

authors' words – to the right of the “default positions” of other nations? The authors hesitate before giving a firm answer. There are significant cultural and political differences within the US and generalizations about the country are often misleading. There are also some signs of long-term convergence between the US and Europe. However, notwithstanding these qualifications, the US is – the authors conclude – exceptional. Its approach to foreign policy issues has, they assert in an echo of other recent accounts, been characterized by unilateralism long before George W. Bush took office. In the domestic policy sphere, its seeming harshness in confronting offenders, its faith in economic inequality and commitment to self-reliance, its religiosity, the conservatism of contemporary liberalism, and the conservative subtext to the American revolution. Furthermore, although the US is exceptional in its conservatism, it conservatism is also exceptional. Micklethwait and Wooldridge point to the political and cultural gulf between the American and European right. The US has not produced – Patrick J. Buchanan's electoral campaigns aside – hard right populist or, in some eyes, quasi-fascist organizations comparable with the Front National (France), the *Freiheitls-Partei* (Austria), or the *Lega Nord* (Italy). In contrast with Europe, mainstream American conservatism is not only rooted in a party but based upon a movement that is structured around interlocking clusters of groups and networks. The thinking of the American right is also tinged – a much greater degree than European forms of conservatism – with a faith in “democratic millenarianism,” a Promethean belief in change, and libertarian individualism. It is infused with notions of certainty and righteousness.

There are, however, frustrations. The book is scrupulously balanced – through the presentation of competing and contrary claims – in a way that not only provokes occasional irritation but sometimes makes it hard to discern the overall argument. More significantly, *The Right Nation* simply fails to go far enough. As the book's endnotes make clear, it is over-dependent on a relatively small number of secondary sources. It explores political culture without drawing to any degree upon the wealth of polling data that is, in many instances, freely available. *The Right Nation* has many strengths but there will not be enough here to satisfy the *aficionados* of American conservatism who have followed the movement's twists and turns over the past few decades. *The Right Nation* lacks the depth, substance and originality that they will require. But, and this is as fair a way as any of evaluating a book's worth, it is a very good read.

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Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*. Boston: Little Brown, 2003. 838 pp. + 32 pp. of black and white photographs; ISBN: 0-316-17238-3; \$ 30, cloth.

It has become impossible to write about the life of John F. Kennedy without dealing with the popular adulation of the man. The public fantasy of Kennedy as the embodiment of youth, glamour, and progress was already well established before the presi-

dent was assassinated in Dallas on November 3, 1963. Perhaps the first politician to fully understand the impact of modern media and its political implications, together with his staff Kennedy carefully forged an image of regeneration and masculinity that was metonymically summed up as "Camelot." 40 years later, these collections of metaphors and images, or rather what Garry Wills has called "the shallowest symbols of Kennedy potency," continue to affect our judgment of a brief presidency and its legacy.⁵

After literally thousands of volumes of academic and popular work, John F. Kennedy and his politics still provoke scholars and writers to produce new works of biography, analysis, gossip and speculation. Yet, Robert Dallek's biography *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, reveals that there still is new ground to cover in the study of the 35th president of the United States. Indeed, the public's demand for "new" findings on the Kennedy family and its most prominent member seems insatiable.

Dallek, Professor of History at Boston University and acclaimed biographer of Lyndon B. Johnson with *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908-1960* (1991) and *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (1998) has been given access to previously unreleased material in the Kennedy Library in Boston. Using fresh source material, *An Unfinished Life* provides new information on crucial aspects of John F. Kennedy's life and, in part, new analyses of both the man and his politics. Most prominently, Dallek's findings in medical files and drug prescription records have caused much attention to be focused on Kennedy's poor health following the publication of the biography. It was well known that Kennedy suffered from various ailments, but the extent to which the treatments of these may have impeded his capacity to execute his offices as US Senator and subsequently as President has thus far remained substantially unexplored, or at least medically verified. Dallek shows that Kennedy's health problems were far worse than previous speculations have suggested. *An Unfinished Life* documents that the young Jack Kennedy suffered from a long list of infirmities, ranging from relatively minor to potentially fatal, all of which required constant medical attention.

Readers interested in John F. Kennedy as a popular and political phenomenon must go back to Kennedy's own books *Why England Slept* (1940) and the Pulitzer prize winning *Profiles in Courage* (1956) in order to understand how a millionaire's son, Harvard graduate and budding politician from New York and Boston came to occupy such a central position in the public mind of the United States. In exploring and juxtaposing American history, current events, and political campaigning, these titles planted the first seeds of the myth of John F. Kennedy. Hagiographies like historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr's *Kennedy or Nixon: Does It Make Any Difference?* (1960), political scientist James MacGregor Burns' campaign biography *John Kennedy: A Political Profile* (1960) and journalist William Manchester's celebratory *Portrait of a*

5. Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (1981; new ed. 1994), xii.

President (1961) contributed to its contemporary spread.⁶ After Dallas, two of his aides wrote biographies that preserved the idea of JFK as a political executive who had been in full control of both his own and his country's destiny, if not of the fate of the entire western civilization. Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (1965) and Theodore Sorensen's *Kennedy* (1965) remain two useful, if undoubtedly biased, sources for the Kennedy scholar. These titles remain the foundation of the Kennedy legacy. Manchester continued to build on Camelot with his detailed account of November 20-25 1963 in *The Death of a President* (1967). More recently, there has been a spate of books debunking Kennedy, exploiting "the dark side of Camelot," as Seymour Hersh inevitably and sensationally would put it in a recent book of the same title. If these, and other, studies partly explain how JFK has continued to fascinate and intrigue readers and scholars, they are also part of what is the potential problem. Writers who work on Kennedy seem to have a notoriously difficult time shaking previous public notions of the man. "JFK" has thus become a self-perpetuating image. Dallek is more successful than most in negotiating his way out of the Kennedy quagmire.

If Kennedy's medical records were carefully kept secret from the public for political rather than private reasons, the same was not necessarily true when it came to the Presidents numerous extramarital affairs. In fact, JFK's philandering and womanizing were never main concerns for his public relations managers. In the early 1960's, the press still differentiated between public and private life. Indeed, Dallek's account of Kennedy's relationship with the media is an important lesson in the changing circumstances that public officials have to navigate in the United States, and elsewhere. Set against recent events in American politics – under the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush – Dallek's documentation of Kennedy's various cover-ups, manipulation of facts, and questionable ties to campaign contributors make it possible to outline a modern history of political expediency and outright dishonesty that shows contemporary US politics in a disturbing light.

An Unfinished Life is above all a thorough investigation into the political life of the United States during the early 1960s. Dallek shows in detail how the dead-lock between the Soviet Union and the US, from August until October 1961, when the Soviets threatened to cut off the Western Allied powers from Berlin, up until the

6. Schlesinger's account of Kennedy's sense of history is an interesting, if often overlooked, example of how the public image of JFK was crafted. In this pamphlet, Schlesinger writes that Kennedy "understands that history has an intricate combination of fatality and fortuity on which the will of the leader can at times operate with decisive effect." Kennedy, Schlesinger continues, "believes that, within limits, the intelligence of man can affect the course of events" (Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Kennedy or Nixon: Does It Make Any Difference?* New York: Macmillan, 1960, 19-20). I have argued elsewhere that this is an example of public rhetoric that illustrates how Tocqueville's paradox of perceived destiny and self-reliance that has been prevalent in American political discourse forcefully continues into our own time and deserves special attention in the study of today's American political landscape (see Mattias Bolkéus Blom, *Stories of Old: The Imagined West and the Crisis of Historical Symbology in the 1970s*, Uppsala: Studia Anglistica Upsaliensis 106, 1999, e.g. 49-50).

Cuban missile crisis in the fall of 1962, was the period when the world was near the brink of nuclear war. Dallek argues that the complex political and diplomatic game surrounding the Berlin crisis and its consequences (which eventually lead to US involvement in South East Asia and Vietnam) was when Kennedy came into his own as an international politician. Indeed, Dallek goes so far as to suggest that Kennedy's personal judgment saved the world from nuclear disaster, particularly as he turned down all military advise on the Cuban issue.

However, Dallek fails to convince that JFK personally safeguarded peace at all cost. Evidence to the contrary is ample: the administration's Latin American policy, involvement in South East Asia, the penchant for covert operations, and a substantial increase in military spending during the Kennedy incumbency suggest that peace not always was a priority. Kennedy's vocal support for a unilateral nuclear arms build up during the campaign 1959-60 further shows that this "idealist without illusions" (which was Kennedy's own characterization of himself) was not alien to exploiting national security issues to his own political advantage. Nevertheless, Dallek's final conclusion is that John F. Kennedy was, and will remain, a stoic figure in American public life. Kennedy substantially contributed to the legislative efforts of the civil rights movement as well as providing visions that lead to social and economic reform in the US. These important political contributions make Kennedy transcend any interpretation of "image" or "myth," Dallek argues.

It is possible to read *An Unfinished Life* in an even wider sense. If we set aside the Man, the Myth and the Medication, and read the biography as an account of the development of political life in the United States after 1945, we get a more profound and lasting impression of John F. Kennedy. He is a political Frankenstein, the dream of an ideal public figure, a projection of post-war modernity onto the canvas of American idealism and progress. If John F. Kennedy had not invented himself, somebody else would have done it, which is perhaps what happened after all.

It can be argued that all attempts to cover Kennedy's life somehow have had to relate to accounts of his life and tenure in the White House presented to the public by associates, admirers or adversaries. Robert Dallek's *An Unfinished Life* will replace these works, and give scholars and readers a Kennedy biography written from a sound temporal, emotional and political distance. Perhaps Dallek's biography marks a new beginning of Kennedy scholarship, that can better shed the image and focus on the political achievements and short-comings of not only the president himself, but of the US political system in the early 1960s. *An Unfinished Life* is a valuable and lasting contribution to the Kennedy sourcebook, and as such to our understanding of contemporary American politics. It will be the standard biography of John F. Kennedy for a long time.