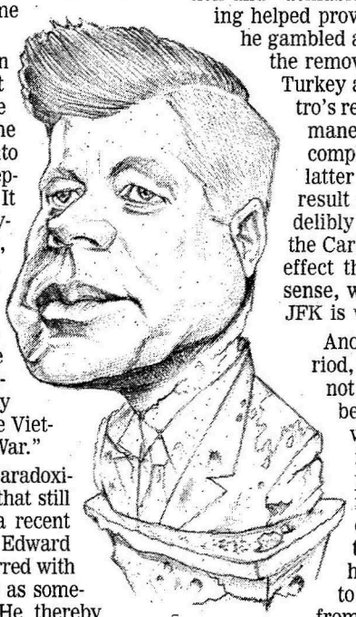
Where's the Aura?

By Christopher Hitchens

A short while ago, I chanced to be in Dallas, Texas, making a documentary film. One of the shots involved a camera angle from a big commercial tower overlooking Dealey Plaza and the former "book depository," and it was later necessary for us to take the road through the celebrated underpass. The crew I worked with was younger than I am (you may as well make that much younger) and consisted of a Chinese-Australian, an English girl brought up in Africa, a Jewish guy from Brooklyn and other elements of a cross-section. As we passed the "Grassy Knoll," and looked up at the window, and saw the cross incised in the tarmac, I was interested by their lack of much interest. The event of Nov. 22, 1963 isn't half as real to them as the moment, say, when the planes commandeered by suicide-murderers flew into the New York skyline. Nor, as I realized, is it half as real or poignant to me as the site of Ford's Theater in Washington D.C. Time has a way of assigning value.



Ismael Roldan

I may still be in a minority in this, and don't care if I am, but I am glad to find that the Kennedy drama and the Kennedy cult is falling away into nothingness. The effort of keeping it up is too much trouble. It has been a long time since anyone rang me, or wrote to me, with hectic new information about the real scoop on the assassination. It has been a very long time since I heard anyone argue with conviction (let alone with evidence) that if the president had been spared that day we would not be referring to the Vietnam calamity as "Kennedy's War."

The last thought is also, paradoxically, the kernel of the illusion that still keeps the JFK cult green. In a recent ill-phrased speech, Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts referred with contempt to the combat in Iraq as something cooked up "in Texas." He thereby gave vent to a facile liberal prejudice that still sees the Galahad of Camelot as having been somehow slain by Dallas itself, or by Texas at any rate. And what do we think of, or what are we supposed to think of, when the word "Texas" is invoked? Why, cowboys and gunplay and irresponsible capitalist dynasties.

For those reasons (if not for those reasons alone) Sen. Kennedy might have done better to keep a guard on his tongue. The biographers and archivists have done most of the relevant job of reporting and disclosing, and what they have reported and disclosed is a president frantically "high" on pills of all kinds (that's when he was not alarmingly "low" for the same reason); a president quick on the draw and willing to solicit Mafia hit-men for his foreign policy; a president willing to risk nuclear war to save his own face; a president who bugged his own Oval Office; a president who used the Executive Mansion as a bordello and a president whose name we might never have learned if not for the fanatical determination of his father to purchase him a political career. If a tithe of these things were really true of George Bush, Howard Dean might claim he was onto something. As it is, "the mantle of JFK" is a garment that no serious Democrat can apparently afford to discard. The last time it was plucked from the wardrobe of central casting, it made Bill Clinton look—at least to the ridulous—like a potential statesman. Which

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urned out to be about right.

Had Napoleon Bonaparte been fatally hit by a musket ball as he entered Moscow, it was once pointed out, he would have been remembered by history as one of the greatest generals who ever lived. It would be cruel and unfeeling to say that Kennedy's luck and "charisma" did not desert him even in death, and in any case I prefer to blame this callous opinion on those who actually hold it—namely his hagiographers and mythologists. Who now seriously believes that Kennedy intended to undo his own rash commitment in South Vietnam? Can we not at least agree that his zeal for the assassination of President Diem—whom he had installed at some price in blood—was a somewhat contradictory indicator of any intention to disengage?

That would make a point, as it were, for the "Left." But what of the pugnacious anti-communism that Kennedy also maintained when he thought it suited him? Having tried assassination and "deniable" invasion in Cuba, and having helped provoke a missile crisis on which he gambled all of us, he meekly acceded to the removal of American missiles from Turkey and to a pledge that Fidel Castro's regime would be considered permanent. He and his brother did not completely hold to the terms of the latter agreement, it is true, but as a result the United States became indelibly associated with Mob tactics in the Caribbean, and Castro became in effect the President for Life. In this sense, we may say that the legacy of JFK is with us still.

Another inheritance from that period, the Berlin Wall—which he did not oppose until well after it had been built (having again risked war on the proposition but not felt able to follow up on his punchy short-term rhetoric)—did not disappear from our lives until a quarter-century later. His was the worst hard-cop/soft-cop routine ever to be attempted, and it suffered from the worst disadvantages of both styles. On the civil rights front at home, by contrast, even the most flattering historians have a hard time explaining how the Kennedy brothers preferred the millimetrical, snail's pace, grudging-and-trudging strategy. But at least this serves to demonstrate that they knew there was such a thing as prudence, or caution.

Every smart liberal of today knows just how to deplore "spin" and "image-building" and media strategy in general. Quite right too, but does anyone ever pause to ask when this manner of politics became regnant? Which Kennedy fan wants to disown the idea that the smoothest guy wins? Yet this awkward thought is gone into the memory hole, along with the fictitious "missile gap" that the boy-wonder employed to attack Eisenhower and Nixon from the Right. As I said at the beginning, I am glad that this spell is fading at last. But I wish its departure would be less mourned. The Kennedy interlude was a flight from responsibility, and ought to be openly criticized and exorcised rather than be left to die the death that sentimentality brings upon itself.

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