

The Analysis of the John F. Kennedy's Presidential Image

Sára Megyesi

I

The aim of the essay is to analyse John Kennedy's image by introducing the idea of presidential character and demonstrating how it applies specifically to JFK's image. Furthermore, the essay will discover the falsehoods fabricated by Kennedy and his associates to influence his image and discuss the reasons for which Kennedy had to use these tactics. The essay will include James Barber's definition of presidential characters and Richard Neustadt's power to persuade theory, and the argument will be based on case studies that demonstrate Kennedy's hidden affairs and how he concealed them in order to benefit his presidential image.

II

The presidential character is a complex image in which every detail is crucial, because the picture the people form on the president matters from the beginning of the election and throughout the presidency, meaning, to get and then maintain power a solid presidential image has to be created. James Barber explains that John Kennedy has an active-positive presidential character, which is the result of not only his political successes, but his well-fabricated model of a healthy, youthful family man. Active-positive presidents are characterised by energetic and vigorous attitude and great enthusiasm towards their presidential duties (Barber 300).

Despite his spotless reputation as a president and family man, John F. Kennedy had quite a few scandals, which were hidden from the public. His unfaithfulness to his wife and his drug addiction are his most notorious transgressions that were widely disregarded, or even denied by the public, however, there is solid proof to these accusations. Case studies based on interviews, the life history of the Kennedys and other prominent figures who play a key role in creating the former president's image certainly refute the widely held false belief about John F. Kennedy as an

ideal president and husband, which portrait is merely the work of his press team aiming to cement his presidential image.

According to Barber's categorization of presidential images JFK fits into the active-positive category (Barber 211). Barber established that the first huge part that forms the presidential character is the president's personality. Kennedy had to appeal to the public not only when he was in his office, but when he made public appearances or was shown with his family, when people could catch a glimpse of his personality.

According to Zsolt Virágos and Gabriella Varró, there are three kinds of myth, from which the modern myth is the type that surrounds Kennedy, other presidents or any other popular media personality. The modern myth characteristically morphs fiction – in Kennedy's case his image – into a kind of myth, resulting in the often false or incomplete facts becoming public beliefs (Virágos and Varró 33). The Kennedy-myth showcases a healthy, youthful family man, and JFK had to act to achieve and undermine this image of himself.

Kennedy's typical image was heavily built on being a family man. In order to strengthen his political career and build up his positive portrayal his successful personal life as a husband and father had to be carefully invented as well. Although Jackie Kennedy is the one who is most often accused of not being a faithful wife because of remarrying after being widowed, John Kennedy cheated on her several times during their marriage (O'Brien 307). The most widely known example of his affairs is his relationship with Marilyn Monroe.

JFK and Marilyn Monroe's relationship was a threat to Kennedy's presidential image, since, as Peter Summers, JFK's former aide said "you're not going to elect somebody a president that is perhaps ignoring his wife or cheating on his family" (Olgati, 00:06:00-00:06:10). Kennedy's positive image was heavily based on his personal life as well as his political success, thus Kennedy and Monroe's affair was a great concern for his presidency. Summers also clearly stated that if the affair had been made public, it would have destroyed Kennedy (Olgati, 00:06:23-00:06:30). There was a high risk of ruining his reputation by exposing himself as an adulterer. Jackie Kennedy was aware of her husband's affairs, but they "dealt with these issues together" (Agins 71).

It is notable from the perspective of the Kennedy family's reputation that Marilyn Monroe had a relationship with Robert Kennedy as well, JFK's brother, who only broke off their affair in fear it would result in problems related to the mob (Olgati, 00:38:25-00:38:56). According to an interview with Senator George Smathers, who was also a close friend to Kennedy, he has overheard John Kennedy instructing

Robert Kennedy to end his affair with Marilyn to protect their reputation. On the other hand, Smathers has not heard the mob being mentioned in the conversation (Olgiate, 00:38:56-00:39:16). If Robert and Marilyn's affair had been found out it would have made headlines, creating a further threat to JFK's presidency. Marilyn's involvement with another Kennedy was a risk factor, because it complicated the situation and made both affairs more difficult to conceal from the public.

The ideal family life was not the only main side of Kennedy's facade. His youthful and healthy image rooted in his usual active, vigorous behaviour during public appearances. However, Kennedy, who constantly suffered from physical pain from various health problems would not have been able to create and hold up his active-positive presidential character if he hadn't found a solution to relieve his physical symptoms. "At that time, Senator Kennedy was perceived by the media as a youthful and vigorous naval war hero. The cover-up for the senator's poor health was in full steam during the campaign, even though rumors were circulating concerning his wartime injuries and bad back" (Lertzman and Birnes 13). To keep up Kennedy's healthy image, his physicians Dr. Janet Travell and Dr. Eugene J. Cohen sent a letter addressing the "media vultures" and the public. In this letter "they flatly denied that the senator was in ill health." However, naturally this letter was merely a cover-up to Kennedy's real state of health (Lertzman and Birnes 13).

This is the reason why John Kennedy needed Dr. Max Jacobson, a German doctor who had an office in Manhattan after fleeing Nazi Germany (Lertzman and Birnes 8). Dr. Jacobson was John Kennedy's 'private doctor', who supplied him with different kinds of drug cocktails in order to 'fuel' him up enough to enable him to pursue his political career, not to break under the pressure and to help him to get rid of his physical problems and illnesses, most importantly his chronic back pain.

In the 1960s Dr. Jacobson "had become JFK's unofficial doctor, keeping him upright, functioning and invigorated" so that he could fulfil his duties and keep up his healthy, youthful image seemingly effortlessly (Lertzman and Birnes 7). Kennedy has had problems with his back from his early twenties and despite having had numerous surgeries to fix the problem, he never completely got rid of the pain. His back problems allegedly originated from a football injury from his Harvard years, and were worsened by a military injury, from which point he constantly battled his condition and underwent countless surgeries. (Pait and Dowdy) In addition to that, Kennedy had other health problems, specifically Addison's disease, migraines, gastrointestinal disorders, which conditions could have spoiled his healthy and youthful image. To prevent this "there was acute vigilance by the Kennedy staff to keep JFK's illnesses under the radar" (Lertzman and Birnes 12). Chuck Spalding,

a friend of Kennedy's from Harvard introduced Dr. Jacobson to Kennedy because he previously complained about a "lack of stamina" during his campaign for the presidency (Lertzman and Birnes 11-12).

Dr. Jacobson was available to Kennedy because of his position as a senator and candidate, then as the president. Richard Neustadt's power to persuade theory explains how JFK could receive Dr. Jacobson's help. Neustadt claims that the president has to persuade or bargain, rather than command. The president has a reputation, an influence that comes with the presidency, and he has to utilize that to convince people that what he wants is good for them too (Neustadt, 30). Commanding does not always work, in some cases even shows weakness. Since JFK's bad health was a vehemently denied fact "Kennedy reached out to his friends to find his own sub rosa doctor" (Lertzman and Birnes 13). Spalding was already one of Dr. Jacobson's patients, and as well as the others, he was also already addicted to the drug cocktails Dr. Jacobson made, thus he knew the risk of being exposed himself, or calling attention to Jacobson (Lertzman and Birnes 11).

Spalding's call to Dr. Jacobson was strictly confidential. Spalding recognized the risk of Jacobson and Kennedy being associated in any way (Lertzman and Birnes 12), but despite the risk of a scandal he made an appointment for Kennedy to Dr. Jacobson, because he was certain of Jacobson's secrecy. On the one hand, this appointment and Spalding's secrecy were a favour from him to Kennedy, on the other hand, Spalding's certainty for Jacobson's discretion was due to Jacobson knowing he was going to keep a senator's secret, and both were the result of Kennedy's persuasive power.

Kennedy's persuasive power also showed when he met Dr. Jacobson in person. Lertzman and Birnes' book says Kennedy "made clear that he wanted complete anonymity" and "Jacobson reassured him that he would absolutely keep all their conversations confidential" (16). As Neustadt's theory claims, the president's public prestige is essential not only because it goes hand-in-hand with the president's professional reputation, but it also affects how swiftly legislation works. Thus, Kennedy did not only have to keep up his public image of a healthy, youthful man, but he had to make sure he conceals the solution he found to hide his physical problems.

"From then on, it was clear sailing. Miracle Max shot up the president before the Kennedy-Nixon debates, the major state addresses, and even the 1961 Vienna summit meeting with Nikita Khrushchev" (Bryk). Because of Kennedy's everlasting back pain, alongside with all the prescribed medications and injections the president had to receive regularly, it was not difficult for Dr. Jacobson to blend in the drug cocktails. John Kennedy soon became addicted to these drug cocktails, which were "a concoction of different types of blood serum mixed with a powerful

methamphetamine stimulant. This mixture of liquid methamphetamines injected directly into the president's bloodstream gave the president, who suffered constant pain from his back injuries, a reliable source of energy and mental high" (Lertzman and Birnes 10). Dr. Jacobson's drug cocktails preserved Kennedy as a vigorous man, pain free and full of energy, cementing his youthful, healthy image.

A notable case that remarkably represents Kennedy's dependence on Dr. Jacobson is the Vienna Summit. Kennedy knew that Nikita Khrushchev would do everything to discover any flaw or weakness JFK would show and use them against him, thus he needed to be on his guard and be ready to react quickly to anything. By the time of the Summit Kennedy was heavily addicted to Dr. Jacobson's drugs and he needed the doctor's help (Lertzman and Birnes 91). It was a risky move, and although Kennedy tried to minimize the risk of suspicion from the press by travelling on separate planes with Jacobson, the Secret Service still had to interfere with the press' attempts to get close to the president as Dr. Jacobson was about to meet him (Lertzman and Birnes 93).

Jacobson's input was significant in Kennedy's performance during the summit meeting. Just before the meeting was about to begin, Jacobson gave a shot to "ease Kennedy's stress, give him energy and build his confidence" (Lertzman and Birnes 97). However, the meeting began late, the effects of the shot have started to wear off by then and Kennedy demanded another shot. Dr. Jacobson was hesitant to give him a second shot, but when Kennedy returned for a break he had to persuade the doctor to give him a third shot (Lertzman and Birnes 97-98). Kennedy utilized his power to persuade Dr. Jacobson, as it is stated in Lertzman and Birnes' book "although too many injections of amphetamines could have a deleterious effect, Jacobson told himself that this was the president of the United States, and the free world hung in the balance" (97).

JFK's inner circle and other celebrities have also enjoyed the service of Dr. Jacobson, further deepening the importance of his role next to the president. Among Dr. Jacobson's patients were Marilyn Monroe, Mickey Charles Mantle, Elizabeth Taylor, Judy Garland, Ingrid Bergman and many other prominent figures of the era (Lertzman and Birnes 104, 112). Dr. Jacobson achieved popularity among celebrities and those close to JFK through his talent for boosting up his patients, who, as Byrk writes in his article "went out the door singing." Dr. Jacobson did not use specified amounts, but he rather liked to improvise with the ingredients, creating each cocktail differently (Bryk).

III

From the case studies detailed in this chapter, a conclusion can be drawn that John Kennedy's image is quite different from the truth, showing him in a favourable light in order to establish his presidential image as a youthful, healthy family man. To achieve this, he had to exploit his presidential position in order to hide certain aspects of his life that would have harmed this thoroughly fabricated and maintained image.

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