

Media sensationalism and the Kennedy crash

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It was sad to hear the news Saturday of the likely death of John Kennedy Jr., son of the assassinated president, his wife and his sister-in-law, in the crash of his small plane off the coast of Martha's Vineyard. Whatever one's political opinion of the Kennedys, no one would wish greater personal misfortune for a family that has lost so many people to violent death.

But it was with growing amazement—if one can still be amazed by the performance of the American media—that one saw this calamity transformed by the press and television into a great historical event. The television networks first interrupted Saturday programs to announce that Kennedy's plane was missing, then suspended regular programming entirely to give continuous attention to the story. As there was little to show, outside of aerial photos of Long Island Sound and occasional press conferences to announce the lack of results from the search, most of the media "coverage" consisted of interviews with politicians and pundits who reminisced about the Kennedy family.

While television set the pace, the Sunday newspapers followed with page upon page of coverage, as though they were reporting on the outbreak of a major war or political crisis. There was an obvious and conscious attempt to give the Kennedy disappearance and likely death the full "Diana" treatment, aping the saturation coverage which followed the death of the British princess in a 1997 car accident.

Perhaps the most outlandish and mawkish example was provided by the *Detroit Free Press and News*, whose Sunday edition carried a front-page six-column headline, "CAMELOT PRINCE LOST", in bold capital letters three inches high, more appropriate for announcing the first Moon landing.

The media is engaged in a systematic attempt to confuse public opinion, saturating it with contrived images. Commentators spoke of the apparent death of John F. Kennedy Jr. in hushed tones, as though society

had sustained a grievous loss. The less there was to say about his career and accomplishments, the more air-time was devoted to presenting images of his father, mother and uncle and to recounting their turbulent history.

It is impossible to accept the media presentation of this incident as a tragedy of monumental proportions. Nothing that John F. Kennedy Jr. accomplished in his 38 years would have drawn any particular attention if he had not been the son of an assassinated ex-president. He led a largely undistinguished life, which ends by providing yet another example of an upper-class individual possessing "more dollars than sense".

A mediocre to average student, who famously passed his New York bar exam on the third try, Kennedy spent several years as an assistant district attorney in New York City, then gave up a legal or political career to become the publisher of *George* magazine, a venture which combined the worlds of celebrity and politics with which he was familiar.

Kennedy took flying lessons and last year obtained a pilot's license. He had logged about 300 hours of flight time, although he was not yet qualified for instrument flying, and was therefore limited to flying under conditions of good weather. As to his decision to make the trip from New Jersey to Martha's Vineyard and Hyannis Port on Friday night, under conditions of haze and low visibility, there have already been suggestions that this was an instance of poor judgment, if not outright recklessness, for which he and his companions paid with their lives.

The deaths of John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy were the result of assassinations carried out under conditions of the political convulsions of the 1960s. In contrast, the subsequent misfortunes of the Kennedy family—Chappaquiddick, deaths from drug overdose and ski accidents, scandals involving charges of rape and infidelity—were largely self-inflicted. They have

had more the character of a continuing demonstration that easy access to wealth and celebrity status can lead to trouble.

In its own way, the Kennedy incident is another demonstration of the social gulf that has opened up in America between the ruling elite and the mass of working people. Vast resources were mobilized for the search and rescue operation and the investigation into the causes of the crash, on a scale that would be unimaginable if an ordinary private citizen were lost or missing at sea.

But for all the media sensationalism, there is no reason to believe that this incident has deeply touched public opinion. The even more publicized death of Diana has passed quickly from popular consciousness in Britain—two years after, there is so little interest that attempts to turn her memorial into a tourist attraction have failed. The media may not be able to distinguish between real and contrived events, but its powers to inundate and stun the public have definite limits.



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