



A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy

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No issue is more hotly debated than how, or even if, a politician's private life affects his public competence. In *A Question of Character* John F. Kennedy's two lives—public and private—are examined to answer this timely question. Respected historian and biographer Thomas C. Reeves reveals discrepancies between JFK's public persona, which has reached mythic proportions, and his scandalous private behavior. Most illuminating is the constant theme of Joe Kennedy's almost total control of JFK's behavior and politics throughout most of his son's career.

"The John Kennedy who emerges from these pages was not a man of good moral character. He was reared not to be good but to win." — *Los Angeles Times*

Reeves has provided the most truthful and balanced assessment of John F. Kennedy to date. Written more in sorrow than in anger, *A Question of Character* explores the sensitive and difficult question of how people, and history itself, ought to judge the relationship between personal character and national leadership.

A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy Details

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Shannon McDermott says

An excellent biography of JFK that not only explores one president's life, but also a historical era and questions of leadership and character. The author handles the lurid side of Kennedy's life perfectly, neither ignoring it nor indulging a prurient interest; he found the historical significance of Kennedy's escapades and went no further. This biography is a substantive historical account and analysis, with the clarity that comes after time has allowed emotions to cool, perspective to form, and truths to be revealed.

Marty Acks says

This book paints JFK as a philandering, completely amoral individual who was under a Svengooly-like influence of his father. The author is highly focused on debunking the "Camelot" school of Kennedy's greatness.

I am no Kennedy scholar but the conclusions that even when he did good it was only for political gain got to be rather overwrought and unbelievable at times.

The book was a fascinating read in a gossipy kind of way.

Douglas says

Readers should be somewhat skeptical of this book. Reeves includes a great deal of mere hear-say, anecdotes, and speculation which if not read carefully may come off as absolutely true and factual. We all know by now that President Kennedy had faults and was a reckless young man. Yet how was it humanly possible for Kennedy to sleep with all of those women and "do" all of those drugs while in the White House, especially when his death from Addison's disease was five years away?

Robert says

For me, there's nothing like a good presidential biography; they're a great way to learn Your American History through the prism of the office of the most powerful elected official in the country. This is the first Prez-bio I've read that *isn't* by Doris Kearns Goodwin. Anyway, A Question of Character is a long, fascinating, quite critical account of Jack Kennedy's life and ascension into our nation's highest office, originally published in 1991. Apparently back then, nearly 30 years after the early 60's there still hadn't been a really good, honest appraisal of JFK's life and career; the author felt it was high time that the story was finally presented not as hagiography but as factually as possible, and with no small amount of author editorializing. The portrait that emerges here is one of a deeply flawed, even occasionally despicable man who slowly grew into his presidency before his tragic assassination in November 1963. The author really did his homework: the book is painstakingly researched, well-annotated, and makes for an intense (omg, the

Cuban Missile Crisis!) and illuminating reading experience. Highly recommended, especially if there happens to be an updated volume out there (I think it was republished in 1997, but I had to make do with this old '91 hardcover from Paperback Swap). In the meantime, I'm slowly working my way through bios of the presidents I find most interesting. I hope to find a good volume on Truman somewhere, as well as something decent on Eisenhower.

Jim says

This book is an interesting review of the presidency and the man of Kennedy, a Catholic, liberal on economic/social issues, conservative on education, civil liberties, anti-communism. Congressman Kennedy favored fiscal conservatism and wary of big government. It discussed that he was not a liberal at all and lacked a firm ideological leaning. An "authentic moderate without excessive party loyalties."

Talked about his numerous affairs. Made me think of Clinton. He was skirting a chance of being caught but "I guess I can't help it." Jackie is portrayed as caring more about money/position above romance.

Total separation of Church and State a secular man opposed to the appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican.

I like this quote: "Nobody asked me if I was a Catholic when I joined the USN." Did he forfeit the right to run for president when he was baptized? "that wasn't the country my brother died for in Europe." "and nobody asked my brother if he was Catholic or a Protestant before he climbed into an American bomber to fly his last mission." pg 162

Talks about his ties to Sinatra and then Giancana in funding for his election bid...and later discusses the mafia's recruitment in assassination attempt of Castro.

Kennedy won election 49.7 to 49.6%. Close. Similar to today's elections...

He supported the buildup of the Military in contrast to Eisenhower's warning of the "military-industrial complex." Good coverage of the Cuban missile and Berlin wall events. The book was supportive and complementary on this topic. Good insight here.

References the Bay of Pig's fiasco as influencing Kennedy to slow down in Laos. Interesting summaries of Vietnam, Cuba, Berlin, the public view and his. Interestingly quotes the left as being against his stance on the Cuban Missile crisis "needlessly endangering"...really I think he got that right, in fact his right leaning anti-communist stances are commendable in my eyes. Reality rules not fluffy stuff.

Discussed his dependency on amphetamines for pain and discusses his pain and illness throughout the book. Mostly through the eyes of him deceiving the public...didn't FDR do this to? Not sure I care about this if he is competent...

The book concludes "Had Kennedy lived to see a second term, the realities of his lechery and his dealings with Sam Giancana might have leaked...his adultery demeaned the presidency...the mindless worship of celebrity contributed to his success...hmm history repeats?"

Erik Graff says

Reeves, previously author of a study of Joseph McCarthy, begins this biography by noting how he had been a strong supporter of JFK during his rise to power. This changed, however, as the years passed and ever increasing amounts of information came out about the Kennedy's presidency and personal life. This study therefore is one of contrasting the public image against the private reality of the man.

Like Reeves, but much more naively (I was in elementary school in '63 and was apeing my dad), I had also been a strong supporter of Kennedy, following his press conferences and the news on television and in print. With the Cold War threat of sudden annihilation always in the background, I was dreadfully aware of the Bay of Pigs, the Berlin Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Laotian and Vietnam conflicts. Throughout I accepted Kennedy's actions and explanations, proud to be a supporter, proud of our space program, of the Peace Corps, of the Green Berets, of the high culture of his White House. I even had a portrait of Kennedy over my desk.

That all changed, but not until he was dead, not until I was in high school with Johnson in office, his promises of peace during the 1964 election broken. Beginning with Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment*, doubts had entered my mind about the government, there seeming to have been a cover-up of the assassination, the possibility that elements from within the government itself were involved. The enemy was less international communism, more domestic racism, global capitalism and U.S. imperialism. The more I studied, the more I learned that Kennedy himself had represented all of these evils. Alongside these discoveries were those, detailed here by Reeves, concerning Kennedy's personal immorality.

The childish identification with those ideals embodied in JFK's Camelot has, however, stayed with me to the extent that I have found myself weeping upon immediately starting another Kennedy study, that being Talbot's *Brothers'* account of the day JFK was murdered in Dallas. I don't know whether it was merely youthful impressionability or the sheer archetypal power of the Kennedy image that causes this emotional fascination and response, but it's certainly there and I likely continue to pursue the unfolding of this mystery.

Boris says

As one person of the time said of Kennedy, he was 'an illusion and a myth' which this book goes on to illustrate in great detail. A lot of people contributed to and conspired to create this myth from Joseph Kennedy Senior to gifted writer Theodore Sorenson and historian Theodore White.

Joseph Kennedy pulled all manner of strings with his connections, Sorenson put some very compelling prose into Kennedy's mouth (possibly the best speech writer of all time) and historian White continued and enabled the cover up of Kennedy's misdeeds and irresponsible behavior. The elegant and very cultured Jacqueline Kennedy gave the administration and their marriage a patina of culture and sophistication that contributed greatly to the myth of Camelot.

The Kennedy myth is still kept alive in some quarters which is unfortunate. He was at best a mediocre president and a mediocre man whose main claim to fame was satyriasis. This idol has clay feet.

Tiziano Brignoli says

The book itself is well researched, and interesting to analyze the life of John F. Kennedy, through the presence of his father, his destiny, and, as the title say, his deeply and complexes character. The problem, in my view, is that the author is many times is less objective, and just critical about the president and the man. I could say that he go to find the needle in the haystack, even when JFK was acting good.

If you want study in depth the life of John F. Kennedy, this book can be interesting, but definitely is not among the best books written about him.

Avis Black says

Despite what people may say about this book, it is not all negative, though it's certainly not a hagiography. Reeves tries to present a more balanced view of Kennedy, and he has been sharply criticized for it.

Nonetheless, his unromantic viewpoint has genuine validity to it. This book is for those who have grown-up attitudes about politicians, and are not given to either worshipping or demonizing them, but who realize that they're just people.

Jennifer says

This book covers not so much the events of this popular politician and American but rather the psycho-social, economic, cultural and ethnic fabric of the man. Because of this web-like comprehensiveness, I consider this to be one of the best books I have ever read.

Bethany says

So very, very good. I took a class in undergrad on the JFK assassination and this was required. Summary: JFK was an asshole.

John Hales says

The author, Mr. Thomas C Reeves, seems to be afflicted with an "Holier than Thou" attitude. The resulting bias was obvious and made the reading of otherwise interesting historical events difficult to read. While recognizing President Kennedy's notable achievements at home and abroad, Mr. Reeves would finish with a jab in the back apparently influenced by his definition of morality.

Steve says

<https://bestpresidentialbios.com/2017...>

“A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy” by Thomas C. Reeves was published in 1991. Reeves is a former professor of history at the University of Wisconsin and the author of nearly a dozen books. He is probably best-known for his 1975 biography of Chester Arthur and his 1982 biography of Joe McCarthy.

When first published, Reeves’s book was one of few vigorously revelatory studies of John Kennedy’s character. To label this book a “character study,” however, would be misleading. It is a comprehensive – but not historically exhaustive – biography of JFK infused with an unmistakable tabloidesque quality.

This book’s 421 pages of text are fast-paced and often riveting. Reeves’s primary thesis is that a president’s character and fitness for office are inextricably linked and much (if not substantially all) of the book is devoted to tearing down the Camelot facade and, implicitly, Kennedy’s legacy. But while the author successfully proves JFK’s countless moral failings he is far less successful convincing the reader that a president’s character actually matters.

The man who emerges from this book is a depraved and despicable villain who masquerades as a charming, courageous, intellectual man-of-the-people. But JFK himself is not the author’s only target: his parents, many of his siblings and several of his colleagues are also indicted for creating an environment in which Kennedy and his worst instincts were allowed to thrive.

But the book’s greatest flaw is not found in its themes, evidence or conclusions- it is the delivery system itself. “A Question of Character” seems to be a tabloid hit-piece rather than a deliberate, scholarly study of a person’s character. It often feels carelessly breezy and biased – and not the handiwork of the sober-minded historian who authored the thoughtful biography of Chester A. Arthur I read three years ago.

If Arthur Schlesinger’s exceedingly sympathetic “A Thousand Days” can be criticized for overlooking Kennedy’s numerous flaws, this study of John F. Kennedy can be faulted for always seeing the glass as half-empty. While it seems to promise a critical but fair reexamination of Kennedy’s image, there is little balance to be found and much of the narrative relies on gossipy speculation and hearsay.

But Reeves’s study is not entirely devoid of merit. The author provides a more coherent review of the Bay of Pigs operation than in many other JFK biographies and one of the clearest explanations of the tensions in Laos and Vietnam that I can remember. He also offers interesting, and surprisingly lengthy, discussions of Kennedy relating to civil rights and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Overall, Thomas Reeves’s “A Question of Character” proves a lively and engaging, but decidedly partisan, survey of Kennedy’s life with a principal focus on his character and, secondarily, on his politics. There is little in this book for scholars or historians who are already well-versed in the defects of the Camelot legend. But general readers interested in broad coverage of JFK’s life are likely to find the book’s tone too imbalanced, too petty and lacking in scholastic gravitas.

Overall rating: 3¼ stars

Natalie says

An eye opening review of the Kennedy family history and the the psychological development of JFK. I was

particularity disturbed by the chapter on Marilyn Monroe. Thomas C Reeves provides a thorough investigation of JFK. If you enjoy Biographical reads, this one is great!

Jacque Applegate says

Interesting read. Was recommended by my father in law. I enjoyed seeing the two sides of Kennedy. I think my favorite was of the swift boat incident. It made me truly understand why there is a group about the former swift boat soldiers that speak out so strongly during election. Worth the read.
