

The Kennedy Half Century: The Presidency, Assassination, and Lasting Legacy of John F. Kennedy

By Larry J. Sabato

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John F. Kennedy retains an outsized hold on Americans' imagination, to a much greater extent than he does on American public policy. The legend of a charismatic young leader cut down in his prime complicates the task of evenhandedly assessing Kennedy's legacy. Larry Sabato's book does a good job of accomplishing this task. Much of the volume covers ground that will be familiar to students of the Kennedy era, but those interested in contemporary views of the Kennedy presidency and the appropriation of his image by more recent presidents will find new material here. Sabato's research is very well documented in more than 150 pages of endnotes.

Three aspects of the book are especially intriguing. One—at least for those who have not overfed themselves on assassination theories—is Sabato's careful discussion of the security lapses that preceded Kennedy's death, as well as the efforts by President Lyndon Johnson and others to cover up those lapses and quash the conspiracy theories that followed. Sabato's own conclusion is mixed. Although he cites numerous inadequacies in the Warren Commission report, he also reports the results of an independent analysis, conducted by an audio research firm that he commissioned for the purposes of this study, which refute evidence

of a second shooter. A 1978 House committee re-examining Kennedy's assassination cited a Dictabelt recording of a gunshot-like noise coming from a different location than that of Lee Harvey Oswald. Sabato's audio research firm found, however, that the noise came from a police motorcycle two miles away from the shooting.

Second, Sabato offers a telling comparison between Kennedy's response to the Soviet isolation of West Berlin in 1961 and President George W. Bush's response to the 2001 terrorist attacks. Kennedy, Sabato points out, called for an increased draft and more taxes to protect West Berlin. "Contemporary Americans may be stunned to read these words," Sabato writes (p. 93). "In recent years, presidents have often avoided asking citizens to make sacrifices even in wartime. Taxes must never be raised, nor expenditures reduced in other areas to support an emergency priority.... Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were put on the national credit card and added to a burgeoning debt, while taxes were simultaneously reduced further."

The concluding section of the book examines subsequent presidents' use of Kennedy mythology to further their own ends. The first was JFK's vice-president and successor, Lyndon Johnson, who Sabato argues was able to accomplish much more

legislatively because of Kennedy's tragic death than Kennedy himself would have been able to accomplish if he had lived. Especially interesting is the chapter on Ronald Reagan's efforts to draw on JFK's rhetoric and policies (tax cuts, including for the most affluent, and strong anti-Communism) to appeal to Democrats alienated from their party. The comparison calls attention to the stark differences in the political climate between Kennedy's era, in which bipartisan compromise was routine, and the party polarization that greatly accelerated with Reagan's presidency and left both parties allergic to compromise.

Sabato writes frankly about the recklessness of JFK's personal life—particularly his numerous affairs, which would have obscured his accomplishments had they been exposed by journalists at the time. The image of the Kennedy years as a

kind of “Camelot,” Sabato points out, appeared not while JFK was in office but rather at the behest of his partisans after his death. He concludes that Kennedy's hold on our political consciousness is due to the rhetorical skills of the president and his speech writers, the glamour surrounding his person and family, and the tragedy of his assassination. Yet that hold is real and, as Sabato shows, it has provided a well of symbolism for more recent political leaders to draw upon.

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