; rather, it focuses on the ideas and fantasies, the myths and narratives that have shaped the public perception of Kennedy and have been the basis of his amazing popularity. This popularity was, and still is, especially strong in Germany. In trying to find an explanation, it

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<sup>9</sup> This argument is the starting point of David Lubin’s interesting study *Shooting Kennedy. JFK and the Culture of Images*: “Yet the point of this book is to argue that participants and onlookers alike always and inevitably understand historical events, tragic or otherwise, through culture, high, low, and in-between” (10). In a neo-historical *tour de force* Lubin then explores the various visual connotations opened up by the Kennedy myth but does not focus on narrative patterns.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Brown’s introductory thoughts to his *JFK: History of an Image*, published in 1988, aptly outline the present issue: “If there is any enduring monument on the ever changing landscape of contemporary American politics, it is the people’s affection and esteem for John F. Kennedy. It has weathered the declining fortunes of the party and policies with which JFK was associated in his lifetime, the bitter controversies provoked by some of the politically active members of his family, and even potentially damaging revelations about Kennedy himself. What makes this phenomenon especially noteworthy is that Kennedy would seem to be unpromising material for a personality cult. His congressional career was largely undistinguished, he won the election to the presidency by the barest (and one of the most tainted) of margins, and his major legislative objectives were stymied at the time of his death. Even in foreign policy, where Kennedy did exercise considerable initiative as president, his record is marred by the Bay of Pigs invasion, the collapse of the Vienna conference with Khrushchev, and the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam” (Brown 1).

has often been argued that Kennedy was an ideal embodiment of America's best virtues for Germans. But what exactly is so specifically American about Kennedy? Cultural analysis can help to explain the continuing admiration of Kennedy which, in light of a seemingly never-ending string of disclosures, must appear "irrational" and inexplicable from the perspective of political analysis.

### III.

It is well-known today that Kennedy was already highly image- and television-conscious. "John F. Kennedy," writes Harald Wenzel "was the first outstanding politician in the US who fully recognized the importance of television for political success and drew strategic conclusions from this awareness. Television helped Kennedy to stage himself, and also to stylize himself, as different from other, conventional politics and politicians, so that he could convincingly embody the dawning of a new age, the age of the *New Frontier*" (Wenzel 486-7, my translation, his italics).<sup>11</sup> Kennedy's television appearances were carefully choreographed, and one of the reasons why they were so effective can be attributed to the fact that the public was not yet fully aware of the potential for manipulation inherent in the new medium. Although Kennedy's public appearances were staged, they could still thus appear as authentic expressions of his personality and character.

However, being aware of these facts does not yet help us to explain why certain forms of self-presentation were so appealing. It is important to know that Kennedy's public image and appearance were carefully crafted (and not an authentic expression of his inner self), but this in itself does not yet explain their attractiveness and meaning for the public. Popular images must offer something to the public that is of use for the imaginary desires of its members. From today's perspective, then, the issue is not a character issue, that is, the question of whether Kennedy's self-presentation in the media was a deception of the public or not. Rather, the crucial question is how this self-presentation could become so amazingly effective. In order to arrive at an answer, we have to describe some of the main elements of Kennedy's media image and interpret their cultural meaning. A starting consideration is that in analyses of charismatic persons or stars, we often fail to grasp the meaning of the seemingly obvious.<sup>12</sup> The challenge, then, is to analyze the cultural

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<sup>11</sup> In his study *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, Joseph Berry arrives at the same conclusion: "Media manipulation was a key factor in the political career of John F. Kennedy" (Berry 2). See also the following comment by Berry: "Management of the news was a daily concern of Kennedy's. He was the first president who fully understood and used the media for its political potential. ... Particularly, his ability to master television was unparalleled in his era" (Berry 1-3).

<sup>12</sup> An example of this view is provided in Thomas Brown's introduction to his *JFK*.

meaning of precisely that which may seem to be “self-explanatory.”

What is the “obvious” in Kennedy’s case? Dallek’s explanation of Kennedy’s inauguration provides a first hint: “‘He looked like such a new, fresh man,’ Lincoln [his secretary] said, ‘someone to whom we could have confidence.’ One Washington columnist compared him to a Hemingway hero who exhibits grace under pressure .... He is one of the handsomest men in American political life,’ she wrote without fear of exaggeration” (Dallek 323). Time and again, articles about Kennedy emphasized three main characteristics: Kennedy’s youth and youthful appearance (he was the youngest president ever to be elected), his handsome appearance and good looks, and the rhetoric of a new political beginning. Let us begin with his good looks. One of the most obvious elements of Kennedy’s popularity was his attractive appearance. In Kennedy’s case, this entails not only his symmetrical facial features, which often provide the basis for an impression of physical attractiveness. Kennedy combined youthful appeal and manliness in a specific way. The body already appeared masculine, while the face was still boyish – remarks on his “boyish grin” were legion – and the full shock of hair was that of an adolescent or young man.<sup>13</sup>

In the cultural imaginary, these are the attributes of an adventure hero, and particularly of a specific kind, the hero of tales of knighthood as he has been defined visually in pictures, films, and comic strips since the late 19th century. The knightly association was visually enhanced by tightly waisted suits and Kennedy’s somewhat angular body movements which seemed to echo the constraints of armor. The perfect set of white teeth, which was part of Kennedy’s boyish grin (and contagious smile), signaled the hero’s health and vigor. One reason for the appeal of the Kennedy figure can therefore

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*History of an Image*: “It is possible, of course, to explain Kennedy’s appeal by reference to his personal attributes – his youth, good looks, glamour, wartime heroism, humor, and ineffable ‘style.’ But it is difficult to accept the argument that those qualities alone can account for the public’s posthumous glorification of him” (Brown 1). Indeed, the mere observation of these characteristics remains unsatisfactory as long as we do not ask for their respective cultural meanings. Many people who are in the spotlight of modern media society are called “attractive,” and still they stand for different meanings and values in society. The fact only becomes significant in combination with a narrative. The attributes Brown lists might not be meaningful in themselves; however, this cannot mean that they should not be considered as relevant for an explanation.

<sup>13</sup> In a retrospective report on Kennedy’s visit to Berlin, entitled “Ein Triumphzug mit heißen Herzen, Konfetti und grenzenlosem Jubel” [“A Triumphant Parade With Hearts, Confetti, and Boundless Jubilation”], *Tagesspiegel* reporter Brigitte Grunert summarizes these essential elements of Kennedy’s public appearance: “This time, the wholehearted jubilation sounds confident, for Kennedy himself has an air of hope, energy, courage and compassion. He epitomizes youthful enthusiasm, the determination to change things, so that our world can become a better place. And one can adore Kennedy, his hearty laugh, the boyish gesture of sweeping his hair out of his face, his effortless appearance” (Grunert 10, my translation).



already be identified: the transformation of the figure of the politician into a youthful adventure hero. A youthful man performs a role for which he normally would have to be much older; the fact that he is nevertheless able to fill out the role successfully seems to indicate special powers that set him apart from the familiar type of politician. Kennedy's good looks thus had a double benefit. In addition to the instinctive sympathy they created, they also suggested unique abilities. Youth and power combine as a set of attributes which, in myths, fairy tales, and adventure tales identify the young man who holds the promise of slaying the dragon.

This "hero-effect" is enforced by a second aspect, namely the amazing fact that this youthful hero appears in a realm usually dominated by a completely different type of man, the professional politician. In public perception, the figure of the professional politician is diametrically opposed to the innocence, integrity, and vigor of the young adventure hero. In Kennedy's days even more so than today, politicians were often defined by old age (Adenauer, Wehner, Walter Ulbricht), frail health (Breshnev, Jelzin), sometimes physical disability (Roosevelt, Churchill), or they were sporting an unattractive bodily corpulence that carried associations of an undeserved "usurpation" of power (Kohl). Although age, physical frailness, or ailment should have made him abdicate his power long ago, this type of politician clings to power, much to the detriment of his country and the younger generation. We assume that he has managed to hold on to his power for so long only because he has learned to defend it cunningly and with shady backroom politics against more promising successors who would be able and willing to make a new beginning. The archaic adventure scheme in our heads suggests that when a politician becomes mired down in such power games, his political power is no longer legitimate and becomes associated with political corruption. This, it seems to me, is one of the reasons for the wide-spread unpopularity of the figure of the professional politician, for it makes the considerable power he holds appear undeserved.

In our modern use, the word "politician" usually has a double meaning. On the one hand, it is used to describe a profession. On the other hand, it carries strong expectations of moral responsibility; where these are being disappointed, it can therefore also refer to a corrupt, unscrupulous person who has gained his unwarranted power through shady deals or fraud. If, within this horizon of expectations, a character appears who seems to be exactly the opposite, his arrival is greeted with enthusiasm and will arouse great expectations, for it raises the hope that old-style politics will finally come to an end and better times can arrive at last.<sup>14</sup> One of the most important elements

<sup>14</sup> Brown gives an excellent description of the cultural implications of Kennedy's youthfulness and their promise: "the Kennedyite conception of youth was rich with connotative associations: activism, optimism, originality, vigor . . . , and the pursuit of excellence. But above all, it implied *idealism*. . . the special perspective of youth was due to its exemption from the moral compromises and conventional wisdom of adult

of Kennedy's self-presentation was thus his rhetoric of a new beginning that held the promise of fundamental reform: "If you trust me and give me the power," his public persona suggested, "then I will liberate America from the clutches of the career politicians and old men who still cling to their offices and stand in the way of national rebirth."<sup>15</sup>

More recently, Tony Blair has successfully revived this narrative (until he went along with Bush in Iraq), while the 68ers in the Schröder Administration in Germany, such as Joschka Fischer or Otto Schily, went exactly in the other direction and tried to demonstrate that they were serious professional politicians and no longer irresponsible radicals from the 1960s. The 2004 presidential campaigns of George W. Bush, Jr. and John Kerry also present an interesting case. While Kerry tried to revive the Kennedy myth, Yale-graduate Bush played the "average Joe" from Texas. The strategic populism of the Bush camp prevailed because they successfully managed to transform the meaning of Kerry's image from adventure hero into snobbish aristocrat.

Kennedy's combination of youthfulness and manliness thus has an interesting consequence, for it challenges our customary narrativization of politics. We grow into our culture with genres like the fairy tale or adventure stories in which the ruler (read: the aging politician) is the stern father or even the villain who governs his people with a stern hand or even oppresses them instead of protecting them. This selfish ruler stands in opposition to the youthful hero who promises to put an end to oppression and political paralysis. The youthful hero can symbolize a new start because in his idealism he seems to be immune to the temptation of power and therefore does not run the risk of being corrupted. Kennedy managed to establish a new political image because, in

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life. Kennedy's admirers almost automatically assumed that youth's impatience with established ideas and institutions invariably manifested itself through progressive causes such as the civil rights movement. ... To Kennedy's allies and memorialists, the idealism of youth was also inextricably connected with hostility to the routine and commonplace – in a word to *bureaucracy*. ... JFK's 'charismatic' leadership style was also central to his intensely *personal* appeal to young people, who could see mirrored in the president some of their own impatience with institutional routine. ... Kennedy appealed to the 'anti-establishment' bias of the young ... " (Brown 18-19). See also Hellmann: "Kennedy aligned himself with youth as a force for alternative values" (104-105).

<sup>15</sup> Thus, Kennedy's successor Lyndon B. Johnson was often associated with the return of old-style politics, despite the fact that Johnson was actually a much more reform-oriented president than Kennedy: "Little wonder, then, that many Americans instinctively felt that LBJ was somehow a usurper of the presidency, who shared responsibility for the assassination. ... Most simply put, LBJ seemed to represent a reversion to the past after the cosmopolitanism and modernity of the Kennedy years. ... That Johnson's techniques met with great success was galling to Kennedy loyalists, for it reminded them that, for all his professed 'pragmatism,' JFK had not been very effective in his dealings with Congress. For this reason, they often held Johnson's very achievements against him; he was a mere 'politician,' whose legislative triumphs betokened his deviousness and manipulateness" (Brown 24-25).

his person and appearance, he brought together two usually contradictory elements. He successfully redefined the politician as a young knight, skillfully drawing on popular perceptions of the knight who combines forceful masculinity with unselfish idealism. Or, to put it differently: The adventure hero whose task it normally is to save the world from the politicians now takes the politician's place, implying that new times have finally arrived. Kennedy's adventurous, "knightly" appearance provided him with an edge on which his public image still rests.

#### IV.

On the basis of the associations created by Kennedy's public persona, many elements of the Kennedy myth can be better understood and can help to explain key aspects of his popularity:

1) The figure of the young adventurer fit Kennedy's *New Frontier* rhetoric perfectly (and vice versa). The *New Frontier* evoked the American pioneer tradition and its promise of a new beginning. In order to keep this frontier myth alive, however, constant updates are needed. The young adventurer is, by definition, the person who looks for new challenges. He is the one who ventures into unknown realms and unexplored territories. Since this was no longer possible in the United States itself, outer space offered the ideal alternative. Space exploration therefore became more important for Kennedy than for any other American president. The adventure pattern proved useful in this context, not only because of its rhetoric of exploration and conquest, but also because it suggests rich rewards. New worlds will be opened up and eventually provide relief from the hardships of the "old" world. Peoples' fantasy and their utopian longing can be nourished, because the youthful adventurer promises to overcome a state of stagnation in both society and fantasy.

2) Once we realize the crucial importance the "hero-effect" had in the public perception of Kennedy, the key role of his book *Profiles in Courage* in establishing his public persona should be obvious. It was a crucial part of his public self-presentation and fit perfectly into the pattern of the adventure narrative. Of all the traits defining the adventure hero, personal courage is the most important and inspiring one, because courage is the ability to overcome fear in the face of even the greatest adversity and enables the hero to sacrifice himself for the common good: "Jack's book was seen as a rallying cry to put public needs above private concerns" (Dallek, 210).<sup>16</sup> In the 2004

<sup>16</sup> Brown refers to yet another consequence of the adventure scheme and its emphasis on personal courage: "The reasons for this infatuation with counterinsurgency are not difficult to find. To both Kennedy brothers, counterinsurgency, as personified by the Green Berets, symbolized the romance, élan and dash of the Kennedy 'style'" (Brown 37). Secondary sources repeatedly note the large influence of adventure and spy-novels on Kennedy's (self-)image of masculinity.

presidential campaign, it was therefore crucial for the Bush camp to destroy Kerry's claim of being a Vietnam War hero – which they did with amazing success.

3) Only gradually have we begun to realize to what extent Kennedy and his family deliberately and systematically concealed his various health problems from the public:

The medical records collected by his physician Janet Travell show that Kennedy's health was even more problematic than previously understood. Between May 1955 and October 1957, while he was launching his vice presidential and presidential bids, he was secretly hospitalized nine times for a total of forty-four days, including two weeklong stays and one nineteen-day stretch (Dallek 212).<sup>17</sup>

Despite a certain degree of consolidation, Kennedy's state of health remained precarious throughout his presidency. Nevertheless, his physicians repeatedly credited him with "excellent health" in public: "When newsmen asked about his medical condition two hours before his swearing in, two physicians announced that an examination earlier in January had shown the president-elect to be in continuing 'excellent' health" (322). Kennedy also appeared to be in excellent health at his inauguration: "His seeming imperviousness to the cold coupled with his bronzed appearance – attributed to his pre-inaugural holiday in the Florida sun – and his neatly brushed thick brown hair made him seem the 'picture of health'" (323). This deception of the public was continued successfully in the following years. Information about Kennedy's various chronic illnesses were guarded like state secrets: "Yet however confident Kennedy was about taking on the job, he understood that public knowledge of his many chronic health problems would likely sink his candidacy," Dallek sums up the rationale behind Kennedy's decision (211). He does not tell us, however, why public knowledge of Kennedy's illnesses would probably have been the end of his political career. The image of the youthful adventurer on which Kennedy's popularity rested would have collapsed with any hint about chronic physical ailments, because it would have moved him into the league of "old," frail, or handicapped politicians that he promised to supersede.

4) Kennedy's most popular and famous statement was a formulation he used in his Inaugural Address: "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." The adventure hero can keep his authority intact only as long as he does not become

<sup>17</sup> His comprehensive medication corresponded to this: "The treatments for his various ailments included oral and implanted cortisone for the Addison's and massive doses of penicillin and other antibiotics to combat the prostatitis and abscess. He also received anesthetic injections of procaine at trigger points to relieve back pain, antispasmodics – principally, Lomotil and trasantine – to control the colitis, testosterone to bulk him up or keep up his weight (which fell with each bout of colitis and diarrhoea), and Nembutal to help him sleep. He had terribly elevated cholesterol – 410, in one testing – apparently caused by the testosterone, which also may have heightened his libido and added to his stomach and prostate problems" (Dallek 213).

a mere adventurer and as long as he can convincingly claim that he is acting unselfishly in the service of higher ideals. Kennedy's Inaugural Address is thus characterized by a rhetoric of public service, and by calls for a renewed commitment to the ideals of America.<sup>18</sup> The key sentence ("Ask not what your country can do for you") implies: This is how I conceive of my duties as President of the United States. I have not become President out of personal ambition or a thirst for power, but because I feel responsible for the fate of America and that of the free world. Because of this, you can trust me ("ask what you can do for your country") and my own engagement can serve as a model for all citizens – thus establishing a common ground between all citizens on the basis of unselfishness.

5) The enthusiasm that greeted Kennedy in Berlin finds a new explanation in this context. Apparently, Kennedy managed – like no other president before or after him – to impart a feeling of personal responsibility for the fate of Berliners. The promise of security that came with it was enhanced by the adventure pattern. Kennedy not only provided an abstract statement of support in the style of politics-as-usual, he embodied this guarantee in person. The rhetoric of support in modern politics is always under suspicion of being a mere public relations maneuver, whereas Kennedy's presence in Berlin (and the "royal" association of his encounter with the population) revived an archaic adventure pattern in which the hero comes to the rescue of the besieged fortress at the right moment. Kennedy's promise of protection was thus believable. Against this background, the extraordinary effect of his "Ich bin ein Berliner" sentence becomes understandable. With this rhetorical gesture, *the* hero of the western world personally took on responsibility for the protection of Berliners. In this public demonstration, the hero persona also gains something, however, for the jubilant population gives him an air of royal majesty and confirms his claim to leadership by public acclamation. This might explain why Kennedy was so strongly moved by the reception he got in Berlin. It was reported that he wanted to leave his successor a letter with the message that Berlin "is good for you."

6) The grief about Kennedy's assassination could be so deep and gripping because Kennedy stimulated an intensity of identification that politics nowadays can hardly provide any more. Identification does not mean that we wholeheartedly surrender to a person. Rather, the crucial point is that the person allows us to attach imaginary longings, for example, fantasies of strength, salvation, or regeneration.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the sudden, premature death of the youth-

<sup>18</sup> Dallek emphasizes the significance of the Inaugural Address for Kennedy's self-conception: "Kennedy believed that no single element was more important in launching his administration than a compelling inaugural speech. ... Kennedy wished to draw the strongest possible contrast between the 'rift' of his predecessor and the promise of renewed mastery" (321-2). Detailed textual analyses of the address can be found in Bellah (1972) and Rueckert (1994).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Lubin: "Apparently many others, not only his numerous female admirers but also

ful hero on whom hopes for the future have rested constitutes a tragedy of grand proportions. It resembles the fall of the hero in ancient myth. Kennedy can be called a fallen hero, not because later disclosures brought down the monument, but because of the cruel, undeserved, and therefore entirely incomprehensible death of a hero with quasi-magical powers who promised to rescue us and to elevate us to his level of nobility. In moments like these, the world is turned upside down, as it is in Shakespeare's tragedies. Kennedy's death is probably the most painful and unsettling event of my generation. My wife, myself, and all my friends still remember precisely every detail of the circumstances under which the news of Kennedy's death reached us and how we felt. Seeing films of Kennedy's funeral today still creates the impression of a king being carried to his grave.<sup>20</sup>

7) The public response to the hero's death reflects a painful trauma. Probably no other death in the western world has spawned such a plethora of conspiratorial fantasies as Kennedy's assassination.<sup>21</sup> In light of the unique status

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his male friends, and eventually a large segment of the American electorate, fed off the sense of self-confidence and health that Jack [Kennedy] exuded" (Lubin 7). Dallek holds that this identification also carried an ethnic component: "Jack's success rested on something more than being the 'first Irish Brahmin:' he was the first American Brahmin elevated from the ranks of the millions and millions of European immigrants who had flooded into the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The beneficiary of his father's fabulous wealth, a Harvard education, and a heroic career in the military fighting to preserve American values, Jack Kennedy was a model of what every immigrant family aspired to for themselves and their children. And even if they could never literally match what the Kennedys had achieved in wealth and prominence, they took vicarious satisfaction from Jack's identification as an accepted member of the American elite" (Dallek 175-6).

<sup>20</sup> In this respect, Jacqueline Kennedy played a crucial role: "Although some members of the family wished to bury the president in Brookline, Massachusetts, JFK's birthplace, Jackie insisted on Arlington Cemetery. An eternal flame, like one in Paris at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier built after World War I at the base of the Arc de Triomphe, was to mark the grave. She also asked that the ceremony resemble Lincoln's, the most revered of the country's martyred presidents" (Dallek 696). This adds the association of martyrdom to the one of nobility. For further elaboration on Jackie Kennedy's role in planning the funeral, see "The Birth of Camelot" in Nigel Hamilton's *JFK: Reckless Youth* (ix-xxiv).

<sup>21</sup> See Peter Knight: "In the collection of the unofficial Assassination Archives and Research Center in Washington, DC there are more than two thousand books on the JFK shooting and related topics. In the wake of Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991), nearly half the books on the *New York Times* top-ten bestseller list in early 1992 were about the case, and, significantly, all of them promote conspiracy theories of one kind or another. ... By 1992 three quarters of Americans – including, allegedly, even President Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore – believed that there was a conspiracy or an official cover-up involved in the assassination" (Knight 76, 78). Knight points out that the "publication" of the so-called "Zapruder" film in 1975 was a crucial starting point for the increase in conspiracy theories. The first chapter in David Lubin's *Shooting Kennedy. JFK and the Culture of Images* provides a brilliant analysis of the film's

and magic aura of the Kennedy persona, the assumption of a single killer would be too banal and undermine the promise of special powers. The assassination thus has to be explained as result of a secret collaboration and conspiracy.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, however, it was his assassination that enshrined Kennedy's status as a quasi-mythical figure. Whereas under changing political circumstances, a gradual disenchantment would have been inevitable (e.g. through the Vietnam War), the Kennedy legend could thus remain untouched.<sup>23</sup> Kennedy was assassinated at a point in time when the legend was still intact, and when he had just confirmed the promise of courage and youthful vigor by successfully mastering the Cuban missile crisis. This froze the myth in its apex, so that all following disclosures have bounced off the shiny armor of the legend. We may recall the words of the editor in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* at this point. Through Kennedy's assassination, the legend has become reality and no exposures can harm it anymore.

8) Conspiracy theories and paranoia often go hand in hand and have led to deeply disappointed and disenchanted analyses of American society and the American political system, as, for example, in Oliver Stone's film *JFK*. Along with the traumatic death of Kennedy came a sweeping disillusionment with the United States. "The other common explanation for the prevalence of conspiracy theories is that the traumatic assassination led to a widespread loss of faith, not just in the goodness of America that Kennedy seemed to represent, but in the legitimacy of the authorities who investigated the murder" (Knight 78)<sup>24</sup> Kennedy's death was a watershed. His assassination became the sym-

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various layers of meaning.

<sup>22</sup> See Peter Knight, who quotes a letter by William Manchester: "if you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President's death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for *something*. A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely" (Knight 78).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Brown has terrifically described the ironies of this "inconsequential progressiveness:" "Not only was Kennedy president in a period of relative prosperity, peace, and social stability; more important, he is associated in the minds of Americans with their highest ideals and dreams of power, but not with the costs of change. In the popular view, Kennedy is connected with the high hopes and optimism of the early movement for black rights, when it espoused traditional American ideals of equal opportunity, fair play, and legal due process. But Kennedy has escaped responsibility for race riots, affirmative action programs, racial quotas, and government-imposed busing – all of which have seriously divided blacks and whites. ... Kennedy is seen as a president who served the interests of the poor and downtrodden, but he does not share blame for expensive entitlement programs. It may indeed be a special irony of Kennedy's image that it has profited from his inability to achieve some of the prime objectives of his presidency, for that failure has allowed Kennedy to escape responsibility for the problems that followed his death" (Brown 44-5).

<sup>24</sup> Knight's reference is to Don DeLillo: "Like Ellroy and Mailer, DeLillo finds in the assassination the emblematic story of America itself, entitling his article 'American

bol of an America that seemed not really serious about realizing its ideals and had therefore squandered its utopian potential: "... Kennedy's sudden violent death seemed to deprive the country and the world of a better future" (Dallek 694). Since Kennedy had been the exemplary American hero, his assassination now became the exemplary story of the United States (which was further confirmed by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy): "Considered the painful *rite de passage* to a 'decade of shocks,' it [Kennedy's murder] has come to be seen as a national end of innocence, separating an era of optimism and self-confidence from one of pessimism and self-doubt" (Brown 2). The emotional shock caused by Kennedy's assassination fueled increasingly cynical depictions of American society as a violent and pseudo-democratic system in which politicians, capitalists, and mafia dons secretly collaborate to cement their power. The old type of politician that Kennedy had promised to replace had returned with a vengeance.<sup>25</sup> This changing view of American society also affected American Studies. The critical unmasking of the so-called American founding myths became a central project of American Studies, as it did in American high and popular culture. However, the Kennedy legend itself remained unaffected by this revisionism. On the contrary, it seems that it was needed more than ever in order to highlight the "betrayal" of American ideals.

## V.

My thesis – that the amazing popularity of Kennedy is linked to a carefully crafted persona as adventurer and knight – is supported by the crucial role the Camelot myth, the legendary medieval court of King Arthur and his Knights

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Blood" (Knight 106). In Knight's opinion, the event thus stands at the beginning of American postmodernism: "In many ways, then, the assassination of President Kennedy has come to function as the primal scene of postmodernism. It is represented as an initial moment of trauma that ruptured the nation's more innocent years, and which in retrospect has come to be seen as the origin for present woes" (Knight 116). For Knight, the influence reaches even further into postmodern epistemology and the related theory of historiography. The boundlessness of new conspiracy theories expresses not only the impossibility of recovering an underlying truth; it also manifests the impossibility of a coherent narrativization of history: "In effect it inspires an endless proliferation of narratives about the impossibility of coherent narratives." From this perspective, Knight can speak of a "postmodernization of American history" (115).

<sup>25</sup> See also the following comment by Brown: "Nevertheless, the assassination was commonly seen as a blow to national self-esteem, an assault of the comforting faith that the United States is a uniquely benign place, exempt from the anguish and tragedy that have accompanied social change elsewhere. The most common first reactions to Kennedy's murder – shock, followed by incomprehension and disbelief – expressed the shared sense that such things simply did not happen *here*" (Brown 2).



of the Round Table, played not only in Kennedy's public self-presentation but also in his self-image. In an interview with Theodore White, Jackie Kennedy confirmed the link:

At night, before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records, and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record. The lines he loved to hear were: Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot. She wanted to make sure that the point came clear and went on: "There'll be great Presidents again – and the Johnsons are wonderful, they've been wonderful to me – but there'll never be another Camelot."<sup>26</sup>

After his death, Kennedy's wife and friends actively promoted this knightly "ennoblement" not only of Kennedy but also of his "court." The reference to Camelot was well chosen, for it transforms an elite, with its potentially un-American associations of undeserved privilege, into a "natural" aristocracy of action that deserves its special social rank because of the nobility of its ideals and behavior. It is like going back to a time in which political leadership was still in search of the Holy Grail. In this context, four aspects are of particular interest:

1) The youthful adventure hero Kennedy has become king in the Camelot myth, and he is the right man for it, for he is an exceptional figure, a King Arthur of American Politics. Kennedy profited from a particularity of the American political system, which makes no difference between the office of prime minister and the symbolic representative of the nation such as the king – or, in the case of Germany, between Chancellor and President. Consequently, American presidents have to fulfill both functions. This explains the strong ceremonial dimension in the self-representation of the American political system. Probably no other American president has merged both of these functions so masterfully as Kennedy has. The legend of King Arthur provided the myth in which idealism and power could be combined; idealism is rewarded with kingship, and power is ennobled.

2) Being a person of integrity and never losing sight of his goal to regenerate society, the Arthurian hero does not go the way others have gone as rulers. Instead, he strives to establish a model society that sets new standards. At this point, the role of highbrow culture in the self-presentation of

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Brown 42. Cf. White: "So the epitaph on the Kennedy administration became Camelot – a magic moment in American history, when gallant men danced with beautiful women, when great deeds were done, when artists, writers and poets met at the White House, and the barbarians beyond the walls held back" (525). Today, the Camelot myth is seen primarily as Jackie Kennedy's creation: "Describing Kennedy's death as marking the end of Camelot, a romanticized association with King Arthur's court that White faithfully recorded in a *Life* magazine article on December 6, Jackie helped create an idyllic portrait that Schlesinger has said, would have provoked John Kennedy to profane disclaimer" (Dallek 697). However, the Camelot myth turned out to be the ideal catalyst for the public perception of Kennedy. It "ennobles" the attributes described above and adds a mythical dimension.

the White House is of significance. The conspicuous cultivation of the arts by the Kennedys was more than just another attempt to counter a view of American society as cultureless. It also fulfilled the purpose of an ennoblement of power which lend the White House an air of “royalty:”

Kennedy’s popularity with the press and public also partly rested on the glamour he and Jackie brought to the White House. Though most Americans did not think of themselves in terms of highbrow culture, they saw the President and First Lady as American aristocrats. Their stylish White House soirees – the president in white tie and tails and Mrs. Kennedy in the most fashionable of gowns –, their interest in the arts, and their association with the best and the brightest at home and abroad made the country feel good about itself. For millions of Americans, the United States was re-establishing itself not only as the world’s premier power under Kennedy but also as a new center of taste and elegance, a nation with not only the highest standard of living but also a President and First Lady who compared favorably with sophisticated European aristocrats. However overdrawn some of this may have been, it was excellent politics for a Kennedy White House working to maintain its hold on the public imagination (Dallek 479).<sup>27</sup>

The imagery of Camelot, the noblest and most unselfish, “best and brightest” of the East Coast Ivy League, was part of a transformation of the White House into a quasi-royal court which draws its legitimacy from the First Lady and a quasi-aristocratic family dynasty, and from the prestige of artists with worldwide name recognition.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Jackie Kennedy played her role perfectly, as Lubin asserts in comparison with Elizabeth Taylor and her performance of Cleopatra: “Jackie, as she was affectionately called by the American people at large, was regarded as a queenly woman who didn’t need to impersonate anyone, or be paid exorbitant fees – if any fees at all – to share her beauty with an adoring public” (Lubin 11). In other words, Jackie appeared to be “the real thing.” Just like her husband, she seemed to embody “natural aristocracy,” and not just its Hollywood version. Lubin shows how this contrast of real/substantial and imitated/perverted found expression in a 1963 article of the magazine *Photoplay*. The cover juxtaposes pictures of the Kennedys with those of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton; the subtitle establishes a contrast in values, reading “Marriage and Taste” for the Kennedys, and “Passion and Waste” for the Taylor/Burton couple. On a cover one year earlier, *Photoplay* had already spoken of “America’s 2 Queens” (Lubin 12). See also Lubin’s quotation from an English newspaper: “Jacqueline Kennedy has given the American people from this day on one thing they had always lacked – majesty” (104). As his well-deserved reward, the adventure hero has received the beautiful princess.

<sup>28</sup> In this case, too, it has become clearer now to what extent Kennedy’s self-presentation of sophistication was a performance and actually did not at all correspond to his own personal interests: “As in the matters of Kennedy’s relation to intellect, the praise of Kennedy’s style raises some interesting questions about values. Kennedy’s admirers have made it abundantly clear that as a *personal* matter, his taste was quite commonplace. As Sorensen admitted, Kennedy had no interest in the opera, was bored at the ballet, and fell asleep at classical musical concerts. When he was not posturing for the public, he preferred such fare as James Bond novels, Broadway show tunes, romantic ballads, and western action movies. Even so effusive a witness as Richard Rovere confessed that Kennedy’s cultivation of the high arts, as in the famous Pablo Casals

3) The skillful staging of a “royal” dimension revealed unexpected advantages in establishing a form of political authority that transcended political parties and appealed directly to “the people.” Kennedy’s huge popularity protected him against many things, last but not least against indiscreet reports about his philandering. However, in populist America this strategy was a risky one. Connotations of royalty and majesty can ennoble power in American culture, but they can also quickly turn into connotations of decadence and pretentiousness, which will put the legitimacy of authority into question. The difficulty for Kennedy lay in the stimulating the first set of connotations and evading the second. Public conceptions of the Kennedy family as “dynasty” show what a precarious balancing act this was. During Kennedy’s lifetime, being part of the Kennedy clan enhanced the royal image. In the Kennedys, Americans had finally found their own royal family, which distinguished itself positively from European monarchs by its unconsumed energy and its close-to-the-people informality.<sup>29</sup> If Camelot was an ideal, the ensuing history of European royalty was one of decline, and it was now reversed in American democracy in the shape of a new, “natural” aristocracy.

All the strokes of fate the family had to endure only seemed to confirm their extraordinariness, lend them heroic grandeur, and single them out from normal mortals. The Kennedys became principal characters in a “Greek tragedy” (Elder 170) and hence larger than life. Those who are chosen by the gods have to reckon with the fact that the gods will, from time to time, let them feel their power. This public conception changed radically with Ted Kennedy’s Chappaquiddick. “Natural aristocracy” turned into an irresponsible, decadent elite that should not be entrusted with an important political office such as the Presidency. People trusted John F. Kennedy because he promised to ennoble politics, they mistrusted his brother Ted because he seemed to presume to be above the law. While John F. Kennedy had been the noble knight, Ted Kennedy appeared as decadent rake. At this point, the association of aristocracy and “royalty” becomes counterproductive: the promise of ennoblement is replaced by hubris. Thus, American politicians after Kennedy preferred to return to the safe figure of the frontiersman, as, for example, in George Bush’s photo ops while he was “brush-clearing.”

4) The figure of Kennedy poses an interesting interpretive problem, which has been aggravated the more the “royal” and aristocratic elements of the Kennedy myth have come to the fore. In the final analysis, our cultural

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concert at the White House, arose from the president’s vague sense that it was a good thing to do rather than from a genuine appreciation of artistic achievement. Kennedy’s conception of ‘culture,’ it appears, was distinctly middlebrow: for him, it was little more than a chic commodity and status symbol, certainly not a genuinely enriching aspect of life” (Brown 14-15). See Sorensen’s chapter on “Intellectual and Cultural Revival,” 384-389.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Garry Wills: “The Kennedys rightly dazzled America. We thought it was our own light being reflected back on us” (Wills 275).

reading has yielded surprising findings in the attempt to explain the sources of Kennedy's enormous popularity. At first sight, Kennedy seems to appear to us as "typically American." However, looking more closely at the attributes of this supposedly typically American idealist, we find a cultural compound whose raw material stems essentially from European class societies. The raw material is transformed, however: Class distinctions become a matter of style, the art of combining democracy and taste.<sup>30</sup> In American society, "class" has become a term for a personal, tasteful style, without carrying any class conceit: "The Kennedy style was also self-consciously and rather promiscuously cosmopolitan and 'sophisticated.' In broad strokes, it seems to have embodied the common man's (and woman's) conception of 'class'" (Brown, 13).<sup>31</sup> However, this strategy carries a risk: "style" has to be mastered. The frontiersman is a safe ground for the American politician because his American genealogy cannot be questioned. Royalty and aristocracy, on the other hand, are associated with the Old World. Nevertheless, Americans identified with Kennedy, and Europeans found him to be the epitome of the American.

What, then, is so "American" about Kennedy? At closer inspection, we encounter a cultural transfer and reappropriation. Royalty or aristocracy signal a certain claim of uniqueness – and thus superiority – which are, however, not acceptable for Americans in the European version because they do not appear as individually merited but rather as an effect of class privileges. Kennedy's genius lay in Americanizing the European form and keeping its positive connotations. His appearance was "noble," but casual and refreshingly informal instead of stiff; he was open and friendly, not arrogant and "elitist," and not stuck in stiff ceremonial behavior; he was energetic, but instead of being obsessed with power, he appeared cooperative and acted like a team player (there are boundless pictures of Kennedy among his advisors). To this we can add Kennedy's origin as the son of an Irish immigrant family, which was not considered a stigma, but part of the American promise of success. The social and economic success story of the Kennedy family confirmed the American Dream. In American society, money or good looks are the two major "democratic" characteristics (because according to the American Dream they are not dependent on class privileges) that legitimize special recognition. Thus, the combination of various cultural elements

<sup>30</sup> For the relevance of this aspect for the public perception of Kennedy, see Brown's elaborations on Kennedy's "style" in *JFK. History of an Image*, 12-5.

<sup>31</sup> In *The Kennedy Promise*, Henry Fairlie traces crucial elements of Kennedy's self-perception back to English origins, "particularly to the aristocratic ideals projected in the writings of one of Kennedy's favorite authors, John Buchan" (Brown 64). If Kennedy was indeed, as Theodore White argues, the politician who broke through the dominance of the WASP-elite and thus opened the door for marginalized ethnic groups, then this became possible, ironically, only through the skillful revitalization of English upper-class ideals.

create an effective cultural construct: European culture supplies the idea of “royal” distinction, American culture provides the promise that America can give this idea new substance and vitality. American society is able to do this because as a democracy it can make sure that those who become rulers are indeed the winners of political competition and thus the best and the brightest. Kennedy democratized the European culture of nobility, and this democratization aroused enthusiasm in Europe as well. It could be experienced as typically American, for it expressed the politically correct – read: democratic – regeneration of a compromised European ideal.

Today, Obama has revived the Kennedy-role of “classless class” successfully. Associations with Kennedy, e.g. by Kennedy’s daughter, were highly welcome during the election campaign and were carefully nurtured. Obama’s youthful appearance, his slim torso, his elegant suits, his obvious fitness (as the contemporary redefinition of health), and, finally, the informality of his rolled-up sleeves at election campaign speeches fit the pattern I have analyzed.<sup>32</sup> Obama’s wife Michelle has moved almost effortlessly into the role of Jacqueline Kennedy, including the French association created by her first name. At the visit of the Obamas at the English royal court, they made American patriots proud in true Kennedy fashion: in their seemingly effortless balance between nobility and informality they proved that “natural aristocracy” is superior to Old World traditions.<sup>33</sup> When Michelle put her arms around the Queen in an almost protective way, the picture went around the world and put Old World aristocracy in a position of vulnerability (and thus inferiority) by making the Queen look old, small, and awkwardly stiff. In the American press, the Obamas received the highest praise possible in American culture, when an editorial tried to summarize the cultural meaning of the event: “Obama showed the British how to be classlessly classy” (Gill 6). “Classless classy” means to demonstrate a superiority that is not inherited, but earned by individual merit. It therefore does not stand for the privileges of a class but for the superiority of a nation: “Honey, we shrunk the royal family. If ever we needed a totemic image of the merits of a republic over a monarchy, this was it” (Ibid.).

One thing, of course, has changed since Kennedy’s days: the new American leader is no longer Anglo-Saxon but multicultural (although he is black, he is not really black; rather he presents the “new ethnicities”). For Obama, it was crucial to revive associations of “natural nobility” in order to overcome

<sup>32</sup> Informality is an important element of the Obama-figure. The title of an article in the *International Herald Tribune* says it all: “In Washington, the guy with the burger? Yep, it’s probably Obama” (*IHT*, March 28/29, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> See an editorial by Anand Giridharadas: “And there is the power of democracy: not the democracy of casting a vote at regular intervals, but the democracy that weaves into everyday human interactions, a culture in which no one is thought to be better than anyone else, in which the idea of a taboo against ‘commoners’ touching a queen is strange” (“Watching the Empire Move On” 2).

a lingering racism in American society. In the beginning, his race was a handicap (as was Kennedy's Irishness and his Catholicism). However, in the meantime it has become an asset, because it provides the role of the idealist with renewed authenticity. Since the political and moral capital of the former Anglo-Saxon elite has been compromised and almost entirely used up, regeneration can only come from the outside. Being a (moderately) black man who has gone to a top Ivy League School means that Obama is not a man of class privileges, yet nevertheless very smart (and thus qualified); being black and having an obviously exemplary middle-class family life, means that this upstart family, living the American Dream, takes those values still seriously to which members of the elite, including Kennedy, paid lip service. (Nobody would suspect Obama of adultery!) The claim of a nationally significant natural nobility can only work, if it comes across as being authentic. Obama's multicultural identity has been crucial in re-authenticizing the role of the noble idealist and has thus helped him to overcome the most negative legacy of the Kennedy years, that of an entirely unforeseen moral corruption. This negative legacy has been so strong that another Kennedy male would not stand a chance today in American political life. Ironically enough, only Obama could therefore become Kennedy's successor.

## VI.

My Cultural Studies perspective has led to the insight that the appeal of the Kennedy myth is due to a successful combination of European motifs with new American forms, so that Kennedy could appear as a symbolic figure representing the best of American values. Knight talks about "the goodness of America that Kennedy seemed to represent" (78). What conclusion should we draw, then, from the disclosure that he was not the person he presented in public? Kennedy biographers and commentators have refused to follow the example of the editor in *Liberty Valance* and to simply burn the notes. Instead, a fierce debate has erupted about what importance should be ascribed to the realization that Kennedy was different from what he pretended to be. Biographers like Theodore Sorensen, his advisor for many years, emphasizes the strength of his ideas and ideals which overshadows his personal weaknesses. In contrast, Thomas C. Reeves argues that Kennedy "arrogantly and irresponsibly violated his covenant [of high moral values] with the people" (421). Here, the implication is that if someone deceives the public so completely, we can no longer believe his ideals either. Robert Dallek's biography, in many respects exemplary, covers the middle-ground between these two approaches. Without palliating, Dallek strives to objectify the discussion. His goal is to move back our view of Kennedy from the genre of moral melodrama to that of *Realpolitik*, and thereby to move beyond the mythological

dimension in order to reach a “fair” judgment of Kennedy, the politician: “All the mythmaking – positive and negative – about Kennedy would not have interested him as much as a fair-minded assessment of his public career ... the overheated discussions of his private life have told us little, if anything, about his presidential performance” (Dallek, 703). From this perspective, the question can only be whether Kennedy’s “other side” affected his effectiveness as a politician. For Dallek, this question poses itself specifically in regard to Kennedy’s health problems: “His medical difficulties did not significantly undermine his performance as president on any major question” (705). Similarly, “Kennedy’s dalliances were no impediment to his being an effective president” (707). Ultimately, the conclusion can be drawn that “it must be acknowledged that the Kennedy thousand days spoke to the country’s better angels, inspired visions of a less divisive nation and world, and demonstrated that America was still the last best hope of mankind” (711).<sup>34</sup>

While Dallek tries to objectify the debate, he only succeeds at the price of simplifying the problem. He seems to evade the more fundamental questions posed by the revelations about Kennedy. For, ultimately, the problem is not whether Kennedy was capable of acting in spite of his health problem, or whether his affairs distracted him from work. The essential problem – in the final analysis one of democratic theory in general – lies in the fact that Kennedy owed his power to this deception. Kennedy owed his election and his political power to a carefully crafted fiction. Strictly speaking, this is a case of surreptitiously obtained legitimacy. Since in spite of all reservations, it is generally accepted today that Kennedy did not, or at least not dramatically, abuse his power, the problem is rarely expressed in such words. However, during a time in which wars are being led and justified on the basis of other stories with archaic connotations, the danger of surreptitiously gained legitimacy for democracy should have been more obvious.

In the final analysis, Kennedy’s case expresses a terrible truth about democracy. Benedict Anderson has spoken of an “imagined community” in regard to the nation state, that is, of the necessity to create a fiction of commonality and community with the aid of the imagination. Historically speaking, the nation state and democracy came into being in close connection and thus share similar problems with regard to the creation of consent: How can a pluralist system of diverging interests establish a common ground among its

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<sup>34</sup> This judgment, in its metaphorical flight rather untypical for the book and almost mimicking Kennedy’s own rhetoric, stands in contrast to other assessments: “In 1982, two thousand scholars asked to categorize American presidents as great, near great, above average, average, below average, and failure, ranked Kennedy as number thirteen, in the middle of the above-average group. In 1988, seventy-five historians and journalists described JFK as ‘the most overrated public figure in American history.’ An October 2000 survey of seventy-eight scholars in history, politics, and law, which gave considerable weight to length of presidential service, ranked Kennedy number eighteen, at the bottom of the above-average category” (Dallek 700).

members and remain capable of action? In the nation state, Anderson argues, this commonality is created by a common identity and, consequently, an assumption of common interests. Democracy pushes this problem one step further. The basis of democracy is not consent to a common identity anymore; for in democracy consent is reduced even further. The only remaining common ground now consists in the agreement to temporarily give political power to certain politicians and to accept their decisions as legitimate for the time being. The case of Kennedy shows, however, that this legitimacy can be created through fiction. Kennedy's physical appearance is once again relevant here, for it seemed to function as an effective tool of legitimation: We believe what we see. And yet, everyone who adored Kennedy and cheered for him cheered for a fictitious person. As the case of Kennedy shows, the symbolic level can ultimately become the actual source for seeking and upholding power. Furthermore, the case of Kennedy also points to a second, potentially frightening truth about the working of democracy: It raises the possibility that at the center of democracy (and democratic consent) stands a "void" – a hero that does not exist.

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