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The Mythic Space of the New Frontier:
The Façade of *The White House Tour*
and Visual Culture of the JFK Library and Museum

By

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Abstract

ADVISOR: Andrew Feffer

The motivation for this project came from my desire to investigate the substance behind President John F. Kennedy's careful self-presentation during his presidential campaign and incumbency, and to demonstrate how his memory is still prevalent in today's society. I applied Robert Slotkin's language from *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* as a framework to my discussion on the language Kennedy conveyed to the American public, starting with his creation of the New Frontier at the 1960 Democratic National Convention. By establishing an image evocative of the American Frontier and hero-tales, Kennedy constructed a site for which the American public could witness an ideological historical narrative play out, a public arena to which Slotkin refers as *mythic space*. I attempt to show how this space is extended to the Kennedy White House, and how it is preserved in the monumental John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston, MA.

In the first chapter, I aim to show how Kennedy and his campaign advisors, with a carefully manipulated set of images and rhetoric, effectively create a mythic space through the New Frontier, a motto that evoked nostalgia for what Slotkin calls a "falsely idealized past."¹ In the New Frontier, Kennedy calls on the American public to awaken itself from the stagnation of the Eisenhower Era, and to participate

¹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, p. 660.

in social change and in ‘unchartered’ areas of science and space. He preached that “it would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric—and those who prefer that course should not cast their votes for me.”² I refer to Gary Wills throughout, who provides a less wide-eyed analysis of Kennedy and holds that the President’s “coolness *was* a new frontier.”³ I conclude the chapter with a political psychology study conducted by Patricia K. Felkins and Irvin Goldman that proves the Kennedy-as-hero myth is still perpetuated and constituted as an aspect of American popular culture today.

My second chapter focuses on John and Jackie Kennedy’s use of the media to manipulate images and extend the mythic space of the White House. For primary sources, I analyzed the numerous *Life* magazine covers from 1956-1963, resources on the Cuban Missile Crisis such as Kennedy’s recordings and written correspondence to Khrushchev in addition to the subsequent televised address to the nation regarding the matter, and the *CBS* special “A White House Tour with Mrs. John F. Kennedy.” I used idioms from Gore Vidal’s memoirs for expressive purposes. Specifically, I discuss how through his intercourse with the American public and Cuban policies, Kennedy proved that the projection of his hero image was not only in his manipulation of images but also in the way he constructed his presidential power. I support this argument with his negotiations regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis by using military resources accessed from the online National Archives and

² John F. Kennedy, “The New Frontier,” Democratic Convention Nomination Acceptance July 15, 1960, JFK Presidential Museum and Library, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-137-003.aspx> (accessed 3/11/11).

³ Gary Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Mediation on Power*, First Mariner Books, 2001, p. 150.

YouTube footage of Kennedy's October 22, 1962 address to the nation—which was an example of benevolent censorship. Kennedy made Castro accepting Russian missiles onto his territory seem unprovoked and threatening when in reality it was his candid defensive measure taken as a result of the disorder caused by the Kennedy Administration's plot to overthrow the Cuban regime. By blaming Khrushchev of a "clandestine, reckless, and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations" between the U.S. and Soviet Union, JFK attributes the problems that *he* himself provoked to the premier, and assures the nation that the American policy had always been one of "patience and restraint, as befits a peaceful and powerful nation which leads a worldwide alliance."⁴ Though the United States was on brink of nuclear war, Kennedy was able to maintain his public perception as the Defender of the Promise.

The second half of the chapter focuses on Jackie Kennedy's role in restoring the White House and using it as a platform for her nationally-televised *Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*, where she welcomed the public into the private realm of the White House. By focusing on certain architectural details and artifacts from George Washington, James Monroe, and Theodore Roosevelt's era, Jackie attempts to embody the symbolic space that Americans have conventionally attached to the president's official home. By adding her indelible touches, such as imported French wallpaper, she weaves her and her husband's modernized sense of culture into the fabric of American history. By blending the American past and

⁴ John F. Kennedy, "Cuban Missile Crisis Address to the Nation," October 22, 1962, YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7YkJxQT_0Y&feature=player_embedded#at=157 (accessed 5/31/11).

present—and public with private—Jackie was able to create a mythic space that in Gary Wills’s words “rightly dazzled America.”⁵

The third chapter centers around the JFK Library and Museum: the conception of its monumentality, its ultimate role in legend-making, and its overall function of what Alison Landsberg defines as a *prosthetic memory*. In addition to Landsberg’s language, I also refer to historian Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, who focuses on museum theory, and her notion of a museum’s ‘hidden curriculum’ as a pedagogical tool. I point out how Jackie and other Kennedy family members carefully chose certain artifacts and images for the museum’s exhibition, such as Kennedy’s rocking chair, war medals, and letters supporting the Peace Corps and Space Program. By highlighting and glorifying the positive hallmarks of Kennedy’s presidency, the visitor is left with an idealized perception of the President and his accomplishments. I discuss how the building creates a certain memory of Kennedy by strategically eliminating elements of his presidency that are considered controversial, taboo, or politically disreputable—such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. The architectural design of the facility adds to the creation of the prosthesis—it takes the visitor on a personal tour of the 1960 presidential campaign and next through the replicated White House. Near the end of the tour, visitors enter a dark hallway and are shown clips from Abraham Zapruder’s footage of the President’s assassination. The tour ends in a massive, 115-foot tall glass ‘contemplation pavilion,’ where architect I.M. Pei intended that the visitor could therapeutically reflect on, remember, and reimagine John F. Kennedy and the idealized 1960s.

⁵ Wills, p. 275.

Personally, the culmination of my thesis came with a greater understanding of the 'Kennedy Obsession' and its prevalence over the past fifty years. His sense of idealism has survived and been preserved by the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum due mostly to its function in glorifying and extending the mythic space of the New Frontier and the tale of Camelot. In Gore Vidal's words, "Today Kennedy dead has infinitely more force than Kennedy living...Part of the phenomenon is attributable to the race's need for heroes...But mostly the legend is the deliberate creation of the Kennedy family and its clients."⁶

⁶ Gore Vidal, "The Holy Family," *Esquire Magazine*, April 1967, p. 99.

Chapter 1

The Preservation of Self-Presentation

"Today Kennedy dead has infinitely more force than Kennedy living...Part of the phenomenon is attributable to the race's need for heroes...But mostly the legend is the deliberate creation of the Kennedy family and its clients." -Gore Vidal ⁷

On February 14, 1962, CBS aired *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*, where the First Lady invited millions of television viewers to observe the newly resorted White House. Not only did Jacqueline Kennedy fulfill her domestic duty by providing visitors a tour of her home, she welcomed the public into the conventionally clandestine and private realm of the White House. This occasion served as a benchmark for opening the private space of the presidential dwelling into the public sphere. Similarly, Jackie incorporated the link between private and public spaces into her role in designing and planning the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum after the President's death in 1963. In a 1964 statement on the plans for the Kennedy Library, she described that the library would be "a vital center of education and exchange and thought, which will grow and change with the times." In referring to her husband, she stated, "His library will be your library, for when the building is completed it will be turned over to the government and become the property of the people of the United States forever."

⁷ Gore Vidal, "The Holy Family," *Esquire Magazine*, April 1967, p. 99.

This paper explores the visual culture of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, with a central focus on the connection between the public and private space, and its inevitable creation of a “prosthetic memory,” by Alison Landsberg’s definition. By explaining Jackie’s role in its development, I hope to link the pedagogic approaches of the museum with the interpretive processes of its visitors. I will incorporate Jackie’s ultimate decision of location and the architectural motives of I.M. Pei into the legacy of JFK’s presidency and its contemporary interpretation. I will analyze how current and past exhibits provide a certain understanding of the 1960s and any other significance they attempt to convey to the library’s audience. The JFK Library is at the forefront of visual and cultural exhibitions and archive digitalization, especially after its January 2011 release of JFK50.org, which strives to “celebrate the past to awaken the future” with interactive access to presidential archives. My overall goal is to demonstrate the cultural impression of the New Frontier on the American nation in the 1960’s, and to compare the nature of its legacy today.



On July 16, 1960, John F. Kennedy accepted the Democratic Party’s nomination as candidate for President at the Los Angeles Coliseum. It was a “tradition of American political oratory” that the acceptance speech christen a palpable slogan that would define the themes of the upcoming campaign and personalize the prospective president—an indication of the style of thought and

action that would characterize the future administration.⁸ Kennedy designated his incumbent administration “The New Frontier.” Richard Slotkin likens this specific identification with a cultural trend in the Second American Century—“the exchange of an old, domestic, agrarian frontier for a new frontier of world power and industrial development had been a central trope in American political and historiographical debates since the 1890s.”⁹ JFK reintroduced the concept of closing the “old frontier”—emblematic of the eight years of “stagnation” under Eisenhower—to the new frontier that would seek public consent to participate in the new social, political and ultimately cultural revolution that was to ensue. Kennedy proclaimed: “For the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won—and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960’s—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.”¹⁰ Slotkin believes that for the Kennedy Administration, the choice of the New Frontier as symbol “was not simply a device for trade-marking the candidate. It was an authentic metaphor, descriptive of the way in which they hoped to use political power and the kinds of struggle in which they wished to engage.”¹¹

On this day, JFK addressed the nation’s eagerness of the next four years trepidation over the domestic and foreign policies by contrasting his predecessor’s style: “I tell you the New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that

⁸ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, p. 1.

⁹ Slotkin, p. 3.

¹⁰ John F. Kennedy, “The New Frontier,” Democratic Convention Nomination Acceptance July 15, 1960, JFK Presidential Museum and Library, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-137-003.aspx> (accessed 3/11/11).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric—and those who prefer that course should not cast their votes for me.”¹² Not only did Kennedy’s campaign as the New Frontier express “in symbolic shorthand a new approach to the use of American power,” it established the mythic space surrounding his presidency that has sustained to today, and is preserved by existence and nature of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.¹³ It is evident when looking at JFK’s legacy that “the myth/ideology of a living culture is not a determinate program that endlessly and helplessly reproduces itself but a volatile and ongoing conversation in which the basic value-conflicts, ambivalent desires, and contradictory intentions of the culture’s constituents are continuously entertained.”¹⁴ Myth is not only something *given* but something *made*, a product of human labor, one of the tools with which human beings do the work of making culture and society. The discourses of myth “are, and have been, medium as well as message: instruments of linguistic and ideological creativity as well as a constraining grammar of codified memories and beliefs.”¹⁵ Slotkin argues that a culture creates mythic space “to reify our nostalgia for a falsely idealized past...By remembering, retelling, and reimagining “America,” we too engage myths with

¹² Kennedy, July 15, 1960.

¹³ Slotkin, p. 489.

¹⁴ Slotkin, p. 659.

¹⁵ Slotkin, p. 659.

history and thus initiate the process by which our culture is steadily revised and transformed.”¹⁶

With his words on July 15, 1960, JFK created a mythic space, not only of his proposed New Frontier, but also of the ‘stagnant’ Eisenhower era. Referring to the past eight years, Kennedy questioned the nation: can a nation organized and governed such as ours endure? In response, he asserted, “That is the question of the New Frontier. That is the choice our nation must make—a choice that lies not merely between two men or two parties, but between the public interest and private comfort—between national greatness and national decline—between the fresh air of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of “normalcy”—between determined dedication and creeping mediocrity.”¹⁷ By electing Kennedy, the nation would bring on a cultural revolution. By historian Gary Wills’s articulation: “We would at last shake off the Eisenhower spell, the deadening “benevolence without leadership” that had made the nation sluggish—its architecture empty, its manners sexless, its goals tame: The life of politics and the life of myth had diverged too far, and the energies of the people one knew everywhere had slowed down.”¹⁸

By establishing an image evocative of the American Frontier and hero-tales, Kennedy concurrently created a site for which the American public could witness an ideological historical narrative play out, a public arena to which Slotkin refers as *mythic space*—“a culture has its heritage of “lore,” which is preserved for use by designated lore-masters, story-tellers, or historians and is transmitted by them to

¹⁶ Slotkin, p. 660.

¹⁷ Kennedy, July 15, 1960.

¹⁸ Gary Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power*, First Mariner Books, 2001, p. 145.

the “public” in one or more of the genres.”¹⁹ From the beginning of his campaign, Kennedy traveled the country to create his own organization and his own constituency of reporters and correspondents, “men his own age.”²⁰ Even before he was president, Kennedy “changed politics some, but he remade the culture of American ambition. Watching the Kennedys was the most American of activities: self-improvement.”²¹

In his take on the Kennedy family, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Mediation on Power*, Garry Wills traces JFK’s media presence and public appeal to his father Joseph Kennedy’s role of a “PR man”—“what moguls did for “starlets,” Kennedy would do for his offspring.”²² He went to the lengths to “forge a separate world for his children,” one that “hovered above ordinary life. It created reality.”²³ “He took great pains to have the Kennedys portrayed in public as, invariably, winners.”²⁴ However, Wills indicates that “in time, John Kennedy surpassed his father in skill at creating the right image for himself.”²⁵ Regarding various aspects of Kennedy’s presidency—such as his authorship of *Profiles in Courage* and his role on PT 109—Wills notes that any ‘cover-up’ “would pose an ethical problem for a man who did not separate his “image” so clearly from any concern for the truth.”²⁶ Instead, Wills constructs an argument where Kennedy was willing to go to any extreme to achieve upward mobility and clout. “Putting the best face on one’s performance is a

¹⁹ Slotkin, p. 7.

²⁰ Richard Reeves, *Portrait of Camelot: A Thousand Days in the Kennedy White House*, Abrams, New York, 2010, p. 8.

²¹ Reeves, p. 8.

²² Wills, 129.

²³ Wills, p. 138.

²⁴ Wills, p. 129.

²⁵ Wills, p.134.

²⁶ Wills, p. 138.

fundamental political skill; and it was for Joseph and John Kennedy an imperative...creating the Kennedy “image” was a basic drive for both men.

Sometimes this meant exaggerating what was, admittedly, a heroic episode.”²⁷

Because Kennedy was the first president of the TV-watching generation of the 1960’s, television and photographs were able to present him and his family a manner that displayed and defined the New Frontier to the public. Slotkin writes that “in modern society the mass media provide the broadest-based and most pervasive means for canvassing the world of events and the spectrum of public concerns, for recalling historical precedents, and for translating them into the various story-genres that constitute a public mythology.”²⁸ Yet he warns that media industries are often influenced not only by politics, but also by other forms of popular culture—we must not assume that “the mythologies of mass media are a kind of modern “folklore,” or that they constitute the totality of “American culture.””²⁹ Kennedy understood the power of the media, and its influence on the American people. He “worked always to turn journalists into unofficial spokesmen for his administration, and he succeeded with a great many of them. They were there to help him arrange reality, to make style become substance, to define power as the contriving of appearances.”³⁰ Richard Reeves recounts a December 3, 1960 meeting between Senator and President-elect Kennedy, the youngest man ever elected, and Eisenhower, the oldest man ever elected to lead the nation—
“Eisenhower, in an overcoat and hat, waited inside the doors of the North Portico as

²⁷ Wills, p. 138.

²⁸ Slotkin, p. 8.

²⁹ Slotkin, p. 9.

³⁰ Wills, p. 150.

the president-elect's car arrived. The moment it stopped, Kennedy, hatless and coatless, jumped out of the car and bounded up the six stairs; Eisenhower, glaring at his aides, came through the door, whipping off his hat. That's what the cameras caught: an angry old man and a smiling young one. It was no accident, of course. That was what Kennedy wanted the world to see."³¹ According to Wills, his "coolness *was* a new frontier."³²

The Kennedy image really evolved when the First Family arrived in Washington, D.C. He, with the aid of Jacqueline Kennedy, "could not have shaped his dazzling façade of style unless he had a genuine feel for many of its components. He liked the kind of glamour he was now in a position to dispense."³³ Their transition to life in the White House began their official display of the ideal American identity. In her discussion of the symbolism of the Washington pilgrimage, Lauren Berlant explains that "the totality of the nation in its capital city is a jumble of historical modalities, a transitional space between local and national cultures, private and public property, archaic and living artifacts, the national history that marks the monumental landscape and the everyday life temporalities of federal and metropolitan cultures."³⁴ The mere presence of the lionized Kennedys in the White House acted as a premise for the unique balance of the private and public sphere that would unfold over the next one thousand days. As Berlant describes, Washington and the White House act as "a place of national *mediation*, where a

³¹ Richard Reeves, *Portrait of Camelot: A Thousand Days in the Kennedy White House*, Abrams, New York, 2010, p. 6.

³² Wills, p. 150.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Duke University Press, 1997, p. 25.

variety of nationally inflected media come into visible and sometimes incommensurate contact.”³⁵ Their brief residency in the White House transformed the nation’s understanding of it, due to Jackie’s 1961 *Life* interview titled “The First Lady Tells Her Plans for the White House,” and her 1961 establishment of The White House Historical Association, in addition to the previous year’s CBS special *The White House Tour* for which she was awarded an honorary Emmy. The *Tour* meticulously displayed Jackie’s choice in fine arts and furniture, as if to seemingly invite the American people into the White House and the intimate domain of the First Family. The Kennedys created and exhibited the perpetuated myth of the New Frontier through the transformation of the White House, and every piece of its interior decor attests to their constructed image. Quoting Wills, the president’s rocking chair was an ‘acceptable’ sign of relaxation— “Even the chair had its carefully chosen image, making it a nationally recognized symbol of the traditional values, reflective patience, and practical informality prevailing in the White House.”³⁶

In their 1993 *Political Psychology* study titled “Political Myth as Subjective Narrative: Some Interpretation and Understandings of John F. Kennedy,” Patricia Felkins and Irvin Goldman conduct a study that regards JFK as a paradigm of the “mythic hero” form. In their interpretative approach to myth, the focus is on the purpose that myths “serve critical individual needs that include establishing

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Wills, p. 143.

personal identity, and creating a sense of community.”³⁷ Felkins and Goldman support that myths are often accepted and integrated into the “total cultural mosaic and passed from generation to generation as part of a personal heritage that gives identity and meaning by linking past, present, and future. Indeed the origin of many parables, allegories and legends has been lost in a kind of cultural amnesia that does not recognize any need for justification of verification.”³⁸ Their study revealed that the majority of Americans retrospectively view Kennedy as the ‘hero’ form of ‘Defender of the Promise;’ the other two factors were the ‘Unenhanced Skeptic’ and the ‘Reformed Believer.’ The dominant response to the mythic embodiment of Kennedy as the Defender of the Promise where the Promise is interpreted as “hope, optimism, and energy” that President Kennedy represented, “as well as a shared commitment to making the world a better place.”³⁹

The content of the research performed by Felkins and Goldman demonstrates that the Kennedy narrative and myth that it perpetuated is still constituted as an aspect of American popular culture today. As they put it, “the Promise is safely in the realm of myth, which transcends Kennedy the man.”⁴⁰ Through his assassination, “youth, idealism, and hope are lost, but for the Defender of the Promise, the memories of what might have been continue to exist.”⁴¹ His figure as a mythic hero of the New Frontier was established on July 15, 1960, when

³⁷ Patricia K. Felkins and Irvin Goldman, “Political Myth as Subjective Narrative: Some Interpretation and Understandings of John F. Kennedy,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 3, September 1993, 447-467, p. 451.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Felkins and Goldman, p. 454.

⁴⁰ Felkins and Goldman, p. 460.

⁴¹ Felkins and Goldman, p. 455.

he accepted the Democratic nomination for the presidency, and his legacy has persisted through outlets of contemporary media, the same types that helped construct his image, and is preserved as a prosthetic memory to the American narrative in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum—"the myth generated back then is still prevalent today...without myth we are uprooted from our past and present."⁴²

⁴² Felkins and Goldman, p. 451.

Chapter 2

The Mythic Landscape of the JFK Administration

By definition, a myth is a traditional story that ideally and often fictively reflects natural or social events. Cultural historian Richard Slotkin theorizes that this tradition of story-telling is a cliché of historical memory, rather than historical discourse, that is formulated and perpetuated by media forms in their various capacities to make and use metaphors. He states, “If symbol and experience match closely enough, our belief in the validity and usefulness of the symbol will be confirmed; if the match is disappointing, we will be forced to choose between denying the importance of the new experience and revising our symbolic vocabulary.”⁴³ John F. Kennedy, his manipulation of image, and his culture of lore was and still is effectively conveyed to the collective American population as the “hero-president.”⁴⁴ When “the heroic character is assumed by a modern political leader, its representational function becomes political as well as symbolic.”⁴⁵ Because Kennedy gained widespread public credibility as a hero through his careful symbolic construction, he was able to achieve considerable political authority and trust as President.

John F. Kennedy’s political career began with a public agenda after his senior thesis at Harvard, *Why England Slept*, was published and became a best seller. This

⁴³ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Slotkin, p. 497.

⁴⁵ Slotkin, p. 498.

feat was achieved in part due to his father Joe Kennedy's persistent determination to present his son as a political frontrunner. This moment marked Kennedy's first palpable public action as a political agent, and the manner of its context and popularity set the tone for the tenure of his career. Though opinions differ on the statistical substance of the book, *Why England Slept* proved Kennedy to be widely read in history and politics. Ted Sorensen denotes the book as a "well-reasoned and well-regarded analysis of that nation's lack of preparedness for the Second World War."⁴⁶ However, according to Gary Wills, the book is a "passable undergraduate paper" in which "the disparate things stuffed into it have obscured its principal argument; its only unity comes from a cluster of attitudes John Kennedy had drawn from his reading, his experience of England, and his dependence on his father for information and point of view."⁴⁷ Wills finds that young Kennedy became enthralled with English attitudes towards personal honor, aristocracy and sex, presumably during his brief scholarship at the London School of Economics, and created a concept of an 'adventurer' who could "save the people by guiding them, sometimes without their knowledge."⁴⁸ With the release of his thesis and its subsequent popularity, Kennedy demonstrated his awareness and mastery of image and appeal to the public that would last through his presidency.

Wills provides a compelling discussion that links Kennedy's frame of mind and his father's influence to his political doctrines employed while he was President. Wills delineates the manner in which Kennedy's father instilled in his son a sense of

⁴⁶ Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 1965, p. 14.

⁴⁷ Wills, p. 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

self-worth and created a miniature aristocracy. From the time of *Why England Slept*, “John Kennedy had not thought of power as the recruiting of people’s opinion, but as the manipulation of their response by aristocrats who saw what the masses could not see.”⁴⁹ Wills believes that JFK as President relied on his own talent and will to persuade the masses “against their instincts” and instead toward duty and empire.⁵⁰ Wills connects this method of public persuasion and assurance to the Kennedy Administration’s secret war on Castro, and specifically to how the American people were not informed of the government’s activities—“those in the know performed these services for people who could not understand the necessities of power.”⁵¹ He argues that this ‘benevolent censorship’ rendered Americans unaware and unprepared to estimate the severity of the situation surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis. To the general public, Castro accepting Russian missiles onto his territory looked unprovoked and threatening when in reality it was his candid defensive measure taken as a result of the disorder caused by the Kennedy Administration’s plot to overthrow the Cuban regime. “In this game of power used apart from popular support, the Kennedys looked like brave resisters of aggression” though in fact they were the original cause of it.⁵² Kennedy’s political motives were conveyed to the public in a certain manner—as Wills puts it “Americans watched this drama, as it were, through a glass pane, unable to hear the dialogue.”⁵³ Ultimately, though

⁴⁹ Wills, p. 258.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Wills, p. 259.

⁵³ Wills, p. 260.

unbeknownst to the public that he risked nuclear war to do so, Kennedy was credited with lessening the threat of nuclear weapons.

Throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis, it can be asserted that Kennedy was thoroughly concerned of how his choices would reflect himself in the now and in latter generations' historiographical studies. Throughout the thirteen days in October 1962, Kennedy kept his previous political engagements and appearances in Ohio and Illinois to symbolically maintain a façade of stability. Meanwhile, the ad hoc Executive Committee of the National Security Council was in frantic debate over waging war with Khrushchev. Kennedy left Chicago after one day and decided to return to the White House as the crisis quickly became urgent. An October 20th article titled "Kennedy Ends 6-State Tour Due to Cold, Fever is Lower After Return to White House" (written by White House reporter for the Associated Press Douglass Cornell) demonstrates how Kennedy, to avoid public suspicion, consulted his steadfast physician to fabricate the diagnosis of a cold, allowing JFK to return to Washington without arousing public panic.⁵⁴ In an ExComm meeting, while Kennedy was seriously considering a preemptive air strike to destroy the missile launching sites, it is generally held that Robert Kennedy passed his brother a note saying, "I now know how Tojo felt when he was planning Pearl Harbor."⁵⁵ Robert saw the potential damage of neglecting history's lesson from the Bay of Pigs and acting impatiently—and had to convince the President not to strike. JFK attempted to relay the same message to the American public later that evening in the October

⁵⁴ Douglass B. Cornell, "Kennedy Ends 6-State Tour Due to Cold," Associated Press, October 20, 1962, <http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct20/> (accessed 6/6/11).

⁵⁵ Wills, p. 263.

22 television and radio broadcast, we announced “the 1930's taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads to war. This nation is opposed to war. We are also true to our word. Our unswerving objective, therefore, must be to prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere.”⁵⁶ By evoking a sharp wound from the past, Kennedy established a scenario that would vindicate any necessary actions paradigmatic of the hero-President and Defender of the Peace.

In retrospect, the Cuban Missile Crisis proved to be a platform for Kennedy to demonstrate his adept use of crisis rhetoric to gamble with Khrushchev—*war* itself became a symbol of political authority. In the telegraph correspondence between Kennedy and Khrushchev during this time, it is evident that Kennedy emphasized boldness and no caution when dealing with the Communist leader. Kennedy summarized his national address to Khrushchev in a telegraph, where he explicitly informs the Chairman: “I publicly stated that if certain developments in Cuba took place, the United States would do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies... I wish to point out that the action we are taking is the minimum necessary to remove the threat to the security of the nations of this hemisphere.”⁵⁷ “Just imagine, Mr. President,” Khrushchev wrote, “that we had presented you with the conditions of an ultimatum which you have presented us by

⁵⁶ John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba,” October 22, 1962, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8986&st=&st1=#axzz10jWZGIQw> (accessed 6/6/11).

⁵⁷ John F. Kennedy, “Letter From President Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchev,” October 22, 1962, *Department of State Archives*, http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/volume_vi/exchanges.html (accessed 6/6/11).

your action. How would you have reacted to this? I think that you would have been indignant at such a step on our part. And this would have been understandable to us.”⁵⁸ Here, Khrushchev confronts Kennedy’s unfounded threat, and misuse of the term “quarantine” rather than the better-suited “blockade,” which would constitute as an act of war: “You, Mr. President, are not declaring a quarantine, but rather are setting forth an ultimatum and threatening that if we do not give in to your demands you will use force. Consider what you are saying! ...You are no longer appealing to reason, but wish to intimidate us....I cannot agree to this, and I think that in your own heart you recognize that I am correct.”⁵⁹ Though eventually the crisis is averted by virtue of Khrushchev’s reasoning, Kennedy nonetheless invoked war as what Slotkin calls a national project where “the people as a whole become the platoon and the President becomes the commander in whom (at least for the duration of the crisis) we must repose *implicit* confidence.”⁶⁰

Kennedy’s performance of provoking war to sustain peace constitutes as Slotkin’s interpretation of the paradox of the New Frontier, which was that it aimed at accomplishing democratic goals through “structures and methods that were elite-dominated and command-oriented.”⁶¹ Kennedy’s self-presentation as a tough-minded yet consistently cool-headed leader permeated not only through images, but also in the manner he wielded his presidential power. By masking his true aggressive motives to the American people, Kennedy discredited any democratic

⁵⁸ Premier Nikita Khrushchev, “Letter From Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy,” October 24, 1962, *Department of State Archives*, http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/volume_vi/exchanges.html (accessed 6/6/11).

⁵⁹ Khrushchev, October 24, 1962.

⁶⁰ Slotkin, p. 500.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

political substance emblematic of the New Frontier—and instead the elitist operations of Camelot were overplayed. This perspective of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Kennedy's empty façade of power, was realized after his presidency—by some. In 1967, Vidal wrote, "Not until the second year of his administration did it become plain that Kennedy was not about to do much of anything. Since his concern was so much with the appearance of things, he was at his worst when confronted with those issues where a moral commitment might have informed his political response not only with passion but with shrewdness."⁶² Kennedy's "attempt to fashion power solely out of resource and will led to the celebration of power as destruction—as assassination of leaders, the sabotage of rival economies, the poisoning of opponent missiles."⁶³ His influence on the 1960s in general proved the period to be obsessed with power and its manipulation—the "power of the American system, or power to be sought by working outside of it; the power of insurgency, or of counterinsurgency; the power of rhetoric and "image" and charisma and technology."⁶⁴ Politically, the manipulated management of power and subsequent damage control seemed to be a priority on Kennedy's agenda as the New Frontier witnessed crises that were originally caused by himself and his administration from the start.

Like his assertion of power, Kennedy similarly used his image to present a particular pretense to the American public, especially to a nation that views itself as naturally entitled. Slotkin explains that "to the extent that the hero-leader

⁶² Vidal, p. 821

⁶³ Wills p. 299.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

represents us, we license him to act on our behalf to achieve things that are beyond us.”⁶⁵ Superseding the aesthetically stale Eisenhower Administration, Kennedy was welcomed with open arms, as the collective political and cultural attitude seemed to believe that “a new generation must take up again the torch that had guttered out.”⁶⁶ Wills suggests that the Kennedys “rightly dazzled America. We thought it was our own light being reflected back on us.”⁶⁷ In his memoirs on the American nation, Gore Vidal reflects on the Eisenhower era White House, that “at that time the White House was as serene as a resort hotel out of season. The corridors were empty. In the various offices of the Executive quiet gray men in waistcoats talked to one another in low-pitched voices.” Vidal later visited the White House in 1961 to find the corridors filled with “eager youthful men, while those not young are revitalized.”⁶⁸ He observed that press reporters were constantly gathered, photographers were constantly alert, and television cameramen were on standby for “news is made at all hours” in the Kennedy White House.⁶⁹ After his visit, Vidal told London’s *Sunday Telegraph* that “for twenty years the culture and the mind of the United States ignored politics. Many never voted; few engaged in active politics. Now everything has changed. From Kenneth Galbraith to Robert Frost the intellectual establishment is listened to and even, on occasion, engaged to executive

⁶⁵ Slotkin, p. 498.

⁶⁶ Wills, p. 276.

⁶⁷ Wills, p. 275.

⁶⁸ Gore Vidal, “President Kennedy,” from London *Sunday Telegraph*, April 9, 1961, *United States Essays 1952-1992*, Random House New York, 1993, p. 797.

⁶⁹ Vidal, p. 798.

policy.”⁷⁰ The mere presence of the Kennedys in the White House galvanized both a political and cultural transformation.

This achievement would not have been possible without Kennedy’s adept manipulation and perpetuation of his image as the all-American hero. Coincidentally, Kennedy’s political campaigning timed with the inception of television broadcasting. Kennedy and his council utilized the latest technology to create a commercial image of a politician who had a personal bond with his constituents. In his visually-analytical study *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*, historian David Lubin explains this impact: “He appeared frequently in their living rooms, brought there almost daily by newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Listening to his memorably eloquent speeches, enjoying the delicious offhand wit of his televised press conferences, and poring over the extensive photo coverage that he and his beautiful young family received during the golden age of popular picture magazines such as *Life* and *Look*, observers in America and abroad experienced a rapport with Kennedy, whose aura was that of someone remarkably yet reassuringly familiar.”⁷¹ This appeal had a seductive influence over the majority of the American nation, and Kennedy was aware of its political clout. In a retrospective article published in 1967, Vidal reflects that “what doubts one may have had about the Kennedys were obscured by the charm and intelligence of John F. Kennedy.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Vidal, p. 798.

⁷¹ David M. Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*, University of California Press, 2003, p. x.

⁷² Gore Vidal, “The Holy Family,” from *Esquire* April 1967, p. 810

According to Slotkin, in modern society the mass media “provide the broadest-based and most pervasive means for canvassing the world of events and the spectrum of public concerns, for recalling historical precedents, and for translating them into the various story-genres that constitute a public mythology.”⁷³ The public needed a certain image of their president, and the 1960s media industries—from newspapers to mass entertainment magazines—provided it. Writing in 1967, Vidal observed “the most expensive legitimate item in today’s politics is the making of the image. Highly paid technicians are able to determine with alarming accuracy just what sort of characteristics the public desires at any given moment in a national figure, and with adroit handling, a personable candidate can be made to seem whatever the times require...the Kennedys alone possess the money to maintain one of the most remarkable self-publicizing machines in the history of advertising, a machine which for a time had the resources of the Federal government at its disposal.” Both John Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier “unleashed the media’s fascination with every aspect of their photogenic life.”⁷⁴

The picturesque portrayal of the Kennedy couple began seven years before the actual presidency and has been the subject of perpetual media attention throughout history to the current day. In the summer of 1953, Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier appeared on the cover of the July 20th edition of *Life* magazine for a story titled “Senator Kennedy Goes A-Courting,” which acted as the public announcement of their engagement. The two were captured sailing in the bay outside of the Kennedy family compound in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. “Youth,

⁷³ Slotkin, p. 8.

⁷⁴ Lubin, p. x.

freshness, teeth. That's what we see at the beginning," remarks David Lubin in *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*. In this photograph, Kennedy "squints in her direction, not at her but past her toward the camera. She may be the object of his attention, but so too, implicitly is the electorate. After all, this is not a private snapshot, even though in its apparent informality it pretends to be."⁷⁵ This appearance marked the first of eighteen times that the future Mrs. Kennedy graced the cover of *Life*—more times than any other individual in the history of the magazine except her husband.⁷⁶ According to Lubin, the image served as an advertisement "for an emerging post-Depression, postwar consumerist attitude toward life and for a handsome young politician who brilliantly embodied that attitude."⁷⁷ At this point in his career when the picture was taken, Lubin believes that "selling" John Kennedy involved "showing him to be, at heart, a young, irrepressible, carefree lad, a barefoot boy."⁷⁸

The July 1953 *Life* cover launched the selling of Kennedy's image as an item on his political agenda. Though his innocent and boyish looks attempt to deny his sexuality, Lubin argues that Americans in the early fifties were beginning to take notice of sex. However, the American nation expected certain standards of their leader to which they could relate—for instance, his social status must be married and with children. Until this photo was published, Kennedy relied on his persona as a "footloose young bachelor with an eye for the ladies," which served him well.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Lubin, p. 40.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Lubin, p. 42.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Lubin, p. 43.

Lubin refers to a letter in which Kennedy jokes with a wartime friend: “I am getting married this fall. This means the end of a promising political career, as it has been based up to now almost completely on the old sex appeal.”⁸⁰ Like Wills, Lubin considers how JFK’s father was aware that the new era of prosperity and security required a prerequisite of a successful politician who was a “marrying kind.” He attributes Joe’s friendship with *Life* publisher Henry Luce to the rumor that he paid for his son to appear on the cover with his fiancé. Supposedly Joe Kennedy boasted to Francis Cardinal Spellman over lunch, “I just bought a horse for \$75,000. And for another \$75,000, I put Jack on the cover of *Time*.”⁸¹ Regardless, the 1953 *Life* cover photo provided the story that fit the public’s prototype and demonstrated the future president’s “forthcoming conversion from ladies’ man to married man,” thus constructing the ideal image for the future president.⁸²

The cover for *Time* Magazine for the week of November 24, 1958 featured Kennedy with other democratic candidates including Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey with the caption “Democratic Hopefuls”.⁸³ Kennedy was placed in the center of the six other men, seated, with his gaze directly on the viewer. This 1958 image provides the first visually symbolic creation of Camelot. The next *Time* cover that featured Kennedy was the July 11, 1960 edition, and portrayed a perfect family portrait with Joe and Rose Kennedy standing behind Jack and Jackie, who are seated. Picture frames containing Kennedy’s brothers and sisters hang on the wall. The

⁸⁰ *Time*, “Historical Notes: Sex & the Single Senator,” July 1, 1956, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835859,00.html>

⁸¹ Lubin, p. 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Time*, “Democratic Hopefuls,” Cover, November 24, 1958.

accompanying article states, “When they are together, the family foofaraws are noisy and the discussions continuous, but when they are apart, their need for constant communication strains the facilities of the telephone company and the U.S. postal service. No matter where they happen to be, the Kennedys are a cable-stitched clan.”⁸⁴ The cover is published two days before Kennedy receives the nomination for President at the DNC in Los Angeles, and also contributes to the Senator’s image as a stable family man—another expectation of a future President.

According to Slotkin, Kennedy’s “heroic myth owed as much to careful construction as to his unquestionable gifts as a performer.”⁸⁵ In addition, his campaign staff and presidential cabinet equally understood the power of political imagery. Slotkin disclosed that one of the first papers that Kennedy read as President was a working paper by Herbert Goldhamer titled “Political Implications of Posture Choices.” This advisory paper provided by the Rand Corporation highlights the importance of “projecting the *appearance* of power” in retaliatory actions with the Soviets and also with the American public. A “heroic style enhances the appearance of power by indicating that the President is confident that he possesses strength and is willing to use it to further national and personal objectives.”⁸⁶

Though his image may have been constructed, accounts from those who personally knew Kennedy attest that “the truly extraordinary man is truly the

⁸⁴ *Time*, “Pride of the Clan,” July 11, 1960.

⁸⁵ Slotkin, p. 498.

⁸⁶ Slotkin, p. 498.

ordinary man.”⁸⁷ Upon first meeting him, Special Counsel to President Kennedy Ted Sorensen recalls that “he did not try to impress me, as office-holders so often do on first meetings, with the strength of his handshake, or with the importance of his office, or with the sound of his voice.”⁸⁸ Though Sorensen may have been biased due to his close friendship with the President and particularly nostalgic when writing Kennedy’s biography, it is still valid to note the President’s interactions with his aids and journalists, who were critical in disseminating his self-presentation. While in office, Kennedy applied his charisma to media outlets. Vidal recalls that “most interesting of all, and the greatest break with tradition, have been his visits to the houses of friends in Washington, many of them journalists. Ever since the first protocol drawn up for George Washington, the president seldom goes visiting and never returns calls. Kennedy has changed that. He goes where he pleases; he talks candidly; he tries to meet people who otherwise might never get to him through the elaborate maze of the White House, in which, even during the most enlightened Administration, unpleasant knowledge can be kept from the president.”⁸⁹

If the White House was his stage, Kennedy acted as the representative hero of the country. As Slotkin puts it, “even where the public’s identification with Kennedy-as-hero was no more profound than that which bonds the audience to the characters in a movie, it gave force and validity to his belief that by acting on his own inclinations he was representing the will of the nation.”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Sorensen, p. 11.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Vidal, p. 802.

⁹⁰ Slotkin, p. 593.



Jackie & The White House

"From her first weeks as first lady, Jacqueline Kennedy set out to transform the White House, the platform of her husband's presidency, into an enchanting icon."⁹¹

⁹¹ Barbara Perry, *Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier*, p. 17.

Jacqueline Kennedy entered the public stage during her husband's presidential campaign in true maternal form, expecting their first child Caroline weeks later. Even at the most "superficial level, the first lady's sophisticated, statuesque appearance on the world stage, in shimmering gowns and colorful suits and dresses, maintained a conspicuous contrast to the dull grayness and stock physiques of communist leaders and their wives in the 1960s."⁹² Historian Barbara Perry finds that "by maintaining control over her public image while first lady as best she could in an increasingly intrusive media age, Mrs. Kennedy preserved the value of her political currency and the symbolism she created around it and her husband."⁹³ According to Perry, a political symbol conveys a meaning that "need not be independently or factually true, but will tap ideas people want to believe in as true."⁹⁴ Thus she makes an argument that the reality of the Kennedy marriage is irrelevant, but instead the symbolic creation exposed to the public establishes the presidency as a myth, and the White House as mythic space of their residence. Her first ladyship and its accompanying duties reflected "societal transitions from the seemingly quiescent 1950s to the turbulent 1960s...new media technology captured their iconic essence while minimizing their human foibles."⁹⁵ Like her husband, Jackie's image, which she projected onto the White House, satisfied the collective needs of the majority of Americans.

Years later, in a condolence note to the widowed Jackie Kennedy, Richard Nixon wrote: "You brought to the White House charm, beauty and elegance as the

⁹² Perry, p. 6

⁹³ Perry, p. 17.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Perry, p. 18.

official hostess of America, and the mystique of the young in heart, which was uniquely yours, made an indelible impression on the American consciousness.”⁹⁶ In an interview with Theodore White for a December 1963 *Life* article titled “For President Kennedy: An Epilogue,” Jackie evoked the allegory of Camelot from the 1960 Broadway play and eternally bestowed it as the emblem of Kennedy’s legacy. “At night, before we’d go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records; and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record...*Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.*”⁹⁷ She continued, “There’ll be great Presidents again—and the Johnsons are wonderful, they’ve been wonderful to me—but there’ll never be another Camelot again.”⁹⁸ Though this symbolic legend was applied after the presidency, historian Thomas Brown holds that it is possible to find latent meaning in Camelot during the Kennedy tenure in the White House. He argues that the usage of a monarchical symbol to describe the government of a republic represents Kennedy’s tendency towards a centralized, personalized authority based on charisma. With her restoration of the White House, organization of countless cultural events and diplomatic dinners, in addition to her subsequent christening of Camelot, Jackie successfully created and preserved the White House as stage for the New Frontiersmen to carry out their duties, where Kennedy and his council were viewed as “a cultured, cosmopolitan

⁹⁶ Perry, p. 5.

⁹⁷ Theodore H. White, “For President Kennedy: An Epilogue,” *Life*, December 6, 1963, p. 159.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

elite who would lead the United States away from its provincial past and prepare it for the tasks of empire.”⁹⁹

An instance emblematic of the First Lady’s critical role in creating the mythic space of the Kennedy White House is captured in Vidal’s memoirs: “Mrs. Kennedy once told me that the last thing Mrs. Eisenhower had done before leaving the White House was to hang a portrait of herself in the entrance hall. The first thing Mrs. Kennedy had done on moving in was to put the portrait in the basement, on aesthetic, not political grounds.”¹⁰⁰ He continues that upon overhearing this, President Kennedy “told an usher to restore the painting to its original place. “The Eisenhowers are coming to lunch tomorrow,” he explained patiently to his wife, “and that’s the first thing she’ll look for.””¹⁰¹

Jackie “not only became a pop icon, with her own recognizable symbols and images, she also created and projected emblems of American culture, the White House, and the presidency at a crucial and transformative period when television changed how the United States and the world viewed the president and his family.”¹⁰² Like her husband, Jackie was aware of the media as a powerful tool, and used it wisely to display the symbolic importance all Americans have come to attach to the president’s official home. A secretary for the Kennedy family recalled that Jackie’s restoration of the White House “as the focus of American history and

⁹⁹ Thomas Brown, *JFK: A History of an Image*, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 43.

¹⁰⁰ Vidal, p. 815.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Perry, p. 4.

accomplishment” was one of her “missions, delineated in an avalanche of memos immediately after JFK’s election to the presidency.”¹⁰³

Jackie embodied a sense of marital compatibility that historian Stephanie Coontz explains was a socially constructed gender convention carried over from the 1950s—“the housewives expressed deep satisfaction about motherhood and often described childbirth as the high point of their lives...it takes more than motherhood to make a woman completely happy; it also takes a man. And not just any man. He must be the leader; he cannot be subservient to the female.”¹⁰⁴ In keeping with her domestic duties, Jackie concentrated on refurbishing the White House as one of her projects as the First Lady. She understood that renovating the presidential stage would be a formidable task: “I was warned and begged and practically threatened! Not by my husband, but by people who had been in government a long time—Clark Clifford, for example—not to dream of touching the White House. They said it was such a symbol of the American people that anyone who had the audacity to tamper with it could only bring down the wrath of a nation on their head and it would hurt my husband politically and turn into a cause célèbre like the Truman balcony.”¹⁰⁵ Thus Jackie took on the daunting task of reorganizing the mythic space encompassed by the White House—the symbol-making, interpretation, and imaginative projection that is interlocked with the political and social existence of the presidential home.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Perry, p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, Basic Books, 2011, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ Perry, p. 97.

¹⁰⁶ Slotkin, p. 5.

In an article written for the Journal of the White House Historical Association titled “Editing the First Lady, *Life* Magazine Goes to the White House,” journalist Hugh Sidey recalls a phone call he received from President Kennedy—“Hugh, Jackie has this idea of turning the White House into a living museum, or redoing the White House and getting the original furniture and paintings that are still available so the White House reflects the ideas of Jefferson and Monroe and the others. She would like to write an article for *Life* magazine explaining all this and use money from that article to start a fund so she can get the work done and find the antiques. Here, Jackie will explain it to you. By the way, how much will *Life* pay her for a piece?”¹⁰⁷ Jackie took the phone and continued, “Hugh I want to do something special with the White House. It is such a beautiful old building. It is so bound up in our history. We need to bring it back to the way the founders envisioned.”¹⁰⁸ Sidey then turned her hand-written notes—“a modern equivalent of the Dead Sea Scrolls” he joked—into the September 1, 1961 *Life* article “The First Lady Brings History and Beauty to the White House.” In this article, Jackie explains that it was the “interior remoteness” that motivated her to renovate the building, and on the day she moved in she remembers asking herself, “How are we going to live as a family in this enormous place?”¹⁰⁹

In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, historian Lauren Berlant argues that during a pilgrimage to Washington D.C., an American citizen travels the

¹⁰⁷ Hugh Sidey, “Editing the First Lady: *Life* Magazine Goes to the White House,” *Journal of the White House Historical Association*, Number 13, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Hugh Sidey, “The First Lady Brings History and Beauty to the White House,” *Life*, September 1, 1961, p. 17.

conceptual distances of the national landscape “not always because they want to usurp the space of national mastery, but sometimes because they seek to capture, even fleetingly, a feeling of genuine membership in the United States.”¹¹⁰ In the 1961 *Life* article, Jackie reminisces, “My mother brought me to Washington one Easter when I was 11. That was the first time I saw the White House. From the outside I remember the feeling of the place. But inside, all I remember is shuffling through. There wasn’t even a booklet you could buy. Mount Vernon and the National Gallery of Art and the FBI made a far greater impression. I remember the FBI especially because they fingerprinted me.”¹¹¹ Before the restoration, Jackie explains that “all these people come to see the White House and once inside it they see practically nothing that dates back before 1948. Every boy who comes here should see things that develop his sense of history. For the girls, the house should look beautiful and lived-in. They should see what a fire in the fireplace and pretty flowers can do for a house; the White House rooms should give them a sense of all that.”¹¹² Here lays another paradox of the progressive New Frontier: Jackie is reinforcing the conventional view of a women as subordinate and strictly restricted to domestic sphere—the “problem with no name” until Betty Freidan christens it the “feminine mystique” in 1963. Regardless, the First Lady adhered to social expectations and, according to her biographer Barbara Perry, “methodically tackled

¹¹⁰ Berlant, p. 21.

¹¹¹ Sidey, “The First Lady Brings History and Beauty to the White House,” p. 10.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

her monumental venture” and “the project’s overall success illustrated Mrs. Kennedy’s abundant energy and managerial talents.”¹¹³

The widespread publicity of the White House renovation propagated through *Life*, which averaged around seven million readers per edition, provoked great interest in the building compared to previous privatized presidencies. In her essay, “Remembering the Glorious Kennedy Times,” Jackie’s chief of staff Letitia Baldrige explains that “in the Kennedy days, the public had surprisingly open access to the house five days a week, with tours and close-up views looking through the fences, where one could see who was coming and going at any time through the north and south gates. Today the public would need an armored tank, not a limo, to get close to the mansion.”¹¹⁴ The American public now wanted to see the Kennedys and follow their everyday activities—“they wanted to know what the Kennedy dogs were fed, how Baby John was burped, and how many hair rollers Mrs. Kennedy used at night.”¹¹⁵ In an opportunity to quench this enthusiasm and exhibit her restoration project, Jackie agreed to air *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy* with CBS correspondent Charles Collingwood on February 14, 1962.¹¹⁶ Jackie showed the 3 out of 4 Americans viewing the hour-long documentary a selection of public rooms on the first floor while expounding every detail from a memorized script. At the end, President Kennedy made an appearance “in which he praised his wife’s efforts, encouraged visitors to come see the results of her White

¹¹³ Perry, p. 103.

¹¹⁴ Letitia Baldrige, “Remembering the Glorious Kennedy Times,” from *Journal of the White House Historical Association*, Number 13, p. 19.

¹¹⁵ Baldrige, p. 22.

¹¹⁶ Perry, p. 124.

House project, and slipped in some subtle Cold War rhetoric about the United States' longevity."¹¹⁷ The quote Perry refers to reads: "When we were founded, there was a king in France, a czar in Russia, an emperor in Peking. Today all that's been wiped away—and yet this country continues. It makes us feel that we will continue in the future...Anything which dramatizes the great story of the United States—as I think the White House does—is worthy of the closest attention and respect by the Americans who live here and who are part of our citizenry. That's why I am glad Jackie is making the effort she is making. I know other First Ladies have done it; and I know that those who come after us will continue to try to make this the center of a sense of American historical life."¹¹⁸

The program was released by the United States Information Service to be televised in 106 countries, six of which were behind the Iron Curtain, and approximately ninety percent of Americans owned televisions.¹¹⁹ The event was "emblematic of the era and the first lady's indelible mark on it. Her youthful, knowledgeable, and elegant style reinforced that of her husband."¹²⁰ Perry describes how she "embodied the very image that she sought to project for the White House: a place of excellence, perfection, historicism, beauty, and radiance. The telegenic first lady beamed these symbols into American living rooms and throughout the free and communist worlds. She had woven the Kennedy mystique and aura into the fabric of one of the nation's most potent political icons."¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Perry p. 125.

¹¹⁸ President John F. Kennedy, *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*, YouTube, May 10, 2011.

¹¹⁹ Perry, p. 125.

¹²⁰ Perry, p. 126.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

A comprehensive viewing of *The Tour* reveals how Jackie strategically evoked symbols of the American past by juxtaposing images and artifacts from certain presidencies with new facets of European culture. The broadcast opens with a voice-over quote from Theodore Roosevelt that is emblematic of Jackie's motives to highlight the past: "The White House is the property of the nation, and so far it is compatible with living therein, it should be kept as it originally was. It is a good thing to preserve such buildings, which keep alive our sense of continuity with the nation's past. Our nation's past is reflected in a small part by the history of the walls of the White House."¹²² When Charles Collingwood begins the interview by asking, "What's your basic plan?" Jackie nonchalantly answers, "Well I really don't have one because I think this house will always grow and should. It just seemed to me such a shame when we came here, to find hardly anything of the past in the house. Hardly anything before 1902."¹²³ The tour begins in the Diplomatic Reception Room =, which is the room that people see first when they come to the White House. Like most of the rooms, it is decorated with mainly American furniture. She points out how she kept Eisenhower's furniture but added the custom-printed wallpaper made in France in 1834. The wallpaper's theme is "America," and as the camera pans across the different images, Jackie slowly states each location one by one, "Niagara Falls...New York Harbor...Indians...West Point"—all seemingly integral in the United States' Westward Expansion, and symbolic indicators to the New Frontier.

¹²² President John F. Kennedy, *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*, YouTube, May 10, 2011.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

Next she takes viewers to the East Room, which was originally intended as an audience room, “something like the throne room in European palaces,”¹²⁴ comparing it to the lavish Hall of Mirrors of Versailles. Jackie indicates that Teddy Roosevelt transformed it back into a simple and elegant room—and how she strived to preserve the same simplicity. The main focal point of the room is the symbolic placement of Franklin Roosevelt’s piano, restored wooden eagle legs. She is quick to tell how Pablo Casals played in the room, too. Collingwood asks, “Mrs. Kennedy, this administration has shown a particular affinity for artists, musicians, writers, poets. Is this because you and your husband just feel that way, or do you think that there’s a relationship between the government and the arts?” Pausing briefly to contemplate, she responds, “That’s so complicated. I don’t know. I just think that everything in the White House should be the best.”¹²⁵ As if reading off a script, Collingwood asks: “Isn’t that the famous Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington?”—“That’s right. That’s the oldest thing in the White House, the only thing that was here been since the very beginning. The government set a rather interesting precedent when that picture was painted. They commissioned the finest living artist of the day to paint the President, and then they gave it as a gift to the White House. I often wished that they followed that, because so many pictures of later presidents are by really inferior artists.”¹²⁶ Jackie’s vision for the “best” is especially noticeable in the State Dining Room, a room that is symbolic of the duties of the First Lady as an official hostess. When asked about the *silverware*, Jackie

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

explains “Well, it’s not silver. It’s all gold or vermeil. They used to use Monroe’s knives and forks, but so many of them have been lost so they’ve been copied.”¹²⁷ Abraham Lincoln’s portrait overlooks long dining table, contributing to “a perfectly beautiful room” with the architectural and historical unity. The rest of the tour is similar in that Jackie only exhibits the traditional reception rooms—the Red Room, Blue Room, and Green Room, where focal points include a table that belonged to Napoleon’s brother Joseph Bonaparte—symbolic of the transfer of French ideals such as Empire and culture to America. Because artifacts such as the American eagle, and references to Presidents George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt are motifs throughout *The Tour*, Jackie not only tried to preserve America’s past and ideals of patriotism, but also created a modern and sophisticated stage for her husband to perform his duties.

In addition, “JFK’s cameo appearance at the end of the program served as an opportunity for him to exalt American history and the enduring republic it had produced.”¹²⁸ This media event correlates to a quote by Gore Vidal: “if it is true that the medium is the message and television is the coolest of all media and to be cool is desirable, then the televised thirty-fifth President was positively glacial in his effectiveness.”¹²⁹ Jackie not only introduced the Camelot metaphor, a symbol that would “embody the magical quality of the Kennedy White House in the American mind,” she also cemented her husband’s historic legacy as the American hero

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Perry, p. 6.

¹²⁹ Vidal, p. 815.

through the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum.¹³⁰ Wills puts it “Camelot ended in November of 1963. But its effects were just beginning to be felt.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ Perry, p. 18.

¹³¹ Wills, p. 188.

Chapter 3

The John F. Kennedy Library and Museum: A Monument “born in national grief”¹³²

Historian Thomas Brown holds that it is the circumstances of Kennedy’s death rather than the events of his life that have elevated him to a primary place in the political consciousness of Americans who annually observe the day of his death, not his birth, as a benchmark in American history.¹³³ His glorification through death reflects the public’s need to form a collective, cultural memory to accommodate for his assassination. In his study *JFK: History of an Image*, Brown writes “in the most pervasive evidence of the president’s canonization, all sorts of public buildings and facilities—roads, bridges, airports, schools, libraries...were named or rechristened in his honor. All this, of course, was powerful testimony to the continuing hold Kennedy had over the people’s affections.”¹³⁴ This sense of primacy—“JFK’s presumptive importance in the popular imagination” has meant that Americans “have projected upon him their deepest beliefs, hopes, and even fears. The ambiguous and cruelly aborted nature of Kennedy’s presidency has also allowed Americans an unusual degree of freedom in interpreting his life and achievements.”¹³⁵

¹³² John Kifner, “Cambridge Loses Kennedy Museum,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 5/30/11.

¹³³ Brown, p. 2.

¹³⁴ Brown, p. 4.

¹³⁵ Brown, p. 5.

Such interpretation of his legacy is credited to the Kennedy family, especially Jackie, and is visible in her role in planning and constructing the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Author and kinsman Gore Vidal remarks, “not since Mary Todd Lincoln has a president’s widow been so fiercely engaged with legend if not history.”¹³⁶ He continues, “For it is the dead hero’s magic that makes legitimate the family’s pretensions.”¹³⁷ By using Alison Landsberg’s notion of a “prosthetic memory”—one that emerges at the interface between a specific person and historical narrative, at a public site such as a museum—as an analytical framework, one can see that the JFK Library and Museum subjectively creates a specific memory of Kennedy, in which he is presented and remembered as the modern hero-president whose reign was cut short.

Four years after the assassination, in a 1967 essay for *Esquire* magazine titled “The Holy Family” Vidal remarked on the Kennedy family’s role in preserving JFK’s image: “Wanting to regain power, it is now necessary to show that once upon a time there was indeed a Camelot beside the Potomac, a golden age forever lost unless a second Kennedy should become the president. And so, to insure the restoration of that lovely time, the past must be transformed, dull facts transcended, and the dead hero extolled in films, though memorials, and in the pages of books.”¹³⁸ This intention went somewhat awry after the Kennedy family commissioned William Manchester to provide a written account of the events surrounding the President’s assassination. In his *The Death of a President*, Manchester used Jackie’s taped

¹³⁶ Vidal, “The Holy Family,” p. 811.

¹³⁷ Vidal, holy family 813.

¹³⁸ Vidal, “The Holy Family,” p. 810.

recollections of events in late November 1963 in a manner that did not please the 'Holy Family,' which publically objected to the liberties Manchester took. Vidal recalls "the famous comedy of errors that ensued not only insured the book's success but also made current certain intimate details which the family preferred for the electorate not to know, such as the President's selection of Mrs. Kennedy's dress on that last day in order, as he put it, "to show up those cheap Texas broads.""¹³⁹ Ultimately, one powerful message from the infamous book and its backlash seems to ring true: legend-making was and remains necessary to the Kennedy future. More so than books and films, the John F. Kennedy Library, like the White House during his incumbency, acts as a platform to perpetuate and prolong the myth of Camelot. The museum—which alleviates the trauma of Kennedy's assassination—is an orchestrated fusion of theater, art and politics and as a whole creates a tangible, prosthetic memory for those who did not experience Kennedy's presidency. For those bore witness to the events of the 1960s, the library cathartically pieces together a time where Kennedy was an integral component of the national past and artificially sustains a therapeutic memory.

In 1955, Congress passed the Presidential Libraries Act (PLA) and established the guidelines for a system of privately erected and federally maintained libraries. The Act not only encouraged Presidents to donate their historical materials to the government after their incumbency, but also ensured the preservation of Presidential documents and their open availability to the American

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

people.¹⁴⁰ The PLA, with two subsequent amendments in 1978 and 1986, inaugurated a new institution that intended to augment the President's political and social legacy. Under these acts, presidential libraries are required by federal law to include a museum in addition to the extensive archives. The collections of thirteen libraries—starting from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush—make up the nationwide network of facilities that is maintained by the National Archives and Records Administration's Office of Presidential Libraries.¹⁴¹ The JFK Library and Museum holds all of the President's papers and correspondence—yet they are tucked away on the top floor, out of the museumgoer's sight. The focal point of the 'library' is a multiplex array of exhibits chronicling Kennedy's presidential career and family life. The original plan reveals that the complex would expect to attract one million visitors per year, and was designed to take in around 7,000 visitors a day. Researchers who apply to access the archives would enter through a separate door, "but the two functions of research and exhibition have been deliberately placed within the same structure to emphasize their interrelationship."¹⁴² Undoubtedly, however, one could visit the Library and leave unaware of its vast archival reservoir cached behind the scenes.

Unlike other presidential museums, most of which were constructed while the President was either incumbent or alive, Kennedy did not live to oversee the organization and construction of his shrine. The building became the product of

¹⁴⁰ National Archives, "Presidential Libraries Act of 1955," <http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/laws/1955-act.html> (6/1/11).

¹⁴¹ <http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/contact/libraries.html>

¹⁴² Paul Goldberger, "New Library Plan: A Response to the Critics," June 8, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 5/30/11.

much debate and controversy over site locations, but ultimately resulted in an opulent memorial commemorating his ‘accomplishments.’ A close examination at the library and its construction process demonstrates the Kennedy family’s proficiency in creating an effective prosthesis for the American nation.

Barbary Perry points out that in a November 1973 article entitled “The Bright Light of his Days,” Jackie advocated for the completion of the Library, which needed the last portion of funding, with a tribute that declared, “For those of us who shared his days it is too painful to look back. But for the young it can be helpful. That is why I care about his Library. It can’t replace him, but it can help people who believe ‘tis not too late to see a newer world.”¹⁴³ Kennedy’s assassination resonated with the American people to the extent that it did because of the blending of the presidency’s private sphere with the general public. Gore Vidal reflects that “his death in public was all the more stunning because he was not an abstraction called The President, but a man the people thought they knew.”¹⁴⁴ David Powers—former Irish Mafia member who eventually became the JFK Library curator—explained to journalist Donald Smith in a 1973 *New York Times* article titled “Camelotians, Where They Are Now,” that the library team wanted “to build a museum where you would almost expect to step through the door and meet the President.”¹⁴⁵

Jackie began planning and preparing for the library in the month following her husband’s assassination. In a May 1966 *New York Times* article titled “Items on Kennedy Pour into Office,” journalist Murray Schumach described the high volume

¹⁴³ Perry, p. 192.

¹⁴⁴ Vidal, p. 824.

¹⁴⁵ Donald Smith, “The Camelotians: Where They Are Now,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 5/20/11.

of condolence letters and presidential artifacts that Jackie and a team of eleven women aids sorted through in a Park Avenue office. One volunteer, Pamela Turnure, told Schumach, "Mrs. Kennedy is reluctant to throw things away. She feels it all came from the heart, and who is to know in the future how much any letter or poem or painting will show about how people felt."¹⁴⁶ Jackie felt that every letter from the plethora of simple sympathy notes was necessary to the historical narrative, and would contribute to her husband's legacy and the library's overall monumentality. Jackie stated, "His library will be your library, for when the building is completed it will be turned over to the government and become the property of the people of the United States forever."¹⁴⁷

Jackie chose young architect Ieoh Ming Pei, who had never worked on a monumental project to this degree, to transform the building into an energetic work of art. Because it was constructed with private donations but would be maintained by federal funds, the Presidential Library constituted as a national monument. Alison Landsberg traces the use of such national monuments back to ancient Rome, where they guaranteed stability as well as "depth of time and of space in a rapidly changing world that was experienced as transitory, uprooting and unstable."¹⁴⁸ Because she planned it in the recent wake of both personal and national trauma, Jackie attempted to create the illusion of a stable past. Visitors could re-experience the social and cultural harmony that existed before Kennedy was assassinated,

¹⁴⁶ Murray Schumach, "Items on Kennedy Pour into Office," *New York Times*, May 1, 1966, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Archives, 5/20/11.

¹⁴⁷ "The Role of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis," <http://www.jfklibrary.org/About-Us/About-the-JFK-Library/History/Role-of-Jacqueline-Kennedy-Onassis.aspx>, (accessed 3/21/11).

¹⁴⁸ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Columbia University Press, June 2004, p. 6.

rather than recall negative memories of social upheaval. Landsberg notes the irony of such structures: “the very monumentality of monuments might have undercut the monument’s memorial effect, standing in for memory rather than provoking it. As Robert Musil declared, ‘there is nothing so invisible as a monument.’”¹⁴⁹

The *New York Times*’ coverage from 1964 to 1975 on the debate over the library’s future location publicized the controversy over its monumentality, and illustrates Jackie’s crusade for grandiosity. Before landing its current spot, the main prospective location was adjacent to the Harvard University campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Pei’s initial design for the structure included a truncated glass pyramid symbolizing President Kennedy’s abruptly cut-off life, a design that re-emerged twenty five years later in his design for the expansion of the Louvre Museum in Paris. In June of 1974, Paul Goldberger wrote that “Pei buildings have always been reasonably sensitive to their surroundings, but they have been formal objects in themselves first. Here, community pressures required a nonmonumental building that would make a more total accommodation to what surrounds it.” He continues, explaining that “the result—if, indeed, the troubled project does go ahead—will undoubtedly have Pei finesse, but it will remain an uneasy compromise between an admirable desire to tie a building modestly to its surroundings, and a set of architectural forms that seem more to want to stand alone.”¹⁵⁰ Harvard, and the city of Cambridge, rejected Pei’s original plan because its modernist architectural qualities clashed with the neo-Georgian landscape of the surrounding environment,

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Paul Goldberger, “New Library Plan: A Response to the Critics,” June 8, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 5/30/11.

and would inevitably result in an intrusive influx of tourists. In an article from the following year, Stephen Smith—the president of the library corporation and JFK’s brother-in-law—was quoted: “We want the Kennedy Library to be a happy place. It would not be in keeping with the nature of this memorial for it to open in an atmosphere of discord and controversy.”¹⁵¹ The library corporation and I.M. Pei & Partners thus settled on a less urban location on Columbia Point in Dorchester, Massachusetts, overlooking Boston Harbor at the water’s edge. Jackie was pleased with the future monument’s aesthetic backdrop and near proximity to her husband’s childhood home in Brookline, MA.

Ground breaking took place on June 12, 1977, and the building was completed and dedicated in October 1979.¹⁵² The final product resulted in a 125-foot high monolithic structure consisting of two concrete towers, joined by Pei’s glass façade at the heart of the building. Before entering, one can already sense the building’s imposing yet simple monumentality—produced in part by the nine-story concrete exterior’s stark opposition to Boston’s harbor. The museum’s exhibition offers a guided tour that begins with an 18-minute documentary of Kennedy’s life from birth until his presidential nomination in 1960. The film orients its viewers to the 1960s—flashing images of products of the times such as cars, kitchen appliances, TV commercials, magazines and newspapers—and brings to life the era when JFK was in the political spotlight. The film ends at the 1960 presidential campaign, and the collection of permanent and special exhibits takes over in

¹⁵¹ John Kifner, “Cambridge Loses Kennedy Museum,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 5/30/11.

¹⁵² JFK Library History, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/About-Us/About-the-JFK-Library/History.aspx> (accessed 5/30/11).

recreating the New Frontier. The first half of the tour focuses on the presidential campaign, where viewers are directed into a room decorated with campaign memorabilia and TV monitors that broadcast the Kennedy-Nixon debates. The latter half of the tour is devoted to Kennedy's 1,000-day presidency and the accomplishments of his administration are displayed in a scaled down reproduction of the White House's East Room, the largest room in the house used for entertaining. The visitor walks through separate exhibit rooms devoted to the Peace Corps, the Space Program, Attorney General Robert Kennedy's office, the Oval Office, the First Lady's quarters, and the Kennedy family tree.

Nearing the end of the museum tour, visitors descend into a dark hallway with four, small televisions embedded in a plain black wall. The TVs replay the Zapruder film to the moment before the assassination, and also show clips from the President's funeral service. The hallway is completely silent, and renders the visitor absorbed and reflective, evoking the same nostalgic sentiment as the Eternal Flame at Arlington National Cemetery—which Jackie also conceived.

Documentation on Kennedy's assassination is limited mainly because the National Archives in Washington, D.C. is the repository for the Warren Commission and other official materials related to the assassination. But other motives framed the exhibit as well. William Johnson, a research archivist in 1979 stated, "Our oral histories go into the assassination because it was one of the things that those we interviewed wanted to talk about. But we could never hope to have a definitive collection in that area. And so, it would be an indulgence in the morbid to do it."¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Kaiser, October 22, 1979.

This relevance in part was most likely attributed to Jackie's desire to have her husband remembered in life rather than his untimely and tragic death. Yet the use of the Zapruder footage in the museum also acts as prosthetic memory that erases history as it creates an emotional balance. The Zapruder film, according to Robert Burgoyne, "has become synonymous with the cultural memory of the event. Our individual and collective memories have been reconfigured by the Zapruder film; we imagine that it was part of our experience—we 'remember' seeing the film when we 'remember' our experience of the assassination."¹⁵⁴ Regardless if the viewer was alive during the time of JFK's assassination, the Zapruder film is an example of a technology of memory that one can use in their "management of national identification."¹⁵⁵ The museum's use of this technological prosthesis plays a key role "in articulating and shaping the national viewpoint" of JFK's assassination.¹⁵⁶ In addition, the use and arrangement of the film at the end of the tour demonstrates that "no longer is storytelling the culture's meaning-making response; an activity closer to therapeutic practice has taken over, with acts of re-telling, remembering, and repeating all pointing in the direction of obsession, fantasy, trauma."¹⁵⁷ Yet the video replay ends before the most controversial part of the film—frame 312 where Kennedy receives the fatal shot. Thus, in this particular prosthetic memory, Kennedy does not actually die.

¹⁵⁴ Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 106.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

After a solemn moment of reflection, the visitor then leaves the dim, somber hallway and is ushered into the contrasted ambience of the bright “contemplation pavilion,” a 115-foot-high glass hall where Pei explained, “we hope they will linger, think about what they have just seen, and look at the sea and the city.”¹⁵⁸ The space is starkly juxtaposed to the dark, tunnel-like Zapruder room in order to provide catharsis for the visitor, who has just relived the New Frontier in the manner that Kennedy and his family meant them to experience. In a later interview, Pei—presumably influenced by Jackie—stated, “In the silence of that high, light-drenched space, the visitors will be alone with their thoughts. And in the reflective mood that the architecture seeks to engender, they may find themselves thinking of John F. Kennedy in a different way. In the skyline of his city, in the distant horizons toward which he led us, in the canopy of space into which he launched us, visitors may experience revived hope and promise for the future.”¹⁵⁹ Rather than being left to wallow in the sadness and astonishment of Kennedy’s assassination, the pavilion, integral skyline, and open harbor instead create a space that allows visitors to nostalgically reflect and speculate history if Kennedy had lived. To contribute to the mythic space, JFK’s sailboat the *Victura*—the one featured on the 1953 *Life* cover—complete with sail flags that spell out JFK and JBK, sits in open view on the shore during the spring, summer and fall, with its bow facing the horizon.¹⁶⁰ After the library’s inauguration, JFK’s sister Patricia stated: “What feeling do we want to give

¹⁵⁸ Paul Goldberger, “New Kennedy Plan Released,” *New York Times*, August 13, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 5/31/11.

¹⁵⁹ “The Role of I.M. Pei,” <http://www.jfklibrary.org/About-Us/About-the-JFK-Library/History/IM-Pei-Architect.aspx> (accessed 6/1/11).

¹⁶⁰ *Victura*, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/0VB9As8Dd0Cgfh8OnhA0Org.aspx> (accessed 5/30/11).

people who walk through the Library? People should leave the Library feeling that this was someone they would have liked to know, feeling sorry that they missed those years, and feeling that somewhere, somehow, the country will fulfill the promise that he strove for, and that they will try to help the country achieve that promise."¹⁶¹

Before exiting the building, one may or may not notice the end of an illuminated timeline that pairs important dates in the Kennedy family to concurrent events in world history. For example, in 1917 the timeline reads "John F. Kennedy born in Brookline" juxtaposed with "Russian Revolution." In November 1963—"President and Mrs. Kennedy arrive in Texas for political tour" matches up with "Diem government in South Vietnam is overthrown." This is the only aspect of the Presidential Library that Garry Wills addresses in his Kennedy discourse, calling it "embarrassing" and quips that it is "as if Clio viewed history stereoscopically with a Kennedy always in one slide."¹⁶² The timeline runs along the entire exhibit and culminates under a massive, custom-made American flag that hangs in Pei's glass pavilion. Independently, this timeline sutures Kennedy as a prosthetic memory into a larger history. Symbolically, the individual events in JFK's life are meant to be seen in a broader picture, as if he alone affected world events, a trailblazer of global history. Wills apprises that "no man's life should be drawn across the rack of Everything Important supplied by this schedule."¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Patricia Kennedy Lawford, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/About-Us/About-the-JFK-Library/History.aspx> (accessed 6/1/11).

¹⁶² Wills, p. 287.

¹⁶³ Wills, p. 287.

This display is not the only example of the Presidential Library's symbolically constructed prosthesis. In fact, the framework supporting the created memory is what is strategically left out of the mythic space of the exhibits. Elements of the presidency that are considered controversial, taboo, or politically disreputable are intentionally invisible. By highlighting and glorifying the positive hallmarks of Kennedy's presidency, the visitor is left with an idealized perception of the President and his accomplishments. For the visitor who witnessed the events of the era, the hand-picked artifacts and images emblematic of the 1960s reactivate latent memories of the climate JFK strived to create through the New Frontier. Equivalently, younger visitors enter the building with a vision that David Lubin explains is both "enlarged and constrained" by what literary theorists call a horizon of expectations: "the knowledge, presuppositions, and interpretive competency individual viewers bring to an image that enable them to make emotional and intellectual sense of it."¹⁶⁴ Any preconception that these 'infantile'—to borrow a term from Lauren Berlant—viewers have has been taught to them by educational institutions that indoctrinate the socially acceptable national narrative.

Collectively, the museum's exhibits create a theatrical drama and thus transform its visitors into an impressionable audience. By selecting and arranging certain artifacts to display, the Kennedy family effectively constructed a visual culture that influences viewers to interpret history in an idealized manner. The method in which these artifacts are displayed is often through interactive exhibits—such as the replication of the podium on which Kennedy delivered his inaugural

¹⁶⁴ Lubin, p. xxi.

speech—that create a close and personal relationship between the museum and its visitors. Cultural historian Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explains that museum exhibitions are produced to communicate meaningful visual and textual statements, but it is not guaranteed that the viewer will perceive the intended meaning and perspective; “visitors will construct their own coherence none the less, which may or may not comply with that of the curator.”¹⁶⁵ Hooper-Greenhill discloses that oftentimes museums have a “hidden curriculum” that embodies specific style, attitudes and values that produce a cohesive narrative.¹⁶⁶ Because visitors are exposed to a glorified and ideal Presidency, they are rendered infantile citizens who believe that the nation under Kennedy was practically utopian.

Though not explicitly stated, the Kennedys weave an intricate myth that pays no heed to the ‘questionable’ events during the incumbency, such as failed social legislation and Kennedy’s near-disastrous interactions with Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev. Despite fine rhetoric and wise commentary, the Kennedy administration never substantially fulfilled hopes of political change. The failed Bay of Pigs Invasion set the tone in foreign affairs three months into the presidency, and his subsequent actions led to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Rather than explain and enlighten viewers on this history in American foreign policy, the exhibition instead avoids the entire affair and creates a portrayal of Kennedy as the youthful yet commanding, energetic hero-president. One of these creations is Jack the War Hero—where artifacts such as his Navy jacket, a torn flag, and the coconut shell with JFK’s inscribed SOS metonymically represent his valor. The museum’s focus on this

¹⁶⁵ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, Routledge, 2000, p. 4.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

artifact correlates with Vidal's memoirs, which explain how the story of PT109—where Kennedy was serving as Lieutenant in World War II and allegedly rescued his crew after being attacked by a Japanese boat—was “deliberately told and retold as an example of heroism unequaled in war's history. Through constant repetition the simple facts of the story merged into a blurred impression that somehow at some point a unique act of heroism had been committed by Jack Kennedy.”¹⁶⁷

One can see the similar intentions in a past exhibit titled “Shaping Up America: JFK, Sports and the Call to Physical Fitness” that was on display from September 27, 2007 to August 17, 2008, which was headlined with a quote by the President: “We do not want our children to become a generation of spectators. Rather we want each of them to be a participant in the vigorous life.”¹⁶⁸ The exhibit highlighted a number of artifacts such as the football presented to President Kennedy by the 1962 Navy football team; the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Award given in recognition of the President's dedication to competitive athletics, specifically intercollegiate football; a bronze sculpture of a discus throw given to the President by the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation; and also his set of golf clubs used at the Palm Beach and Hyannis Port Golf Clubs.¹⁶⁹ First accounts from presidential photographer Cecil Stoughton, not included in the exhibit, disclose that JFK rarely golfed due to his chronic back pains—and rather posed in a graceful backswing. Another ironic facet of the exhibition is the enlarged print of Stoughton's photograph of Pablo Casals

¹⁶⁷ Vidal, p. 816.

¹⁶⁸ “Shaping Up America: JFK, Sports and The Call to Physical Fitness,” <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Exhibits/Past-Exhibits/Shaping-up-America.aspx> (accessed 6/1/11).

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

performing at the November 13, 1961 White House Dinner for Puerto Rican Governor and Mrs. Munoz-Marin. The placement of the image acts to represent the nation's burgeoning interest of culture while the Kennedy's occupied the White House—"The appearance of Pablo Casals in the White House became for them a signal that America had adopted art as a national purpose."¹⁷⁰ It was widely known that the President much preferred Broadway show tunes over the Spanish cello. Thomas Brown writes, "Kennedy's cultivation of the high arts, as in the famous Pablo Casals concert at the White House, arose from the president's vague sense that it was a good thing to do rather than from a genuine appreciation of artistic achievement."¹⁷¹

These few examples of glorified artifacts and notions about the President piece together the visual experience that the Kennedy family intended—one in which viewers rekindle the sense of patriotism that President Kennedy emphatically advocated. Around the middle of the Kennedy presidency in 1962, Vidal commented that "there are fragile signs (the warm response to the Peace Corps) and favorable omens (popular approbation reflected in polls) that a torpid society has at last been stirred by its youthful leader. If true, it is in the nick of time. Civilizations are seldom granted a second chance."¹⁷² In a sense, this remark can symbolize the pedagogical agenda of the Presidential Library, which aims to preserve the President's legacy of youth and vitality. In the same commentary, Vidal predicts that "what he will accomplish depends largely upon his ability to rally the bored and

¹⁷⁰ Wills, p. 146.

¹⁷¹ Brown, p. 15.

¹⁷² Vidal, p. 803.

cynical Western world, to fire the imagination of a generation taught never to think of “we” but only of “I.””¹⁷³

In the “Architecture View” section of the *New York Times*, Ada Huxtable offered her critique of the library following a 1979 visit, a week after the library’s official dedication. “The Presidential Library may be the biggest draw since Disneyland,” she writes. “Its combination of history, sentiment, politics and patriotism, its glimpses of power and personalities, have proved to be an irresistible lure for the American public and the ideal destination for the family vacation tour.”¹⁷⁴ She goes on to describe the obviously over-emphasized museum portion of the library: “What has happened, of course, is that the union of library and museum has gone unexpectedly askew; it has turned into a Catch-22 shotgun marriage. The museum function has expanded to the point where it has taken over more and more overtly from the archives.” She blamed the federal government for this phenomenon, resulting in the presidential library as an odd architectural couple “with the library serving as an excuse for the museum.”¹⁷⁵ Huxtable’s biggest problem was the neglected archival portion of the Presidential Library, and comments that “scholars and museum-goers, like oil and water, will not mix...this is not the definition of library to be found in any lexicon.”¹⁷⁶

When compared to the twelve other presidential libraries, Kennedy’s facility is at the forefront of archive preservation through digitalization, especially after its

¹⁷³ Vidal, p. 803.

¹⁷⁴ Ada Louise Huxtable, “The Museum Upstages the Library,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1979, ProQuest, (5/31/11).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

January 2011 release of *JFK50.org*, which strives to “celebrate the past to awaken the future” with interactive access to presidential archives. Current archivists at the library share the same intentions as the original JFK archivists thirty years ago—to not only memorialize the Kennedy years, but to preserve his legacy with generations of people who did not experience the past for themselves. In an October 1979 *New York Times* article “Kennedy Archivists Hope for Wide Appeal,” Robert Kaiser wrote that the new library was “just a shell” for Kennedy scholars.¹⁷⁷ Kaiser observed how the first director of the library, and former aid to the President in 1961, Dan Fenn, Jr. attempted to “destroy an old idea that archives are best left to Ph.D.’s.”¹⁷⁸ He quotes Fenn who explained the library’s main goals: “We’re running a public institution here, and we want to spread the word that all its resources are public. That means we will be serving people across a wide spectrum. The scholars will come. But we’ll be reaching out to youngsters, trying to get them to come and learn how to use primary source material.”¹⁷⁹ This project has progressed with the advances of technology, and the JFK Library and Museum continues to celebrate Kennedy’s short-live presidency and virtually extend the mythic space of the New Frontier.

In October 1979, journalist Ada Huxtable observed generally of the Presidential Libraries that “since the politician or statesman does not exist who could resist the temptation to write his own way, in a settling of commensurate dignity or grandeur, these undertakings will instruct, persuade, inform and

¹⁷⁷ Robert Blair Kaiser, “Kennedy Archivists Hope for Wide Appeal,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 5/30/11.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

propagandize, suavely or crudely, depending on the talents of the employed. Increasingly, the Presidential Library is being designed and constructed as an immensely impressive and skillful exercise in selective immortality.”¹⁸⁰ In addition to its general architectural facets, the 18,000 square feet of exhibition space and integrated landscape of the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum collectively contribute to the President’s immortality and monumentality. Both the individual artifacts and the museum as a whole form an overall visual culture that acts as a prosthetic memory for visitors. Thomas Brown wrote that “if there is any enduring monument on the ever-changing landscape of contemporary American politics, it is the people’s affection and esteem for John F. Kennedy. It has weathered the declining fortunes of the party and policies with which JFK was associated in his lifetime, the bitter controversies provoked by some of the politically active members of his family, and even potentially damaging revelations about Kennedy himself.”¹⁸¹ By manipulating the reality of the factual discourse of Kennedy’s presidency and glorifying the ideal, the building effectively creates a platform for visitors to experience the myth of Camelot—a metaphor that ultimately promises idealism and fantasy rather than reality and fulfillment. In the words of Gore Vidal “from the beginning of the Republic, Americans have enjoyed accusing the first magistrate of kingly ambition.”¹⁸²

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¹⁸⁰ Huxtable, *The Museum Upstages the Library*, *New York Times*, October 28, 1979.

¹⁸¹ Brown, p. 1.

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