

The death of JFK Jr. and the politics of celebrity

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A week-long media barrage on the death of John F. Kennedy Jr. culminated in the burial at sea Thursday of the ashes of Kennedy, his wife Carolyn and her sister Lauren, and the memorial service Friday in New York City. While both the burial and the funeral were private and closed to the press, the American media nonetheless gave them virtually continuous coverage, with the television networks showing hour after hour of long-distance shots of the naval warship from which the ashes were to be scattered and the cathedral in Manhattan where a select group of mourners gathered.

The Clinton administration's authorization of the use of a Navy ship to conduct the burial at sea was unprecedented, given that the victims were private citizens who had never served in the military. This decision only underscored the quasi-official character of the whole process by which public opinion has been besieged with the claim that the death of JFK Jr. represents an enormous loss to society.

There are contradictions too many to enumerate in the presentation of this fairly undistinguished multi-millionaire as a model of social virtue. Article after article, broadcast after broadcast, celebrates Kennedy's alleged role as a philanthropist and benefactor of the poor, although he did little more than follow the prescribed course for any scion of a wealthy capitalist family who wishes to present the image of *noblesse oblige*—a little charity work, a few foundation meetings, all very useful for a future political resumé.

One obvious question related to the plane crash remains unanswered. According to the media presentation, JFK Jr. was universally admired and beloved, a “regular guy” who befriended ordinary people, a man treasured by his elite friends. Why was it then, that none of these friends and admirers sought to prevent him from putting his life and the lives of his

wife and sister-in-law at risk with the reckless decision to fly a small plane under adverse conditions? A colossal machinery has been set into motion to magnify the grief after the event, but there apparently was not a word of wisdom said beforehand.

Thousands of Americans die in accidents every year, but none of these deaths are singled out as a national tragedy. On the contrary, the political and media establishment resolutely opposes drawing any social conclusions from such incidents, even when they are fairly obvious—the large number of tornado deaths among poorer sections of workers compelled to live in mobile homes, or the horrendous rate of road deaths among overworked truck drivers.

Aside from concern that examination of the social implications of such “accidents” might pose a threat to corporate profits, there are broader ideological issues. The trend in America over the last several decades has been to reduce all the social evils produced by the profit system—hunger, homelessness, drug abuse, unemployment—to issues of “individual responsibility.”

Yet in the death of John F. Kennedy Jr., the full power of the American media and the government is being mobilized to present the death of an individual who made no significant contribution to American society as a calamity of historical dimensions. In part, this could be attributed to the machinery of media manipulation going about its work almost automatically. It has become routine for the press and television to take any unfortunate event involving even a minor celebrity—such as the skiing death last year of Congressman Sonny Bono—and milk it for every possible drop of sentimentality.

But the official response to the death of JFK Jr. goes beyond this. Other considerations are involved, some of them suggested by a column which appeared

Wednesday in the *Washington Post*, written by Charles Krauthammer.

First, a word about style. Krauthammer begins the column, “Heir to Camelot,” with a quote from *Moby Dick*, and ends it by comparing JFK Jr. to Prince Hal (the future Henry V of England). It is pretentious in the extreme to cite the writings of literary geniuses to describe an incident of so little intrinsic importance. References to Shakespeare and Herman Melville cannot give the death of John Kennedy Jr. the broad historical significance which it lacks.

Krauthammer claims Kennedy's death evoked “a feeling of national loss, the kind one feels at the death not just of youth but of royalty.” American politics is democratic only in theory, he declares, “In practice, we are lovers of dynasty.”

Kennedy was the only son of the assassinated president. “And it is precisely the death with him of that name—and the redemption, nay restoration, that it promised—that added so strangely and deeply to the sense of national loss at his death...”

“Can there be any doubt that it was only a matter of time before John Kennedy Jr. would have made the transition from a life associated with politics to a life of high office himself?”

Other Kennedys, not directly descended from John F. Kennedy, might have to seek lesser offices to build up their political credentials, “But not the one true heir. He does not have to apprentice to greatness. He can wait, then claim it.”

Krauthammer combines prostration before money, power and celebrity with an unabashed defense of inherited privilege. His column might seem more in keeping with a monarchist tract of the 18th century than a political commentary written on the eve of the 21st. Nonetheless, his effusions demonstrate what, under certain circumstances, could have been set into motion to build up John F. Kennedy Jr. as a political figure, the heir to the tradition embodied by his martyred father and brother, etc., etc.

What did JFK Jr. actually stand for politically? The magazine that he founded, *George*, was certainly not a voice of the Democratic Party liberalism that prevailed in the heyday of his father and uncles. It provided a venue for a mix of conservatives and free market liberals—former New York Senator Alfonse D'Amato was a columnist—and approached political Washington

in the fashion of a Hollywood gossip publication.

As Krauthammer admits, JFK Jr. could have played a political role not because he was a political figure, but because he was a celebrity. The transformation of celebrity into political power has become a recurring feature of American political life, and an important symptom of the decay of bourgeois politics. This trend assumed major proportions with the election of Ronald Reagan, the former movie actor, continued with the rise of eccentric billionaire Ross Perot and the promotion of a number of show business and sports celebrities to national office, and now finds expression in the professional wrestler and governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura.

Texas Governor George W. Bush, although little known nationally in terms of his actual political views, has become the leading Republican presidential hopeful by combining the power of celebrity with the benefits of heredity. He has “name recognition” because he is the son of the former president. Largely for that reason he does well in the polls, and his performance in the polls is a major reason why he is being inundated with contributions from big donors and sweeping the Republican field, eight months before any balloting.

The recourse of American politics to the promotion of celebrity is one expression of its inability to address any of the social concerns of the masses of working people. To the extent that no important issues—the growth of social inequality, the rise of militarism, the erosion of democratic rights—can be seriously discussed by any of the bourgeois parties, and the political and media establishment is increasingly isolated and alienated from the broad mass of the people, the methods of Hollywood and Madison Avenue play an ever larger role.

Krauthammer gives voice, in an unabashed way, to the anti-democratic ethos that prevails within a well-defined political elite that is recruited from and serves the most privileged and narrow strata of society.



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