

The Resilience of Camelot: The Kennedy Myth in Danish Newspapers during the Cold War

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***Abstract:** John F. Kennedy holds a unique position in American public memory and opinion polls continuously rank Kennedy among the best presidents. The scholarly assessment of Kennedy, however, has changed considerably over time and holds a decisively less celebratory appraisal of Kennedy today. This dissonance between public opinion and scholarly assessment is closely connected to the so-called Kennedy Myth, which presents an idealized mythological image of Kennedy. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that Kennedy was immensely popular among Danes up until his assassination in 1963. However, little is known about how Danish perceptions of Kennedy developed over time. This article traces the portrayal of Kennedy in four major Danish newspapers from 1963 to the end of the Cold War. The article finds a clear manifestation of the Kennedy Myth throughout the period. Moreover, the article demonstrates that exposure to scholarly criticism and increased awareness of the existence of the Kennedy Myth does little to damage positive appraisals of Kennedy. The article thus testifies to the resilience of the Kennedy Myth across both space and time.*

***Keywords:** John F. Kennedy, myth, newspapers, Cold War, Danish-American relations, collective memory*

“The new president ran the gamut. He could speak, he could act, he could inspire [...] Seldom has such a well-equipped politician in such a favorable age moved into the White House.”¹ This statement by journalist Niels J. Haagerup in *Information* on November 23, 1963 is illustrative of the per-

1 Niels J. Haagerup, “Kennedy – ungdom og erfaring,” *Information*, November 23, 1963, 2.

ception of John F. Kennedy one finds in the columns of Danish newspapers in the aftermath of his assassination.² The Danish appraisal of Kennedy mirrors a similar perception in the United States and across Europe in the days after the assassination.³ Up until the present day Kennedy remains extraordinarily popular in American public memory, often topping the opinion polls on modern presidents.⁴ This significant and persistent popularity of Kennedy has been closely connected to the so-called Kennedy Myth, which projects an idealized mythological image of Kennedy.

However, while American popular opinion on Kennedy has remained favorable over time, the scholarly assessment has changed considerably.⁵ Broadly speaking, the academic literature on Kennedy has moved through three phases from the overly positive appraisal by the so-called “Camelot School” to a divisively more negative revisionism and eventually a more balanced post-revisionism. The scholarly assessment of Kennedy in Denmark generally reflects this development. The perception of Kennedy among Danish opinion-makers and the general public over the years, however, remains largely uncharted territory as there has been no exhaustive historical examination of the matter and no opinion polls exist. Danish historian Nils Arne Sørensen has demonstrated that Kennedy enjoyed enormous popularity among ordinary Danes during his presidency and in the immediate aftermath of his assassination, but little is known about Danish perceptions of Kennedy in decades after.⁶

This article traces the portrayal of Kennedy in four major Danish daily newspapers during the Cold War in order to examine whether the “Kennedy Myth” persisted or if the Danish coverage changed in accordance with the changing scholarly assessment. The four newspapers in question, *Politiken*, *Berlingske Tidende*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Information* were chosen because they aptly cover the Danish political landscape and because their combined

2 I would like to thank the two anonymous peer-reviewers for insightful comments and suggestions.

3 Frank Costigliola, “Like Children in the Darkness: European Reaction to the Assassination of John F. Kennedy,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 20, no. 3 (1986): 115-21.

4 See, for instance, “Kennedy Still Highest-Rated Modern President, Nixon Lowest,” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/145064/kennedy-highest-rated-modern-president-nixon-lowest.aspx> (accessed: May 26, 2017).

5 Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image* (London: Tauris, 1988), 65, 100.

6 Nils Arne Sørensen, “... Og Han Var Også Så Pæn : Danske Syn På John F. Kennedy, 1960-1964,” in *Diktatur Og Demokrati: Festskrift Til Kay Lundgreen-Nielsen*, ed. Thomas Wegener Friis and Kristine Midtgaard (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2010); “Kære Fru Kennedy. Amerikanisering, Kennedy Og Danskerne,” *Ny Viden* Oktober 2010 (2010).

circulation throughout the period examined was very high.⁷ Being popular papers from differing political orientations they offer something of a representative example of the Danish public opinion. In all, the empirical data is comprised of 140 texts spanning editorials, op-ed pieces and various articles by journalists, politicians, and others published between 1963 and 1988. The texts were identified through a systematic search using a number of keywords relating to John F. Kennedy in the Infomedia electronic database. I also did a close reading of all editions of the newspapers published immediately after the assassination and the days surrounding the anniversaries in 1964, 1968, 1973, 1978, 1983 and 1988 (November 20. - 25.).

This article opens with a brief conceptualization of the Kennedy Myth followed by a survey of the historiographical development of the scholarship on Kennedy. It then assesses how Kennedy was depicted in the Danish daily newspapers in the wake of the assassination, before analyzing how this portrayal developed during the Cold War. The article makes two main contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it provides the first scholarly examination of how Danish perceptions of Kennedy developed throughout the Cold War. Second, it serves as a case study of the resilience of the Kennedy Myth among the opinion makers of an American ally.

The Kennedy Myth: Function and Content

Scholars generally define myths through their function and content. The Kennedy Myth is a national narrative about Kennedy produced mainly in the aftermath of his assassination. It initially served to unite Americans at a time of collective shock and national tragedy. According to historian Ben Halpern, "The social function of myth is to bind together social groups as wholes or, in other words, to establish a social consensus."⁸ The Kennedy Myth originated to establish consensus on the collective memory of the deceased president. However, the Kennedy Myth moved beyond the confines of the United States to other national communities, where Kennedy had enjoyed significant popularity, such as Denmark. In the Danish context, the Kennedy Myth likewise served the function of uniting Danes in their grief over the sudden death of an exceptionally popular president in whom sev-

7 Niels Thomsen and Jette D Søllinge, *De Danske Aviser 1634-1991. Bd. 3, 1918-1991* (Odense: Dagpressens Fond i kommission hos Odense Universitetsforlag, 1991), 130, 65, 239, 475.

8 Ben Halpern, "'Myth' and 'Ideology' in Modern Usage," *History and Theory* 1, no. 2 (1961): 137.

eral Danes had taken a great interest and invested much hope for the future.⁹

The Kennedy Myth draws on images of Kennedy shaped by Kennedy himself, as well as the international media throughout his lifetime and in particular during his presidency.¹⁰ These early views portray Kennedy as a talented academic, a war hero, a brave politician, and a popular celebrity.¹¹ Following the assassination, these notions served as the foundation for the construction of a more elaborate Myth to which the Kennedy family and Kennedy's successor Lyndon B. Johnson were among the key contributors. Communications scholars Patricia Felkins and Irvin Goldman argue: "It is in death that Kennedy is assured a place in the American mythos, not as much the man himself, but what he represented to many people."¹²

The exact content of the Kennedy Myth is subject to debate (and ongoing attempts by various actors to shape the Myth). Based on the existing scholarship, I take the Kennedy Myth to encompass the following elements. First, Kennedy is presented as the embodiment of hope for a better world dominated by peace and freedom.¹³ Second, Kennedy is described as a political genius, whose rational pragmatism and extraordinary courage allowed him to solve almost any issue.¹⁴ Third, Kennedy is characterized as a youthful, vigorous, and entrepreneurial president, who brought new ideas and optimism to the office.¹⁵ Fourth, Kennedy, and his family, comes out as the incarnation of the American Dream, i.e. the poor immigrant family that successfully pursues happiness in the United States through hard work. Fifth, Kennedy is seen as a martyr, whose death revitalizes the American society. This element draws comparisons between Kennedy and President Abraham Lincoln and the mythic King Arthur.¹⁶ Finally, the Kennedy Myth contains an "evolutionary thesis," which contends that Kennedy held enor-

9 Sørensen, "Kære Fru Kennedy. Amerikanisering, Kennedy Og Danskerne," 7-14.

10 Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 17-27.

11 Daniel Boorstin, *The Image. A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Reprint. ed., Harper Colophon Books Cn 37 (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

12 Patricia K. Felkins and Irvin Goldman, "Political Myth as Subjective Narrative: Some Interpretations and Understandings of John F. Kennedy," *Political Psychology* 14, no. 3 (1993): 449.

13 Ibid., 449. According to Felkins and Goldman, Kennedy came to represent "a rebirth of hope, a promise of youthful possibilities, and of individual commitment to create a better world."

14 John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 82.

15 Brown, 18-19.

16 Ibid., 41.

mous potential for personal growth that would have allowed him to become an extraordinary president if he had lived longer.¹⁷ The assassination absolved Kennedy from delivering on these high expectations he had raised and ensued in counterfactual speculations about what might have been.¹⁸ Among the most popular are speculations that Kennedy could have prevented the race riots of the 1960s, the Watergate scandal, and salvaged the United States from the Vietnam War by deescalating the conflict.¹⁹

Both the content and function of myth have been subjected to variations over time and space. Perhaps not surprisingly, in relation to content, Danes focused more on the elements pertaining to Kennedy's role as a world leader than on his domestic politics. Furthermore, in relation to function, the Kennedy Myth initially united Danes in grief and later represented a better version of America at a time when the Vietnam War made Danes increasingly antagonistic toward the United States.²⁰

Fading Colors of Camelot: Scholarly Assessments of John F. Kennedy

The scholarship on Kennedy falls in three historiographical schools. These are not self-proclaimed entities with clearly delineated borders or fixed time periods, but rather dynamic bodies of scholarship, which can be grouped together because of their relatively coherent assessments of Kennedy.

The first scholars to write about Kennedy in the wake of his assassination were a group of predominately liberal historians belonging to the liberal consensus of the early 1960s.²¹ Subscribing to, and expanding on, Jacqueline Kennedy's analogy between the tales of King Arthur in the mythological land of Camelot and her husband's administration, these scholars have been labeled the "Camelot School." They tend to portray Kennedy in an overly positive fashion, stressing his acclaimed virtues and downplaying his possible vices.²² Several of them, such as Kennedy's speechwriter Theo-

17 Ibid., 20.

18 Ibid., 44.

19 Herbert S. Parmet, "The Kennedy Myth and American Politics," *The History Teacher* 24, no. 1 (1990): 32-33.

20 For the relationship between myth and historical memory, see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 5-8.

21 Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, The New American Nation Series (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 1-17.

22 For early example predating the assassination, see Theodore H White, *The Making of the President, 1960*, 2. print. ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1961).

dore Sorensen and liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., were either part of the Kennedy administration or they knew Kennedy personally.²³ These scholars were very dependent on good relations with the Kennedy family, who controlled access to important sources in order to influence scholarship. An example of this is William Manchester's *The Death of a President*, which was commissioned and supported by the Kennedy family.²⁴ In Denmark, a 1964-book by journalist and author Knud Meister conveys a similar largely celebratory account of Kennedy's presidency.²⁵

The unraveling of the liberal consensus in American society over the course of the 1960s paved the way for a revisionist approach to the study of American history, which also influenced the scholarship on Kennedy.²⁶ Disillusioned with America's role in the Vietnam War, these revisionists of the New Left expressed a more critical perception of America's role in the world. Moreover, heightened skepticism with the presidency following the Watergate scandal paved the way for a more critical approach to the presidency, which helped dismantle the beautification of Kennedy. These broader changes, along with the availability of new documents that revealed some of Kennedy's extramarital affairs and his poor health, meant that Kennedy's private life became the subject of scholarly scrutiny for the first time.²⁷ This led to critical judgments of Kennedy's moral character, such as historian Thomas C. Reeves' *A Question of Character*, in which he argues that Kennedy's countless affairs posed a risk to national security.²⁸ Another example is journalist Peter Wyden's critique of the Bay of Pigs invasion, in which Wyden characterizes Kennedy as inexperienced, indecisive, and ultimately unfit as commander in chief.²⁹ The books of journalist Seymour M. Hersh and historian Garry Wills take the revisionist critique to its extreme, focusing on Kennedy's alleged connections to the mafia and sexual scandals, respectively.³⁰

23 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John Kennedy in the White House* (London: Deutsch, 1965); Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965).

24 William Manchester, *The Death of a President* (London: Harper & Row, 1967). The Kennedy family repeated clashed with William Manchester about the details of the book, testifying to their concern about shaping the posthumous image of John F. Kennedy.

25 Knud Meister, *Klokken 12.31. John F. Kennedys Saga* (København: Chr. Erichsen, 1964).

26 Brown, 50-69; Matusow, 343-44.

27 Brown, 71-75.

28 Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character* (London: Arrow, 1992).

29 Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (London: Cape, 1979).

30 Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment* (Boston: Little, 1982); Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of*

The revisionists also deliver more substantiated criticism of Kennedy's policies. On domestic policy, they criticize Kennedy for being too hesitant in his support for the civil rights movement and for pursuing a failed economic policy. On foreign policy, revisionists, such as journalist Richard Walton, label Kennedy as a conventional Cold War warrior, who created unnecessary tensions between East and West and pursued a counterrevolutionary policy towards the "Third World."³¹ Another point of contention concerns Kennedy's role in escalating the American presence in Vietnam and the resulting responsibility for the unpopular war.³² Søren Mølstrøm provides a Danish example of a revisionist account in his 1997-book on the myth-making surrounding Kennedy.³³

Towards the end of the Cold War and afterwards, some scholars have sought to strike a balance between the two extremes of the "Camelot School" and the revisionists. These so-called post-revisionists take advantage of the increasing availability of archival material and strive to assess Kennedy's political achievements within the structural constraints of his historical context.³⁴ Arguably, the most successful post-revisionist account is Robert Dallek's *An Unfinished Life*, which stresses Kennedy's limited domestic accomplishments and his mixed record in foreign affairs.³⁵

Boys Do Cry: Danish Reactions to Kennedy's Assassination

Danish perceptions of the United States in the years leading up to Kennedy's assassination were mostly positive. Besides being the provider of Denmark's national security, the United States was generally viewed as an economic and cultural role model.³⁶ The context of the Cold War and the

Camelot (Boston; London: Little, Brown, 1997).

31 Richard J Walton, *Cold War and Counterrevolution. The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972).

32 Kent M Beck, "The Kennedy Image: Politics, Camelot, and Vietnam," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58, no. 1 (1974).

33 Søren Mølstrøm, *Kennedy - En Amerikansk Myte*, 1. udg. ed. (København: Kolorit, 1997).

34 Brown, 80-86.

35 Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

36 Poul Villaume, *Allieret Med Forbehold: Danmark, Nato Og Den Kolde Krig: Et Studie I Dansk Sikkerhedspolitik 1949-1961* (København: Eirene, 1995); Sørensen, "... Og Han Var Også Så Pæn : Danske Syn På John F. Kennedy, 1960-1964," 272; According to Hans Hertel, American popular culture had its definitive breakthrough in Denmark around 1960. Hans Hertel, "\$Torebror \$Am Og Den Forbudne Frugt. Amerikansk Litteratur Og Kultur I Danmark Før Og Efter 1945 - Et Overblik," in *Amerika I Dansk Kulturliv*

United States' role as leader of "the free world" constituted the main framework for Danish discussions of American society and politics and clearly informed Danish perceptions of their powerful ally. Nevertheless, Danes expressed reservations about certain aspects of American society, most notably McCarthyism, racial discrimination against African-Americans, and fear that confrontation with the Soviet Union would lead to nuclear war.³⁷

Most Danes, however, had no reservations about Kennedy who enjoyed widespread popularity in Denmark. Kennedy was a household name for Danes and enjoyed a celebrity status uncommon for a foreign head of state through his appearances on TV, weekly magazines, and daily newspapers.³⁸ Danes generally revered Kennedy as a stylish, young, modern, and charming president. Moreover, Danes perceived Kennedy as someone who could help the United States overcome its issues with racial discrimination and help defuse the nuclear threat.³⁹ Kennedy's popularity among the general population in Denmark was mirrored in most European countries, despite his official relations with European leaders being marked by significant difficulties.⁴⁰ Thus, the ground was already prepared for the Kennedy Myth before the assassination.

Kennedy's assassination was front-page news in all the Danish newspapers as it was throughout the rest of the world.⁴¹ The immediate reaction was one of great sorrow and sympathy for the deceased president, his family, and his country. The editorial in *Information* proclaimed that news of the assassination "shocked millions of human minds in a way that was unprecedented in all time."⁴² *Berlingske Tidende* described the assassina-

1945-75, ed. Søren Hein Rasmussen and Rasmus Rosenørn (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2010), 34; For an example of Danish criticism of America in the 1950s, see Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, "Anti-amerikanisme Blandt Danske Intellektuelle I 1950'erne," *1066 Tidsskrift for Historie* 42, no. 1 (2012).

37 Søren Hein Rasmussen and Rasmus Rosenørn, "Life I Danmark. Billed-Bladet Og Se Og Hør 1938-70," in *Amerika I Dansk Kulturliv 1945-75*, ed. Søren Hein Rasmussen and Rasmus Rosenørn (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2010), 221-24. For concern for nuclear war, see Villaume, 606-10. For McCarthyism, see *ibid.*, 791, 809.

38 Sørensen, "... Og Han Var Også Så Pæn : Danske Syn På John F. Kennedy, 1960-1964," 295-97.

39 *Ibid.*, 296-97.

40 Costigliola, 120-21.

41 For international reactions to the assassination see, for instance: David Culbert, "Public Diplomacy and the International History of Mass Media: The Usia, the Kennedy Assassination, and the World," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 30, no. 3 (2010): 422-24. The Danish newspapers also covered the international reactions. See, for instance: "Mordet paa præsident Kennedy ryster hele verden," *Information*, November 23-24, 1963, front-page.

42 Editorial, "En rystet verden," *Information*, November 23-24, 1963, front-page.

tion as a horrible crime, which had “sent shock waves around the world.”⁴³

The Danish reactions to the assassination also indicate that several Danes felt a strong personal connection to Kennedy, beyond what one would expect for a foreign head of state. Danes turned up in droves in front of the American embassy to pay their respect. “The atmosphere was almost as during World War 2, when something terrible had happened,” a reporter from *Politiken* observed about the mood at the embassy, where one could see “grown men with tears running down their face.”⁴⁴ Across the country, numerous events were canceled and in Copenhagen, the telephone network was overloaded with calls.⁴⁵ The country’s public TV-station, the Danish Broadcasting Cooperation (DR), received complaints from its viewers, who believed its coverage of the event was lacking.⁴⁶ These reactions testify to the Danish public’s strong emotional reaction to the news of Kennedy’s assassination much in the same way as Sørensen’s analysis of Danish letters of condolence to Jackie Kennedy.⁴⁷

Aside from the immediate reactions of shock and sympathy, Danish newspapers devoted considerable attention to Kennedy’s foreign policy and unanimously reproduced the image of Kennedy as a world leader offering hope of a peaceful and free world.⁴⁸ The editorial in *Politiken* the day after the assassination opens by asserting that Kennedy was connected with “a great hope of peace and fair play in the Western world, about understanding and good-faith towards the Eastern world as long as it followed the rules of the game.”⁴⁹ The Cuban Missile Crisis is by far the most cited event, and the verdict on Kennedy’s handling of the situation is one-sidedly positive. “The world was driven to the brink of war but saved from the catastrophe by Kennedy’s firmness and lack of fear,” Niels Nørlund wrote in *Berlingske Tidende*.⁵⁰ Nørlund even spins Kennedy’s greatest foreign policy failure, the unsuccessful invasion of the Bay of Pigs, into an illustration of

43 “Verden slået med forfærdelse,” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 23, 1963 8.

44 “Det frygtelige chok,” *Politiken*, November 23, 1963, 8.

45 “Totalt sammenbrud på telefonerne i København” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 23, 1963, 9. “Danske reaktioner paa dødsbudskabet,” *Information*, November 23, 1963, 5.

46 “Mangelfuld TV- og radiodækning,” *Politiken*, November 23, 1963, 8. “Radio og TV lukkede - mange vrede seere,” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 23, 1963, 15.

47 Sørensen, “Kære Fru Kennedy. Amerikanisering, Kennedy Og Danskerne,” 3-13.

48 This focus is hardly surprising given that a number of dramatic foreign policy events dominated Kennedy’s tenure, and the Danes were understandably preoccupied with the foreign policy of their most important ally.

49 Editorial, “Den unge døde: Præsidenten som vort håb knyttede sig til,” *Politiken*, November 23, 1963, 13.

50 Niels Nørlund, “Den unge modige præsident,” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 23, 1963, 16.

his statesmanship by crediting him for showing restraint in its aftermath.⁵¹ The assessment of Kennedy's role in the second most cited event, the Berlin Crisis, is likewise overly favorable. Kennedy is thus clearly portrayed as a world leader, who kept the peace and offered hope for a brighter future.

Moreover, the newspapers present Kennedy as a political genius with impressive political skills, courage, and vision. Ole Henriksen in *Jyllands-Posten* writes: "In his brilliant cultural history, Egon Fridell writes that the genius differs from all others in that it understands, acquires and becomes one's contemporaries. Kennedy was such a man."⁵² According to Niels J. Haagerup in *Information*, Kennedy possessed political capacities that made his predecessor Dwight D. Eisenhower look like "a hopeless amateur."⁵³ Kennedy, Haagerup continues, "...could speak, he could act, he could inspire" and his knowledge about political issues was extensive.⁵⁴ An editorial in *Information* argues that Kennedy achieved "an eminent command of the United States' military powers."⁵⁵ Several articles praise Kennedy for what they perceive as his moral and courageous stance on civil rights and race relations. Guided by his respect for human rights, Kennedy threw himself into the struggle for civil rights with "personal courage and political fearlessness," an article in *Berlingske Tidende* argues.⁵⁶ The issue of civil rights dominates the coverage of Kennedy's domestic policy and throughout the conclusion is the same: Kennedy was the torchbearer from Lincoln embodying the best American values.⁵⁷

The portrayal of Kennedy as a political genius is closely combined with admiration for his youth, vigor, and entrepreneurial spirit. Under the headline "The Young, Brave President," Niels Nørlund argues, "John F. Kennedy was the young America in all its strength and moderation, audacious courage, sober-mindedness, and determination."⁵⁸ In an article titled "Kennedy - youth and experience" in *Information*, Haagerup takes issue with

51 Ibid.

52 "Kennedy fik USA til at genfinde sin revolutionære samvittighed," *Jyllands-Posten*, November 24, 1963, second section, 1.

53 Niels J. Haagerup, "Kennedy – ungdom og erfaring," *Information*, November 23, 1963, 2.

54 Ibid.

55 Editorial, "Johnson og Verden," *Information*, November 25, 1963, 2.

56 "Efter Kennedy," *Berlingske Tidende*, November 24, 1963, second section, front-page.

57 Editorial, "Offer for borgerkrig," *Information*, November 23, 1963, 2. Ole Bernt Henriksen, "Kennedy fik USA til at genfinde sin revolutionære samvittighed," *Jyllands-Posten*, November 24, 1963, 2nd part, 1. Editorial, "Den unge døde," *Politiken*, November 23, 1963, 13.

58 Niels Nørlund, "Den unge, modige præsident," *Berlingske Tidende*, November 23, 1963, 16.

those who criticized Kennedy for his youth and inexperience during the presidential campaign, arguing that Kennedy was more than capable for the job despite his young age. “Youth characterized his three-year presidency. It characterized his endurance in the pursuit of important tasks, his ability to promptly penetrate big issues and reach a decision and it characterized his untraditional and inspiring way of communicating with the American nation.”⁵⁹ Thus, according to Haagerup, rather than being a weakness, Kennedy’s youth was a source of strength.

The remaining components of the Kennedy Myth: Kennedy as the American Dream, Kennedy as martyr, and the “evolutionary thesis” are all also present to varying degrees. The American Dream does not occupy a central role the coverage, although it is addressed occasionally. Describing the family history of the Kennedys, Niels Nørlund writes in *Berlingske Tidende*, “John F. Kennedy was the symbol that the immigrants of the third generations could reach the highest pinnacle of power.”⁶⁰ Moreover, the theme is addressed indirectly through the extensive celebrity coverage afforded to the Kennedy family at large.⁶¹ The newspapers refrain from explicitly describing Kennedy as a martyr, but they do make frequent comparisons to the assassination of Lincoln.⁶² Several articles present Kennedy as the heir to Lincoln’s legacy of abolishing slavery and speculate that it was Kennedy’s struggle for civil rights that got him killed.⁶³ “John F. Kennedy was shot because he as Lincoln wanted to make America one country and the Americans one people, a country with equal rights for everyone wherever they lived and whatever their skin color,” Niels Nørlund argues in *Berlingske Tidende*.⁶⁴ Finally, the “evolutionary thesis” is a pervasive element throughout the coverage. “At the time of his death he was developing rapidly as a president,” states an article in *Politiken*, before specifying that “after the initial mistakes and defeats over Cuba and South East Asia, he

59 Niels J. Haagerup, “Kennedy – ungdom og erfaring,” *Information*, November 23, 1963, 2.

60 Niels Nørlund, “Den unge, modige præsident,” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 23, 1963, 16.

61 For celebrity coverage of the Kennedy family see, for instance: “John F. Kennedy – Politikerens, Præsidenten, Familiefaderen,” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 23, 1963, 10-11.

62 Kennedy’s assassination quickly became the focus of its own myths and conspiracy theories.

63 Ole Bernt Henriksen, “Kennedy – En Mand af stort Mod,” *Jyllands-Posten*, 23 November 1963, 3. “Kennedy myrdet,” *Politiken*, November 23, 1963, front page. John Danstrup, “Omveltningens unge præsident,” *Politiken*, November 23, 1963, 10.

64 Niels Nørlund, “Den unge, modige præsident,” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 23, 1963, 16.

gained a foothold and an increasing superiority.”⁶⁵

Even the most critical assessment of Kennedy, an article by John Danstrup in *Politiken*, reinforces key elements of the Kennedy Myth. Comparing Kennedy to Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, Danstrup argues that Kennedy lacked their “deep, strong personality.” Danstrup emphasizes that Kennedy struggled to push his policy through Congress and that his impatience created unnecessary opposition from allies abroad. Yet, Danstrup argues, Kennedy possessed visions and bravery that helped compensate for his limitations, “[he] lacked the wisdom of age, but with young eyes [he] saw further than most of his great contemporaries.”⁶⁶ The fact that even a relatively negative assessment of Kennedy’s presidency contains elements of the Kennedy Myth underlines its strength. To summarize, in the days following the assassination, the Danish newspapers describe Kennedy in terms that clearly reflect the nascent Kennedy Myth.

In the “Martyr Halo’s Glow”: The Myth Persists through the 1960s

For the remainder of the 1960s, the newspapers overwhelmingly continue to reflect the Kennedy Myth with only a few scattered observations about Kennedy’s shortcomings. All four newspapers provide extensive coverage of the one-year anniversary of the assassination in November 1964, including reports from the American commemoration ceremony.⁶⁷ An editorial in *Politiken* emphasizes the mark Kennedy had left on the world and argues, “With Kennedy, a light was lit, which glare reached around the world – before the martyr halo’s glow provided it with new force.”⁶⁸ The editorial proceeds to praise Kennedy as the only of his contemporaries, who was capable of speaking to the youth and as someone who offered hope in a way that his predecessor failed to do. *Berlingske Tidende’s* correspondent in Washington D.C., Anders Georg, describes Kennedy as “elegant, intelligent and witty” and offers numerous quotes and anecdotes about the deceased president.⁶⁹ Describing Kennedy as “the fairy-tale president of American

65 “Præsident John F. Kennedy,” *Politiken*, November, 24 1963, Sunday section, 40.

66 John Danstrup, “Omvæltningernes unge præsident,” *Politiken*, November 23, 1963, 10.

67 See, for instance: “Kennedy mindet overalt i USA,” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 23, 1964, front-page. “Kennedy mindes,” *Jyllands-Posten*, November 23, 1964, front-page.

68 Editorial, “Den levende Kennedy,” *Politiken*, November 22, 1964, 39.

69 Anders Georg, “Fra tragedie til legende,” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 22, 1964, third section, 13.

politics” and his death as “unreal,” Georg continues by arguing that the assassination was “particularly painful because it felt like it was the future that was taken away.”⁷⁰ The picture painted of Kennedy at the one-year anniversary of his assassination is thus one of an extraordinary president who embodied the hope for a better future.

In June 1968, a few months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Frede Madsen draws comparisons between Kennedy, King, and Lincoln in an article on political assassinations in *Politiken*. “John F. Kennedy was a great American. So was Martin Luther King,” Madsen writes, “They were of the same lineage as the humanitarian Abraham Lincoln...”⁷¹ The article is a clear example of how Kennedy is ascribed a mythic status in American history through comparisons with other prominent leaders who suffered martyrdom.

Nevertheless, the coverage of Kennedy also includes a few slightly more critical appraisals. An editorial in *Politiken* in November 1964 notes that Kennedy had significant limitations in the political game, “He was neither capable nor deep down interested in becoming a master of it.”⁷² The day before what would have been Kennedy’s fiftieth birthday in 1967, Anders Georg disavows the “evolution thesis” in *Berlingske Tidende*. While Georg gives Kennedy credit for paving the way for Lyndon B. Johnson’s reforms, he argues that speculations over what Kennedy might have achieved had his life not been cut short constitute a pointless effort.⁷³ Thus, a few articles display a less celebratory take on Kennedy’s legacy, although they can hardly be said to be overly negative.

A front-page editorial in *Information* a year after the assassination stands alone in expressing awareness of the mismatch between myth and historical reality. “In both regards – about the person Kennedy and about his assassination – legends have replaced what must have been the historical truth,” the editorial states.⁷⁴ The editorial gives a courteous assessment of Kennedy’s legacy, but it maintains that most of his visions were never implemented and that “more than the great president, he stands as the great promise.”⁷⁵

70 Ibid.

71 Frede Madsen, “Attentat og mord som politisk kampmiddel,” *Politiken*, June 6, 1968.

72 Editorial, “Den levende Kennedy,” *Politiken*, 22 November 1964, 39.

73 Anders Georg, “Han var blevet 50 i morgen,” *Berlingske Tidende*, May 28, 1967, 2.

74 Editorial, “Et år efter,” *Information*, November 21, 1964, front-page.

75 Ibid.

However, on page two in the same edition *Information* brings an article by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. on Kennedy's legacy, thereby giving coverage to one of the leading authors of the Kennedy Myth.⁷⁶ Not only were Danish newspapers' depictions of Kennedy influenced by the Kennedy Myth, they also reprinted the words of one of the myth's most significant advocates.⁷⁷

Still a "Brilliant President": The Absence of Revisionist Criticism in the 1970s

During the course of the 1970s, the Danish coverage of Kennedy drops considerably.⁷⁸ The most striking observation in the limited coverage is the absence of revisionist criticism. The perhaps most obvious cause for a revisionist examination of Kennedy, the Vietnam War, does not lead to any break with the Kennedy Myth in the examined newspaper articles. One explanation for this absence of criticism could be the Danish press' relatively positive coverage of the American military operations in Vietnam even after the Christmas bombings in 1972.⁷⁹ Yet, as Danish popular opposition to the Vietnam War increases, this does not translate into any revisionist criticism of Kennedy. On the contrary, opposition to the Vietnam War gives rise to counterfactual speculations that Kennedy might have prevented the escalation of the unpopular war. In an op-ed piece in *Jyllands-Posten* in November 1973, ten years after Kennedy's assassination, Professor Erling Bjøl argues that Kennedy most likely would have pulled the United States out of Vietnam in time.⁸⁰

The general premise of Bjøl's piece is a counterfactual assessment of what the world might have looked like if Kennedy's life had not been cut short. Bjøl makes the case that the American economy would have been in a

76 Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "John F. Kennedy's Arv," *Information*, November 21, 1964, 2. (Translated into Danish)

77 In addition, the newspapers bring favorable reviews of books and movies about Kennedy. See, for instance: "Præsidentens død som passionsspil," *Politiken*, November 24, 1964, 12.

78 A reasonable explanation for this could be that the interest in the deceased president gradually faded, yet an increase in coverage in the 1980s seems to suggest otherwise.

79 Kenneth Lund, "Papirkrigerne. Pressens Dækning Af Vietnamkrigen 1964-1973," in *Den Kolde Krig På Hjemmefronten*, ed. Klaus Petersen and Niels Arne Sørensen (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2004).

80 Erling Bjøl, "Skuddene i Dallas som ændrede historiens gang," *Jyllands-Posten*, November 21, 1973, 11. Nils Arne Sørensen likewise points out that the Vietnam War only strengthened the Kennedy Myth by casting Kennedy as the representative for a "better USA than the official." Sørensen, "... Og Han Var Også Så Pæn : Danske Syn På John F. Kennedy, 1960-1964," 298.

much better shape. Surveying American international relations, Bjøl argues that the transatlantic relationship, in particular, would have been better with Kennedy in the White House. “And he had a good name in Western Europe, a myth even,” Bjøl argues before noting, “Eventually, the Europeans even became inclined to make Kennedy whiter and Johnson darker than they were.”⁸¹ In tune with the Kennedy Myth, a picture of Kennedy with Jacqueline and their kids John and Caroline with the caption “a happy presidential family” accompanies the article.

On the same day, *Jyllands-Posten* brought a brief note mentioning an hour-long radiobroadcast on public radio on Kennedy’s 1000 days along with a picture of Kennedy with the caption “A great president that was assassinated.”⁸² The title “Kennedy’s 1000 days” suggests a reference to Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s seminal book in the school of the Camelot School tradition.⁸³ All in all, the coverage thus resembles the Camelot School’s assessment of Kennedy.

When the revisionist literature is addressed, its criticism of Kennedy is mostly ignored. An article by Ole Røssell in *Politiken* in September 1979 presents the arguments of Peter Wyden’s revisionist account of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Yet, although the article labels the invasion “Kennedy’s mistake,” it insists that Kennedy was a “brilliant president” and speculates that if he “had not let the CIA go its own way, this unhappy action would probably never have happened.”⁸⁴ Another potential cause for a revisionist critique, the revelations of Kennedy’s extramarital affairs, is likewise absent from the source material. In all, the 1970s thus overwhelmingly sees the profound persistence of the Kennedy Myth.

“One Brief and Shining Moment” That Will Not Fade Away: Between Myth and Reality in the 1980s

The 1980s witnessed an increase in Danish newspaper articles pertaining to Kennedy. As before, the majority of the writings continued to be influenced by the Kennedy Myth. However, the Myth is now supplemented by a few examples of revisionist criticism and several more nuanced accounts.

81 Erling Bjøl, “Skuddene i Dallas som ændrede historiens gang,” *Jyllands-Posten*, November 21, 1973, 11.

82 “En times radiomontage om Kennedy’s 1000 dage,” *Jyllands-Posten*, November 21, 1973, 23.

83 Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John Kennedy in the White House*.

84 Ole Røssell, “Da Kennedy for sent fik kolde fødder,” *Politiken*, September 28, 1979, second section, 3.

Hereby, the Danish newspaper articles begin to reflect the historiographical disagreements, although the Kennedy Myth continues to dominate. Moreover, the articles express a greater awareness of the existence of a Kennedy Myth and acknowledgment that it influences perceptions of Kennedy.

Echoing the positive assessments of Kennedy from the previous decades, the articles from the 1980s express every element of the Kennedy Myth. On the twentieth anniversary of the assassination in November 1983, *Jyllands-Posten's* New York correspondent Niels-Victor Christiansen describes Kennedy as a young, vital president whose assassination "provided a breeding ground for a legend."⁸⁵ In his article, which featured on the front-page of the newspaper's "Sunday section," Christiansen supplements this assessment by praising Kennedy's wit, vitality, creativity, and personal and political courage. Christiansen repeats his positive assessment in an article five years later, describing Kennedy as a symbol of youthful energy, renewal, dynamism, and social justice.⁸⁶

Two 1988-articles inviting Danes to reflect on Kennedy twenty-five years after his assassination likewise underline the persistence of the myth. In Ib Johansen's "The shots hit us too," printed in *Berlingske Tidende*, a conservative member of the Danish parliament and former defense minister Hans Engell argues that Kennedy "stood for something new, a new America, new dreams, new hopes."⁸⁷ Gallery Owner Knud Grothe declares, "All hope in the world was unified in Kennedy's person. He was the young, dynamic, close-cropped man, who had managed to turn around the Cold War."⁸⁸ In Lars Jørgen Andersen's "When hope faded" in *Jyllands-Posten*, former social democratic Prime Minister Anker Jørgensen states, "Finally, we had an American president, who had modern, free and right positions on several issues."⁸⁹ Together these recollections by prominent Danes demonstrate a strong ongoing identification of Kennedy with hope, renewal and political accomplishment.

Among the more than twenty-four Danes interviewed in the two articles, Jørgen Schleimann, director of the private television station TV2, is

85 Niels-Victor Christiansen, "Skuddene, verden aldrig glemmer," *Jyllands-Posten*, November 20, 1983, "JP Søndag," 1.

86 Niels-Victor Christiansen, "Såret på USA's sjæl," *Jyllands-Posten*, November 20, 1988.

87 Ib Johansen, "Skuddene ramte også os," *Berlingske Tidende*, November 21, 1988, third section, 8.

88 Ibid.

89 Lars Jørgen Andersen, "Da håbet brast," *Jyllands-Posten*, November 20, 1988, second section, 5.

the only interviewee to express a revisionist view of Kennedy. «I suppose that I was just as excessively besotted with Kennedy as everyone else [...], Schleimann recalls, «but he was not a liberal-minded person. In American domestic politics, he was rather reactionary. I think he is grossly overrated.»⁹⁰ Schleimann thus clearly acknowledges that he has revised his assessment of Kennedy over the years and his new position coincides with that of the revisionist scholarly literature.

The only article dedicated to a full-fledged revisionist criticism of Kennedy is a 1984 op-ed piece in *Politiken* by political scientist Morten Ougaard. Under the headline “Kennedy and Reagan – two of a kind,” Ougaard argues that the foreign policies of Kennedy and Ronald Reagan are essentially identical as both presidents can be labeled as rearmament Cold War warriors, who “conduct the same ideological crusade against world-communism.”⁹¹ Yet, Ougaard notes, West-Europeans generally remember Kennedy as “an honest, knowledgeable and rational politician” that they both like and respect, whereas they tend to see Reagan in a decisively negative light.⁹² According to Ougaard, part of the reason for this mismatch in West-European perceptions is the persistence of a false myth about Kennedy, which understates the militaristic elements of his foreign policy. Ougaard’s critical depiction of Kennedy as a conventional Cold War warrior clearly mirrors the revisionist account of Kennedy’s foreign policy by Richard Walton.⁹³

Whereas Ougaard debunks the Kennedy Myth, most article authors that express awareness of the existence of such a myth, argue that it at least partially mirrors reality. In his 1983 piece cited above, Niels-Victor Christiansen notes that Kennedy actively crafted an image of himself through his TV-appearances, but that this image was genuine. The article ends with a direct reference to the “Camelot School,” as it recalls how Jacqueline Kennedy, in conversation with Kennedy-biographer Theodore H. White, compared her deceased husband’s administration to the reign of King Arthur in Camelot.⁹⁴ In an article in *Berlingske Tidende* in 1988, Jens Demalieth

90 Ibid.

91 Morten Ougaard, “Kennedy og Reagan – to alen af et stykke,” *Politiken*, November 25, 1984, 5.

92 Ibid.

93 Walton.

94 Niels-Victor Christiansen, “Skuddene, verden aldrig glemmer,” *Jyllands-Posten*, November 20, 1983, “JP Søndag,” 1.

speculates, “Maybe John F. Kennedy’s memory has actually had a greater influence on America over the past twenty-five years than he himself would have had had he been alive.”⁹⁵ Danish newspapers certainly displayed an awareness of Kennedy’s mythic image, but rarely did this lead them to part with their positive assessment of Kennedy.

Perhaps the strongest testament to the Kennedy Myth’s persistence come from those multiple articles that make references to the revisionist criticism but reject it in favor of either a full-scale defense of the Kennedy Myth or a more balanced assessment. An example of the former is the historian Hans Peder Raaby’s op-ed in *Politiken* in 1983, which explicitly discounts the revisionist criticism and calls Kennedy “The White Prince.”⁹⁶ Raaby acknowledges that “the so-called Kennedy Myth” has influenced perceptions of Kennedy but maintains that “Kennedy in his time had a far greater significance than the later Kennedy-revisionists suggest.”⁹⁷ Raaby proceeds to relay several of the Kennedy Myth’s core elements such as Kennedy inspiring hope, his visions, and charisma, and the essentially unlimited talent of his youthful administration of the best and the brightest. The op-ed is accompanied by a front-page note titled “Kennedy the Dream” alongside a portrait of Kennedy captioned “John F. Kennedy: youth, charisma, visions.”⁹⁸ Raaby underlines his identification with the Kennedy Myth by starting and ending his op-ed with quotes from Theodore H. White: “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief and shining moment that was known as Camelot.”⁹⁹

Other articles reject the revisionist criticism in favor of a more balanced assessment of Kennedy. One example is *Politiken*’s correspondent Michael Meyerheim’s piece “100 days that became a myth” from November 1983. After relaying the Kennedy Myth narrative at length, Meyerheim cites revisionist criticism that Kennedy was a poor president, who lacked serious content behind his flashy exterior, conducted a reckless foreign policy and failed to deliver results domestically. Yet, Meyerheim rejects this criticism and asserts, “The truth is that he was far from as bad as certain critics have made him out to be, but also not as marvelous as the myth has it. First

95 Jens Demalieth, “10 sekunder af historien,” *Berlingske Tidende*, November 20, 1988, third section, 4-5.

96 Hans Peder Raaby “Lad det aldrig blive glemt,” *Politiken*, November 21, 1983, second section., 6.

97 Ibid.

98 Hans Peder Raaby “Drømmen Kennedy,” *Politiken*, November 21, 1983, second section, front-page.

99 Hans Peder Raaby “Lad det aldrig blive glemt,” *Politiken*, November 21, 1983, second section, 6.

and foremost, he was a brilliant political talent, a masterly speaker, and a marked pragmatist. But he certainly made mistakes.”¹⁰⁰ Meyerheim lists the Bay of Pigs invasion, the arms race and the escalation in Vietnam among such mistakes in the realm of foreign policy. Yet, he argues, in accordance with the Kennedy Myth’s “evolutionary thesis,” that Kennedy, had he lived, would likely have pulled out of Vietnam in time as he was willing to learn from his mistakes and constantly grew in office.¹⁰¹

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that the Kennedy Myth heavily influenced Danish perceptions of Kennedy during the Cold War. Changes in the scholarly assessment from the 1970s onwards had little impact on the Danish newspapers’ coverage of Kennedy. Since several newspaper articles engage scholarship from the various historiographical schools, this missing impact is not due to unawareness among Danish opinion makers of the changes in scholarly perceptions. When revisionist criticism of Kennedy is addressed, as is increasingly the case in the 1980s, it is overwhelmingly rejected. Although the coverage in the 1980s, to some extent, reflects a more balanced view of Kennedy, the Kennedy Myth continues to dominate. More research needs to be done to determine why the Kennedy Myth remained so resilient among Danish opinion makers. Kennedy’s continued popularity is particularly noteworthy in the context of increasingly negative Danish perceptions of the United States during the Vietnam War and the distinctly more mixed coverage of Kennedy’s successors, especially Ronald Reagan. One reason, already mentioned, might be that, as perceptions of the United States grew less favorable, Danes viewed Kennedy as a representative of a bygone, better version of America.

Moreover, the 1980s witnessed an increased awareness of the existence of a Kennedy Myth and acknowledgment that this myth continued to shape perceptions of Kennedy. As with the revisionist criticism, however, this awareness rarely translates into a more negative appraisal of Kennedy. Thus, this article testifies to the resilience of the Kennedy Myth in the Danish press despite changing scholarly assessments and increased awareness of the existence of a Kennedy Myth. This observation underlines the strength and appeal of the Kennedy Myth across both space and time. Not only has the Kennedy Myth stood the test of time among the American

100 Michael Meyerheim, “1000 dage der blev en myte,” *Politiken*, November 20, 1983, third section, 2.

101 *Ibid.*

population, which continues to rank Kennedy among the best American presidents, it has also continued to affect popular perceptions of Kennedy outside America's borders.