

BOOKS

[Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: How the Assassination of John F. Kennedy Shattered American Liberalism, James Piereson, Encounter Books, 176 pages]

What Jackie Did Next

By John O'Sullivan

ONE OF THE FOUNDING MYTHS of the American conservative movement is the Goldwater debacle. It tells of how a handful of embattled partisans recognized Senator Goldwater as the natural leader of their fledgling movement; how they nominated him as presidential candidate of the GOP entirely against the will of the party establishment (and largely against the senator's wishes); how Goldwater, after a flawless performance in the primaries, squandered his chances with a campaign of gaffes and blunders; and how, almost miraculously, conservatism rose from the near-death of the anti-Goldwater landslide to defeat liberalism and gain power 16 years later in its more glamorous Reaganite form.

In short, the 1964 election was a pyrrhic defeat for conservatism—a necessary testing that introduced conservatives to each other and erected the first scaffolding of their future organizations.

As myths go, there is a good deal of truth in this account. Both friendly and hostile critics, however, have always pointed to the influence of external events in both the Goldwater debacle and the later recovery of the Right. Most significantly, President Kennedy was assassinated. The original thinking behind the Goldwater candidacy was that he would play the conservative insurgent from the West against a complacent governing liberalism symbolized

by an eastern establishment near-Brahmin from Massachusetts. Goldwater hoped that the campaign would be a series of civilized debates between their two philosophies. The two men liked each other. Kennedy might well have reckoned he could take the moderate risk of elevating his rival in order to ventilate his more eccentric views. If Lee Harvey Oswald had not intervened, the 1964 election might well have been just such a knightly tournament.

Kennedy's assassination and the succession of Lyndon Johnson to the presidency changed all that. Johnson exploited the assassination not only to push through a series of liberal reforms but also to stigmatize—unfairly, brutally, and effectively—Goldwater and the Right as carriers of the “extremism” that had killed Kennedy. Goldwater was destroyed politically by the same bullet that killed Kennedy physically.

By the usual rules of politics, Republican conservatives—however brilliantly they preached and organized—should have been doomed to opposition for a generation or two. Instead, they made impressive gains in the 1966 midterm elections, won the presidency in 1968 and, delayed only briefly by Watergate, placed Reagan in the White House a decade later. Why had the seemingly inevitable gone into reverse?

What happened, according to James Piereson in his closely reasoned, original, and stimulating new book, *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: How the Assassination of John F. Kennedy Shattered American Liberalism*, is that American liberals committed political suicide. They picked up Oswald's gun and turned it upon themselves. And in the mid-1960s, they made an unmissable target.

In the age of Reid and Pelosi, it's hard to remember that the liberalism of those days was the reigning public philosophy of American life. It dominated the universities, the media, the great foundations, business corporations, labor unions, and (until Goldwater) both political parties. This governing philosophy was very different from today's queru-

lous utopianism. Though it had already drunk deep of statism, it was also meliorist, pragmatic, patriotic, and problem-solving. It embodied the grand compromises of American politics. It believed in containing the Soviet Union but not in rolling it back. It advocated a moderate welfare state resting on a relatively free economy (relative, that is, to Western Europe). It supported the advance of civil rights through federal intervention, but was nervously ambivalent about the “freedom riders.” And because it dominated both parties—it was Eisenhower who had sent troops into Little Rock to enforce desegregation—liberalism seemed to be the immovable center of American politics.

Against this bland Leviathan, two small forces contended in the early days of the Kennedy presidency: the new conservatives clustering around William F. Buckley and *National Review*, founded in 1955, and the new radicalism of Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, and the “Beat” writers. Buckley's conservatives criticized liberalism in practical terms: its suffocating refusal to think clearly about moral and political choices undermined religion, free enterprise, patriotism, and any serious anti-communist foreign policy. The new radicals attacked it more daringly as a form of cultural conservatism. They saw liberalism as a surrender to the bourgeois blandness of the 1950s whereas what was needed was a revolution in consciousness, the family, sex, and education that would transform capitalism far more fundamentally than another welfare program.

In more immediate political terms, the great radical cause was the civil rights “revolution” of the freedom riders, just as the great conservative cause was the liberation of the nations held captive by Soviet communism.

In the early '60s, however, these movements scarcely mattered. Both new conservatives and new radicals were such fringe phenomena that complacent liberals began talking of the necessity of encouraging conservatism as a necessary (though naturally subordinate)

counterpoint to liberal ideals. At the same time, whenever strong popular resistance to liberalism actually emerged, whether McCarthyism or the Ku Klux Klan, they denounced it as an irrational or even psychotic phenomenon. In effect, liberals assumed they could determine both government policies and the proper limits of opposition.

Only a political earthquake, it seemed, could overturn such a stable dominance. That earthquake duly appeared in the form of Lee Harvey Oswald's assassination of President Kennedy. Piereson's first original (and brilliant) insight is his recognition that what transformed American politics was not the assassination itself but how it was interpreted.

Kennedy was slain by a devout communist, one-time defector to the Soviet Union, and admirer of Fidel Castro who had kept in touch with Soviet diplomats after returning from the USSR and was trying to re-defect to Cuba. A common-sense interpretation of the crime would have portrayed Kennedy as an anti-communist martyr of the conservative cause in the Cold War. Oswald himself would almost certainly have endorsed that interpretation. Such a view would have made the Cold War—rather than civil rights—the central issue in U.S. politics; it would have given credibility to Goldwater's hard-line anti-communism; and it might even have produced a different election result in 1964. But such an account would also have been contrary to the emerging "spirit of the age," which dictated to commentators a very different analysis.

Before anyone knew the identity of Kennedy's assassin, his death was at once and widely attributed in media speculations to "extremists" and "bigots" on the Right. This was not wholly without basis. By late 1963, the civil-rights revolution in the South had boiled over and elicited violent racist resistance. That year, Medgar Evers was murdered in Mississippi, and a church bombing killed four girls in Birmingham. Then in October, Adlai Stevenson was mobbed by anti-UN demonstrators in Dallas and

hit on the head with a placard. There was no link between the racial murders and the anti-UN demonstration, but in the collective mind of the liberal establishment, these events merged into a great stew of irrational "extremism." So it was understandable that they leapt to the conclusion that Kennedy had been killed by a radical-Right extremist.

But that conviction hardly changed once it became known that the assassin was a communist. To be sure, the newspapers dug into Oswald's career as a defector very thoroughly. But the editorials and opinion columns, their television equivalents, and the comments of liberal and cultural leaders repeatedly and passionately blamed the assassination on something called "extremism," which was disconnected from the actual assassin but linked to America in general and to the radical Right in particular. On the day after, James Reston—then the leading establishment columnist in America—stated this broader judgment very plainly: "The indictment extended beyond the assassin, for something in the nation itself, some strain of madness and violence, had destroyed the highest symbol of law and order ... from the beginning to the end of his administration, [Kennedy] was trying to damp down the violence of the extremists from the right." These themes were taken up by the *New York Times* and other newspapers in editorials and in public statements by figures as different as Sen. Mike Mansfield and Martin Luther King. It soon became the conventional wisdom that all Americans bore a share of the blame for the bigotry, intolerance, and hate that had struck down the president. John F. Kennedy in death became a martyr for the cause of civil rights—a cause to which in life he had shown a prudent political coolness.

This conclusion could never be stated clearly because it was directly contradicted by the facts of the assassination. If Kennedy was a martyr for civil rights, then Oswald must have been a racial bigot. But as Piereson points out, whatever else Oswald was, he was undoubtedly a strong supporter of

racial equality. Nor could Oswald be reasonably seen as acting out and thus symbolically revealing America's hidden bigotries. Being a communist and one-time Soviet defector, he was much too unrepresentative an American to serve in that way. Finally, no one in authority wanted to examine, let alone draw, the conclusion—for which there was ample evidence as Piereson shows—that Kennedy was a Cold War martyr, killed by a serious Marxist acting out of loyalty to the USSR and perhaps in response to a public appeal by Castro. Almost any conclusion was preferable to that. So an interpretation contrary to all the known facts was fervently embraced by the liberal establishment.

Piereson's second great contribution is to establish that Mrs. Kennedy herself, in the very depths of her grief, was significantly responsible for inventing and spreading this misinterpretation and lifting it to the level of myth. When she returned by air to Washington on the day

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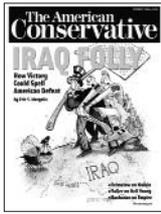
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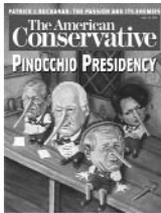


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of the assassination, she was asked to change out of her blood-spattered clothes before leaving the plane.

"No," she replied, "I want them to see what they have done." As Piereson asks: "Who, exactly, were 'they'? And what did 'they' do?"

Those questions were answered when Mrs. Kennedy learned that the lone Oswald had killed her husband. She then complained, "He didn't even have the satisfaction of being killed for civil rights. It had to be some silly little communist. It even robs his death of any meaning."

Even before the misinterpretation had become current, she had intuitively grasped both its main features and the unfortunate fact that reality did not quite measure up to them. In her arrangements for the funeral and her selection of those speaking at the various memorial services, she ensured that the misinterpretation would be the dominant theme. Finally, by dictating to Theodore White the story that Kennedy had often ended his day listening to songs from his favorite musical, "Camelot," and by insisting that it must remain in White's article over the skepticism of his editors at *Life* magazine, she lifted the misinterpretation to the level of myth: Camelot, an idealistic hero-king, achievement, betrayal, unworthy successors, a ruined people, nothing left save the memory of "one brief shining moment."

Was Jackie Kennedy really capable of such a brilliant coup—one that survives to this day? Was she not a mere woman of fashion, out of her depth in high politics, let alone in historical myth-making? To be sure, Piereson has to construct his case on the basis of relatively modest and scattered evidence. But the evidence he cites is powerful. And there are matters external to Piereson's book that support his thesis.

Twenty-two years ago, I was lucky enough to be present at a small dinner with Mrs. Kennedy, then Mrs. Onassis. At one point when we were discussing the dubious idea of resignation as a tactic of political advancement, I started to quote a British political maxim: "I forgot ..."

"Goschen," she said, completing my thought, "I forgot Goschen."

Perhaps I looked surprised at her knowing this obscure remark by Lord Randolph Churchill (who was explaining ruefully that his resignation as chancellor of the exchequer had not brought down the Salisbury government because the prime minister had simply appointed a little-known economist in his place). At any rate, she smiled in an amused way and said, "It was one of Jack's favorite remarks." For the remainder of a very pleasant dinner, she discussed high statecraft with an easy confidence suggesting either that she had received very good tutoring in it or needed none.

Women of fashion are very rarely air-heads; successful women of fashion never. Long ago fashion ceased to be confined to clothes, hairstyles, and shoes and exerted its sway over art, music, literature, and politics.

Kennedy's arrival in the White House was a moment in which style itself became an important element in a politician's armory. No one had reflected on Eisenhower's provincialism; everyone remarked on the sophistication of Jack and Jackie.

But this superficial exaltation of style concealed a deeper influence that fashion was exerting on underlying political attitudes. Civil rights had been the province of deeply unfashionable people like Hubert Humphrey in the '50s; at some point in the '60s, owing in part to the heroism of the freedom riders, it became a glamorous cause. Likewise, anti-communism was losing its cachet over this period as McCarthyism drove smart liberals away, abandoning the cause to ordinary vulgar Americans.

Extended to the present, these trends have produced a cultural atmosphere in which the 20th-century political figures most admired by readers of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* would probably be Che Guevara and Martin Luther King. Observers attentive to purely political signs—votes, laws, opinion polls—were inevitably late to notice

this cultural shift. But a woman of fashion, who was also politically knowledgeable, was able to sense it from the surrounding atmosphere. Hence Jackie's initial regret that her husband had been killed by a "silly" admirer of Che Guevara rather than by a sinister enemy of Martin Luther King. Hence, too, her extraordinary ability to rescue him from this gauche plight by ensuring his transfiguration, if not his death, would be festooned with the right cultural symbols.

THE RADICALIZATION OF AMERICAN LIBERALISM DROVE TRADITIONAL LIBERALS INTO NEOCONSERVATISM.

What liberals then achieved, with the brilliant assistance of Mrs. Kennedy, secured the passage of liberal legislation, the rout of Goldwater, and the temporary ostracism of "the radical Right." But the damage did not stop at that convenient point. A profoundly disorienting falsehood had been shoehorned into the national mind: that Kennedy had been killed by "something in the nation itself." One logical consequence of that belief was the desperate search to prove that Oswald, far from being a lone communist assassin, was in fact the cat's paw of powerful official and/or right-wing forces. Another was the coinage "Amerika," which implied a fascist reality under the constitutional disguise of the United States. A third was the conclusion that if Kennedy had been killed by Amerika, then the most powerful force in American political life, namely liberalism, must be complicit in this vast national crime—and in other national crimes, too.

Some people had already advanced a more restrained version of this argument before the assassination—namely, the cultural radicals of the Left. After Dallas, they returned to the fray with no holds barred.

As the Vietnam draft began to bite on college campuses, they found an army of young recruits to the antiwar movement and their wider cause of a radical

rebellion against liberal America and its proudest institutions, notably the universities and the Democratic Party, in pursuit of a culture of gratification without restraints (aka sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll.) To their surprise, however, as the radicals rushed forward with their battering rams, the liberals opened the gates and surrendered. How could they resist? If Amerika had killed Kennedy, then liberalism was merely a smiley face painted on a System of racist and sexist oppression. Liberals could best atone for their participation in

such a charade by supporting the revolution in all its exotic incoherence. For a decade or so after November 1963, liberalism and its institutions were convulsed by disputes, entering the maelstrom as pragmatic, patriotic, and problem-solving bodies and emerging from it as perfectionist, utopian, anti-American ones, secretly anxious to punish the American majority for its sins rather than solve its problems.

Ideas have consequences—and those consequences have consequences. The radicalization of American liberalism drove traditional liberals into neoconservatism. It forced blue-collar workers with patriotic and/or socially conservative views (i.e., the vast majority) into the arms of the GOP. It created an opportunity for the post-Goldwater "new conservatives" of Buckley and Reagan to move into the vast ideological territory abandoned by liberalism with its own philosophy of libertarian conservatism. And these various trends merged to shape a new political spectrum in which over the next two decades, conservatism would replace liberalism as the reigning public philosophy. Q.E.D.

Surely, however, Piereson's thesis, though persuasive, is open to one objection: namely, that the revolution of the Sixties happened in almost all advanced countries. Would it not have happened

in America exactly as it did even if Oswald had remained in Russia and Kennedy had lived?

Let us agree that some form of radical social convulsion would have taken place in America without Kennedy as a cause. But most social observers in early 1963, if told that a revolutionary mood would sweep the world in the coming decade and asked to predict its course in different countries, would have responded that the U.S. would likely experience the least serious upheavals, not the most. Left-wing movements in Europe had always had strong and openly revolutionary wings. Yet in the 1960s and '70s, these movements were tough in resisting their own radicals. It took a long march through the institutions (or, more prosaically, generational change) for the '60s radicals to come to power in France and Germany. America's lack of a socialist tradition, and its advantage in having a dominant liberal one, should together have ensured a smaller revolutionary threat and a stronger resistance. In the more dangerous conditions of the Depression, when FDR's liberalism was still establishing itself, it had contained the threat of revolutionary communism quite easily (in more senses than one).

No observer in 1963 would have forecast that the dominant American liberalism of that time would collapse and surrender to its own radicals almost without a fight. That it did so in reality testifies to an extraordinary loss of morale among liberals. That in turn is hard to explain except as a result of how they interpreted the Kennedy assassination as it was encapsulated above all in his wife's invention of the Camelot myth.

Successful women of fashion are never airheads, but as Che could have told Jackie, they can still be outwitted by the cunning of history. ■

John O'Sullivan is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and author of The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World.

[*Twilight at Monticello: The Final Years of Thomas Jefferson*, Alan Pell Crawford, Random House, 312 pages]

Mr. Jefferson Comes Home

By Bill Kaufman

THE EDIFYING SIGHT of Ron Paul calmly explaining the contemporary application of American Revolutionary principles to the smirking disbelief of the plastic men and 9/11 junkies of the Republican field calls to mind the reaction of the reprobates who unexpectedly encounter Kurt Russell in John Carpenter's film "Escape from New York": "Snake Plissken—I thought you were dead!"

Paul has re-introduced the Founders into American political discussion, whence they had been banished long ago by New Dealers who dismissed the "horse and buggy Constitution" and, more recently, by the rootless airport-lounge-souled Republicans who regard the Bill of Rights as outmoded in our global wireless blah blah blah world.

The revolutionary fuse is lit. Quick, to the wick!

How wonderfully coincident that just as Paul is speaking the hauntingly resonant language of the early Republic, Alan Pell Crawford, Hoosier boy cum historian of his adopted Old Virginia, has published *Twilight at Monticello: The Final Years of Thomas Jefferson*, a superb and revealing study of Thomas Jefferson in retirement (if not ever repose) that makes Jefferson—the older, wiser, even more radical Jefferson—newly and provocatively relevant.

Crawford did his time on the Hill, working for Sen. James Buckley ("a genuine conservative") and none other than Congressman Ron Paul (for whom he will vote). In 1980, he anatomized the swindle known as the "New Right" in *Thunder on the Right*, which made him, for a time, something of a darling of the

liberal Left. He would later marry, raise a family, put down roots in Richmond—all those things the New Right claimed to support in those hysterical fundraising letters its bilkers-in-chief composed between cruises at the Brass Rail.

Crawford fell in love with Virginia, the Ancient Dominion, and in 2000 published *Unwise Passions*, an evocative study of the scandal-ridden Randolphs of Virginia.

Twilight at Monticello is Crawford's best book and a humanizing corrective to the recent tide of Jefferson damning. This is Jefferson in his late autumn, brooding on the parlous state of republicanism, delighting in the presence of his family, tormented by boils on his backside. His death is rendered with especial poignancy. (In his final months, Jefferson used opium to allay a painful urinary ailment. Imagine the DEA breaking down the doors to Monticello! The medical marijuanans could do no better than to enlist Jefferson.)

Crawford excels at capturing the rhythms of life at Monticello, punctuated as they were by discord and disease, by debts no honest man could pay,

prove Jefferson didn't do it," Crawford tells me of the conjugations with Sally Hemings, "just to be ornery—or at least to challenge what has become the conventional wisdom on the matter. I checked his health during the time of the pregnancies, for example, and he was fine. He suffered all sorts of ailments, but none when Sally got pregnant. The family alibis were unpersuasive, and then I realized that even if you believed them when they said it was Peter Carr, or Samuel Carr, or one of the Irish workmen, or Randolph Jefferson, you still had to conclude that all these men were having sexual relations with the slave women and that Jefferson's daughter and grandchildren were aware of it. That's how you had all those 'yellow' servants up there. The Hemingses weren't the only ones."

Jefferson never did reconcile his philosophical opposition to the "hideous evil" of slavery with the thing itself, despite entreaties by such Virginians as Edward Coles to act on his emancipatory convictions. Jefferson "simply could not imagine a realistic way to end" slavery and recommended instead

JEFFERSON NEVER DID RECONCILE HIS PHILOSOPHICAL OPPOSITION TO THE "HIDEOUS EVIL" OF SLAVERY WITH THE THING ITSELF, DESPITE ENTREATIES BY SUCH VIRGINIANS AS EDWARD COLES TO ACT ON HIS EMANCIPATORY CONVICTIONS.

by sottish in-laws and roistering Randolph relatives. He is affectionately amused by Jefferson's penchant for theoretical agrarianism, noting that in the year of the ex-president's elaborately planned "experimental" garden, Jefferson and his "family would rely to a remarkable extent on vegetables purchased from their own slaves, who grew them in far more modest garden plots alongside their cabins."

Crawford is no white-washer. For instance, he concedes that the preponderance of evidence suggests that Jefferson fathered children by Sally Hemings, and his depiction of life at Monticello is neither Arcadian nor naïve. "I set out to

a graceful and almost quietistic submission to regnant attitudes—"a position convenient for the slaveholder," as Crawford notes, but "less so for the slave." In the early 1840s, his grandson, Jeff Randolph, as governor of Virginia, proposed gradual emancipation and colonization (in Liberia) of Virginia's slaves, which, despite the inhumanity implicit in the displacement of African Americans who were by then rooted, inextricably, in American soil, was one of the last real efforts to end slavery before the peculiar institution perverted the Southern Democracy into expansionist (Annex Cuba!) pro-slavery apologists.