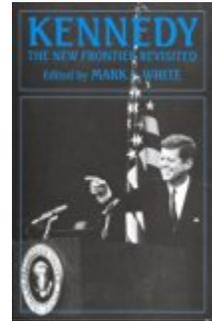


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark J. White, ed. *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. ix + 291 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-9340-4.

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## JFK and more JFK

In this collection of essays, seven historians revisit the Presidency of John Kennedy. Six of the eight chapters deal with different aspects of Kennedy's foreign policy: Vietnam, Cuba, Berlin, the Common Market, Charles de Gaulle, and space policy. Not only do these numerically outnumber those on domestic events, they are far more solid and original. Different historians may prefer one essay over another, but as a whole it is these foreign policy articles which give the book its true value. Yet even here, there is an overall problem. Most of these essays focus too much on the Presidential perspective, often ignoring Congress, the opposition party, the media, and public opinion. Presidents do not operate in a vacuum, but in this book, it is rare that special interest groups or such people as Barry Goldwater, Richard Russell, or Walter Lippmann are mentioned.

The editor, Mark J. White, wrote the introduction, which covers the historiography on the overall Kennedy Presidency. But he hurts the book by choosing the wrong topic. He lost the chance to directly and solidly explain the format of the book. Why has he balanced this volume as he did? Why did he include only a couple of articles on domestic affairs, when such a number obviously cannot cover the topic? Why are there no essays on the civil rights movement, or on the rise of television in the media world and Kennedy's great ability with TV? Or, if he wanted to book to have a foreign policy emphasis, why has he not strengthened this by including articles on the Alliance for Progress, Africa, the Peace Corps, India-Pakistan, or Laos? In other words, I find the value of the book to be less as a coherent whole and more on the

individual essays standing alone.

In the first chapter, Fredrik Logevall examines Vietnam—not so much as what happened in the war or what Kennedy did, but rather what he might have done had he lived and been re-elected. In other words, Logevall does not explain such key realities as the strategic hamlet policy or the Buddhist crisis. Rather, he confronts the hypothetical assertions of Oliver Stone, John Newman, and a few others who assert that JFK would have never sent in American combat troops and indeed would have pulled out of this quagmire. The best part of this article is its tone, a low-key, moderate, reasonable tone, which is unusual for those who write on this controversial war and especially for those who deal with Mr. Stone's movie. Logevall concludes that, while there is no easy answer to this or any hypothetical question, Kennedy chose and would have continued to take a middle of the road approach. First, the President had not decided to pull out American forces (that is, Stone is wrong) but secondly, he would have rejected the massive escalation that LBJ decided on in early 1965. Personally, I am not convinced by Logevall's second conclusion, but he should be given credit for arguing it well. What Logevall does not do well is to confront a totally different interpretation, the structural perspective that sees U.S. foreign policy being shaped by larger factors than just whoever happens to be President at a particular moment. Logevall does not argue against it convincingly as much as he quickly dismisses it.

Mark White analyzes Kennedy's policy on Cuba in

a nicely written narrative manner. He harshly criticizes JFK for some of his decisions in 1961-1962. It was the President who allowed the events to develop into a bigger crisis. In other words, "there would almost certainly have been no missile crisis had it not been for JFK's inordinate belligerent Cuban and defense policies (p. 85)." This conclusion is far too easy on Nikita Khrushchev. White then turns and, agreeing with most historians, gives the President much credit for his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis itself. What would have made the article stronger would have been to elaborate the one-page conclusion on the events and policy after the Missile Crisis ended. This truncation is the article's major weakness. Finally, one small disagreement. White criticizes JFK for excluding liberals such as Chester Bowles or Arthur Schlesinger Jr. from the Executive Committee of the NSC. While White thinks it is obviously good to hear "a broader range of options" (p. 79), my personal experience has been that widening membership on a committee has not brought a better decision but only indecision, delay, and frustration.

In examining "The Berlin Crisis," Georg Schild deserves credit for seeing this as more than just a U.S.-Soviet confrontation. Schild emphasizes that "of equal importance were the conflicts within NATO" (p. 95), especially the tensions between JFK and Konrad Adenauer, the West German leader. Schild then uses this perspective to criticize President Kennedy. "Most of the blame for the American-West German controversy lay with the Kennedy administration. It had changed post-World War II American policy toward Berlin without giving its Allies sufficient time to adjust (p. 123)." This thesis is argued well enough, but other historians agree with the Kennedy administration that Adenauer was the inflexible one. Schild rejects the hypothetical assertion that a stronger U.S. policy could have forced the Soviets to tear down the Berlin Wall. He credits the Kennedy administration for understanding that the building of the Wall was not a war-like action but "an acceptance of the status quo (p. 113)." Schild faults Khrushchev for mistakenly thinking of JFK as vulnerable, but he is not harshly critical toward the Soviet leader who, Schild claims, acted "cautiously" (p. 123) in building the Wall.

In contrast to the relatively well-known events in Vietnam, Cuba, and Berlin, Thomas W. Zeiler examines less familiar territory, Kennedy's trade policy toward the Common Market. In general, Zeiler praises Kennedy's free trade, internationalist policies. The author rejects both the protectionist argument and the revisionist interpretation which condemns American capitalism's hege-

mony. Kennedy "made great strides in adopting bold and realistic trade policies.... His Trade Expansion Act ... was innovative and comprehensive.... Kennedy did an admirable job in meeting the challenges he faced" (pp. 133, 142, 152). One of the best parts of this article is that Zeiler correctly sees this issue as a blend of foreign policy and domestic politics. Thus, in contrast to most of the historians in this volume, Zeiler includes references to powerful politicians, such as Congressman Wilbur Mills and Senator Robert Kerr. JFK is portrayed not just as a foreign policy leader but also as a masterful politician, compromising and balancing various domestic interest groups. Some scholars have criticized the President for failing to anticipate the 1970's economic difficulties, but Zeiler is more restrained and does not blame JFK for not seeing the future.

Josephine Brain examines JFK's relationship with Charles de Gaulle, the leader of France. Brain writes well in this narrative, and she gives Kennedy credit for his "tact and restraint" (p. 166) toward de Gaulle. This is not a bad essay by any means, but I found her focus to be too narrowly trained on Kennedy and his aides. She includes some information on Britain, but she could have done more research and fully discussed British policy as well. Such a triangular approach, balancing the U.S., France, and Britain, would have made her ideas more convincing. Another example of her narrow approach is that, like many other authors in this collection, she lacks information on the media, on Congress, and others outside of the administration. She briefly notes a contrast between JFK and Lyndon Johnson as President, but she could examine this in much more depth. The best part of Brain's essay is that she does not become overly argumentative or make grandiose conclusions out of her specific case study.

Derek W. Elliott analyzes Kennedy's policy on space exploration and finds three chronological stages. As a Senator, JFK did not emphasize the space program. In his early Presidential years, JFK made space a much greater priority, seeing it as part of the Cold War and a way to show U.S. power versus the Soviet Union. Most famously, the President demanded that the U.S. send an American to the moon and back. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy continued to emphasize space exploration but began to try to cooperate with the Soviet Union whenever possible. At the same time, however, he never wavered from his policy on a moon voyage. Elliott is more positive toward President Kennedy than Walter McDougall, who condemns the Apollo effort. Elliott would have improved his article if he had directly challenged McDougall's thesis. Elliott correctly under-

stands that the space program was not just foreign policy, and certainly not just science, but good politics, enabling Congressmen to bring home the bacon. I don't want to beat a dead horse, but he could have strengthened this perspective on domestic affairs by including information on newspaper editorials, public opinion polls, and television reporting by Walter Cronkite and others.

After six chapters focusing on foreign policy and based on original research, the next article changes pace. James N. Giglio writes on domestic affairs and in a historiographical approach. He covers a wide range: not only the books on Kennedy's overall Presidency but also those on more specialized topics, such as civil rights, fiscal policy, agriculture, and the environment. The one omission in his coverage is the books from the conservative and ultra-conservative position. While these are often diatribes with little scholarly methodology, they were the first to challenge the Camelot legend of Theodore Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and thus they should be considered part of the historiographical record. Another problem is Giglio's conclusion, which is not very original or insightful. His last sentence on Kennedy's legacy and image declares that "only time will tell (p. 245)." What would have made the article far better would have been to combine Giglio's chapter with Mark White's introduction, which covers the important overviews on the Kennedy Presidency in a similar historiographical approach. By having a joint authorship, this redundancy would have been eliminated. Even more important, White has a stronger conclusion, which could have helped Giglio's chapter.

The final chapter, written by Mark White, examines Kennedy's private life. Sex, drugs and the Mafia—these are the hot subjects that most of my students want to hear more about. White remorselessly attacks Kennedy's private actions, and even puts JFK on the psychoanalyst's

couch to posit why he was so sexually active. But at the end of the essay, he turns to analyze Kennedy's policy actions and warns that the relevance of JFK's private life to his official Presidential actions "should not be exaggerated (p. 272)." In other words, Kennedy was more cautious in his policies than in his private life. While I generally agree with White's conclusions on JFK's policies, I think White is too heated on the private scandals. He admits that some of these juicy stories may not be true, but this is brief and buried in the middle of his article. White would gain credibility if his tone were more disinterested and cool. The article would also improve if White explained why he accepted sources such as Kitty Kelley, a gossip journalist who has never been known to use scholarly research methods. Richard Reeves, to use just one example, does not believe that Kelley's account about Judith Campbell Exner has much validity. Finally, White's article would be stronger if, in his conclusion, he directly confronted Thomas Reeves on the issue of private behavior influencing Presidential policy. White is challenging Reeves (and I think successfully), but he needs to do more than to mention Reeves briefly in an early paragraph.

Examining the book as a whole is difficult. The authors write on different topics and thus do not directly criticize or disagree with each other. Yet taken together, their different perspectives on President Kennedy have a scholarly weight. No President should be judged by a single action, event, or policy. In short, the value of this book is in its varied perspectives.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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