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# The Rhetorical Criteria of Kennedy's Camelot

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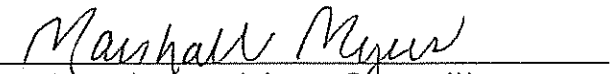

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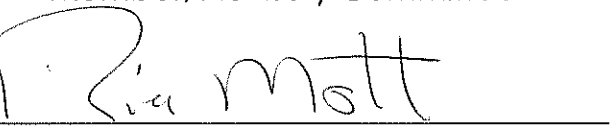

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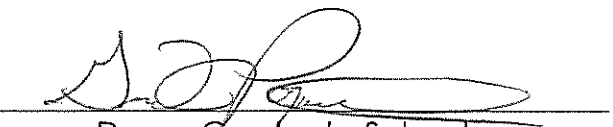

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# The Rhetorical Criteria of Kennedy's Camelot

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## ABSTRACT

John F. Kennedy's presidential rhetoric reflects key criteria necessary for creating and sustaining the American Camelot myth. That myth was successfully ingrained into the American psyche through the use of visual rhetoric, campaign speech rhetoric, and crisis time rhetoric. Moreover, the collective memory of cultural trauma following Kennedy's assassination suggests a promising continuation of the Camelot myth. Because the four rhetorical categories (visual, campaign, crisis, and collective memory) worked in tandem, all were essential for creating Kennedy's legacy, and together solidified Kennedy's lasting reputation as a skilled rhetor.

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# CHAPTER 1

## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

John F. Kennedy, thirty-fifth President of the United States, presided over what is now known as America's "Camelot" (Brigance 2). However, underneath his seemingly utopian leadership lie many personal and political secrets. Despite the carefully crafted professional persona he wore in front of the American public, he was privately dishonest, unethical, and fatally flawed. He "reveled in personal excess and recklessness," and often lied about matters if the truth threatened his reputation (Hersh 2). A telling attestation of his propensity to be less than honest involves his own fragile health—a lifelong battle he learned to hide in early childhood (13). Facts regarding his numerous health conditions, many of which were not available until years after his death, report Kennedy suffered from Addison's disease, irritable bowel syndrome, hypertension, failing vision, the onset of gum disease, partial deafness, failing back syndrome, and a sexually transmitted disease, among other conditions; Kennedy often blatantly denied any such illnesses (Giglio 349; Hersh 5). As a result of his complex medical problems, Kennedy took a regimen of medicines, some of them, such as amphetamines, highly addictive and on which he developed an unhealthy dependency—another fact he kept hidden from the American public (Giglio 349). He also lied concerning his extramarital affairs. His string of mistresses is now public knowledge, as is a secret first marriage for which he and his men stole all related official documents, thus ensuring his wife could not damage his political career (as she could have easily done with official documents since she and Kennedy never officially divorced) (Hersh 2-3, 10-11). Despite a successful, albeit

temporary, cover up of his first marriage, a later romantic fling did, in fact, affect his presidency: the leg brace he wore in addition to his usual back brace the day of his assassination was the result of a groin injury he suffered during a tryst with one of his many lovers. The brace prevented him from ducking after the initial bullet struck his throat, leaving him upright and vulnerable to the second bullet that shot through his head, killing him (Giglio 353; Hersh 12). Naturally, this fact was not documented in his official autopsy report, and was only told to the public decades later (Hersh 12).

Beyond his questionable health and marital matters, Kennedy also lied about political corruption, such as his support for assassination plots made by members of the Republican Party concerning select world leaders—plots he supported while still serving in the United States Senate (Hersh 3-4). He continued committing unethical political acts while on the campaign trail in 1960; his bribery of the Chicago-based mafia and the local and state officials of West Virginia are now knowledge open to the public (4-5, 90). As President, he placated J. Edgar Hoover by re-appointing him Director of the FBI out of fear that Hoover would publicize information which would irreparably damage his career (6). Later in his Presidency, Kennedy struck a private deal with Nikita Khrushchev concerning American missiles in Turkey so as to avoid World War III—a fact he kept hidden from both the American public and ExComm, the ad hoc committee designed to handle that situation (3). As he prepared for the 1964 re-election campaign, Kennedy was yet again linked to financial corruption and bribery so as to ensure another election victory (5). These examples of Kennedy's deception regarding his personal and political life reflect only a sample of his questionable doings. Compounding these acts of unethical behavior is the fact that throughout his career in Congress and the Oval Office, he

accomplished relatively little; as Herbert Parmet points out, Kennedy's administration brought about "no social and economic transformation…closed out the New and Fair Deal reform movement," owed much of its progressive reputation to the conveniently and "timely marriage of technology and nature" and lacked anyone who resembled what America now considers a "Jack Kennedy" type politician (33). In other words, Jack Kennedy did not even resemble the Jack Kennedy society assumes existed, and failed to accomplish much worth praising. However, his popularity has not flagged since his death. Writer John Murphy notes in his analysis of the beloved leader: "Since John Kennedy's death, scholars and revisionists, scriptwriters and novelists have failed to shake the public's admiration for his presidency. Indeed, the most recent poll conducted of historians ranks John Kennedy eighth in the presidential pecking order" (Murphy 579). A looming question lying in the wake of such a positive report despite scandalous revelations is thus: Why is Kennedy's tenure still regarded as "Camelot," and why have recent insights into the personal and political flaws of the late President done little, if anything, to sway the public's positive regard for him?

Camelot literally means "a time, place, or atmosphere of idyllic happiness" (Merriam-Webster 177). Although the literary tradition of Camelot involves King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and the infamous Knights of the Round Table, the American Camelot encompasses a different type of mythic leadership—a modern, democratic tale that is both romanticized and uniquely Americanized. This version of Camelot centers on a prominent family who, for a short time, exercised seemingly respectable leadership over a nation facing both domestic and foreign threats. In regard to Kennedy's presidency, the term "Camelot" specifically reflects the characteristic ephemeral nature of his dynasty as

according to his widow, Jacqueline. She told family friend and reporter Theodore White in an interview just three weeks after Kennedy's death that the late president was particularly fond of a song from Alan J. Lerner's and Frederick Loewe's Broadway play *Camelot* (Brigance 3). Jackie repeated the lyrics for White, who reported them to the public, hence solidifying the mythic reputation that has become a lasting part of American cultural history: "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot" (qtd. in Brigance 2). Jackie then went on to confidently state that "there'll be great Presidents again…but there'll never be another Camelot…This was Camelot…Let's never forget" (2). Although he was only in office for slightly more than one thousand days, and despite the fact that he had done little politically to prove himself among the great American Presidents, Jackie's claim to Camelot has characterized Kennedy's presidency ever since the White interview (Moy 249). As Linda Czuba Brigance notes, "Americans searched for ways to make sense of the [assassination]…After the publication of White's interview with Mrs. Kennedy, the popular media and the general public seized upon Camelot to represent the Kennedy era" as a means to understand and cope with the President's death (2). Furthermore, the Kennedy family itself is still regarded as "American Royalty" (Brigance 5). In fact, the idea of Camelot has persisted to the point that during the 2008 presidential campaign, John Kennedy's daughter, Caroline Kennedy, and his brother, Senator Edward Kennedy, stated in a national interview with Diane Sawyer that they felt Barack Obama would inherit, and thus revive, Camelot by imitating John's youthful and optimistic appeal (Sawyer, Gibson, and Stephanopoulis). In other words, current presidential candidates are still being compared to Kennedy, meaning his time in office—his rule of Camelot—has

left a lasting impact on Washington while also creating a set of standards by which the American public will judge any presidential candidate who resembles him. Whether or not Obama rhetorically resembles Kennedy, although interesting and undoubtedly worth in-depth investigation of its own, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, the exact rhetorical criteria that made Camelot, Camelot is now under investigation. What rhetorical qualities did Kennedy exercise that led the public to so readily embrace Jackie's claim that her husband was not only a great leader, but also an Arthur-type figure?

Over the course of the following pages, I will argue that there are three categories of rhetoric characteristic of Kennedy's career that ensured his permanent place within American history as the modern Arthur: visual rhetoric, campaign speech rhetoric, and crisis time rhetoric. Additionally, a fourth rhetorical category has organically attached itself to his presidency in the years following his assassination: rhetoric of collective memory and cultural trauma. The sum total of these four categories composes Camelot's rhetoric. Camelot can never be replicated or resuscitated, as to do so would require that these four rhetorical categories not only be present in a president's administration, but that they also be present in the same degree and under the same circumstances that initiated and characterized them in the first place, and that they be executed in the same manner as they were by Kennedy. Because the passage of time continuously shapes politics as well as culture, and because the present political and cultural climate is vastly different from that of the 1960s, Kennedy's Camelot can never again exist—it is impossible to replicate the rhetoric that shaped and defined it.

A Brief Historical Overview of Kennedy's Career

John F. Kennedy's association with politics dated earlier than his campaigns for representative, senator, or president; as the grandson of former Boston mayor John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, and son of former United States Ambassador to the United Kingdom Joseph P. Kennedy, John grew up in a prominent family, surrounded by politicians (Hersh 35, 44-47, 63). The Kennedys were a large, wealthy family very familiar with the social scenes of both America and Europe (Hersh 63). After returning from World War II as a decorated war hero, Kennedy sought political office (Hersh 14). When he did so, he already had support from his grandfather's and father's political alliances; all he needed to do, then, was add to the backing granted him by his forebearers' careers with voters he won over on his own—a task he embraced and at which he excelled.

Kennedy began his political career by serving in the United States House of Representatives from 1947 until 1953. He then served in the United States Senate until 1960, when he began his presidential campaign. In neither position did he prove anything to suggest great leadership qualities; his job performance was merely average (Sorensen 43). However, after extensive campaigning, he won the presidential election and was inaugurated as the youngest American President on January 20th, 1961 (Sorensen 179; "John Fitzgerald Kennedy"). Almost immediately, Kennedy faced a number of crises that threatened the country with nuclear holocaust, mounting tensions between the U.S. and Communist nations, financial upheavals in the economic and business sectors, and unchecked racism in the southern region. In fact, the Bay of Pigs incident took place in April of 1961—only three months after his inauguration (Chase and Lerman 65). Other

situations such as the Berlin Crisis, Steel Crisis, Cuban Missile Crisis, and segregation riots in Alabama and Mississippi are among the most infamous of the other crises Kennedy faced while president, yet still do not portray an exhaustive list of the challenging circumstances he confronted (see Kern, Levering and Levering 37, as well as Sorensen 393, 635, 661 for additional crises). In fact, the Bay of Pigs incident took place in April of 1961—only three months after his inauguration (Chase and Lerman 65). As history books have recorded, the situation did not end well for the new president, and nearly squelched his approval ratings. However, throughout all the crises, including that of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy relied on a specific style of rhetoric to not only explain the matters at hand to the general public, but to also maintain, and even accrue more, support from American citizens.

Conflict characterized Kennedy's administration until he was assassinated in the midst of escalating national and international stress (Depoe 220). Trying situations such as those that gave birth to the Vietnam War, only waxed in the years following his death (Schlesinger 996-97, 1009). As Bruce Miroff notes, "Kennedy's death came to organize popular understanding of modern American history…After his assassination, the nation found itself spiraling downward, into race riots, overseas catastrophes, and economic stagnation" (qtd. in Brigance 7-8). Although Kennedy would have had to face the "race riots, overseas catastrophes, and economic stagnation" had he lived, and even though his presidential efficacy would have in turn reflected such circumstances, his administration ended on a relatively positive note, and is therefore still regarded as Camelot, a "golden age" in Washington that crumbled upon the President's November 1963 assassination (Brigance 7; Murphy 577-78). Rather than assume he would have made mistakes if and

when he encountered the pressures his successors did, Americans typically assume he would have solved any conflict before the brink of destruction, much as he did during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In addition to the downward spiral of specific events jumpstarted by Kennedy's assassination, such as the increasingly unwinnable Vietnam War, larger and more general circumstances ensued that also brought with them cause for alarm, such as the social uproar against the traditional values of the 1950s, and, maybe more importantly, a cynical distrust of the government (Brigance 7-8). After he was struck down and could no longer protect the nation, the political arena suffered, and the nation replaced the safety formerly felt under his leadership with uncertainty and fear. His posthumous apotheosis speaks to the positive effect he had on has country that was immediately missed by the public upon his death. Research produced since his assassination proves his positive impact was largely due to rhetorical qualities. However, scholars often disagree as to what rhetorical components were most significant in the Kennedy White House. While an exhaustive meta analysis of all rhetorical devices Kennedy used would prove overwhelming for a thesis of this scope, key strategies consistently appeared between 1960 and 1963 that merit closer examination. Thus, those strategies upon which Kennedy often relied will be investigated by aligning them with the respective proper rhetorical theory so as to prove his persuasive appeal was not accidental, but instead followed patterns that were meant to influence the public the way they did.

Relevant Theories for Evaluating Camelot

For each of the rhetorical categories that helped create Camelot, specific theories apply that explain how Kennedy's use of rhetorical strategies appealed to the public. He understood how to use visual media to the best of his advantage and thus gain voter interest. He was well aware at the start of his career that his physical appearance would be a great asset to him, and knew securing voters required him to visually portray himself as a competent, qualified, desirable politician. To do so, Kennedy continued replicating the visual rhetoric he had grown up demonstrating: portraying an individual and family image consisting of, well-dressed, athletic, intellectual, and seemingly happy, wholesome members with whom the American public could identify. In other words, he kept up an "'ordinary' demeanor—a quality that in itself is extraordinary among politicians" (Sorensen 19). This concept served him exceptionally well during the 1960 presidential campaign, as his athletically fit, bronzed body suggested youthful health. Images of he and his young wife Jackie, who was expecting their second child toward the end of the campaign, and their young daughter Caroline visually represented what was widely regarded as the average nuclear family unit (Hersh 88). When Jackie and Caroline were unable to travel the campaign circuit because of the former's pregnancy, Kennedy's sisters and mother stepped in to add the feminine appeal and balance his wife and daughter were unable to (Sorensen 173). The televised campaign debates with Nixon further proved an invaluable means by which to attract voters. In fact, studies report that among citizens who listened to the first debate on the radio, Nixon was thought to have won; among those who watched it on television, Kennedy was considered the winner (Druckman 563; Hersh 155). Although three subsequent televised debates followed, the

tone the initial one set indicated good reason for Kennedy to so optimistically rely on visual media during his campaign and presidency.

Relevant theories that will be explored in the coming chapter to explain how such visual rhetoric impacted the public in these situations include the following as informed by Deanna Sellnow: media logic, a theory first offered by David Altheide and Robert Snow that explains how and why visual media caught the attention of so many Americans; David Horton and R. Richard Wohl's parasocial relationship theory, which deals with the feelings of intimacy in one-sided relationships; visual pleasure theory, originally conceptualized by Laura Mulvey, which demonstrates how physical appearance satisfies the male gaze; psychoanalytic theory as originally informed by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, which uses scopopheia and narcissism to explain why audiences find certain images to be pleasurable; and Albert Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes how individuals act as role models for others.

The second rhetorical category necessary to Camelot's existence was campaign rhetoric. Although a member of a well-known and attractive family, Kennedy was not associated with such a strong tradition in terms of campaign speech-making. In fact, scholars have noted that during the early stages of his 1960 campaign, he lacked the oratorical skills that later came to characterize his speeches (Powell 59). Despite serving as both a representative and senator before running for executive office, and almost being chosen as Adlai Stevenson's running mate in the presidential campaign of 1956, Kennedy was, as of 1959, a rather awkward public speaker, according to friend and *The Making of the President: 1960* author Theodore H. White (Schlesinger 9; qtd. in Powell 59). Within the year that the young senator spent travelling the country recruiting voters he hoped

would place him in the White House, he grew from the awkward, untrained orator of 1959 into the polished, suave speaker of 1960 who left his legendary—and permanent—mark on American politics. Scholars and politicians alike have attested to Kennedy's memorable rhetoric, as John W. Gardner, editor of *To Turn the Tide* notes: "President Kennedy [had] an extraordinary capacity to express himself in speech and in writing. Rarely has an American President stated the nation's problems with such clarity, or voiced its aspirations so movingly" (vii). Some scholars argue that factors such as these, and not the actual content of his speeches, composed the bulk of Kennedy's rhetorical appeal. For example, James Powell identifies in his article "Reactions to John F. Kennedy's Delivery Skills During the 1960 Campaign" the personable and affable tactics Kennedy used to attract voters and build his legacy, such as his natural demeanor, energetic delivery, frequent eye contact, and candid sense of humor that often analyzed emotional moments in an objective tone so as to inject levity into otherwise predictable, and occasionally boring, political engagements. None of the memorable qualities of Kennedy's speechmaking Powell listed dealt with the statistical, logical, or analytical aspects of the speech's content (59, 62, 64, 66). Close friend and advisor Theodore Sorensen also took note of Kennedy's candid humor in his book, *Kennedy*: "I came to marvel at his…candid and objective responses to public questions" (13). A brief example of this last rhetorical strategy is aptly illustrated by Kennedy's response to being asked by a reporter where he found so much bravery so as to not only voluntarily enlist in the service during World War II, but to also save his comrades after their U-boat was sunk by Axis powers. Kennedy responded with the following: "It was involuntary. They sunk my boat" (Moy 247). On another occasion, after being swarmed by warm-wishers during a

campaign appearance, he joked that he would "never know…why anyone would leave his home just to watch a politician go by," demonstrating his ability to separate from his own interest in the campaign and view it objectively (Sorensen 180). Even when speaking to those who did not support him in the campaign, he retained his characteristic sense of humor; when a drunken woman threw a glass of whiskey in his face in Milwaukee, he simply "wiped off the whiskey, handed back the tumbler and said in even tones, 'Here's your glass'" (181). Neither friend nor foe could faze his sense of humor, and because of his reactions to both protagonistic and antagonistic situations, he easily drew laughs and voters alike. Of course, humor was not his only rhetorical strategy during the campaign.

Relevant theories that will be used in the following chapters to interpret how his campaign rhetoric beneficially functioned include the following: concepts from Aristotle's second cannon; Max Weber's theory of charismatic leaders; John Murphy's theory of heroic tradition in presidential rhetoric; Edward Corbett's theory of elocution; and George Campbell's theory on wit and humor.

Kennedy's campaign rhetoric proved successful in aiding him to election victory, and he was sworn into office in January 1961. At the time of Kennedy's election, the American public still widely regarded the federal government as fair and truly democratic: "Kennedy…had the advantage of his generation, of sharing involvement in foreign policy issues with the press during a self-confident epoch before the shattering results of the nation's Vietnam policies inaugurated a process that altered public attitudes toward presidential authority" (Kern, Levering, and Levering 6). Although America would face much tougher times following the President's death, Kennedy entered office

with the mindset that most situations were "problems" or "crises," and thus aimed to influence American citizens to share that view, regardless of the relatively peaceful time in which he became president. Some scholars even argue that because Kennedy suffered a traumatic experience in World War II, he was conditioned to interpret all political situations encountered during his career as potential crises that could, and would, quickly grow uncontrollable (Meagher 50). Just as he had predicted, Kennedy found himself, and his country, dealing with tense situations that required of him a certain type of rhetoric when informing the American public; though he selected from a vast resource bank of rhetorical strategy during crises, five particular techniques repeatedly appeared during his tenure. In addition, one technique which appeared only once was so unique to his administration and American politics at that time that it deserves special attention.

The six previously mentioned characteristic techniques and rhetorical theories, although not always explained through a specific established theory, demonstrate Kennedy's crisis handling methods. These techniques, which will be covered in the upcoming chapters, include the following: arousing fear in the public concerning inevitable crises, using antithesis to encourage nonpartisan cooperation and civic service to overcome crises, appealing to time, making no promises about crises' outcomes, manipulating the press to portray the most favorable interpretation of the outcomes, and, when left no other choice, admitting strategic mistakes and taking responsibility for undesirable outcomes.

Pulling the nation through times of peril, or as Kennedy termed it, the "hour of maximum danger," qualified him in the eyes of many Americans as a decent, possibly even above-average, leader (Kennedy 4; Sheatsley and Feldman 205). Although approval

ratings published approximately two weeks before his assassination showed no signs of undue esteem nor of unwarranted disdain, his legacy was entombed within the league of the heroic following his 1963 assassination (Sheatsley and Feldman 205; Brigance 5). The nation witnessed the violent and traumatic death suffered by the youngest president to have ever resided in the Oval Office when he was shot to death during a televised and heavily attended parade in Dallas. Swayed by their emotions following the tragedy, many citizens reported thoughts and opinions toward Kennedy that were much kinder than those they would have normally expressed (Sheatsley and Feldman 205). The enduring reputation Kennedy left behind is one of extraordinary persuasive appeal entombed within an untouchable mythic framework constructed by his widow, passed down through the generations, and still highly regarded as of the current day.

Examining Kennedy's assassination through the lens of collective memory and cultural trauma explains how he transitioned from the realm of mortals to that of legends. Relevant theorists and concepts that will be consulted in the following chapters include the following: Judith Herman's trauma theory concerning the nature and consequences of trauma; Susannah Radstone's examination of trauma's context; Marco Bacciagaluppi's and Eliżbieta Halas' studies of psychic trauma's outcomes on collective memory; Emile Durkheim's theory on collective response to cultural experiences; and Victor Roudometof's research in cultural trauma's transmission through the generations.

Throughout all rhetorical situations, Kennedy strove for an immortal and permanent legacy. Kennedy's life and time in office embodies the "modern American hero tale, [as] the life and career of John F. Kennedy, is perhaps even the major American mythology of our time. It has spread out across a proliferating chain of contemporary

texts, meditations of a culture attempting passage through its present doubt and confusion" (Hellman ix-x). However, there are those who hold that Kennedy's rhetoric was rooted in impure motives, therefore he does not deserve to be regarded as a hero: "I believe Kennedy's rhetoric, while idealistic, is not innocent," as Camelot did lead to Vietnam, among other negative situations (Blackmore 167). Although certain ramifications did occur as a result of Kennedy's legislative policies and the public is now aware of the many scandals with which the late president is associated, it is still undeniable that "John Kennedy performed the presidency as a heroic office. Yet it was a peculiarly modern heroism" (Murphy 591). As a rhetorically effective politician who incorporated specific persuasive strategies into his visual appearance, presidential campaign, and handling of crises, the permanent scar left on the American collective memory following his assassination is no surprise, nor is his heroic legacy. He was an American Arthur, and he alone will be the only President ever associated with the American Camelot. Because of the unique rhetorical factors that led to its creation and solidification in this nation's history, Kennedy's Camelot can never again exist.

# CHAPTER 2

# VISUAL RHETORIC

This chapter examines the visual rhetoric theories relevant to how John Kennedy garnered support from the American public, including media logic theory, parasocial relationship theory, visual pleasure and psychoanalytic theory, and social learning theory.

Visual rhetoric played an initial and ongoing role in shaping Camelot, as images of the Kennedy family circulated in both America and Europe before John even initiated his political career (Collier and Horowitz 90). To understand through a scholarly lens how and why the public found the Kennedys, specifically John, appealing, five particular concepts and theories prove useful: media logic theory, parasocial relationship theory, visual pleasure theory, psychoanalytic theory, and social learning theory. Examples demonstrating these concepts and theories include the novelty of the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates, the intimacy of Jackie's White House tour, the pleasing appearance of John and Jackie in photographs, and Jackie's influence on fashion. These rhetorical situations served as the foundation on which Camelot was built; without the visual nature of Kennedy's life, campaign, and presidency, it is doubtful the Camelot myth would have taken hold.

## *Media Logic*

Media logic theory, first coined by David Altheide and Robert Snow, "focuses on the degree to which viewers tend to take the medium and its social uses for granted and,

thus, to fail to realize how it influences us to believe and behave about what is *normal*, *good*, *desirable*, and so forth" (Sellnow 162, emphasis hers). Although televised presidential debates are common practice in contemporary society, television as a source of disseminating political campaign material in 1960 was a novelty to the American public. Because the televised 1960 debates were unique in this manner, more Americans engaged in the campaign than would have otherwise (Becker and Lower 49; Windt, Jr., "The Public Presidency 94). Thus, using television as a means to garner support was a strategic rhetorical decision, and one that Kennedy heavily favored until his death: "The presidential administration of John F. Kennedy is widely seen as having significantly expanded the interaction between White House politics and broadcast television" (Marcus 77). Although his preference for media centered political activity (such as his weekly press conferences [Salinger ix]), became common in the years following his election, the debates between him and Nixon emphasized the innovation of a televised presidential debate. As one scholar notes, "Under our governmental conventions, no president engage[d] in face-to-face debate with the titular head of the opposing political party. President Kennedy, for instance, [did] not ordinarily debate with Mr. Nixon or Mr. Eisenhower as head of the Republican Party. At most he engages in long-range sniping through press conferences" (Laswell 21). There were no face-to-face debates like the Great Debate between Kennedy and Nixon prior to the 1960 campaign because of two particular reasons: 1. Candidates were "not willing to risk the hazards of debate" and 2. There was "no medium which…[made] such encounters so logical and compelling" (Sarnoff 57). However, when Senator Kennedy insisted he and Vice President Nixon

participate in at least four televised debates, the nature of presidential elections changed permanently (Laswell 19).

The visual rhetoric of the televised appearances played such a critical role in shaping the reputation of Kennedy, his family, and administration that at least one scholar has suggested that

> Few viewers paid attention to what he said, but people who would never read a complete transcript of a press conference were able to watch their President handle the press. In those innocent times, it was the drama of Kennedy facing reporters. His mastery of them produced more drama than 'hard news'…In such a rancorous environment, Kennedy appeared relaxed, alert, precise, unruffled—in sum, calmly courageous (Windt, Jr., "The Public Presidency" 94)

Although no studies were performed following the debates to question the effect of novel media use on citizens' candidate preference, it is reasonable to assume under media logic theory that citizens were so focused on *seeing* the drama of the presidential debates play out on television that they forgot to thoroughly *listen* to the candidates' actual responses, and thus remained unaware to some degree of each man's ideas and policies. Although this could be seen as a hindrance, the visual nature of televised debates only served to benefit the young and appealing Kennedy. In fact, those who listened to the debates on the radio considered Nixon victorious, but those who watched the debates on television considered Kennedy victorious (Hersh 155). However, other researchers are more modest in their conclusions regarding winners and losers such as Tannenbaum, Greenberg, and Silverman, who claim that while Nixon definitely did not win the debates, Kennedy did

not necessarily win them, either (287). Even if no clear winner could be determined, Kennedy did gain via the televised debates. Media logic, then, worked in his favor while simultaneously working to the disfavor of Nixon.

Because "the candidates—both seasoned radio and television performers'—and their advisers, both political and technical, realized the tremendous impact of the media with its 'winner-take-all' implications" during these debates, it seems as if they should have begun the series on equal footing (Seltz and Yoakam 73). Unfortunately for Nixon, Kennedy seemed to experience 'beginner's luck' and almost always came out on top during these televised debates. For example, during the crucial initial debate, "Kennedy drew the first position in the first debate, a turn of fate his advisers considered very important. Nixon, therefore, went first on the last debate" (77). Although going first in the last debate may at first seem like a win for Nixon, the truth was that at this point in the debate series, most Americans had already made up their minds and stopped viewing (and/or listening to) the debates. A worthwhile question, then, is why had Americans already stopped listening? Although no scholarship can as of yet provide any definite answer, certain characteristics of Kennedy's may have had an impact on viewers'/voters' decisions at the ballots.

During the televised debates, Kennedy displayed before a national audience physical qualities and responses in action that would not have been witnessed on such a large scale sans the medium of television. In other words, he was "alive" during the debates. Moreover, Nixon's illness and habitual scowling during the initial debate not only became a lasting image in the minds of Americans for the duration of the series, but also portrayed the latter as quite the opposite of the energetic Kennedy: he had recently

lost weight following knee surgery, he was a running a fever, was perspiring heavily, did not focus his eyes, and was fatigued (Sorensen "13 Lessons" 20; Seltz and Yoakam 95). However, even had he been well, Kennedy seemed to be a "natural" in front of the camera, and was thus stiff competition to the older, weary Vice President:

> When Nixon went on camera for a pre-show check, his representatives were in the control room. They asked for certain lighting changes to reduce a shine on his temple and for the floor lights to be raised in intensity to increase his eye light. CBS personnel and the Kennedy advisers looked at Kennedy for about the same amount of time—three or four minutes—and made no changes. (Seltz and Yoakam 85)

Before the pre-show check, Nixon's chief adviser mentioned the Vice President's pale skin and dark hair were difficult to favorably light, an issue that the tanned Kennedy did not experience (85). Simply put, the latter made for a better subject of television cameras than did the former. Kennedy, then, not only physically appealed to the audience because of his own appearance, but also because of the sharp discrepancy between his looks and Nixon's. While appearances may not have played such a large role in affecting voters in any other venue, such as a face-to-face town hall meeting or a typical campaign speech or rally, the televised nature of the Great Debates brought with it factors that Nixon had not had to deal with in other political activities; never had he been required to debate with another candidate in front of the nation under such conditions. Kennedy, on the other hand, thrived in this sort of environment, and the difference between his image and Nixon's did not go unnoticed by a public being introduced for the first time to televised presidential debates.

*Parasocial Relationship*

In addition to media logic as a theory for interpreting Kennedy's visual rhetoric, parasocial relationship theory also plays a crucial role in creating Camelot. As defined by Deanna Sellnow, parasocial relationships are those relationships that are "one-sided…where one party knows a great deal about the other party, but the other does not. Parasocial relationships often occur between celebrities and fans" (165). Because the First Family possesses celebrity-like fame, this theory exploring how intimacy and privacy influences the masses to feel as if they personally know someone promises a high degree of relevance. One particular instance operated on such a personal note and thus aided in the formation of a parasocial relationship between the First Family and the public: Jackie's White House tour following the redecoration. Interestingly, the President's opinion of the White House tour was that it only served to make him appear foolish, as he felt his small role in it made the entire event too informal; however, viewers reacted positively to the tour, due in large part to the informal, and thus personable, feel. The tour created a sense of intimacy between the public and the First Family because it emphasized the similarity in domestic concerns shared by Jackie and families across the nation, because the televised nature of it brought viewers straight into the White House itself, and because John referred to his wife informally, which reflected privacy between the couple, and let the American public take part in that private reference.

Firstly, Kennedy's willingness to allow cameras into the family's home did much to remind the American public that although the Kennedys were held in highest esteem and considered American royalty, they were similar to the average American in certain regards. Jackie's interest in and commitment to redecorating the family's home mirrors a

concern with which many families can identify. As opposed to discussing public policy, legislation, or international affairs, the First Family was instead discussing their choice to use certain colors in certain rooms, and provided information on the White House's decorations. Thus, the tour added a personal side to what was formerly a more professional parasocial relationship; although the American public had seen the Kennedys on television before, this was the first time the family spoke directly to the public about non-political matters in a way that was relatable to the public. Although Jackie had previously given interviews in which she discussed her parenting style and personal feelings of her husband's career, these interviews always framed her as more than just the average wife or mother—she was the First Lady, and therefore different than the rest of America's ladies. Although redecorating the White House is different than redecorating any other house, the medium of the television did not deny Jackie authority in framing the tour as that of a "normal" American home.

Secondly, the tour's televised nature brought the event into living rooms across the country, characterizing it with intimacy and immediacy. Whereas magazines surrounded Jackie's interviews with their reporters' own words mentioning Jackie's elevated status as First Lady, Jackie herself spoke directly to the public over the television, and was thus able to portray the event as she wished. Because she focused not so much on her status as First Lady or the fact that the White House was the subject of redecoration rather than a typical house, she fostered a sense of sameness with the American public. The American public experienced the tour as if they had a more personal relationship with the Kennedys—as if they had actually been inside the Kennedy's home and walked with Jackie through the redecorated rooms. The television,

then, let Jackie express herself as a woman interested in domestic matters while allowing the public to feel they were getting to know her—a woman just like every other woman—a little more intimately. This feeling of intimacy was further established when John made his small appearance during the tour, and committed what he felt was an embarrassing mistake.

Thirdly, John's small flub (if it can even be considered a flub at all) added to the creation of a parasocial relationship between the Kennedys and the American public. When he briefly interrupted the tour and called his wife "Jackie" as opposed to "Jacqueline," he did not initially take notice. It was only after this fact was pointed out to him by a family friend that he realized his mistake (Bradlee 57-8). In fact, the informality of "Jackie" as opposed to "Jacqueline" may have even aided the familiarity Americans felt to the Kennedys that resulted from the White House tour; not only were Americans in the White House with the First Family, but now they were on a first name basis—and an informal one, at that. Although John never publically referred to his wife as "Jackie" after the White House tour, its inclusion could only serve to foster a sense of intimacy that is needed for the establishment of a parasocial relationship (Bradlee 58; Sellnow 165).

*Visual Pleasure*

Visual pleasure theory asserts that "visual images in the media encourage viewers to *look pleasurably* at female images via a *male gaze*," which is the way one looks at the subject of a visual image through the lens of a male, even if the viewer is not a male (Sellnow 144, emphasis hers). As President and First Lady, the Kennedys were the subject of much media attention. While traditional understandings of the male gaze focus

on how females are depicted, I argue that John himself was also the subject of the male gaze. Rather than look at him in a sexual manner, though, viewers could find pleasure in his image by identifying valuable qualities he possessed, such as the power and position he represented. In other words, he was pleasurable to look at because of his authority as Chief Executive. Additionally, I argue that Jackie was pleasurable to the female gaze because of her embodiment of the feminine ideal—a devoted wife and mother who exhibited current fashion; in other words, women looked to her as a role model, and found her image thus pleasurable.

Psychoanalytic theory, in which visual pleasure theory is rooted, argues that people enjoy viewing images that remind them of themselves, or of a better version of themselves that they could be (Sellnow 147). Simply put, people like to see other people that reflect characteristics the already have or aspire to. John Kennedy was young, tan, and appeared physically fit (Sorensen, *Kennedy* 23-4). He was confident, calm, and had a sense of humor (13-14). Because these qualities are associated with him, his image comes to represent all those characteristics. Kennedy's image then, communicates metonymically, as it compacts all the desirable qualities of the American President in a single image (Sellnow 143). Thus, when one looked at a picture of Kennedy, one saw beyond a man in a suit—he was the charismatic young President with an appealing personality (Sorensen, *Kennedy* 24). Additionally, he possessed the most power an individual in American society can possess. Thus, when people viewed his image, they associated his person with that desirable quality of power, and could then identify their own positions of power (even though those positions were not associated with the same amount of power as the President's). Kennedy's image also served as a reminder of the

power to which presumably anyone in the country could rise. This idea of relating to power via visual images of the President relates mostly to the way a male would react to John. However, females could relate to John as the image of a father and husband, identifying in him characteristics their own husbands embodied. Thus, when they saw the President, they saw a man reflecting the American ideals that were likely existent in their own homes and families, and about which their own husbands cared. In addition to John's image as a source of visual pleasure, First Lady Jackie also represented qualities that gave her image a pleasurable appeal.

As First Lady, Jackie supported her husband's career by entertaining guests at lavish White House parties, participating in interviews and politically-related trips, and taking interest in causes her husband supported, such as improving relations with foreign nations (Gerston 56). In addition to her responsibilities to her husband, she also had obligations to her children. Visual images of Jackie, then, acted metonymically to remind American women of the feminine ideals of that time. While images of Jackie could also be assessed through the male gaze, to limit her image as only the target of a male viewer while ignoring the impact that same image had on women would be a major flaw; Jackie was a role model for women, after all, especially in regards to fashion.

*Social Learning Theory*

Albert Banduras' social learning theory asserts that individuals learn how to behave by observing and imitating others (Sellnow 164). As the most powerful family in the country, the Kennedys were in such a privileged position that other Americans could look to them for examples of how to behave, think, and even dress. The influence of the

First Family on citizens reflects Banduras' idea of the symbolic model—the Kennedys, through photographs and television, influenced others' way of living. In fact, it is sound to assume these images did have quite an impact in light of recent research: "Visual material is felt far more viscerally than text, and human beings are far less skilled at guarding their judgment against this style of persuasion. One implication is that communicators gifted in the use of visual rhetoric will thus exert enormous influence over target audiences" (Gurri, Denny, and Harms 102). The same research team later states that political messages are especially likely to persuade constituencies by demonstrating certain ideals, glorifying leadership, and portraying patriotism (104). The Kennedys model these strategic appeals, and their images had much sway over Americans' opinions of politics, and American life in general, at that time. The Kennedys embodied the American dream, and reminded citizens what that meant via their images (106). In other words, ordinary citizens could look at visual representations of the Kennedys and be reminded of what it meant to be patriotic, to be American, to be optimistic about the New Frontier—to be a Kennedy. Although the President had much power in terms of portraying a certain image, his wife's rhetorical appeal is also worth investigation, as her sense of style left quite a mark on the American public.

A major category of influence over which the First Family exercised control was the fashion industry. In her collection of Jackie Kennedy photographs, Jill Gerston mentions the impact the First Lady had on the fashion world:

> Jacqueline Kennedy entered the White House and completely transformed the image of the first lady. She brought youth, vitality, and sophistication...to the stuffy confines of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Her

> beauty and understated elegance captivated the public and captured the spirit of change that was taking place in the nation. (55)

Gerston goes on to say in the same article that Jackie's fashion, sophistication, and concerns with issues such as the arts inspired American women to embrace similar styles and ambitions. Testifying to Jackie's influence was the special exhibition of her clothing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the event which inspired Gerston's article (56). In conclusion, Jackie's role as fashionable model in regards to both dress and behavior fit her role as the President's wife while also demonstrating a way of life that inspired many women, who learned how to be feminine by taking cues from the First Lady (Hummer 404). As gender theorist Brett Lunceford states, "Clothing is far more than simply garments that cover one's body. Rather, clothing has social and political implications" (67). By choosing to dress in a feminine manner, Jackie conveyed to the public that it was not only appropriate, but also desirable, to dress in such a way. Although an examination of her fashion's influence on gender performance and the resulting consequences would prove valuable for a full understanding of how social learning theory affects women, it is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, what remains easily seen from this brief look at her fashion is the iconic role she played in shaping Camelot's rhetoric and influencing the American (feminine) public.

# CHAPTER 3

# CAMPAIGN RHETORIC

This chapter examines the specific rhetorical strategies that characterized Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign, including his use of ethos centered in his veteran status, his use of wit and humor, and his elocution.

## *Ethos*

According to Corbett's explanation of Aristotle's second canon, successful use of ethos as a persuasive appeal is rooted in a speaker's character. Once that person has "ingratiated himself of herself with an audience—and thereby gained their trust and admiration," that person can more easily persuade the audience to support him or her in whatever context (23-4). Corbett later goes on to mention that if the speaker cannot gain trust from the audience, all other rhetorical strategies will most likely prove futile, as audiences are quite reluctant to be swayed by an persuasive strategy of a person whom they cannot identify or trust (24). Kennedy understood that trust was important in attracting voters. Because his family name was a familiar one in politics, he had a head start in the presidential campaign. However, by emphasizing his ethos in another manner, he ensured himself even more support.

Beyond relying on the political careers of his father and grandfather, Kennedy's status as a veteran of World War II served to propel his popularity with the public. Not only had he served his country during one of its darkest hours, but he had also come home celebrated—he received the Purple Heart award for his brave actions after Axis

powers sunk his U-boat and he pulled his comrades to safety despite life-threatening injuries of his own (*Sorensen*, Kennedy 18). His service greatly boosted his chances on the political scene, as it made him a charismatic leader, according to Max Weber's theory. Charismatic leaders are qualified to rule the masses because they have shown "heroism or exemplary character" (Weber 175). Leaders with charisma display supernatural-like qualities, and in the minds of the public, represent a different breed of human altogether. Charismatics are those individuals who earn the right to lead by one of three means: possessing magical powers, leading the hunt, or being heroic in war (177). Although Kennedy's survival in war could be interpreted as proof of magical powers, his main claim to rightful leadership rested in his service. When he returned to America and embarked on his political campaigns, his status as a war veteran did more to propel his chances at victory than did his prestigious last name; as Weber highlights in his work, charismatic leaders, even if born to privilege, are charismatic because of a unique quality they possess, not one shared by many others, even family members (178). Thus, if Kennedy's appeal to ethos was found in his war veteran status, the question arises as to why he, and not another war veteran, became so highly regarded and exuded such charismatic appeal and authority. Although many politicians have served in the military and even received awards for their efforts, few leaders made as light of that time as John Kennedy, who often joked about his Purple Heart when publicly asked about his time in World War II. When combined with his sense of humor and sharp wit, Kennedy's ethos as veteran and charismatic gained strength.

*Wit and Humor*

As rhetorical devices, wit and humor add life to campaign speeches that are usually characterized by legislative, policy-filled jargon about what aspirations a candidate hopes to one day fulfill. In the midst of serious questions and answers, humor goes a long way to inject life into an otherwise dry speech. Additionally, humor allows an audience to see that the speaker understands how not to take him or herself too seriously. As rhetorician George Campbell said,

> The subject of humour is always character, but not everything in character; its foibles generally, such as caprices, little extravagancies, weak anxieties, jealousies, childish fondness, pertness, vanity, and self-conceit. One finds the greatest scope for exercising this talent in telling familiar stories, or in acting any whimsical part in amused character. (16)

Because Kennedy's character—his ethos—lay at the heart of his qualification to lead in political office, his sense of humor about his own person demonstrated a comfort with public scrutiny of his life. One of his most famous humorous remarks occurred when "a flippant high school youth asked him…how he came to be a hero, he gaily replied, "It was easy—they sank my boat" (Sorensen, *Kennedy* 18). Although he could have replied with some long speech about his injuries, and the threat of Axis powers overtaking his unit, he instead modestly reported he had neither intention nor autonomy in becoming a hero. He took an epic story and portrayed it as nothing more than mere accident. Later in his campaign, when military professionals surrounded him with hopes of placing a serviceman in the Oval Office, Kennedy did not let his own glorified past fog his vision of those whom he thought less than reputable; he even told a friend he had serious doubts

regarding such generals and admirals because of the "superhuman ability of the Navy to screw up everything they touch" (qtd. in Sorensen, *Kennedy* 18). In a similar vein, Erik Hansen notes in his article on presidential rhetoric that Kennedy's speeches often contained friendly jocosity in the midst of serious content (114).

Kennedy's humor was not reserved only for those who supported him, but also characterized those tense moments when he encountered a dissenter. While campaigning in Cincinnati, the locals laughed at his New England pronunciation of the city. Rather than feel embarrassed or ashamed, Kennedy merely remarked that he was from Boston, and would be happy to explain to them how to pronounce it (Sorensen, *Kennedy* 180). During another speech, when a small group of Nixon supporters interrupted him with a "We want Nixon" chant, Kennedy simply replied, "I don't think you're going to get him, though," then later addressed a conclusion to "all you young Nixonites—all eight of you" (181). Rather than let dissension defeat him, Kennedy relied on his humor to continue winning support and endure the trials of the campaign. Fortunately for him, "every situation had its humor," and thus he never had to try too hard to make light of the even the most challenging and tiring circumstances (180).

Even after his election, Kennedy continued to make light of serious situations as a means to dispel stress and handle situations more level-headed. Friend and reporter Ben Bradlee once asked Kennedy how he planned to break the news to the public that he was going to chose his brother Bobby as Secretary General. Kennedy responded with the following: "Well…I think I'll open the door if the Georgetown house some morning about 2:00 A.M., look up and down the street, and if there's no one there, I'll whisper 'It's Bobby.'" (Bradlee 38). Similar reports of his use of humor to handle an array of

situations, from informal and relaxed to the most stressful, reflect his reliance on humor as a way to both attract supporters and make sense in his own mind of the events happening around him.

*Elocution*

As Corbett instructs in his text on classical rhetoric, flawed elocution and delivery can be fatal for the rhetor. Among the issues he touches on and in which Kennedy lacked at the beginning of his presidential campaign is articulation (410), a problem with delivery that nearly cost Kennedy voters simply because they could not understand him (Powell 60)

Kennedy's campaign rhetoric was initially filled of botched elocution. As James Powell notes, Kennedy did not start the 1960 presidential campaign as a naturally gifted speaker, but needed much training to become the suave orator he is now remembered as (59). Although he possessed charm and confidence, his delivery of speeches lacked the poise characteristic of his personality when not on the campaign trail. For example, Powell states Kennedy initially spoke so quickly that many listeners could not understand the majority of what he said; he was once clocked as saying 100 more words than the average person would say in a sixty second period (59-60). Compounding this difficulty was his habitual pronunciation of "s" as "z" and "sh" as "zh" (60). Add to those problems his pitch, which was reported as being too high during the campaign's early days, and Kennedy represents a litany of oratorical mistakes. However, after coaching and experience, he began transforming into a more polished speaker.

After learning to control his speed, consonant pronunciation, and pitch, Kennedy's enthusiasm and determination took center stage as opposed to his communicative shortcomings. Kennedy's speeches were now "vivid, energetic, memorable, and…eloquent" (Bose 6). His energetic appeal permeated in his words: "He looked, acted, and talked in a vigorous way. Indeed, so much so that during the televised speeches of October 31 and November 4, 1960, Kennedy's characteristic jabbing of the lecturn with his index finger came over the microphone as a heavy 'thump-thump'" (Powell 62). In other words, his zealous delivery was captivating and alive. He even felt confident enough with his skills to deviate from the prepared text and ad lib when it suited the situation better than what had been written (Sorensen, *Kennedy* 177). He did not shy from interjecting thoughts with "spontaneous remarks" which were "consistently more effective than his prepared texts because they were delivered with more conviction and vitality" (177).

It was also during this stage of his campaign when he began inserting repetition and antitheses in his speeches, the latter of which would become one of his best known trademarks (and which will be discussed in the next chapter, concerning crisis rhetoric) (Sorensen, *Kennedy* 177; Bose 6). Adding to these positive traits was Kennedy's desire to keep all his speeches short (usually less than twenty minutes) (Powell 65). Because of his vivacious delivery and short duration, people found it easier to follow his words rather than let their thoughts drift, as was prone to happen during longer, slower speeches (61). In fact, what content was contained in his brief speeches was "factual, direct, and specific," thus ensuring the few minutes he did speak was not spent simply with filler (Sorensen, *Kennedy* 177). By the end of the campaign, Kennedy's "oratory became less

frenetic, and even spiced now and then with humor and a sense of kinship with his audiences" (66). At least two months before the election, Kennedy portrayed the type of delivery that reflected his true talent, as he was even compared to the great orators of the past during a September 2, 1960 speech (66). Although elocution is only one among many factors that affected Kennedy's campaign rhetoric, it remains one of the most pressing for further study, as had it remained as it was during his initial campaign days, it is highly unlikely he would have been remembered as the suave politician he came to be known as. Additionally, because he relied so much on speeches to convey information about the status of national and international affairs, especially during times of crisis, had Kennedy not refined his oratory, the country may have experienced undue hardship in trying to discern the thoughts, ideas, and words of its leader.

# CHAPTER 4

# CRISIS RHETORIC

This chapter examines six characteristic rhetorical strategies on which Kennedy relied when persuading the American public to support him during times of national and international crisis: arousing fear, using antithesis to spur civic engagement, appealing to time, making no promises, manipulating the press, and when necessary, apologizing.

John Kennedy faced a series of national and international crises during his presidency, and thus his administration was marked by this characteristic (Windt, Jr., "The Public Presidency 92). His rhetoric during those times proves worthy of study, as such political tension threatened his efficacy as president. Only one crisis is widely regarded as a failure—the Bay of Pigs incident—while the multitude of other crises are popularly regarded as, if not quite victories, at least not failures. Kennedy's ability to face crises reflects the confidence he exuded during his campaign days: "Kennedy was expert in the confrontational crisis presidency, crises largely…under control" (Hansen 111). Because stakes were high in such moments, the way Kennedy maintained control and chose to respond to crises reveals insight into his understanding of persuasion, especially in terms of persuading the American public to support him. When dealing with crises, both potential and actualized, Kennedy relied on six tactics (among others) to garner support: arousing fear in the public concerning inevitable crises, using antithesis to encourage nonpartisan cooperation and civic service to overcome crises, appealing to time by emphasizing the immediate nature of crises, making no promises about crises'

outcomes, manipulating the press to portray the most favorable interpretation of the outcomes, and, when left no other choice, admitting strategic mistakes and taking responsibility for undesirable outcomes, or, simply put, apologizing. General calls to fear the future, the need for civic service on behalf of all citizens, the immediacy of such fear and service, and the ambiguous future appear in several of Kennedy's speeches, but his inaugural address, in addition to setting the tone for his administration, eloquently contains all these appeals. Other speeches demonstrating these appeals were made during specific crises, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the botched Bay of Pigs operation.

*Arousing Fear of Inevitable Crisis*

Apocalyptic rhetoric dominated Kennedy's speeches (Bose 7). In light of developing national and international tensions, John Kennedy believed the 1960s would be a decade of "maximum danger" (Windt 92). Accordingly, "crisis—both domestic and foreign—was the theme of the Kennedy administration," and became a staple of his speeches starting with the one he gave during his inauguration (90). As confidante and speech collaborator Theodore Sorensen later shared in his book *Kennedy*, the amount of crisis content in the inaugural speech was extensive, even to the point of taking Sorensen off guard: "As each successive draft was reviewed, he sought to make more somber his warning to the country of the perils that lay ahead," and continuously inserted new additions to the speech highlighting such perils (292). In John W. Garnder's 1962 collection of Kennedy's speeches, *To Turn the Tide*, the President himself mentioned the impending doom Americans faced in the book's Introduction, which he authored: "In 1961 the American people awakened as never before to a sober realization of the perils

that beset our nation…Neither wind nor tide is always with us. Our course on a dark and stormy sea cannot always be clear" (xvii). A large reason the American people may have "awakened as never before" to the dangers facing the country could be Kennedy's use of fear rhetoric to shake them out of their complacency and sense of safety, reminding them that there are no guarantees in a world on the brink of possible destruction. Some scholars argue he relied on fear so much because he understood firsthand that such fear can "produce the 'hard shocks' capable of influencing public opinion" (Meagher 50). In other words, he knew that if he could create an atmosphere of fear in which the public expected to live, he could keep them in his control by suggesting that despite fear-inducing threats, he had the answer to how to remain safe and survive the threats. In other words, the nation was just as much on the brink of destruction as it was on the brink of unlimited opportunity. His inaugural address demonstrated the tactic to create fear and then act as the fearless leader ready to tackle imminent threats. For example, in the January 20th, 1961 address, Kennedy said the following that reflect fear and the ability to overcome it: "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate," "Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors," "Only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility; I welcome it" (Inaugural Address 3-4). Although there were undoubtedly situations to fear in light of the Cold War and its potential to evolve into World War III, Kennedy understood arousing fear, even when unnecessary or unfounded, could serve to his advantage, and thus repeated this rhetorical tactic in numerous speeches.

On several other occasions, Kennedy reminded his audiences that there would be much to fear in the near future. For example, only one year after his inauguration, Kennedy hinted at the expansive number of threats that, upon entering office, he learned endangered the country:

> No man entering upon this office, regardless of his party, regardless of his previous service in Washington, could fail to be staggered upon learning…the harsh enormity of the trials through which we must pass in the next four years. Each day the crises multiply. Each day their solution grows more difficult. Each day we draw nearer the hour of maximum danger, as weapons spread and hostile forces grow stronger... the tide of events has been running out and time has not been our friend. (qtd. in Gardner 22-3)

To combat the unfavorable tides, Kennedy knew he had to do more than scare Americans into listening to him; he also needed to unite them. Unless the public put aside their differences to battle the threats as a unified force, America would be vulnerable to internal dissension and thus weakened in the face of external warfare. However, if citizens agreed to face terrors together and follow President Kennedy's lead, there was chance of victory. In other words, by instilling a sense of fear into the people, Kennedy assured less dissension among them while simultaneously gaining increased public support.

*Using Antithesis to Encourage Non-Partisan Cooperation and Civic Service*

Kennedy understood the power of using "us-against-them" rhetoric to ensure public support for his planned courses of action; antithesis was hence a major part of creating that dichotomous mindset (Meagher 52). He would identify an enemy to the freedoms enjoyed by Americans, and then remind citizens that in order to retain their rights, they would have to work together against that enemy: "For only with complete dedication by us all to the national interest can we bring our country through the troubled years that lie ahead" (qtd. in Gardner 32). Thus, although the country faced numerous dangers, the President, and those persuaded by his rhetoric, believed any threat could be overcome with nationally unified support. Once secured, though, unified support had to translate into action in order for it to have any impact on political happenings. Thus, when Kennedy unified the public, he then called for increased civic service.

An easy way to accomplish unification and encourage civic service was the use of antithesis, a characteristic staple of many of Kennedy's speeches. The inaugural speech which Kennedy delivered on January 31, 1961 demonstrated the new leader's favoritism of antithesis as a rhetorical strategy to affect his audience. Regarding the speech, Edward Kenny notes "It was peculiarly synchronic. Antithesis is orderly. There is a neatness of arrangement, a symmetry, about its contrasting elements. It offers immediate categorization of viewpoints into distinct polar points. As a rhetorical device of contrast, order and balance, it had particular currency in a disordered age" (19). Demonstrating the neatness of categorization and the simplistic contrasting are the following excerpts of antitheses selected from a transcript of the speech: "To those old allies…to those nations who would make themselves our adversary," "not a victory of party, but a celebration of

freedom," "not because we seek their votes, but because it is right," "we offer not a pledge but a request," "not a new balance of power, but a new world of law," "not as a call to battle…but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle," "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" (Inaugural Address 1-4). For a speech as short as his inaugural one, the amount of antitheses reflects the President's dichotomous mentality—there is good, there is America, there is victory, but there also exists bad, enemies, and failure or defeat.

After pushing antitheses highlighting potential crises, Kennedy called for increases in unified civic service. He felt "that through collective sacrifice and governmental intervention, America could transcend the crises at home and abroad" (Depoe 221). He relied heavily, then, on support from the public. His own past in the military may have laid the foundation for this type of reliance on cooperation between the public and government; as trauma theorist Judith Herman suggests, those exposed to war count on support from fellow fighters: "the situation of constant danger led soldiers to develop extreme emotional dependency upon their peer group…they observed that the strongest protection against psychological breakdown was the morale…of the…fighting unit" (25). Although Kennedy may not have exhibited *extreme* emotional dependency, and although his concern was the *political*, rather than *psychological*, ramifications of a crisis, he did rely upon support from his country—his peers—to survive crisis situations. Thus, his constant outreach to the public to band together as a unified group under his leadership reflects not only his personal past as a war veteran, but his understanding of how a nation should operate: as one group achieving common goals while pitted against a group with opposite goals. Accordingly, in his speeches to the public, Kennedy urged

nonpartisan unification and civic service so as to accomplish all of which the New Frontier was capable. Demonstrating his reliance on the American public, Kennedy told an audience the following:

> Finally, our greatest asset in this struggle is the American people—their willingness to pay the price for these programs; to understand and accept a long struggle; to share their resources with other, less fortunate peoples…to serve in the Peace Corps or the Armed Services or the Federal Civil Service or the Congress…to take part in Civil Defense…and, finally, to practice democracy at home, in all states, with all races, to respect each other and to protect the constitutional rights of all citizens. (qtd. in Gardner 52)

Whether because of his war experience or political training, Kennedy understood that "when presidents declare a 'crisis,' public support dramatically increases, if only momentarily (Windt, Jr. 95-6). By constantly reminding the public of potential crises, Kennedy was constantly increasing his support while reminding citizens how important it was to "live up to their public responsibilities," and thus, serve America so as to defeat their antagonists (95). Kennedy provided the public with a problem/solution framework, and charged citizens with cooperating to produce and effectively carry out the solution. Thus, by framing situations in terms of antithesis and encouraging unified support and public engagement to overcome crises, Kennedy garnered support while preparing the nation for potential danger.

*Appealing to Time*

Time plays a crucial role in moving societies toward political action, and always has (Depoe 217). Accordingly, politicians appeal to citizens' sense of time in order to persuade the masses that their goal must be achieved soon, or even now, if it is to ever be achieved at all. In fact, skilled politicians realize that to best persuade constituents means creating the sense that unless a collective consensus is reached immediately, the nation faces catastrophe: "In the public sphere of argument practice, Goodnight stated, 'Public time is constituted in the urgency created by discourse that reshapes the landscape of common opportunities and constraints'" (Depoe 217-18). Thus, when orators speak about the necessity for quick response, they are tempting listeners to engage in action now, not later:

> While rhetoric is produced at a particular moment in time, the speaker is attempting to construct a persuasive view of time to lead audiences toward desired actions or possibilities. Leff has noted a direct relationship between the sense of time constructed by the rhetor within the textual context of a particular message and the audience's experience of time in defining situations for action: 'Time as experienced in the text becomes a vehicle for transforming time as experienced in the world to which the text refers.' (Depoe 217)

As a rhetorical appeal, urgency pushes individuals into feeling that they are responsible for quick movement so as to ensure minimization of potential crises, that "modern democracy hinge[s] on the actions of [that] moment" (Killingsworth 42-3). Kennedy felt he was leading the country through uniquely tumultuous, yet simultaneously promising,

times: “These are extraordinary times. And we face extraordinary challenge (qtd. in Gardner 49). Putting the same idea in different terms, he once said “We stand on the razor edge of history” (Depoe 223). He felt a sense of urgency leading the nation into this razor edge that presented opportunity for many outcomes, and, in order to ensure public support, determined to influence Americans into sharing that feeling of immediacy with him.

During his first State of the Union Address, Kennedy said that “Each day the crises multiply. Each day their solution grows more difficult. Each day we draw nearer the hour of maximum danger, as weapons spread and hostile forces grow stronger... the tide of events has been running out and time has not been our friend” (Gardner 23). By repeating the phrase “each day” three times in three sentences, Kennedy reminds, and urges, the public to hearken his words that soon, if not already, they will find themselves in battle. However dire the current moment seemed, though, Kennedy “appeal[ed] to a brighter future in which the good can be sustained or recovered” following the crisis at hand (Killingsworth 44). Thus, he did not simply paint a morbid picture for Americans, expecting them to be motivated simply out of fear of immediate danger. He also hinted that once the battle was overcome, the nation would experience a more optimistic future. In other words, immediate action could result in future reward. Interestingly, although he suggested battles overcome would be rewarded, he never straightforwardly claimed those battles would indeed be won. In fact, he often reminded the public that he had no idea as to what the outcome of any situation would be.

*Making No Promises*

In his 1961 State of the Union Address, Kennedy acknowledged that he could not make any promises as to the outcomes of the struggles facing the nation, nor was he willing to even predict them (Gardner 16). His honesty in admitting his inability to foresee the future implies he was ethically obliged to refrain from influencing the public to think he possessed more control than he really did. In other words, he reminded the nation that he was merely human. Although this honest tactic would seem to weaken public faith in him, it had the opposite effect: the public trusted him more because of his honesty, and, after being reminded he needed their help, felt more obligated to participate in civic service, just as he had been asking of them. He involved citizens in directing the country with him: "Before my term has ended, we shall have to test anew whether a nation organized and governed such as ours can endure. They outcome is by no means certain. The answers are by no means clear. All of us together—this Administration, this Congress, this nation—must forge those answers" (Gardner 15-6). By refusing to shoulder all the responsibility for every action, Kennedy made the public aware that he would do as much as he could to walk the nation safely through crises, but that because he could not predict the future, he would need their sympathy and understanding if not every crisis was victoriously won. This tactic would prove quite useful when briefing the public about the failure at the Bay of Pigs. However, it also proved useful even when speaking of crises that were not such fiascos.

In October of 1963, Kennedy faced the largest of his political crises—the Cuban Missile Crisis (Sorensen *Kennedy* 718). During the thirteen day period, Kennedy reminded the public that just like them, he could not predict the course of events: "My

fellow citizens: let no one doubt that this is a difficult and dangerous effort which we have set out. No one can foresee precisely what course it will take or what costs or casualties will be incurred" (Kern, Levering, and Levering 126). All he could promise the country was that in crisis situations, "sacrifice and self-discipline lie ahead" (126). Fortunately, the public had already been encouraged to unify themselves in civic service on many occasions, starting with Kennedy's Inaugural Address. The call to sacrifice and practice self-discipline, then, was no new favor which Kennedy asked. Thus, when crises did occur, the public was prepared to face them with their President, trusting his leadership and being sure to not expect more from him than was humanly possible. Simply put, Kennedy lowered the standard by which the public should judge his actions. Luckily for Kennedy, his successful handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis far exceeded what could have been expected of any president, and thus public support expanded for him and his successful handling of the situation that nearly ignited World War III. However, what the public did not know was how Kennedy had achieved that success. Although he claimed Khrushchev backed down in light of America's determination and strong will, the truth would come out years later—a truth that implied a much different handling of the situation than Kennedy suggested.

*Manipulating the Press*

On occasion, political tension between nations may be so delicate and complex that the Chief Executive has no option but to manipulate the press, either by withholding or inaccurately reporting data. In such situations, Kennedy knew the importance of manipulating the press (Windt, Jr. "John F. Kennedy" 93). The Cuban Missile Crisis

exemplifies the way in which Kennedy used the press to his advantage while handling crises. Rather than consult with Congress or prepare statements regarding the situation with his Cabinet, Kennedy decided the press would be the ideal way to inform the nation about the Crisis, and thus told reporters, journalists, and editors about the presence of medium-range missiles on the island (Sorensen Kennedy 717-18; Kern, Levering, and Levering 123-27). This information was not released to the general public until roughly a week later. During that week, the press kept the classified information relatively secret: "Despite a few veiled suggestions in the press that something was happening with Cuba, the story was held in an atmosphere of heightened expectation as the press awaited the president's word" (Kern, Levering, and Levering 126). Because Kennedy briefed the press in private, he was able to put his own spin on the situation, and thus painted the circumstances in such as way as to make himself appear as favorable as possible. As one research team worded it, "the press allowed Kennedy, [Secretary of Defense Robert] McNamara, and other officials to disseminate their views without challenge…the administration dominated the sources during this period of expectation as never before…The press, by giving full credence to the administration's interpretation of events, had played a major role in [Kennedy's] multifaceted triumph" (124, 126, 139). In fact, Kennedy's concern over how the information was depicted to the public led him to create so many rules regarding information released to the press and public that it became difficult to the point of impossibility for his administration to follow (Sorensen *Kennedy* 321). The President felt that if too much information regarding the delicate circumstances that threatened nuclear holocaust were released, developments between himself and Communist Cuba and Russia would be jeopardized. Therefore, Kennedy felt he had the

ethical right and responsibility to control what, and how much, information left the White House (320-21).

Of course, had Kennedy not maintained control of the press, the public may have discovered how he actually handled the crisis; as opposed to the publicized story that Khrushchev backed down to Kennedy's determination and will, Kennedy actually worked out a secret compromise with the Soviet leader (Hersh 342). B. Gregory Marfleet explains that a new understanding of the situation, "generated from recently available data, holds that Kennedy negotiated in a quid pro quo manner…the removal of the Soviet Missiles in Cuba" (546). In exchange for Khrushchev's removing the medium-range missiles from Cuba, Kennedy removed American missiles from Turkey (342-45). Interestingly, it appears that Kennedy negotiated with Khrushchev out of fear—the exact type of negotiating Kennedy adamantly warned the American public about in his Inaugural Address. However, because Kennedy was able to hide this information from the press, and therefore the public, during his administration, the popular account of the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis depicts a more ruthless course of events that favored America: "Qualitative examinations of the public rhetoric support the interpretation that Kennedy made a stand, the opponents faced each other 'eyeball to eyeball,' to quote Dean Rusk, 'and the other fellow just blinked'" (547). While this account does paint a promising picture of an able president whom Americans could easily rally behind and support, it would not have been possible without a manipulation of the press.

Kennedy was not afraid to use the press so as to publicize his successes while hiding his flaws, shortcomings, or even lies (Sorensen 319). However, one crucially

honest admission to the press concerning his shortcomings during the botched Bay of Pigs operation earned him more approval points than could have any manipulation of the press.

*Apologizing*

On one particular occasion, Kennedy faced a crisis and did not emerge the winner. On April 17, 1961, he agreed to a strategic move that cost many lives and botched a delicate operation meant to lessen the power of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro (Sorensen 294). Instead, Castro's followers overtook American forces, resulting in an embarrassing loss for Kennedy. Rather than deny his mistake or try to rationalize it away to the American public, he "swallowed defeat instead" (Douglass 2). In his statement to the nation following the fiasco, he stated that he and his administration would not be committing such a grave mistake twice: "We intend to profit from this lesson. We intend to re-examine and reorient our forces of all kinds" (qtd. in Gardner 47). Interestingly, he did not stop at admitting his administration's fault—he then took individual and sole responsibility: "There's an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan…I'm the responsible officer of the government and that is quite obvious" (Hersh 209). While a public apology may initially suggest weakness on a president's part, it only served to endear Kennedy in the minds of the public. As Sorensen mentions in Kennedy, it was after his national confession to fault and refusal to lay blame on anyone, especially the Republican Party, that Kennedy won (or, in some cases, re-won) the admiration of citizens (309).

Although the majority of America felt touched their leader would admit his flaws and accept responsibility, others found Kennedy's rhetorical strategy of the public apology irritating: "Hedley Donovan, onetime editor in chief of Time, Inc., wrote in 1987 that the president 'was getting preposterous praise—and amazingly high ratings in the polls—for simply stating the inescapable constitutional fact that he was "responsible"'" (Hersh 209-10). Kennedy himself joked about the surge in his approval rating: "The worse I do, the more popular I get" (qtd. in Dallek 4).What may have aided his rise in ratings was that by admitting his participation in the fiasco, he was making himself vulnerable to criticism just like this from the public. The public, rather than jump at the opportunity as Donovan did, sympathized with the President; after all, he was only human, and mistakes are characteristic of all mortals, even America's leader. Because he honestly admitted his fault in the Bay of Pigs incident, the public only increased their support: "private and public polls showed an ever-increasing popularity, and, what was even more encouraging, a genuine sympathy for his burdens of office" (Markmann and Sherwin 323). Because of the public's gracious sympathy, Kennedy "gained immeasurably in public esteem and emerged from the ordeal a national hero" (Kern, Levering, and Levering 139). Such a warm reception following the Bay of Pigs helped Kennedy regain the confidence he had lost due to the defeat. As one of his close friends, reporter Ben Bradlee, mentioned in his collection of private conversations with Kennedy, "The Bay of Pigs shook his confidence—almost beyond repair—in the CIA and in the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Right after the fiasco, and after he had quickly accepted responsibility, he was philosophical. 'Presumably,' he said, 'I was going to learn these lessons some time, and maybe better sooner, than later'" (Bradlee 42-3). He did indeed

learn from his mistakes after the Bay of Pigs incident, and strategically solved the Cuban Missile Crisis without sparking a nuclear war with the Soviets:

> Kennedy earned plaudits and admiration not only for his clear triumph but for his cool style and confident demeanor between the discovery of medium-range missiles on Cuba on October 15 and Khrushchev's public capitulation on October 28. 'It was this combination of toughness and restraint,' Arthur Schlesinger wrote in *A Thousand Days*, 'of will, nerve and wisdom, so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated, that dazzled the world…The thirteen days gave the world—even the Soviet Union—a sense of American determination.' (Hersh 342)

Kennedy was the first president to realize that if the nation's leader were strong enough, he/she could easily manipulate the press for his/her own benefit. Although some might see such manipulation as exploitative, Kennedy saw it as strategic, and it served him well.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE RHETORIC OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CULTURAL TRAUMA

This chapter examines how John Kennedy's assassination was necessary for the substantiation of the Camelot myth, and how the memory of his death has to be understood as traumatic and shared by the nation as a collective whole in order for Jackie's claim that John's presidency had been Camelot to be accepted.

During a parade as part of a political trip to soothe inter-party tensions in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963, two bullets struck John F. Kennedy—one entering through his back and exiting through his throat, the other entering and exiting through his skull (Moy 248). Many people witnessed the event either in person or on television (Culbert 422). Kennedy died within a matter of hours at a local hospital (Giglio 353; Moy 248;); the American public, then, had not just witnessed an attack, but also a murder. Moreover, they witnessed the murder of their Chief Executive.

President Kennedy's assassination resulted in two significant impacts on the nation: the sharing of a collective memory of a cultural trauma, and the creation and solidification of the American Camelot. The second impact is contingent on the first; had the President not been assassinated, Jackie's claim that Kennedy's White House was Camelot would not have translated into a lasting legacy. To understand how the assassination is essential for the existence of the Camelot myth, it is first necessary to understand the theories of collective memory and cultural trauma. Only then will the

reasons for Kennedy's assassination igniting the American Camelot myth be clear from a scholarly angle.

Collective memory retains and transmits knowledge of a society's past. In his article "Collective Memory and Cultural Policies," Victor Roudometof examines shared cultural identity, of which heritage plays a critical role. Heritage, according to Roudometof, consists of all that is handed down through the generations from the past. Some aspects of heritage are more desirable than others, but even the negative parts of the past must be passed down so as to transmit the whole of heritage, or a holistic shared past, that serves to unite the current generation (3). Roudometof reports that American culture, unlike European cultures, prefers the term "memory" to "heritage"; although the two are alike in meaning, memory possess a quality heritage lacks—it is malleable (3). As he goes on to explain, "Memory is a process, not a thing: It is something people *do* but not something people *have*" (8, emphasis his). Thus, historical facts (and how they are perceived) are open to reinterpretation in American society. Although events can be cast in a more gracious light than they may deserve, collective memory does have limitations—significant events cannot be altogether forgotten or represented as their total opposites. Thus, negative events will retain negative qualities in the collective memory, but may be tempered or modified with some type of positive spin, such as extracted significant meaning for the society.

When collective memory pertains to a negative event that psychologically scars a community, it becomes a traumatic collective memory. As cultural theorist Susannah Radstone states, "One definition of trauma theory suggests that [trauma] includes…collective experiences" (11). Thus, one need not be a firsthand participant in a

traumatic event to identify it as traumatic or experience the consequences (Halas 315). These traumatic collective experiences, or cultural traumas, reflect on a societal level what is also happening on the individual level: mourning, grieving, and attempts to define and understand the situation (or meaning-making). While individual members of society can help one another cope with a traumatic event, it is not sufficient for complete societal healing. As trauma theorist Judith Herman notes, "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites…for the restoration of the social order" (Herman 1). Thus, collectively remembering a trauma can aid the societal healing process. Cultural traumas, however, demonstrate the limits of collective memory's ability to reshape the past; while remembering and discussing trauma can be beneficial, the trauma itself can neither be completely changed nor forgotten, although some sense of meaning can be extracted from it, even if the meaning extracted is based upon false information. Hence, society may find meaning (and thus, healing) in a negative event by attributing undue positive qualities to the people involved in the trauma. Positive attribution as a means of societal healing is greatly aided by mass media's ability to shape the collective memory concerning the traumatic event and the individuals (specifically the victims) involved.

Media assists both collective memory and cultural trauma. By allowing events to constantly be revisited and reinterpreted via television and film, interviews, and books (among many other outlets), mass media manipulates society's collective memory of the event. Additionally, mass media assists cultural trauma by portraying past events that need to be discussed if a society is going to heal as per Herman's suggestion. By preserving an event on film or paper (or any other means, for that matter), a society can continuously bring up the event for the purpose of defining it as traumatic, attaching

significance to it, finding meaning in it, and passing down that meaning to future generations:

> An occurrence like an assassination is not a significant event until it is accepted as such by an audience… there must be some fit, some common understanding between the narration provided by journalists and their readers or viewers. The story, in other words, must be understood and resonate with those to whom it is addressed. The accounts provided through mass media thus must be constructed in such a way that they are meaningful and emotionally compelling for a particular audience. (Eyerman 457)

Immediately after the assassination, news reports flooded television and radio channels, spreading the news at unprecedented speed (Sheatsley and Feldman 189). The media saturated the public with a sense of loss and grief, and rather than reporting the event and continuing with regular programming, focused solely on the unfolding tragedy: "The President was shot at 12:30 p.m. (CST) on Friday; he was pronounced dead at 1 o'clock. By that time 68 per cent [of American adults] had heard the news…By 6 p.m. the penetration had reached 99.8 per cent" (192). The events following the assassination were just as heavily covered by the media, and since the Monday following the Friday assassination was declared a national day of mourning (and was also the day of the funeral), the period between the assassination and funeral was filled with information regarding Kennedy's death and funeral, as well as the apprehension of Lee Harvey Oswald and his murder at the hands of Jack Ruby. Sheatsley and Feldman emphasize the abnormal amount of attention paid to media during this four day period: "By his own

estimate, the average adult spent eight hours on Friday, ten hours on Saturday, eight hours on Sunday, and another eight hours on Monday, watching television or listening to the radio" (197-98). The American public's devoted attention to the President's death and following events created an apt environment for what Jackie did shortly after her husband's death to ensure the Kennedy legacy was a favorable one.

In addition to the immediate media depicting the assassination, Jackie's interview three weeks late with Theodore White concerning her husband's role as Arthur serves as another primary, and necessary, emotionally compelling vehicle by which mass media dispersed the Camelot legacy (Brigance 2). By the time of the interview, a post-assassination popularity poll had already been conducted, and reported that approximately half of the American population considered Kennedy one of the top two or three best presidents in the nation's history, with about another third of the population claiming he had been better than average. These statistics reveal the impact of Kennedy's death in granting favorable reception, as when they are compared to "a release dated November 10, it was reported that a relatively modest 59 per cent approved of 'the way Kennedy is handling his job as President,' while 28 per cent disapproved and 15 per cent were undecided" (Sheatsley and Feldman 205). The public obviously understood the events to be both traumatic and significant; however, if perchance individuals had not already identified the assassination as such on their own, Jackie was sure to use mass media to ensure the message reached American citizens. In doing so, she became what Ron Eyerman calls a carrier—those who create and perpetuate a myth so as to influence public reception of a person or event: carriers "are active after the fact and are thus also concerned with how an incident and the victim will be remembered" (Eyerman 460).

Jackie was the leader of those who would claim John was the modern American Arthur—she called his tenure "Camelot," and those of the American public who agreed with her became carriers of that myth, spreading it across the nation and down through the generations. Interestingly, and in line with Eyerman's theory, she never associated Kennedy with Camelot until after his death. Thus, the label was a posthumous one.

Beyond creating a favorable legacy for her late husband, the mythic framework she provided also helped citizens continue life by helping the traumatized nation make sense of the tragedy (Herman 188). The Camelot myth, then, reassured the jilted public by clearly informing them how to interpret the traumatic event. In addition to her interview, other forms of media captured the event and, once offered to society, were interpreted as significant and traumatic without any direction from Jackie. An example of this type of media would be the assassination footage filmed by Dallas citizen Abraham Zapruder (Culbert 427). His footage captured the assassination and was presented to the public immediately following the event; it has continued to be examined and re-examined even to the present day, just as Jackie's interview with White has continued to influence America to the present day: "Collective memory is the site where the past, present and future exist in a symbiotic relationship…Thus, once Camelot was adopted as a narrative structure for our collective memory, it did more than explain the past. It continues to influence and reflect our perceptions and actions in the present and future" (Brigance 9). Because of its graphic nature, the public did not struggle to define such footage as traumatic in 1963, and every re-playing of the footage serves to further solidify that traumatic label even in 2012. The words and images of Jackie's interview and Zapruder's footage thusly proved effective and meaningful to the public both then and now, or else

the Camelot legacy would not have become or still be a part of American culture. However, Jackie and Zapruder were not the first people associated with the assassination to realize the power of media on society's psyche.

Although media proved critical in shaping Kennedy's reputation post-assassination, Kennedy himself knew the importance of media in molding a favorable standing while alive and in office, suggesting Jackie took a cue from his own interests: "John Kennedy believed that the United States Information Agency should spread information about America through the production of films, but not pedestrian educational films with modest budgets and low production values" (Culbert 424). While this particular initiative received less attention from Kennedy's administration than the Space Race, War on Poverty, and Communist relations, Kennedy's desire for a collection of national films capturing the ideals of the country did become a reality at his funeral:

> The state funeral footage is 'inescapably affecting.' Of course it is. The technical quality of the camerawork, given the privileged location for the official cameramen, assures us a chance to view the Kennedy funeral in a way that ennobles the meaning of the president's life. It then allows Hershensohn [the director] to transfer viewer emotions from the funeral itself to Kennedy's legacy. (Culbert 426)

Transmitting Kennedy's somber funeral ceremony on national television ensured the traumatic nature of the President's death was not lost on the American public. Moreover, the televised funeral highlighted the endurance of the already-forming Camelot legacy: "The most inspired part of Hershensohn's film [is] the refusal to mention even the name of Kennedy's assassin. We are instead told that the assassin failed because the assassin

was unable to destroy the Kennedy legacy…The lasting legacy of the Kennedy presidency would far outlive the shots fired in Dallas" (Culbert 427). Because the funeral footage focuses on Kennedy's lasting impact rather than his mortality and the bullets that ended his presidency, it serves to solidify Camelot, thusly placing a positive spin on the collective memory of cultural trauma. Although the negative memory cannot be completely erased from the collective mind or turned into a wholly positive event, meaning can be extracted from it.

While mass media's role in shaping and modifying past events allows meaning to be extracted from even the most tragic of events, it can also reflect objectively fictitious (though subjectively factitious) beliefs held by the public. According to Radstone, culturally traumatic events can neither be forgotten nor accurately remembered (Radstone 21). Nostalgia, by virtue of its excessively sentimental nature, reflects a longing for a past that, in memory, appears more utopian than it actually was. An alternative definition of nostalgia posits it as the 'product of a shared historical consciousness of general displacement' that renders individual suffering socially meaningful" (Roudometof 5). When these two definitions are combined, they result in the idea that the past is interpreted in an overly sentimental manner than not only emphasizes the difference between the past and present, but also helps explain how a society has responded to such a difference. Nostalgia, then, assigns meaning to the past, and by sharing a feeling of nostalgia for Kennedy's White House, American society assigns significance to both his life and death, and refers to this significant moment in history as "Camelot." Simultaneously, society prohibits any other leaders from entering Camelot; it is now, after all, locked in the past.

Even if Camelot cannot be replicated, nostalgia for it continues to exist. Highlighting how "Modernity…has forged a radical transformation of the relationship between communities and the past, whereby, under the influence of nostalgia, new realms of memory [are] produced," Victor Roudometof outlines why interest still abounds in the Kennedy family—an interest that shows itself in many forms (6). A prime example of this interest is the History Channel mini-series *The Kennedys* (Muse Entertainment). Starring prominent and award-winning celebrities such as Greg Kinnear, Katie Holmes, Tom Wilkinson, and Barry Pepper—all of whom can attract large audiences—the show revisits Camelot, accentuating the glamour associated with it while also depicting Kennedy's faults in a sympathetic light. Other forms of media that depict interest in the Kennedys include the newly released interviews with Jackie following John's death, and interest in the Kennedy family's feelings toward Barack Obama, whom some Kennedy family members claim is the next Arthur (Schlesinger;Sawyer, Gibson, and Stephanopoulis). In fact, as Roudometof argues, instilling nostalgia in the younger generation via mass media is critical for the transmission of collective memory:

> Modern societies operate under the imperative to construct and maintain a whole array of products and practices that are essential for the transmission of memory from one generation to the other. Modernity is said to cause the erosion of identity, social values, and personal integrity—and this erosion leads to a perceived loss of a heritage and the inevitable nostalgia toward a real but most often imagined past. (6)

By constantly revisiting the Camelot myth via mass media, Americans are ensuring they do not lose contact with the memory of Kennedy. Each time Camelot is re-examined and

re-perpetuated through such forms of entertainment (or scholarly examination), it continues to remain a significant part of the nation's collective memory, and therefore culture.

The effect of the media-perpetuated collective memory of this cultural trauma is an undue positive regard for the late President. Because of the tragic nature of his death and his widow's claim to Camelot, "John F. Kennedy has achieved a popularity in death which he did not nearly approach in life" (Rosenberg 52). This popularity is renewed with each nostalgic re-visitation of the assassination, and over time has led many Americans to attribute excessive praise to the slain leader, whom they believe embodied all the highest virtues a leader could possess. Thus, they assign him "ardor not usually lavished on men, even great men" (52). Both Moy and Rosenberg go on to describe the type of legendary status given Kennedy, arguing that in American politics, only presidents such as Abraham Lincoln receive similar positive regard; outside American politics, King Arthur is the best known example of this type of memorialization (Moy 246; Rosenberg 59). While America's devotion to cherishing the memory of Kennedy initially appears touching and patriotic, it harbors potential for unrealistic interpretations of a past that was not nearly as pure as Camelot appears to be.

The public should be cautioned against nostalgic attributes, as they carry with them the potential to spin historical truth into a lie. The nostalgic legacy of Kennedy asserts his political superiority to most presidents, both before and after him, while ignoring the darker side of Camelot: "In the decade following the assassination they [the ideals of Camelot] have proven far more resilient than the real men who embodied them" (Rosenberg 58). In a similar vein, another scholar suggests "the assassination of President

Kennedy marks the point at which we took leave of the truth" (qtd. in Johnson 107). Thus, to remember Kennedy as a young, healthy, and intelligent, for example, skims over his many health afflictions and ignorance in certain political situations, such as the Bay of Pigs or Cuban Missile Crisis. Cultural theorist Elżbieta Halas warns against one-sided interpretations of collective memories that fail to incorporate new information: "The modern history of memory should take into consideration the appearance of a new criterion for selecting facts worthy of remembrance and commemoration" (Halas 315). To follow her advice would require the American public to weigh the accomplishments and positive characteristics of Kennedy with his scandals and shortcomings. Any interpretation less balanced threatens to give a grossly inaccurate account of history, even if the less balanced account is only slightly inaccurate. According to Emile Durkheim, collectives can exemplify a common sentiment to the point that it outgrows the emotion shared by individuals, and morphs into a new feeling altogether—one that is much more powerful (Durkheim 93). This new feeling, grown from an exaggerated sentiment felt by the masses, would be much more powerful, and therefore tougher to correct, than ordinary emotions. Durkheim, then, warns against collectives birthing new social facts that are rooted in undue emotion much the same way as Halas cautions the public.

Despite warnings from theorists like Halas, it was easier immediately following the assassination to believe in the Camelot myth than to examine the political (and possibly more factual) ramifications of Kennedy's death: "The multitudinous political ramifications of such events [following Kennedy's assassination] are too complicated and diffuse to comprehend; we seek instead a more familiar referent. At such times, too, our attitudes are strongly swayed by emotion, and our emotions tend to seek a human object

rather than an abstraction" (Sheatsley and Feldman 207). When Jackie dubbed John's tenure as "Camelot," she did so in front of a public still grieving for their late president, a public thus easily swayed by emotion (Brigance 2). Halas' warning still goes largely unheeded today because the myth is now so intertwined into the culture. After entombing John and his characteristic rhetoric within the frame of Camelot, Jackie, and the public who followed her lead, passed down the false legacy to the current generation, who, although aware of Kennedy's many faults, find the cultural memory of the traumatic event strong enough to still outshine the darker side of Camelot—the side consisting of his blatantly denied health problems, extramarital affairs, unethical ties to organized crime, and overall lack of political efficacy and accomplishment. Kennedy's legacy testifies to the adage that the presidency "is not just an office of incredible power but a breeding ground of indestructible myth" (qtd. in Sheatsley and Feldman 210), and proves that even time will be hard-pressed to destroy such a golden age as Camelot.

# CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

At least two conclusions emerge from this study in Kennedy's rhetoric: his career provides a lesson in executing persuasive appeal and a convincing façade, and no president, including Barack Obama, can revive Camelot.

Kennedy entered office as an inexperienced senator whom many accused of riding his father's coattails into the presidency. After elected, choosing his own brother as Attorney General (a position for which Bobby was sorely unqualified) displayed the privilege of familial ties in the Kennedy White House (Hersh 44). Over the course of his presidency, Kennedy used his rhetoric to persuade the American public that he was indeed capable and competent to lead the country though the tumultuous times ahead. As previously discussed, however, he never made any promises about the future. He presented himself as an able-bodied politician with pragmatically optimistic ideas, but at the same time did not claim to possess more power or authority than he actually did. Even if he had to use vague calls for action that used pathos to encourage the actions of American citizens, he still refrained from committing to any certain course of action. As a result, he always appeared to be the "winner" in political situations, and when he was not (such as after the Bay of Pigs disaster), he apologized for not being able to avoid hardship. Essentially, Kennedy seemed to be a leader he was not: experienced, prepared, honest, and worthy of admiration. However, the scandals of both his life and tenure

suggest he was not the Jack Kennedy many believed him to be. The lesson that can be learned from his presidency, then, is thus: persuasive rhetorical tactics can convince the public of something nonexistent, of something greater than what was. Just as Camelot came to be an American truth via rhetoric, so can anyone's persuasive appeal come to be regarded as reality. Current and future politicians would benefit greatly from learning this lesson.

A second lesson from this study implies that no president can replace Kennedy, nor revive Camelot. Because the Kennedy family had been involved in politics long before John's death and showed promise of producing another President, many Americans remained hopeful following the assassination that one of John's brothers would run for President after Lyndon B. Johnson finished his term. The public got what it wanted; Bobby ran for President in 1968, but was assassinated after winning the California primary (Eyerman 461). Although the youngest Kennedy brother, Teddy, held a seat in the United States Senate for nearly forty years, he never ran for President for a multitude of political and professional reasons—his alcoholism as a result of grieving his brothers' deaths appeared to be the most prominent (Meachem par. 1). Because the Kennedy family has not produced an heir to Camelot, many questioned whether Barack Obama would become the next Arthur—he was popularly regarded, after all, as the closest political semblance to John Kennedy that the nation had seen since Bobby.

When Senator Obama announced his presidential candidacy for the 2008 election, the numerous similarities between him and Kennedy were almost immediately spotted, and quickly turned into a hot topic covered by reporters and devoured by citizens. Regardless of whether one supported Obama or not, the likenesses he bore to JFK were

irrefutable: he was a relatively inexperienced senator who had not been a part of any major political victories in Congress, represented a minority which the American public struggled to trust and accept in office, and promised a drastic re-haul of the American government that would favor and reflect the ideologies of the younger generation.

The component ingredients that came together to produce Kennedy's Camelot will most likely never coexist in the same measure again, preventing a second Camelot. Kennedy—a man made in war, defined during his campaign as a hero, constantly attached to some form of crisis, aided by Ted Sorensen, regarded as celebrity-like, and unexpectedly assassinated—led an administration that is difficult, if not possible to replicate. In order for a second Camelot to emerge in American politics, all of the factors that contributed to Kennedy's reputation and legacy would have to again be present, under similar circumstances, and aided by the same types of individuals. Kennedy's Camelot, then, will never re-emerge under the leadership of another, and the optimism, hope, and change he promised the nation regrettably died with him. Maybe Jackie expressed the temporal, ethereal nature of Camelot best when she quoted her late husband's favorite song: "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot."

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