



Illustration by Susan Coyne

You Don't Know Jack

The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.

John F. Kennedy, 1962

AFTER JOHN F. KENNEDY'S narrow victory over Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election (JFK won several crucial swing states by very slim margins) pundits suggested that the first televised debate may have been the decisive factor.

In contrast to the photogenic Kennedy, an ailing and underweight Nixon looked—as one editorial suggested—“like he had already been embalmed before dying.”

On the other hand, JFK’s election odds were no doubt also boosted by backstage bribery and massive vote fraud, notably in running mate Lyndon B. Johnson’s Texas and by Mayor Richard Daley’s corrupt, powerful political machine in Illinois.

Also playing a major role in JFK’s victory was his image as a war hero, earned after his patrol boat *PT-109* was rammed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer in WWII. Kennedy’s father, Joe Kennedy, Sr., brazenly exploited the incident to buy his son a seat in Congress—which ultimately helped pave his road to the White House.

JFK displayed great heroism following the sinking, playing a pivotal role in the survival of 11 crew members. But what remained unacknowledged was his disobedience of orders and the gross negligence which led to his craft being sunk in the first place, actions for which several top Navy brass unsuccessfully sought his court martial.

JFK hated Fidel Castro, but after taking office, he wisely rejected a proposed CIA plot to justify an attack on the island by “sinking a boatload of Cubans” or organizing a phony Cuban terror campaign in Miami.

Instead, he ordered the CIA and 1,500 Cuban exiles to invade the island after Castro nationalized business and shut down Mafia-run casinos and brothels. But the expedition failed spectacularly: Historians rank the ‘Bay of Pigs’ invasion among the worst presidential blunders in U.S. history.

The following year, JFK was perplexed as to why Soviet Premier Khrushchev would risk war by installing nuclear-capable missiles in Cuba, remarking to his National Security Advisor, “It’s not as if we suddenly put ballistic missiles in Turkey; now that would be goddamned dangerous!”—to which the aide could only sheepishly reply, “Actually, we did, Mr. President.”

Unbeknown to JFK, the U.S. military had done exactly that, and—along with his economic embargo against Cuba and his incessant efforts to murder Castro—JFK himself arguably provoked Khrushchev into installing the missiles, in a desperate attempt to prevent a U.S. ‘first strike’ against Russia. (While Khrushchev was widely reported to have backed down, in reality it was only JFK’s secret agreement to remove the U.S. missiles in Turkey which prevented a war.)

Throughout his presidency, Kennedy insisted that his aura of ‘vigah’ and vitality was genuine, neglecting to mention the veritable smorgasbord of daily pills and injections which masked the true state of his medical unfitness for office. JFK had been administered the last rites of the Catholic Church at least four times as an adult, and even throughout the tense Cuban Missile Crisis he relied on a dangerous cocktail of painkillers and amphetamines, regularly administered by his celebrity physician, Max ‘Dr. Feelgood’ Jacobson.

The precarious state of his physical health didn’t seem to effect JFK’s libido, however.

After ensuring voters that his presidency would be the “center of moral leadership,” JFK’s term in office was repeatedly marred by extramarital affairs and clandestine liaisons. (On at least one occasion, his rampant promiscuity resulted in a brief period of anxiety about the location of the nuclear launch codes, which JFK sometimes kept secure in his suit jacket’s inner pocket.)

Among his last acts in office, JFK negotiated the Partial Test Ban Treaty, which prohibited all above-ground nuclear weapons testing—but only after presiding over the largest peacetime expansion of America’s military in the country’s history. Having massively built-up the nation’s nuclear forces—while simultaneously warning about a ‘missile gap’ that his own intelligence agencies knew was completely false—JFK no doubt decided that the strategic nuclear balance had been tilted so much in favor of the U.S. that it would be an ideal time to limit the Soviet response.

Undaunted by the near-catastrophic outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis—called by one aide the “the most dangerous moment in human history”—JFK was determined to gain fame as a war president. (“Who would have ever heard of Lincoln without the Civil War?” he had once mused.)

Raising the number of troops in Vietnam to 16,000, JFK privately told friends: “After Cuba, I have to go all the way with this one.” When Vietnam’s Premier Diem urged negotiations, he was killed in a CIA coup, and 3 weeks later JFK was himself the victim of a murky assassination plot.

Over a half-century after his martyrdom, JFK’s carefully-crafted ‘Camelot’ legend (“persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic”) still hinders an objective appraisal of his scandalous, reckless presidency.