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THE VALUE OF THE HERO TO SOCIETY:

A STUDY OF JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies in the School for Summer and Continuing Education of Georgetown University has been read and approved.

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Director, Liberal Studies Program

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THE VALUE OF THE HERO TO SOCIETY:
A STUDY OF JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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Bachelor of Arts
in Liberal Studies

By

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Date: April 24, 1998
THE VALUE OF THE HERO TO SOCIETY:
A STUDY OF JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY.

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ABSTRACT

The question my thesis will investigate is how a flesh and blood man, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, could achieve mythical hero status. To understand Kennedy's role in history, I will use Joseph Campbell's discussion of the hero and the hero's role in society.

Joseph Campbell presents us with a framework to understand how a man can become a hero. Through the hero journey, the man undergoes a transformation. To understand Kennedy's historical legacy and the transformation that he had to undergo, I researched the years that led up to his public life. This foundation shaped Kennedy's conduct during his years in politics. With a clear understanding of this foundation, I could achieve a better awareness of how he attained his hero status, and what values contributed to that position. It was important to take a close look at his relationship with his father.
Through my research, I discovered that there was a gap between Kennedy's perceived hero status and the events in his public and personal life. He positioned himself as a great leader, while there were personal and public situations where he did not act in a morally acceptable way. When Kennedy began his public life, he was a young, attractive man. His life with his family was often described as "Camelot." The idealization of the Camelot fantasy contributed to his rise toward hero status. When he was assassinated November 22, 1963, he was immortalized forever by the American people as a national hero.

While there is a gap between the public's perception and how he conducted himself in his private life, Joseph Campbell provides us with the framework to draw a conclusion. Although Kennedy may not have been a moral person, he arrived with his message at a time when the American public needed a hero. He put himself in a position to galvanize American society to achieve hero status.
To Mom, for endless love and support!
To Dad, for believing I could do it!
To Dan and Kathleen, for the day to day help that made classes, a job and a dog possible!
To Jim and Stephanie, for the long distance love and encouragement!
To Michael, for everything.

The Dishes are Done.

Kerry
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CHAPTER ONE

The Introduction

History has portrayed John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States, as a modern hero. The perceived quality of his heroism has wavered between the celebrity status of mass culture and the ideal hero as defined by Joseph Campbell. Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, is often cited as the world's authority on mythology and the hero. In his book, Campbell provides us with a framework to study Kennedy’s journey and transformation. This thesis will use Joseph Campbell’s discussion of the hero to determine how Kennedy, a flesh and blood man, could achieve the mythic hero status. To get a better understanding of Kennedy’s hero status and historical legacy, it is important to look at his journey and to interpret the significance of his formative years, the years that led up to his public life. It is the foundation that shaped his conduct and his ideals during his life in public office. Using Campbell’s framework, we can examine the relationship with Kennedy’s charismatic yet controversial father, and the role that he
played in Kennedy's life. Looking at Kennedy's life before his Presidential years, and understanding the relationship with his father will help clarify the nature of his mythic stature.

The question this thesis will answer is how a flesh and blood man can become a mythical figure, as Kennedy seemed to become. To understand Kennedy's role in history, I will use Campbell's discussion of the "Adventure of the Hero" to examine the years that led up to his campaign for the Presidency. In essence, Kennedy presented himself in his political career in a way that embodied society's vision of perfection. Using Campbell's discussion of the word "hero," what Kennedy came to mean to the collective dreams of this country seemed to take on a higher level of value than the concrete facts of his legislative record or the details of his personal life. Kennedy's mythic presence as the "ideal" is what mattered to most people.

Joseph Campbell's discussion of the nature of the "hero," the journey and transformation, will provide a starting point to examine
Kennedy and his role in society. Given that the concept of the "hero" can be elusive, it is important to explore the many connotations of the word, understanding that the colloquial definition of the term is different from the Campbellian definition. Campbell has many perspectives on the hero in society. The many facets of Campbell's discussion of a hero's life need to be understood when trying to determine how Kennedy achieved the hero position in society. In the search to answer this question, it becomes important to look at Kennedy's public record. Given that society has raised Kennedy to the hero level, did his time in office substantiate what society believed about this man? The actual historical record may be substantiated by time, or history may record the imagined achievements perpetuated over time by a society that needed a hero.

While his Presidential record may be seen as most important, recent investigations into Kennedy's personal life may indicate that he was not the virtuous person he portrayed to the public. How could a person who may have led a less than honorable private life be honored by society? John Kennedy is not the first public hero with a
questionable personal life. Questions of his private life have been raised over the years since his assassination. Allegations and innuendoes of his personal life have been discussed by members of the press, as well as the general population since the 1960's, with books still being published 30 years after his death. While one may question the validity of these allegations, to get a better understanding of JFK, they should be factored into the discussion of his position in history.

To continue the search for an answer to the question, I will examine the gap between Kennedy's perceived hero status and the events in his public and personal life. It is important to view Kennedy as the hero and how he interacted with society. What were the social values in the early 1960's that allowed him to achieve hero status? The period surrounding the Kennedy Presidency can be described as a time of great change. From a societal perspective, the end of the 1950's and the beginning of the 1960's saw a shift in the culture. Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement became major issues. The American people were increasingly aware of the U.S. involvement in
Vietnam. When Kennedy began to campaign for public office, he was a young, vibrant, attractive man. His life, often described as "Camelot," was seen as the ideal. As he entered the Presidential race, he had a beautiful wife and child. The average American citizen could look at this family, identify with them, and perhaps strive to be like them. He positioned himself through the campaign as representative of the average American looking forward to a new age. Technology would play an important role in this new age, as Kennedy challenged society to support his goal to send a man to the moon. These exciting new ideas would transfix the American people. But these ideas seem to brush the surface; what was underneath the "Camelot" exterior that allowed him to become a great American hero? Perhaps it was the very idealization of the "Camelot" fantasy that contributed to his rise toward hero status. And what impact did his formative years have on his life in office?

Because Kennedy embodied, and continues to embody the mythic hero, he remains idealized in the public mind, despite flaws in his public record and his personal behavior. Given the above discussions and
taking into account Campbell's explanation of a hero, this thesis will conclude by answering the question; how did Kennedy achieve this hero status?
CHAPTER TWO

The Departure

Joseph Campbell refers to the first step in the mythological journey of the hero as the "call to adventure." ¹ This call, says Campbell, is destiny summoning the hero, "transferring his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown." ² This unknown zone can be represented in both the physical world, as a specific place, or it can be reached through a dream on the part of the hero. However, this zone is always a place of "torments, superhuman deeds and impossible delights." ³ Campbell feels that this call to adventure could be achieved in several ways; the adventure could begin as the result of a mistake, blunder or mere chance, or the hero could be self motivated to accomplish the heroic deed. In either case, there is motivation for the person to undertake an activity that is beyond the capacity of the normal human being.
John F. Kennedy's father, Joseph Kennedy, was an important figure in the lives of all his children. Joseph Kennedy was a well known figure in Boston politics, who had a reputation for unethical deals and illegal business operations. In 1922, at his tenth year college reunion from Harvard, Joe Kennedy supplied the illegal alcohol for the party. He continued to deal with various mob leaders during prohibition to continue the flow of liquor into Boston. As an Irish Catholic in the conservative, Protestant Boston, Joe Kennedy was often locked out of what he considered to be the proper Boston society. He felt that this was based simply on his heritage. He could participate in the business world and amass a fortune, but he could not break the barrier that existed between him and the Boston Brahmin class. As Joseph Kennedy's biographer stated,

Much of Kennedy's demeanor - his aggressiveness, his proverbial indelicacy and often vulgar diction, his scorn for aristocratic blandishments and refinements, and his frequent, almost designed manifestations of just plain bad taste- can be attributed to his rejection of the way of life that the Brahmins symbolized...he remained to his death, in taste, demeanor, and even in political orientation, a rather thoroughgoing Boston Irishman.

Much of his life was spent showing proper Boston society that he
could be better than any one of them, and he passed this drive along to his children. Joe Kennedy was a blatant adulterer, with many documented relationships outside of his marriage to Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy. He was reportedly involved with the Hollywood actress, Gloria Swanson, during the 1920's. Knowing that divorce was impossible in the Catholic church, Joe went so far as to approach church authorities seeking permission to live apart from his wife and family and maintain a second household with Swanson.

Rose Kennedy, mother to John F. Kennedy, was quite the opposite in temperament and personality. Rose was a devout Catholic, attending mass daily and stressing religious devotion and education for her nine children. While Joe Kennedy maintained the appearance of a good Catholic, it was clear to his children, and specifically to the boys, that their identification with the Catholic Church would be a family responsibility,

... they would strongly identify with the church and always attend weekly mass, while doing what was to their advantage with little or no regard to its moral content. Lechery, for example, would be a way of life for the Kennedy men. And in politics they would do what it took to win. 6
A young John Kennedy would never forget the lessons taught to him by his father. He owed his father not only his wealth, but also the lessons learned by example and values. The Kennedy philosophy was simple;

... life was primarily about getting what you want, about winning, no matter what the cost, no matter whom it hurt. Pious talk about integrity, humility and love of one’s neighbor was fine in church, but it had little or nothing to do with reality. The Kennedys were trained to compete, to be second to no one, and to allow no obstacles to stand in their way. The Founding Father thus commanded. 7

Joe Kennedy left little to chance in the lives of his children. He knew exactly what he wanted his children to be, to think and to do, and he was not the type of father to tolerate resistance from them. John Kennedy's oldest brother, Joseph Kennedy Jr., was rumored to be his father's first choice for a run at national politics. Joe Jr. was a Harvard Law school graduate who began his political life at the age of 24. Motivated by his father, Joe Jr. entered the Naval Aviation Cadet Program at Harvard, ultimately flying as a Naval Aviator in England during World War Two. Joe Kennedy Senior felt it was good for the family name to have his sons considered war
heroes. Although John Kennedy may not have had the personal
desire to follow in his brother’s footsteps, he began the journey
into military service. His physical condition, back problems and
asthma among them, should have kept him out of the service, but
his father pulled the necessary strings that allowed John to obtain
a commission in the Navy. He began his Naval career stationed at
the Office of Naval Intelligence assigned to a desk job. But the
desk job would not allow him to be involved in military action, so
Joe Kennedy Senior paved the way for John to join Torpedo Patrol
Training School. John Kennedy’s “eagerness to be in the thick of
things, while courageous, can be seen as somewhat irresponsible.
Navy recruiters had sought athletes to be skippers of the brittle,
plywood speedboats known as PT Boats, and physical fitness was
all the more important in combat.” 

John Kennedy’s acceptance into Naval service could be seen as his
first step in the Campbellian “call to adventure.” It was this
departure from his normal life as a member of the upper class of
society, attending parties and womanizing, that set the stage for
the first step in his journey to attaining the mythical status of public hero. Campbell said that there are two types of adventures. The first is where the hero goes thoughtfully and intentionally to perform a specific heroic deed. The second is where the person is thrown into a situation where he must react, "where the hero has no idea what he is doing but suddenly finds himself in a transformed realm." John Kennedy found himself in a situation as the commanding officer of a PT boat that transformed him from one realm into the realm of the hero. During World War Two, while serving in the Pacific, he was involved in an accident on his PT boat. This event allowed him to present himself to the American public as a great war hero. But what of the situation was truthful and what was manufactured by his powerful father?

On August 1, 1943, John Kennedy's PT 109 was ordered to head off a Japanese fleet headed for United States territories. With 14 other PT Boats, they headed out and drew fire from the Japanese vessels. PT 109 however, did not participate in the skirmish. As soon as the firing began, Kennedy ordered a withdrawal from the area. As they
retreated from the enemy fighting, Kennedy’s boat was rammed by the Japanese destroyer, Amagiri. This collision caused an explosion aboard Lt. Kennedy’s vessel, ultimately causing most of the boat to sink and two crew members to be killed. The surviving crew members began a four-hour swim to a nearby atoll. John Kennedy towed one of the badly injured crewman by holding a strap from the man’s life jacket in his teeth as he did the breaststroke. “Kennedy’s effort was heroic, especially in light of his physical condition.” 10 After five days and several attempts to gain rescue for his crew, Kennedy and the members of PT 109 were saved.

World War Two was certainly a time in history that caused many human tragedies and produced many men and women who were silent, humble heroes. Kennedy, while certainly a hero to the men he saved after the collision, returned to immediate media adulation. One of the reporters who was tipped off that the son of Ambassador Kennedy was the skipper of the rammed PT boat, was quoted as saying “There was no question in my mind that Jack Kennedy was a
legitimate hero.” 11 The situation was presented to the American public and John Kennedy became an instant war hero. But the story that was presented to the press contained numerous omissions and errors. There were many mistakes in Naval policy that caused the accident, mistakes that can be attributed to the Captain of the boat, John Kennedy. While there were two deaths among Kennedy’s crew, he never accepted responsibility for the accident. He actually came out publicly and blamed the other boat captains who were in the area and failed to come to his aid once his boat had been hit. 12 Some of the more glaring issues that failed to be reported to the American public included the fact that Kennedy retreated from the battle. It was reported that Kennedy was attempting to ram the Japanese destroyer when his boat was damaged. A skipper of a nearby boat said, “It’s amazing. You can see the Japanese destroyer at a great distance. We saw that it was more or less headed right at the 109. We radioed Kennedy to look on his starboard bow. There was a bow wake coming directly toward him. No Response. Nothing.” 13 John Kennedy received a Silver Star,
but at the ceremony, his commanding officer said "The medal was for the survival phase, not the preceding battle." A squadron skipper recalled:

This was not a little stream (where PT 109 was rammed); it was a big strait. Kennedy had the most maneuverable vessel in the world. All that power and yet this knight in white armor managed to have his PT boat rammed by a destroyer. Everybody in the fleet laughed about that.

While exaggeration and distortion are common in reporting exploits in time of war, those close to the case, the military men who had the knowledge and expertise to understand the situation and how it should have been handled, were skeptical about Kennedy and his role. More importantly, the distorted version of the collision was publicized to the American public.

Father and son would fall back on the PT 109 episode many times in the years ahead. There were newspaper and magazine articles telling the Kennedy version, with the omissions and errors part of the story. During John Kennedy's run for political office in 1946 and 1952, hundreds of thousands of the magazine articles were
reprinted and distributed to the voting public. Even his Presidential election saw the accident front and center; during his inaugural parade a PT boat was towed down Pennsylvania Avenue near the White House. Robert Donovan said in 1961, "It is even possible that he might never have reached the White House if it had not been for PT 109."  

John Kennedy continued to use the accident for his personal gain throughout his lifetime, perhaps revealing a basic lack of integrity. This journey, although heroic in part, was impulsive and reckless. Given Campbell's discussion of the hero, there does not seem to be motivation on Kennedy's part other than his personal gain. He joined the Navy and signed up for dangerous duty, with a physical condition and lack of military experience that would prevent him from fulfilling his duties. Perhaps he was competing with his brother, Joe, or he was trying to satisfy his father, but by allowing his father to manipulate the standard rules for military appointment, he jeopardized the lives of his crew for his own benefit. While it may be said that he saved the lives of some of his
crew members in a manner that was beyond the capacity of a normal human being, his overall motivation during his Naval career may not have been for the good of all, but the good of himself. With the death of his brother Joe, killed in an experimental military aircraft over England, John Kennedy was now his father's hope for putting a Kennedy in the White House. He would use the distorted version of the PT 109 accident to his advantage throughout his time in public office.
CHAPTER THREE

The Initiation

Joseph Campbell characterizes the next phase of the journey of the hero as “The Road of Trials.” Campbell defines this road of trials;

Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his supernatural passage. 17

John Kennedy had come through his military service a war hero, ready to begin the next phase of the hero journey. This part of the journey would be plagued by various trials, both political and personal.

During the 1944 Christmas holiday in Palm Beach, Florida, Joe Kennedy Senior made his intentions clear; John Kennedy was to take the place of Joe Junior and enter politics. John is reported to have resisted. His health was poor, his back a constant source of debilitating pain, and he felt that he lacked the experience and
expertise necessary to make a successful run for political office. His father, however, would not be denied. John was quoted by a reporter as saying, "It was like being drafted. My father wanted his eldest son in politics. Wanted isn't the right word. He demanded it. You know my father." Joe Kennedy obviously recognized his son's hesitations, but certainly didn't seem to care what John thought about his own goals and ambitions. This would begin the first in a series of trials in John's public life. John Kennedy may not have had his own political ambitions, but the pressure from his father motivated John to be the Kennedy family candidate for public office. Any run for public office is demanding and requires dedication and a strong desire to further a particular set of beliefs or ideals. There is little evidence that John Kennedy had the personal dedication or dominant political ideals one would expect in a politician. In 1957, Joe Kennedy Senior said, "I got Jack into politics; I was the one. I told him Joe was dead and that it was therefore his responsibility to run for Congress. He didn't want to. He felt he didn't have the ability and he still feels that way. But I
told him he had to.” 20 When John Kennedy told friends that he had not entered politics to replace his brother, but to fulfill a personal need to do something to help his country and the world, the deception that would revade his life continued. He took the position of a recognized war veteran, maintaining that he had entered politics as an expression of his own ideals.

But the son of an Irish Roman Catholic from Boston had a difficult road ahead of him. There would be many trials to overcome before he could achieve the goals that had been thrust upon him by his domineering father. Once John Kennedy accepted his future, he began the next step in his Campbellian journey, a step toward a seat in Congress, carrying with him his war hero status.

John Kennedy would face many trials during this phase of his journey, and while many of these trials would be the outcome of uncontrollable situations such as illness or injury, many seem to be the product of his upbringing. Early in the campaign for a
Massachusetts seat in Congress, he began the job of meeting with the people in his voting districts. Being the son of a millionaire, he found it exceedingly difficult to shake hands with people he had little in common with, and his back condition caused him a great deal of discomfort as he walked the streets of Massachusetts. A friend of Joe Kennedy's commented on the young candidate, "Jack was very retiring. You had to lead him by the hand. You had to push him into the pool rooms, taverns, clubs and organizations. He didn't like it at first. He wanted no part of it." This unstable beginning and lack of political experience seemed to point to Election Day failure. But the Kennedy campaign machine, led by Joe Kennedy Senior and brother Bobby, was funded by a generous family-financed campaign coffer. Each member of the Kennedy family was pressed into furthering the political career of the now eldest son. Rose Kennedy and the Kennedy girls would host elaborate tea parties and receptions, sending out invitations giving local women the chance to meet the handsome candidate and briefly shake his hand. Many of the tea parties attracted hundreds of young women, all of whom seemed to entertain the hope that they would catch the
eye of the young Congressional candidate. Joe Kennedy Senior spent money lavishly, buying radio time and newspaper coverage for his son. Behind the well funded campaign there seemed to be little in the way of guiding principles or political tenets. "Jack, like his father and his brother, was without any guiding intellectual, philosophical, or moral vision in his pursuit of office. Politics, like life, was about winning, and little else." 22 Throughout his campaign, John Kennedy worked hard at putting forth an image of youth and vitality, but the reality was quite different. He frequently suffered from severe back pain, often using crutches that would be hidden away whenever he would appear in public. John Kennedy told his friend, Congressman George Smathers, that he was in constant agony during the campaign. 23 Despite his inexperience and his distaste for the life on the campaign trail, the Kennedy family had orchestrated a successful election. John Kennedy won his first Congressional seat by a large margin.

In addition to his back troubles, John suffered from several
illnesses that left him sick and frail for weeks at a time, often taking him away from his official Congressional duties. But his health was not the only issue weighing heavily on the new Congressman. John Kennedy did not appear to his colleagues to be happy in his role as a United States Congressman. Congressman George Smathers recalled that John Kennedy, younger than most, was often mistaken for a Congressional intern. Kennedy felt uncomfortable in the presence of many of the older, more experienced Congressmen, "he was very, very shy and diffident by nature, Jack was clearly not at ease in his new position...he never seemed to get into the mid-stream of any tremendous political thought, or political action, or any idea of promoting this or reforming that -- nothing." 24

A trial that John Kennedy would have to endure for the rest of his life was the diagnosis of a rare condition known as Addison's disease. This disease is characterized by a chronic insufficiency in the production of hormones, which brought John Kennedy close to death in the fall of 1947. Kennedy chose not to tell his colleagues
or the voting public the source of his illness, instead creating the
myth that he had contracted malaria in the South Pacific during his
service to his country. John Kennedy attempted to cover up his
illness in a speech in 1959;

During the war I contracted malaria in the South Pacific, along with water exposure and a series of fevers. Diagnosis showed that this stress was accompanied by a partial adrenal insufficiency, though there was no tubercular infection or other serious problems. From 1946 through 1947 I underwent treatment for the malaria -- the fever ceased -- there was complete rehabilitation and I have no special medical care, no special checkups, no particular difficulty on this score at all, while meeting a very full schedule of committee work, Senate responsibilities and speaking engagements. 25

It may be said that politicians need to present a healthful image in order to garner the trust of the voters. Perhaps he was justified in hiding this illness from others, but John Kennedy suffered great physical pain from Addison's disease. The illness that he endured throughout his life could certainly be classified as a major trial in his Campbellian hero's journey. His health would be a major factor throughout his life. He was near death on several occasions before he found a medication that seemed to alleviate some of the symptoms of the disease. Because of his extensive travels, John
Kennedy had special safe deposit boxes filled with the necessary medication set up throughout the country. This insured that he could keep his secret safe from the American people. His health was a constant trial for John Kennedy, but a trial that was outside his control.

Even though there were rumors surrounding John Kennedy about the many women in his life, he married Jacqueline Bouvier after his successful run for the Senate. Jackie Kennedy was a beautiful, intelligent young woman from a socially prominent New York family. The aristocratic Jackie was seen by Joe Kennedy Senior as an appropriate choice for the Senator from Boston. Her station would elevate the Kennedy’s social and political standing. By the time of his marriage to Jackie, John Kennedy seemed to have accepted his fate, appearing to become more comfortable with the duties and “back slapping” that characterized the life of a politician.
After his marriage to Jackie, John Kennedy allegedly continued to maintain relationships with other women. As his father had done, John seemed to lead two distinct lives; the life of a devoted husband that was portrayed to the public, and the roughish playboy politician who had many extramarital relationships. Jackie’s parents, divorced when she was a child because of her father’s alleged unfaithfulness, may have accepted the actions of her husband as normal behavior. However, John Kennedy’s affairs caused hardship and grief to his wife in the face of personal tragedy. While John Kennedy and his associates traveled to France to contemplate a run for the White House, a pregnant Jackie was left at home in the care of her mother. Having suffered a miscarriage during their first year of marriage, John Kennedy left Jackie, eight months pregnant, so he could rest after his unsuccessful bid for the Vice Presidential slot on the 1956 Democratic ticket. While John Kennedy, Congressman Smathers and several young women were yachting on the Mediterranean, Jackie underwent an emergency cesarean operation and gave birth to a stillborn child. With his wife in critical condition and suffering
the emotional and physical pain of losing the baby, “Jack only agreed to return home three days later, after Smathers convinced him that a shattered marriage would harm his political career.”

When his father agreed with Smathers, John returned home to his wife. His marriage would suffer great strain after Jackie found out that during this difficult time, her husband was aboard a ship with several young women, a fact that was reported in the Washington Star Newspaper.

As John Kennedy traveled the road to the Presidency, he would have to endure a series of trials that would test his valor. Through John Kennedy’s mythic journey to the White House, he had to undergo the physical pain associated with his health problems, in addition to the troubles he caused by his alleged womanizing. But his biggest trial was the influence that his father had over his life. While it may be common for children to follow in their parent’s footsteps, John Kennedy was coerced into a life that he would not have chosen freely.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Return

According to Joseph Campbell, the next step in the hero's journey is "The Return". He defines the return,

When the hero quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal, personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds. 30

While Campbell discussed the various ways a hero can return with the message, he also examined the refusal by the hero to return. He thought that hero figures throughout history occasionally doubted whether their message would be understood or appreciated by the recipients of the runes of wisdom. Having gone through the steps of the hero adventure, the return is the point where the knowledge or information that the hero has gained is passed along. This important component of Campbell's discussion puts the flesh and
blood man into the category of the hero. In the book *The Power of Myth*, there is a transcript of a conversation between Campbell and television personality Bill Moyers. Campbell explained to Moyers that,

\[ \ldots \text{a legendary hero is usually the founder of something -- the founder of a new age, the founder of a new religion, the founder of a new city, the founder of a new way of life. In order to found something new, one has to leave the old and go in quest of the seed idea, a germinal idea that will have the potentiality of bringing forth that new thing.} \]

John Kennedy faced the traditional Campbellian hero adventure on the path to the White House. While on that journey, he faced trials that would test his courage to make necessary political and personal decisions, but the return with the message would be the most important part of the hero adventure. With the return, John Kennedy would be the founder of a new age -- a new society would emerge from the Kennedy Presidency. Through the highest political office in the land Kennedy brought his message to the people. To use the Campbellian terminology, Kennedy’s return would be called “The Magic Flight.” “The Magic Flight,” according to Campbell, is

\[ \ldots \text{the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is explicitly commissioned to return to} \]
the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron. 32

John Kennedy began his return to the American people as he launched his campaign for the Presidential nomination. Having endured the trials of his congressional and senatorial campaigns, he would begin his journey to the White House when he formally announced his candidacy on January 2, 1960. Among the issues of 1960, Kennedy listed the following:

How to end or alter the burdensome arms race, where Soviet gains already threaten our very existence. How to maintain freedom and order in the newly emerging nations. How to rebuild the stature of American science and education. How to prevent the collapse of our farm economy and the decay of our cities. How to achieve, without further inflation or unemployment, expanded economic growth benefiting all Americans. And how to give direction to our traditional moral purpose, awakening every American to the dangers and opportunities that confront us. 33

Perhaps these issues presented to the American people could be considered Campbellian “Runes of Wisdom.” Kennedy also stressed “moral purpose, declaring that the White House must be the center of moral leadership.” 34 When one considers the allegations of
Kennedy's weak morality, there seems to be a gap between that statement and his own behavior.

The months preceding the announcement of his Presidential candidacy were a flurry of activity for the Kennedy campaign machine. While he had been uncomfortable in his early public life as the handshaking, backslapping politician, he now appeared to have mastered the art and was comfortable as the candidate. He continued to present himself as the young, energetic politician, full of new ideas and principles. But while that was the image he wished to portray, others around him worried about what was termed his "flexible political principles." 35 These flexible principles helped him appease many of his liberal critics. Newsweek Magazine labeled Kennedy "an authentic moderate without excessive party loyalties...he has constructed a voting record that is a veritable department store in which almost anyone can find much to like and dislike." 36
John Kennedy's Catholicism would be used as a campaign issue for his opposition. Now a secure speaker, John would respond directly to the issue. He was quoted early in the campaign, "I have enough confidence in the judgement of the American people to believe that they will vote for what they think is a good man seeking office, and not for what church he happens to go to on Sunday." 37 His confidence in his public speaking ability continued to improve, and his appearance and image continued to make a large, positive impression on the voting public. John and Jackie traveled many miles during the campaign, stopping to speak at small town rallies and events, shaking hands with factory workers and housewives throughout the country. "Crowds were consistently awed by the handsome young couple, obviously supportive of each other and committed to the values of family, church and flag that dominated much of American life during the Eisenhower years." 38 American politics had not seen such a young, attractive candidate in many years, and the American people were enamored with the Camelot mystique.
Despite his irresolute politics, his religious affiliation, and his lack of experience, John Kennedy would win the Democratic Presidential nomination. The Kennedy image was now widely appreciated by the American people. He had a beautiful wife and daughter, he had a supportive family, and he was an honored war hero who had persuaded the nation's Democratic leadership that he was the right man to lead the country to greatness. Behind the public facade, there was still a great deal of unpleasantness, bribery, manipulation, reported adultery and impropriety. The gap between the Kennedy public image and reality had grown steadily over his time in public office and would continue to do so throughout the Presidential campaign. Kennedy would have to work hard to ensure that his public image as an honest family man would remain intact. Society, however, seemed ready for the young politician from Boston. During his acceptance speech for the Presidential nomination, he appealed to the American public for fresh energy, ideas and ideals. He used the campaign phrase, The New Frontier, which was "an appeal for public sacrifice to combat
poverty, ignorance and war. It was a set of challenges that summed up not what he intended to offer to the American people, but what he intended to ask of them." 39 The Kennedy election was set in motion not only as a political endeavor, but as a turning point in American society. John Kennedy said of the election "the American people faced a choice, 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." 40

The Presidential campaign would mirror John Kennedy's congressional and senatorial strategies. While Joe Kennedy Senior stayed far from public view, there were rumors that the elder Kennedy continued to hold a prominent role in the activities of the campaign. Television would play a major role in furthering Kennedy as the candidate. While there were still many who doubted that Kennedy would beat the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, Kennedy would use television and the press to his advantage.
During his first televised debate, Kennedy was viewed as confident and attractive, while Nixon appeared slightly disheveled, in need of a shave, tense and hesitant. Television favored the attractive Democrat, who appeared handsome and poised. The candidates and the content of the debate were characterized by CBS news commentator Eric Sevareid as "tidy, buttoned-down men, completely packaged products, both were sharp, opportunistic, devoid of strong convictions and deep passions, with no commitment except to personal advancement." 41

While rumors of Kennedy's extramarital affairs continued to spread throughout the campaign, they never seemed to make it into the mainstream press. There were rumors that Kennedy had spent the hours before the first televised debate with a prostitute. Happy with the outcome of the debate, he told his close advisors that he wanted to repeat the activity before each of the subsequent debates to ensure a similar successful result. 42 There were also allegations that he maintained a long standing relationship with a
young woman named Judith Campbell, from his first congressional term in office, throughout the Presidential campaign. While there have been rumors and innuendos about extramarital affairs of previous Presidents, Kennedy's relationships appeared prolific during a time when he was often in the company of the media. One is left to question why Kennedy enjoyed relative anonymity where his extramarital relationships were concerned? One reason may have been the relationship he formed with the media. Richard Nixon and his campaign staff tended to view the media as an intrusion to be dealt with sparingly. Kennedy and his staff viewed the media as friends and colleagues. They were treated with respect and were often invited to participate in social events with the candidate and his staff. Subsequently, the media seemed eager to support the candidate in any way possible. This may have included turning a blind eye to the Presidential Candidate's dalliances. While they would report on the stories surrounding Kennedy's political position, they would rely on the Kennedy camp to feed them stories and pictures of his loving, devoted wife and daughter. The stories and rumors about Kennedy and various women did not seem to have
an effect on his campaign or his popularity.

Beyond the rumors of marital infidelity, there were also stories circulating about mafia involvement in the Kennedy campaign. The alleged Chicago mafia boss, Sam Giancana, was reported to be actively involved with John and Bobby Kennedy. Judith Campbell, who alleged that she had a long standing romantic relationship with John Kennedy, reported that she had served as a liaison between the two men, arranging meetings and carrying unmarked envelopes from Chicago to Washington, D.C. She maintained that she had no knowledge of the contents of the envelopes or the agenda of Kennedy and Giancana’s clandestine meetings.

With rumors of infidelity and mafia involvement, election day arrived for the Kennedy team. At the conclusion of the campaign, three of the four major public opinion polls gave Kennedy a slight lead. The election would not be an easy win for the charismatic Kennedy. With the large sums of money reportedly spent and the
irrepressible campaigning that had occurred, his inexperience and
religion would continue to be a factor when people went to the
polls. While a record number of Americans voted in the 1960
election, Kennedy won 49.7 percent of the votes, while the Nixon
ticket had 49.6 percent of the votes. There were only 112,803
votes separating the two candidates, the smallest margin of
victory in the century. 45 Elections are won in the United States by
state electoral votes, not national plurality, and Kennedy became
the youngest president in American history by winning many of the
states controlling large blocks of electoral votes. The author of A
Question of Character - A Life of John F. Kennedy, Thomas C.
Reeves, theorized that an explanation for the success that Kennedy
enjoyed through his journey to the White House was the powerful
image he could communicate to the American people. Kennedy was
seen as a man of principle, consistency, and self confidence. Arthur
Schlesinger, Jr., in his book, Kennedy or Nixon: Does it make a
difference? , presented Kennedy as a “committed liberal who
admired intellectuals and would turn to them for advice. Kennedy
was ambitious because the Presidency alone would give him the
power to fulfill purposes which have long lain in his mind and heart.” 46 This statement seems to be a further attempt by Kennedy’s friends to create the image that the candidate had strong, personal political ambitions. Schlesinger’s statement seems to confirm that Kennedy’s journey fits into the Campbellian theory of the return. However, given the information available 30 years after the events, one is left to wonder if Kennedy truly had a message that he wanted to share with the American people. It seems that very few people knew the reality as it was happening.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Assassination and Its Influence on Society

Because the foundational events of his life brought John Kennedy to the threshold of his hero status, for this thesis I have chosen to focus on the time before he was elected to the Presidency. However, there are many issues that can discussed concerning his Presidential record, both in support of and opposition to his hero status. He was able to maintain a tenuous peace with the Soviet Union during the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis, he managed the United States involvement during the building of the Berlin Wall and he supported the Civil Rights Movement. There were also continued rumors about his marital infidelities, including a much discussed relationship with the movie star, Marilyn Monroe, but these inuendoes did not seem to impact his popularity with the American public.

One cannot write about John F. Kennedy as a hero without taking into account his death at the age of 46 in Dallas, Texas, on
November 22, 1963. Kennedy had continued to enjoy relative popularity through his three years as President. As 1963 came to a close, Kennedy began to think about his reelection the following year. With that in mind, Kennedy turned his attention to a trip to Dallas, Texas, a state that he needed to win if he were to sweep the 1964 election, one of his goals after his marginal victory in 1960. Jackie was scheduled to accompany him on the trip to Texas, her first public appearance since the death of their premature child, Patrick Kennedy, in August of the same year. By all accounts, Kennedy was happy that his wife was to be with him during the first leg of his 1964 campaign.

During the now infamous drive through downtown Dallas, President Kennedy and his wife enjoyed the cheers from the people who had lined the streets to catch a glimpse of the couple. Upon entering the center of the city, an assassin's bullet ended the life of the 35th President of the United States. Within minutes the media, who had accompanied the President to Dallas, were broadcasting the news that President Kennedy had been killed. Understandably,
the news sent shock waves throughout the United States and ultimately, the world. The effect on the American people was intense. School children were dismissed from class when the news was received because the teachers were distraught and unable to continue their lessons. Factories and businesses closed, while churches overflowed with those searching for an answer to the national tragedy. Television reporters stayed on the air for several days, reporting every moment of the funeral. With so many poignant moments forever etched in the public consciousness, the image of the young John Jr. saluting as his father’s funeral procession passed will forever symbolize the nation’s grief.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy affected most people in some way. Years later, many can remember with sadness their whereabouts the moment they heard the news that the President was dead. In 1988, author John B. Jovich sent questionnaires to over 250 Americans asking where they were when John Kennedy was shot and the effect that it had on their lives. Many responded with moving tales of their personal reaction to the news, feeling as
if a member of their family had been the victim. Others spoke about the great loss to the country. Whether an entertainer, politician or member of the media, they all shared a common theme; they felt a great man had been taken away from the country. 47

Soon after the assassination, society looked for ways to honor the fallen hero. Out of the need to glorify him, there was a surge to name buildings, highways, airports and space centers after John F. Kennedy. Society had given John Kennedy the hero label early in his public life, and now that hero had been taken away.

According to Joseph Campbell, many heroes give their lives in their journey. They must sacrifice their own life for the needs of others. But out of that death comes new life. “It may not be the hero’s life, but it’s a new life, a new way of being or becoming.” 48 Kennedy did not willingly sacrifice his own life for the American people, but by choosing to put himself in front of the American people as a leader, his death could be the ultimate Campbellian sacrifice. John Kennedy’s death could be viewed as the beginning of a new era in
the lives of the American people.
CHAPTER SIX
The Conclusion

As I conducted research for this paper, I was often questioned by friends and colleagues wanting to know the topic of my thesis. I was amazed at the variety and disparity of impressions that people had of John F. Kennedy. Adults during the Kennedy years seemed to maintain that he was a true hero for the American people, a hero killed before he was able to fulfill his destiny for the country. Others felt that he should not be considered a hero, based on the facts of his personal life that came to light many years after his death. There was a large gap between these two groups of people who commented on my thesis topic. Those people who felt he deserved the hero label often acknowledged his infidelities and alleged immoral actions, but they felt that as President he accomplished a greater good for society. They had essentially separated the moral issues from what they perceived as his actions in public office. They only cared about what he did for the public, and his private life was just that--private. The opposition felt
that a hero in American society should be a role model for the people who have rewarded him their ultimate honor. These people felt that when society votes a particular man to the nation's highest office, there are responsibilities that are inherent and that go beyond the duties of simply running the country. To these people, morality is something that should be valued when deciding whether a flesh and blood man deserves to be called a hero.

The author of the book, *A Question of Character - A Life of John F. Kennedy*, felt that Kennedy acted irresponsibly during his time in office. "While saying and doing the appropriate things in the public light, he acted covertly in ways that seriously demeaned himself and his office." 49 While this statement may be true, Kennedy has maintained his hero status for many years. Given what we now know about John Kennedy, and the fact that he has continued to be a hero to millions of people world wide, one has to realize that there are forces that compel society to hold him in this light.

Joseph Campbell has given us a framework to discuss John F.
Kennedy in an effort to decide whether he was truly a hero in a mythological pattern. In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell and Moyers discuss whether society needs heroes. Campbell is firm in his conviction that society does in fact need heroes. Society, he says, needs heroes, "because it has to have constellating images to pull together all these tendencies to separation, to pull them together into some intention." Given that definition, John F. Kennedy is justly considered a hero to the American people. During the late 1950's and early 1960's, society was going through many substantial changes. There was fear of global nuclear war with the Soviet Union, the Viet Nam situation was escalating and social upheaval was being brought into the American living rooms on the nightly news. John Kennedy stood before that society and was able to galvanize the people to work toward a common goal. He was a young, attractive man with a supportive family who was able, whether by his own initiative or by paternal pressure, to bring his message to society. Heroes, according to Campbell, "are in perfect tune with their time...the public hero is sensitive to the needs of
his time." John Kennedy came to the American people when the people were ready to hear his message. Regardless of his methods or personal actions, he was able to usher in a new era. While the concrete facts of his legislative record may be questioned, or one may object to his personal life, there is no question that he stood before the American people and brought forth a new age. Society itself has the ability to make a flesh and blood man a hero. Given Joseph Campbell's framework, Kennedy's life followed the pattern of the Departure, the Initiation and the Return. He achieved hero status. Campbell said that the true hero sacrifices himself for something, John F. Kennedy lost his life, the ultimate sacrifice a man can make for his country. Society has honored him with our highest tribute, the distinction of being considered a great American hero.
ENDNOTES


2. Ibid., 58.

3. Ibid., 58.


5. Ibid., 21.

6. Ibid., 31.

7. Ibid., 33.

8. Ibid., 60.


11. Ibid., 66.

12. Ibid., 64.

13. Ibid., 63.


19. Ibid., 73.

20. Ibid., 73.


24. Ibid., 87.


26. Ibid., 94.

27. Ibid., 109-110.

28. Ibid., 138.
29. Ibid., 138.


35. Ibid., 151.

36. “This is John F. Kennedy,” *Newsweek*, June 23, 1958, 33-34.


38. Ibid., 156.

39. Ibid., 184.

40. Ibid., 185.

41. Ibid., 195.

42. Ibid., 193.

44. Ibid., 290.


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“This is John Fitzgerald Kennedy,” Newsweek (June 23, 1958): 33-34.