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DARKER Than We Want to Know

*Seymour Hersh discusses his controversial best seller
The Dark Side of Camelot -- why he wrote it, why it's
right, and why historians of John F. Kennedy's
presidency have been wrong*

January 8, 1998

When one of the country's best and most feared investigative journalists turned his attention to the myth of Camelot, it was clear that John F. Kennedy's reputation was going to take a beating. It was less clear that the journalist himself would be attacked so vociferously. Reviewers of Seymour Hersh's *The Dark Side of Camelot* (1997) have reacted almost universally with anger and disdain at the book's claims -- including that Kennedy caused the Cuban Missile Crisis through his continued attempts to have Castro killed, that he only won the 1960 election by enlisting the mob's help, and that he was secretly married during his first term in Congress. Hersh stands by his work, however, saying that people are tearing it apart because, "they don't want to hear what I have to say."

Hersh made his reputation -- and won a Pulitzer Prize -- by uncovering the My Lai massacre in South Vietnam. He is the author of seven books, including *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (1983) and *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and America's Foreign Policy* (1991). He has written several articles for

The Atlantic, including "The Wild East" (June, 1994), an investigation of the Russian mafia.

Seymour Hersh recently spoke with *Atlantic Unbound's* Katie Bacon.

Discuss this interview in [The Body Politic forum of Post & Riposte](#).

Excerpts from *The Dark Side of Camelot*, by Seymour Hersh:

- ["Author's Note"](#)
- ["November 22"](#)

From the archives:

["The Cultural Meaning of the Kennedys,"](#) by Steven Stark (January, 1994)
"To be sure, the Kennedys have had -- and continue to have -- a political impact on the nation.... But politics hasn't been this family's calling card in the mass culture for some time. Even in the aggregate the Kennedys have never had the political impact of Martin Luther King Jr., FDR, or even Reagan. If President Kennedy is still revered today, it's more because of his glamorous style and because he died young than for any specific accomplishments."

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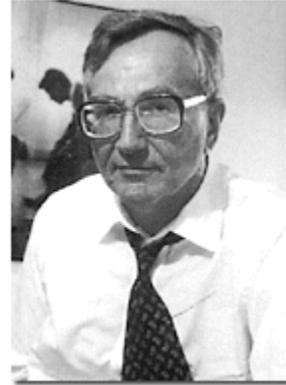
- [JFK Resources Online](#)

What was your impression of Kennedy before you wrote this book? How has your understanding of him changed as a result?

I was like everybody else: I knew John F. Kennedy at a distance as a beautiful young man. I was a young reporter in Chicago when he was President, and I thrilled to the idea that he was a man's man.

I wept when he was killed. But I developed a great deal of skepticism about him and his policies as I became more involved in Vietnam. I always wondered how we got into Vietnam, and I really didn't get much of an answer. It was not something that people were very interested in, even in the seventies. Johnson got most of the blame. We were mad at Johnson, and then Nixon, as the war went on. Johnson expanded the American presence from 17,000 troops in 1963 to 550,000 a few years later, which looked horrid. But if you looked at Kennedy's record, which I have, it was a steady escalation. The other thing that troubled me was the Pentagon Papers, which came out in 1971. They showed that the Kennedy Administration had lied just as assiduously as the Johnson Administration about what was going on.

This book originated not from me but from an editor -- Jim Silberman of Little, Brown. I resisted it for a few years -- I'm sure because it was someone else's idea -- but eventually started doing it, initially looking at the fascination with Kennedy and eventually turning it into a political history. Jim thought that there was something there. He had been the editor of my book on Kissinger, and that proved to be darker than we'd thought. I had no idea that the Kennedy story would be as bad as it was.



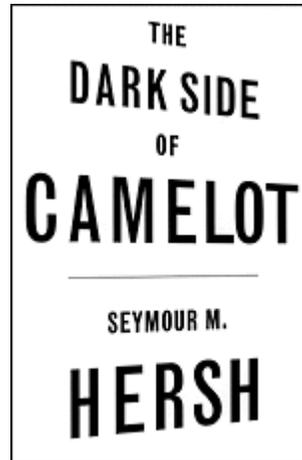
Seymour Hersh

An extensive list of Kennedy sites on the Web

- [The John F. Kennedy Library Homepage](#)

- [John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States](#)

An archive of photos, speeches, and documentaries



You write at the beginning of your book that your central finding was that "Kennedy's private life and personal obsessions -- his character -- affected the affairs of the nation and its foreign policy far more than has ever been known." Many reviewers have quarreled with this assertion, saying, essentially, that you have overplayed the relationship between private and public actions in order to

write about the sordid details of Kennedy's private life. How would you respond to this criticism?

My thesis is you can't really separate the private recklessness from the public recklessness. There's simply a continuum. You can't say to me that someone can be as reckless in their private life as he was and not have evidence of that in his public life. And I think the Cuban Missile Crisis is a classic example. He took us to the edge of World War Three. I think the one thing you have to remember about John F. Kennedy and the missile crisis is that Kennedy and his brother Robert understood more than anyone else, with the exception of Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro, how much Kennedy's reckless desire to have Castro assassinated led to the missile crisis.

There's no question that what the Secret Service men had to say about Kennedy's private life is relevant and historically important. The notion that I'm using it in some sort of titillating way amuses me to no end. I'm sorry I collected it; I'm sorry they put it on the record; I'm sorry it offended people. But once Secret Service agents are willing to go on the record about what happened in the White House, there's no way I'm not writing it. I would be totally negligent and deceitful not to. Suppose I'd decided not to write it, and people learned that. I'd be accused of covering up history. The issue for me is that a lot of people criticized a lot of things in this book because they really don't want to hear what I have to say.

Trust me, with the Secret Service guys -- are you kidding? There's a whole other level I didn't get into; some of the

sexual stuff is even worse than I've reported. When it comes to policy I'm tough, but when it comes to his private life there's a million things I didn't write about.

You acknowledged in an interview with *The Boston Globe* that the now much-publicized Cusack papers, which purported to show that JFK paid Marilyn Monroe a large sum of money to keep quiet about their affair, were really what got you started looking at the dark side of Kennedy. Would you have written the book had you realized at the time that those papers were forged?

I didn't learn about those papers until I was about two years into the book, so yes, I would have written it. In a funny way I'm glad the Cusack Paper scandal happened. Given the pretty much universally hostile reception to my book, thank God I had those papers, because otherwise I would have been accused of falsifying everything. As far as I'm concerned, investigating those papers and doing everything I did is part of the business. I've never been held to a different standard like I have been this time. I've been criticized for a lot of things I've written -- My Lai, CIA stuff -- but this is the first time I've been criticized for what I thought. They were very sophisticated documents. *Sixty Minutes* did a show exposing them but that was only after they spent two months believing them. *The Washington Post* was among my biggest critics, but last time I looked they got a Pulitzer Prize for a story that was fake. So it's not as simple as you think. The bottom line is that I didn't publish them. I don't understand what's so bad about chasing a story, finding out it's not real, and saying so.

Almost no one comes off looking good in your book -- you recount that Lyndon Johnson may have blackmailed his way into the vice-presidency, that Richard Nixon accepted bribes, and that Eisenhower, like Kennedy, was pushing for Castro's assassination. Was Kennedy more corrupt than other post-Second World War Presidents?

Kennedy was much more corrupt than other post-war Presidents, by a major factor. Much more manipulative, though Nixon was a close second. There's nothing wonderful about Nixon, Watergate proved that, but I think

that Nixon was an amateur compared to Kennedy. Kennedy's beauty made him more corrupt. He was above the law; he didn't think anything could stop him.

The four Secret Service agents whom you interview provide new details about the party atmosphere that surrounded Kennedy -- co-ed pool parties at the White House, and a constant stream of prostitutes and Hollywood starlets who were brought to see the President. How was this able to go on for three years without creating a scandal?

The power of beauty. Obviously a lot of reporters knew a bunch about it; they thought it was cute, I guess. Nobody knew quite as much as the agents did, and nobody had ever asked them to speak before. The real question is how come we finally are learning about this now, and the answer is, because I asked them. If somebody had asked them earlier, they would have talked, I think. Why didn't one of the girls talk? That was one of the questions I've been frequently asked. Look what is happening to me thirty-five years after Kennedy's death. Look at the heat. So imagine if you'd tried to do this ten years after his death, if you were a prostitute, or some fading movie star who wanted to tell your story. You would have been trashed to no end. The only thing that made it worth it is that a lot of people are buying the book because there's word of mouth on it -- when they read the book they're pleasantly surprised. It's no different than my book on My Lai or any of the others. Same motives, same attachments, same way I wrote, same evidence. I didn't change my standards. And you know something? It's also right. And if I'm right an awful lot of historians and journalists have been wrong, and that's something that nobody wants to be faced with.

Kennedy was a very seductive man and a very pretty man, and a lot of people responded to that. Americans are caught up in that sort of thing. When Princess Di was killed we suffered as much as the British citizens. It wasn't Jack and Jackie, the President and the First Lady, it was the King and his Queen.

Your description of how Johnson became the vice-presidential candidate centers on the Kennedy campaign aide Hyman Raskin's assertion that Kennedy selected Johnson as his running mate at the last minute

because the Senate majority leader had threatened blackmail. Yet Raskin admitted to you that there have been dozens of other "authoritative" accounts of how Johnson became the surprise choice. Why did you choose this one?

This is a new account, a different account. I didn't say this was the right one. I was very careful. I said it's yet another account, one that's interesting because most haven't heard it before and one that frankly makes some sense to me. One of the things that Raskin said that's very perceptive -- which everybody seems to miss no matter how clearly you write it -- is that with Stuart Symington they would have won California. I don't know why people don't want to read this. The Kennedys didn't need Johnson to win the election. They could have won with Symington too; that was the conventional wisdom. But the spin they put on it afterward was that they needed Johnson to win Texas. And that's the spin that got into history. There's something wrong with that story and everyone knows it. Johnson's getting on the ticket was too surprising for everybody.

The person who initially gave me the blackmail story was Michael Beschloss, a respected historian-journalist. He wrote a book called *The Crisis Years* on Kennedy and Khrushchev, a wonderful book published about five years ago. He was the one who told me to go find Hyman Raskin, who lived next to his parents in their retirement community. Turns out Michael had the same story, wrote it the same way in his book. He used the same phrase I used -- "May have blackmailed his way into the Vice Presidency." So it does get very close to a double standard. I'm treating the information the same way that a perfectly rational historian-cum-journalist did, and look at all the heat I get.

You argue that Kennedy's father brokered a deal with Sam Giancana, the head of the Chicago mob, in which the mob would force the unions under its control to vote for Kennedy in the 1960 election. Giancana expected that in return government surveillance of the mob would lessen after the election. Why, then, did Robert Kennedy as head of the Justice Department actually increase pressure on the mob?

First, he didn't increase the pressure; he kept the pressure

on. The FBI produced a report for the Attorney General saying that the election had been stolen in Illinois. They wanted a full-scale investigation, which, of course, Robert Kennedy did not authorize. What was Robert Kennedy going to do? Suddenly cut back his investigation of the mob? Do you think he could have gotten away with it? I don't think he had any options but to continue the pressure. I also think he wanted to keep up the pressure -- the Kennedys were great existentialists. Once Giancana had delivered the election, they may have thought: To hell with him, let's keep investigating.

There's something else that's very important: What's in it for the mob? From the day Kennedy went into office until the day he died, he wanted to kill Castro. What happens after Castro's death? A new government takes over in Cuba. A government that permits the gambling casinos, the prostitution, the hotels to go back in business. Who controls those? The mob. So as long as John F. Kennedy is President and as long as he's trying to kill Castro, and involving the mob to do so, the criminal element has no complaints, because somewhere down the line Kennedy may get it done. Certainly he didn't fail for lack of trying. And when it's done the mob will get a huge source of income. So they'll tolerate Bobby's continued pressure. And they're not going to talk because they have Cuba. And they're not going to want to kill Kennedy either. The notion that the mob would kill Kennedy is stupid. Why kill the goose that's going to lay the golden egg?

From the archives:

"Inside the Department of Dirty Tricks," by Thomas Powers (August, 1979)

"The Bay of Pigs marked the beginning, not the end, of John F. Kennedy's determination to get rid of Castro, the moment when Fidel Castro ceased to be merely an enemy inherited from Eisenhower. Kennedy's mandate to General Maxwell Taylor in April 1961 was, not to

You criticize Kennedy's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, pointing out that while he was publicly a tough negotiator, he secretly agreed to a deal with Khrushchev in which America removed missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of the missiles in Cuba. Why do you consider this to have been a dangerous negotiating tactic? Did the way this crisis was resolved have negative effects on our relationship with the Soviet Union?

Jack Kennedy knew Khrushchev was rational, otherwise he never would have established the quarantine line -- the line that if Khrushchev crosses we're going to start World War Three. But after the crisis is over Kennedy publicly gives Khrushchev no credit. Kennedy makes it seem as if he won, hides the fact that there was a deal. The other side

fix the blame for the failure of the invasion, but to find out why it hadn't worked, so the next plan would."

is depicted as this irrational, crazy Russian bear who made a stab at trying to achieve parity and Kennedy caught him and kicked him and drove him back with his tail between his legs and his nose in the dirt. That's how we win the bargain when both sides have nuclear weapons? That's wacky.

The secret deal hurt Khrushchev because it exposed him to a lot of ridicule internally and probably was a factor in his overthrow in 1964. Once Khrushchev pulled out of the missile crisis, Kennedy should have done everything he could to make it easy for him. That would have been the start of a new development in nuclear disarmament. Khrushchev was saying, I don't want to go to war. Instead Kennedy took a cheap political victory that he wanted badly. And he left a terrible legacy for the next President: Don't negotiate with the Russians. And Kennedy lets Adlai Stevenson, the one guy on his advisory committee for the Cuban Missile Crisis who publicly supported a Turkish-Cuban missile deal, be destroyed in an article in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Six weeks after the missile crisis Stevenson was depicted in a column written by Charles Bartlett, and approved by Kennedy before it was published, as advocating a Munich appeasement.

Why would Khrushchev have agreed to keep the Turkey deal a secret?

Because he was so eager to get out of Cuba. Kennedy seemed so irrational to him. He was so scared by Kennedy that I think he was ecstatic to get out with anything. Some historians now believe that if Khrushchev had waited a day Kennedy would have publicly agreed to the trade. Khrushchev didn't want to take the chance. Kennedy was losing control of his military, especially after the Russians shot down a U-2, and Khrushchev was losing control of his. He wanted to get this thing resolved. I think Khrushchev was much more pragmatic and cautious than Kennedy was.

Kenneth O'Donnell reported in his book about Kennedy, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye* (1970), that JFK told him that he would pull out of Vietnam in 1965, after the election, but that he couldn't do it before then because, "We would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands." If this was Kennedy's future

policy, then why did Johnson escalate the war after becoming President?

From the archives:

"How Could Vietnam Happen? -- An Autopsy." by James C. Thompson, Jr. (April, 1968)

"From the beginning of John Kennedy's Administration into this fifth year of Lyndon Johnson's presidency, substantially the same small group of men have presided over the destiny of the United States. In that time they have carried the country from a limited involvement in Vietnam into a war that is brutal, probably unwinnable, and, to an increasing body of opinion, calamitous and immoral. How could it happen?"

I have a motto that emerged out of this book: Don't die in office without telling the Vice President your policy. Johnson never knew the war policy. All Johnson knew was the public line, which was that Jack Kennedy was the ardent anti-communist, willing to stand down the Russians, willing to use nuclear weapons. Johnson comes in with the missile crisis as a model for negotiating, and then tells the North Vietnamese that we'll settle the war under our terms only. If Johnson had known, even if Kennedy's close aides had known that there was negotiating in private, he might have gone to the Russians and asked them to broker something with Vietnam. Johnson was worried in 1964 that if he didn't keep the war going that Bobby Kennedy would attack him from the right for not carrying on his brother's war.

I think Jack Kennedy might have wanted to end the war, but I don't think there's anything wonderful in that. Ngo Dinh Diem, the President of South Vietnam, offered him a chance to end the war in 1963, but it came too early. He wanted to end it in 1965 after the election. So he had to have Diem overthrown. My belief is that Kennedy had to have known that Diem was going to be killed in the coup, but I'll never be able to prove that.

You have written several controversial investigative books. Has the response to this one been significantly different? Have you been surprised by the vociferousness of many of the responses?

I haven't been surprised, but I'm a little appalled by some of the stupid reviewers. I can't believe the number of people who have reviewed this book without really reading it, at least in my opinion. They get a chapter that drives them crazy and they write about it. I don't think they're inventing it; I think they genuinely believe it's a lousy book. This is a very petty business I work in, the newspaper business. A lot of people don't want to be told that they're wrong by some smart aleck. I've been here before. With the My Lai stuff there were weeks in which every GI who went to the enlisted men's club and had two beers would call me up at home and tell me what he was going to do to my private parts. The response to this has

been worse in the sense that my fellow liberals are mad at me, so a lot of people who normally would be giving me hosannas are really angry at me. People like the Kennedys.

There were wonderful things about John F. Kennedy.
There were also much worse things than have been known.

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Hersh photograph by Jonathan Becker

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