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Crack-up-alot

Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: How the Assassination of John F. Kennedy Shattered American Liberalism by James Piereson.
Encounter Books, 2007.

Jacqueline Kennedy revealed more than she could have known when she made the following remark on November 22, 1963, after hearing that Lee Harvey Oswald had killed her husband, President John F. Kennedy: “He didn’t even have the satisfaction of being killed for civil rights. It had to be some silly little communist. It robs his death of any meaning.”

It is curious that Mrs. Kennedy wished that her husband had been “killed for civil rights.” For as president, Kennedy had been rather moderate and aloof on the issue. Though he had made some pleasing speeches about civil rights and entertained the odd activist at the White House, when it came to actual policy Kennedy’s approach was decidedly go-slow. He did not goad Congress on the proposed Civil Rights Act; he wished the Freedom Rides of 1961 would get off the television; and the most urgent task he assigned to his attorney general (his brother Robert Kennedy) was to go after the mafia. Indeed, in comparison with his successor Lyndon Johnson, who relentlessly maneuvered the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law, and even with his predecessor Dwight Eisenhower, who deployed troops to confront local defiance of federal integration orders, Kennedy was a moderate on civil rights—one

might even say, a “conservative.”

In her remark that awful November day, Mrs. Kennedy may have realized that, now that her husband was gone, his civil rights credentials could use some polishing: that is, from the perspective of liberalism. But she need not have chosen civil rights. From the perspective of liberalism, JFK’s bona fides on other issues was equally questionable. From the liberal point of view, making alarmist warnings about the Soviet threat was properly the “scaremongering” propensity of right-wingers. Yet just this was the stock-in-trade of Kennedy as candidate and president. His successful 1960 campaign was built on the phony issue of the “missile gap,” prompting the United States to pursue vigorous rearmament to meet the strategic challenge of the Soviet Union. As president, Kennedy made Cuba an issue as it never could have been under Eisenhower, and he menacingly spoke of a “flexible response” to any, presumably communist, threat to freedom around the world. When it came to the economy as well, Kennedy sharply departed from the canons of liberalism. Since FDR, liberals had uniformly argued that production in

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the economy was already sufficient. John Kenneth Galbraith made the point most sonorously in the Kennedy era. The problem liberals perceived was that the fruits of this production fell inequitably among the classes, a problem to be solved by governmentally devised redistribution. Kennedy, in contrast, pursued economic growth. He fought for nothing else in his presidency as he did for the tax cut of 1964 that has always borne his name.

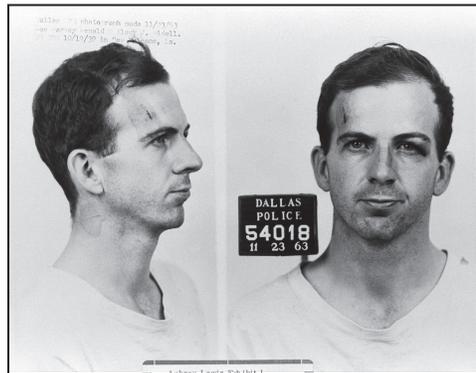
The point of James Piereson's truly original book *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution* is not to make out John F. Kennedy as a conservative, plausible as the case may be. Piereson's point is rather to explain that by the mid-1960s, liberalism had become a very confused and contradictory thing—and that November 22, 1963, exposed liberalism's fault lines as nothing else had done. The book is a stunning success.

To begin with, the book reveals amazing historical facts. It is breathtaking to behold the spurious interpretations of the Kennedy assassination that were instantly laid upon it by the liberal barons of public opinion and sustained in American culture essentially until the writing of this book. As Piereson shows, the main myth-weaver was Scotty Reston, dean of the *New York Times*. In columns that repeated themselves day after day in late 1963, Reston insisted that the political Right was ultimately responsible for the assassination. How can this have been so? Reston held that the Right had stoked up a

climate of hate and paranoia in the country that had made the assassination of this particular president inevitable. Here are a few samples from the Reston oeuvre of late 1963: Kennedy had been a "victim of [the] violent streak he sought to curb in [the] nation." "From the beginning to the end of his administration," Kennedy "was trying to tamp down the violence of the extremists of the right." The extremists were "those who wanted to be more violent in the cold war overseas and those who wanted to be more violent in the racial war at home."

This Reston-
esque line was sustained in pulpits and on editorial pages across the land (though mainly in the East), and it became canonical for future reflections on the assassination. It was also flatly absurd. As immediately became clear, Lee

Harvey Oswald was in fact an uncommonly committed Marxist and he had surely shot Kennedy because he found him too tough on communism. As for "extremists of the right" purportedly paving the way to violence, there were none more ominous in the liberal imagination at the time than the members of the John Birch Society. In an extraordinary nugget of fact that has been lost to history generally (though surely not to Kennedy assassination aficionados), Piereson reveals that Oswald had actually taken a shot (it missed) at a nationally known leader of the John Birch Society, Edwin A. Walker, at his Dallas home earlier in 1963. Oswald was, incorrigibly, a man of the hard Left.



Undigestible to liberalism

He shot at Walker for the same reason he shot Kennedy: he found them both retrograde impediments to the Marxist vision.

This necessary and inevitable conclusion about the president's assassin, however, was indigestible to contemporary liberalism. In the liberal mindset of the early 1960s, Kennedy was an enlightened warrior for "the cause," a left-of-center cause that had commonalities with Marxism. Kennedy was a president who understood, perhaps like some of the old Bolsheviks, that all fundamental questions about politics had already been solved. War was unnecessary because it was possible for all nations to get along; economic superabundance enabled everyone to have more than enough, provided greed was kept at bay; maximal tolerance toward minorities would result in perfect social comity. In these blessed conditions bestowed by modernity, the task of the liberal politician, in particular a president with uncommon *savoir faire*, was to bring about the happy results by adjusting policy. Another task, more exasperating, was to deal with those incorrigibles who insisted on the old ways of politics and society that had been superannuated by modernity and enlightenment. Invariably, these lost souls were lower middle-class folk—in America, provincial whites—who unaccountably failed to realize that utopian progressivism was in their and everyone's interest.

Therefore, Kennedy was—*had to be*—a martyr for "the cause," for "enlightenment." But what was it about the surely rather conservative Kennedy that gave rise to this progressivist sanctification of the man? The answer is that it was Kennedy's own rather ingenious doing. Kennedy had taken care—by his speeches, by whom he chose to elevate to office and to entertain in the White House, in short by his public persona—to advertise himself (once in office) as a committed liberal. This captured

for him the opinion of the establishment. At the same time, however, Kennedy knew that liberal policy was starry-eyed, that the nation needed many of the prescriptions of "the Right," from a formidable foreign policy to economic growth, perhaps even to moderation on civil rights. Hence, his policies were at odds with his rhetoric and his posturing. The liberal establishment noticed only the latter.

It is here that the Kennedys' glamour played a decisive role. The good looks, the clothes, the cool, the Massachusetts and Québécois pedigree all served to reassure liberals that Kennedy was a votary of enlightenment. The identifying characteristic of the retrograde white was provincialism, and the Kennedys were the antithesis of that. Therefore, as president, Kennedy was able to convince liberals that he was their man, all the while pursuing policies that cut sharply against the liberal grain.

It was a Machiavellian stratagem, and it violated the principles of the old Florentine in one crucial respect: it was unsustainable and would lead to gross consequences. Upon Kennedy's assassination, liberals both had to assure the nation that the provincial Right was at fault and that Kennedy's appointed successors would carry on in the martyr's noble work. It was a hopeless task. First, the provincial Right was plainly not at fault. Second, Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, badly lacked the glamour to double-track the way Kennedy had. Johnson's civil rights policy was more "enlightened" than Kennedy's, but when LBJ toed the hard Kennedy line in Vietnam, it was too much for liberals to bear, there being no glamour offset as before November 22, 1963.

In short order, therefore, liberal opinion became disconnected from liberal policy and liberal politicians. Liberal opinion demanded perfection, whereas liberal politicians had to keep an eye on reality

and do what was feasible, plausible, and sound. Kennedy had kept his eye on the same things, but he had also fooled liberal opinion by means of his rhetoric and his glamour. Hence the origins of liberal petulance toward their own, most notoriously in the campus protests of the late 1960s and now in the Leftist blogosphere's demand for absolute purity from Democratic officeholders.

Kennedy not only raised the expectations of American liberalism. As Piereson shows, he also misrepresented them in a most fateful manner. Kennedy souped up the modernistic prejudices of liberalism while seeming to fulfill their promise by means of stealth conservative policy. This incredible Kennedy gambit left liberals, after November 1963, with absurdly high expectations about the possibilities of their final coronation and unjustifiably reinforced their bigotry toward the Right, a Right that certainly had not brought about the killing of their fair president.

At one point in this rather brilliant book, Piereson notes that for liberal opinion, the assassination of JFK by a communist was the equivalent of Lincoln having been murdered by an abolitionist: by a member of the same fraternity. But of course Lincoln was not killed by an abolitionist. He was killed by a partisan for the Southern cause. Lincoln therefore was able to be revered in an even more heightened manner by those who had always revered him, and Northern opinion was uncomplicated in its apotheosis of Father Abraham in the years that followed. There was equanimity in the Northern mind after the Civil War, and this served the nation well in its great prospering in the decades after 1865.

After 1963, in contrast, the nation entered a time of troubles, a time of troubles that incontrovertibly was the crisis of liberalism, a crisis of the very "cause" that the "martyred" president had putatively soldiered for. Because of the self-deception that liberalism had practiced upon itself regarding Kennedy, liberalism proved incapable of psychological equanimity upon his death and the appearance on the scene of inferior inheritors of his mantle. Whenever liberalism came to influence politics and policy after this great juncture, its mark was invariably petulant, suspicious, and demanding.

Kennedy was therefore a transition figure in a more ample manner than we have previously realized. He set up liberalism for a fall that conceivably might have been avoided had another course been taken. He also cleared the ground for the rise of modern conservatism. He did so not only by rendering liberalism psychologically unstable, but also by ratifying conservatism in policy. An arms buildup and a tax cut were, of course, the stuff of Ronald Reagan's historic 1980 campaign and subsequent administration. It took familiarity and historical experience for this policy orientation to be grasped and endorsed by the electorate, but that electorate had initially been prepared in the halcyon Kennedy years.

It is becoming fashionable once again to predict the coming resurgence of American liberalism. But it is difficult to absorb *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution* and not concur with Piereson's judgment that liberalism is still far from escaping the psychological wilderness into which it entered after the Kennedy assassination.