



Camelot's Court: Inside the Kennedy White House

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In anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination comes this riveting, authoritative portrait of this president and his inner circle of advisers-their rivalries, their personality clashes, their political battles-from one of our most distinguished presidential historians

In his critically acclaimed biography *An Unfinished Life*, Robert Dallek revealed John F. Kennedy, the man and the leader, as never before. In *Camelot's Court*, he takes an insider's look at the brain trust whose contributions to the successes and failures of Kennedy's administration-including the Bay of Pigs, civil rights, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Vietnam-were indelible.

Kennedy purposefully put together a dynamic team of advisers noted for their brilliance and acumen, including Attorney General Robert Kennedy, JFK's "adviser-in-chief"; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara; Secretary of State Dean Rusk; National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy; and trusted aides Ted Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger. Yet the very traits these men shared also created sharp divisions. Far from unified, JFK's brain trust was an uneasy band of rivals whose personal ambitions and clashing beliefs ignited fiery debates behind closed doors. With skill and balance, Dallek illuminates a president deeply determined to surround himself with the best and the brightest, yet who often found himself disappointed with their recommendations. The result is a striking portrait of a leader whose wise resistance to pressure and adherence to personal principles, particularly in matters of foreign affairs, offers a cautionary tale for our own time.

Meticulously researched and masterfully written, *Camelot's Court* is an intimate tour of a tumultuous White House and a new portrait of the men whose powerful influence shaped the Kennedy legacy.

Camelot's Court: Inside the Kennedy White House Details

Date : Published October 8th 2013 by Harper

ISBN : 9780062065841

Author : Robert Dallek

Format : Hardcover 512 pages

Genre : History, Politics, Nonfiction, Biography, North American Hi..., American History

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Dana says

It got bogged down for me a lot- all the different foreign policy issues that Kennedy faced got to be a bit much after a while. But what I appreciated was the insight into the life of a president, especially one as storied as JFK. For someone who has not learned much about Kennedy and has a more positive opinion on him, it was interesting to see a different side of him and his family (corrupt, power hungry, and womanizing- although the last one I already knew about). After reading this book, I can see how overwhelming and stressful it is to be a leader of a large country. Kennedy faced many challenges during his short time as president, made all the more difficult (I'm guessing from what I've read) by disagreements and differences of opinion between him and his advisers.

Nicholas Bonnema says

3.5

This is less “inside the Kennedy White House” and more “inside dealings with Cuba, Russia, and Vietnam with brief mentions of other goings on.” So, the expectations I had going into this book were not exactly met. The book was very much focused on foreign policy, with slight mentions of domestic events. So, maybe we should all agree that while people shouldn't judge a book by its cover, we do judge books by their titles.

Kennedy came into the White House and tried to install a “ministry of talent” to provide the advice necessary to avoid nuclear Armageddon and navigate the new world order. Unfortunately, as this book (and others) points out, while these men (and they were all men) may have been “the best and the brightest,” they oftentimes served Kennedy very poorly. The egos were very strong, with infighting on most issues. A quote about Schlesinger sums up why so many of Kennedy's advisers seemed to fail him, as they were all “a brilliant critic who sacrificed his independent judgment to the attractions of continuing access to power.”

In addition to the civilian advisers, the military commanders tried to push Kennedy hard into deploying force and dropping nuclear bombs on the slightest of threats. One particularly chilling quote comes from the head of Strategic Air Command: “The whole idea is to kill the bastards. At the end of the war if there are two Americans and one Russian left alive, we win.”

Overall, Kennedy was very much focused on foreign affairs (or so this book has as its central theme) and had no patience for domestic concerns. From his vantage, the threat of a nuclear war was so great that he saw its avoidance as his primary goal – assuming the domestic areas would be better addressed in a world that moved back from the brink (in his second term). Unfortunately, as Kennedy discovered, domestic unrest does not wait.

While this book outlines a log of the mistakes made and reasons for them, the overall picture is of a president who was learning from each mistake made and becoming more confident in his decision making ability- questioning the assumptions of aides and military leaders more forcefully. This of course only leads into the unresolved questions and what ifs that have plagued many since the JFK assassination. These unresolved questions and the unrealized hopes of what JFK expected to accomplish in his second terms are what makes this book and his legacy so frustrating.

Given the lessons JFK learned, and his reluctance to move forward with a more full scale involvement in Vietnam, it is possible that he would have found a way out, rather than further in. It is also possible he would have come to realize a more morally sound view on civil rights. But it is also possible he may have been lead astray by his administration's main failure in Vietnam decision making, an unwillingness to hear dissenting opinions about progress from the press, or on the ground officials that appears to have grown out of internal reactions to the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Overall, the level of debate within the West Wing was beneficial in providing differing viewpoints... if Twitter was around during the Cuban Missile Crisis I do not think it would have ended well.

Geevee says

The world is lucky to have had Kennedy as president of the USA for that short time from January 1961 to November 1963. He dealt with very difficult and complex events and challenges at home and abroad, and in respect of Cuba and Berlin situations that could have ended the world through nuclear destruction.

Having read about these events, visited the JFK Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, spent some of my army career in Cold-War Germany, including service in West Berlin in the British sector a couple of years before the wall came down, I have a fascination for this period, and Dallek's book, picked up at a discount bookstore on holiday in the US a few weeks' ago, looked like a good way to learn more about the men behind this young president and the decisions he took.

I could perhaps sum up this book in part by saying the military advisors, principally the joint chiefs of staff, wanted to nuke everything and everyone. They criticised Kennedy, sometimes openly and often behind the scenes, and considered him too young and inexperienced.

Another summation is that the young president whilst listening and deciding was at times a very lonely man with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Kennedy's "Ministry of talent" drew together men from all walks of life and experience and the message from this book is they offered many views and lots analysis, but however well-meaning or experienced much (almost all from some) was wrong, misplaced and at downtimes scary and mad (yep that's the joint chiefs and CIA).

Names I assume many Americans' know well, such as: McNamara, Rusk, Rostow, Bundy, McCone and Lodge, Le May, Taylor, Harriman and of course Lyndon Johnson and Bobby Kennedy all feature. It would be hard to argue against that these advisors only wanted to what they thought right for the US, but personal situations and personalities play throughout this book (much of course like any political cabinet or corporate boardroom say), and events show the advice they gave JFK was flawed, wrong and at times possibly more than a little disingenuous.

There's little on domestic affairs, including sadly for me segregation, in this book, but Dallek positions this when he outlines that the biggest problems for the POTUS were external. Although progress on the domestic agenda was made during his short presidency, and there are some mentions Dallek points to plans and priorities in the second term with a more electorally secure Kennedy second term.

Dallek provides a useful introduction on JFK and his rise to senatorship and then presidential nominee/candidate and to election. He then thrusts us into the fierce and fast days of 1961 and on.

The book has useful excerpts or sentences using Jackie Kennedy's comments or later recorded opinions alongside the use of cabinet papers, meeting notes and recordings. Schlesinger and Sorenson's information also feature. As does much on RFK - who for me comes across as determined, talented, pointed, driven, forceful and a little rude but genuinely had his brother's back and helped JFK through these tough times.

There is much in this book about Cuba and the demon Castro; Berlin and the defence of the free world, including of course the wily Khrushchev casting his shadow across these areas and challenges. But it is Vietnam that looms largest and the situation with JFK's advisors' plans, analysis, ideas (or lack of them) and disagreements amongst themselves is most interesting. It looms largest, as whilst Berlin and the Cuban missile crisis were resolved, Vietnam wasn't and slid later into full blown war and the deaths of 58,000 US service personnel (like standing at Britain's Post-1945 war memorial at the National Arboretum I have stood at the Vietnam war memorial in Washington and shed a tear for their bravery, their fear and dreadful experiences as well as the lost-potential).

It is easy to judge and to review these men from the comfort of over five decades later, especially as that intensity and atmosphere when nuclear war, sputnik and communist expansion and dominance are all a daily worry. Dallek is critical of all the players including JFK but he is to my mind even-handed in his treatment of all and the events within.

So as I finished this book I was left with some thoughts. De Gaulle was right about advisors and that ultimately it's best to make your own decision and stick with it. JFK was disappointed, sometimes angry and often despairing of the advice he was give and offered. To his credit and our benefit he took time, negotiated and acted with purpose and personal conviction.

Dallek's book is worthy of the time it takes you to read about one of the USA's most testing times.

It is of course impossible to know but this book suggests a president who would have continued to take tough decisions using a inner strength and intelligence. Sadly, the US lost chances and possibilities to change its and the world's future for the better.

But JFK's legacy for me is perhaps that I was able to stand at the Vietnam war memorial to pay my tribute to fellow allied service personnel as I described above **because** of JFK's wise decisions, rather than never having crawled on this earth as the world had been dissolved into dust.

Susan Paxton says

An excellent supplement to Dallek's earlier JFK biography *An Unfinished Life*, this new title details the interactions of JFK with his carefully chosen group of advisors, led by his brother Robert and including luminaries such as Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy. Detailed analyses of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the ongoing reaction of JFK's administration to Vietnam feature, but possibly the most interesting revelation is how JFK came, fairly quickly, to distrust the vast majority of the advice he was given. He still listened - and Dallek emphasizes that JFK was a good listener - but made decisions on his own. The role JFK played in the preservation of world peace is also emphasized; the readiness of the US military to use nuclear weapons everywhere and at any time is shocking and one wonders if there are still such enthusiasts in the current ranks. As often, we are left wondering what might have been if, as Dallek points out, JFK's back brace had not kept him upright in the car after the first shot hit him in the shoulder....

Jack Pearce says

I was sitting in 9th grade civics class one day in 1964 when one of the English teachers came running into our classroom crying and shouting “the president has been shot, the president has been shot.” About a half hour later, the entire school was called into the auditorium and told that John F Kennedy was dead-assassinated. In addition, since this was during the height of the cold war, we were told not to panic because there was no evidence of the Russians being involved. We were not under attack!

The assassination of JFK, like the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the destruction of the Twin Towers were epic events that changed the world as we knew it. As you can see from the above paragraph, almost everyone alive at the time of those events could tell you 50 years later where they were and what they were doing when it happened. It was seared into your mind.

After 50 years, Kennedy still ranks in the top 10 in most presidential rankings. Since becoming an adult and reading much about him over the years, I have never really considered him to be in that stratosphere but I couldn't put my finger on exactly why. This book really help guide me in that direction. Summarized, my current view is that Kennedy, by his actions was somewhere in the lower top third of our presidents. I think why many people rate him higher is because of three aspects: his personality and intelligence; the toughness of the times he governed in and the impressive list of things that JFK wanted to accomplish

Kennedy's youthful good looks and his impressive quick wit made him stand out sharply against almost any president that we can compare him to. The world in which he governed was never more dangerous: the constant threat of ending civilization by nuclear war, the Bay of Pigs and later the Cuban missile crisis, Viet Nam, Berlin, crazy Khrushchev, civil rights and the nuclear arms race and testing are just some of the things that kept him occupied. His presidency was certainly not Camelot.

The most interesting aspect of this book is the way Kennedy is approached. It is a study of his cabinet, his assistants and appointees, and how he interacted with them that shows Kennedy at his best, and worst. He chose the “best and brightest” but then often got overwhelmed by their conflicting advice. This diversity of thought helped him greatly in some areas and utterly failed him in others because of the wide spectrum of ‘educated’ advice that he got from them. For example, during the Cuban missile crisis, his advisors suggested, or more often demanded, actions ranging from nuking the Russians to doing nothing. He alone had to make the final decision.

One Kennedy greatness is obvious in this book, he had an amazing learning curve. His first year in office was mostly stumbling from one crisis to another. He knew what he wanted to do but was hobbled by trying to please all of the political giants. By his last year he showed so much improvement that you have to ask what would the world be like if he lived through his first term and a possible second?

Joe says

After winning the extremely close election of 1960, JFK was faced with the challenge of all new presidents - transitioning from campaigning to governing - the first task, naming a cabinet and forming a team of advisors. Camelot's Court premise/goal is to provide the reader a detailed view into the workings of the Kennedy White House - the personalities, discussions, differences of opinions and ultimately the decisions made, (or not made), and thus policy. If there was any doubt in your mind, this book will confirm how difficult it is being President - even with a bunch of smart and intelligent people around to help.

The good news is that what is covered here - JFK's foreign policy - is done fairly well. And foreign policy in the early 1960's meant the Cold War - the USSR and Khrushchev, Cuba and Castro, Berlin and of course, Vietnam. On the flip-side the narrative concerning US domestic policy during JFK's 1000 days is at best cursory; topics such as Civil Rights or the US economy minimally covered. (And because of this it's unclear to this reader as to why this book simply wasn't "positioned" as a JFK foreign policy/Cold War book.)

Back on the plus side of the ledger, Dallek, as usual, does a very good job of bringing these historical figures/players to life by utilizing a combination of biographical info, quotes, analysis and context; all without impeding the narrative. (As an aside, McGeorge Bundy does not fare well here.) If you are familiar with this period of history Camelot's Court is a nice "refresher", i.e. nothing really new here. Conversely if you are new to the subject matter, this is a great place to start.

Sunny says

It's about time I finished reading this book! I will try to write this as concise as I possibly can. To begin I feel that, at times, it's a little long-winded. I'm sure the author only left the most relevant information, but I think a slight bit more editing could still be done.

I also recommend a list. Yes, a list. There are plenty of names, organisations, and such, and I got lost. I wish I had wrote down who was who, and their "roles". Perhaps you are better (or read the book all at once), but at page 300 I no longer recalled who, say, Rusk was or his function.

And I finish the review with the authenticity aspect. I tend to forget that, sometimes, people write "fiction", even in biographies. This book seems very true-to-fact to me. There are a lot of quotations, sources, and all of the documents/information used for the book are listed at end notes. I know some authors have "coloured" President Kennedy a little in other biographies, but this one seems well and thoroughly researched. Above all it doesn't fictionalise or "tint" history.

Noah Goats says

The politics of the 1960s were superheated by the constant possibility of nuclear war. The Russian premier, Nikita Khrushchev, seemed to be a bomb throwing barbarian who was capable of anything but reason and goodwill, and on the American side, a shocking number of generals and policymakers wanted to use nukes in all kinds of inappropriate situations. It was a dangerous world.

Kennedy was tested with a series of crises from almost his first day in office. From Cuba, to Berlin, to Vietnam he had to deal with constant flash points in addition to the overall pressure of Soviet power. And he did a pretty good job, standing firm in Berlin, forcing the Russians down in Cuba and keeping us out of a nuclear war. In this book Dallek tells the story of this brinkmanship (largely skipping domestic and personal issues), focusing on Kennedy's relationships with his various advisers.

As I read the barrage of different opinions, many of them terrible, delivered by highly educated experts on every single issue, I was amazed that this cacophony didn't render him inert. How did Kennedy make sense if anything? I would probably be frozen by a such a blizzard of conflicting ideas. Many of the men advising Kennedy were not helpful. Their advice was muddled and the effect of reading one bad piece of advice after another makes Dallek's book feel a little muddled as well. It continually circles back to the same problems and regurgitates the old advice in slightly different forms again and again.

Still, they were big and complicated issues and Dallek knows what he's talking about. This book is worth reading if you have any interest in Kennedy or the history of American foreign policy.

(Finally, the title of this book is irritating. Calling the Kennedy administration "Camelot" always makes me cringe.)

Robert Sparrenberger says

I'm not sure why this book was written other than to pad the author's wallet. Robert Dallek mentions in this book that he wrote a Kennedy bio 10 years ago which I read and found very complete. Also, if one is looking for a comprehensive look at Kennedy's staff, David Halberstam's "The Best and Brightest" is the most complete look at the background's of Kennedy's cabinet. I would recommend those two books for a complete look at Kennedy and the Vietnam War. This book really does not fill any needs.

3 stars for a good review of the Kennedy years but other options are better.

Ebster Davis says

This book is an examination of the Kennedy administration from a political and interpersonal perspective.

It is written like a really big research paper, all the dialogue and facts have a source, and I can't imagine the amount of effort it took to do that kind of research.

It's impressive. However unless you are really into history and appreciate academic-style writing, you might not like this book.

(I do enjoy the style, so I didn't mind this.)

In addition, a lot of the book is concerned with what certain Kennedy and/or his councilors thought of each other:

"Rusk thought McCone was a big poo-poo face, but he didn't want to hurt his feelings so he said, "you can plan a raid on Cuba if you think they're worthwhile."" (*Note: The preceding text has been paraphrased)

Actually, its what the whole book is focused 'round. If you're not intrigued by that kind of thing I'd recommend finding a book that approaches the story from a different perspective.

(I thought it was hilarious!)

I was hoping to learn a lot from this book, (and I did) but mostly it made me curious. Cuz now I want to know more about Diem, Castro, and that one USSR leader who's name I can't spell. It was a really neat introduction into how these people (Not just the communists, but political leaders/advisors in general) think and behave.

One thing I didn't like about the book is that it introduces a lot of people who fulfill different roles and argue with each other, and I have a hard time remembering who is who. It would have been nice to have a graph with basic information on each Kennedy-councilor.

I notice a lot of people think this book is redundant because the author wrote another book on the Kennedy administration. I haven't read that other book, so I can't compare them a whole lot.

Marc says

Inside the Kennedy White House is a fluid tale of JFK's term written by probably the most known scholar on the subject. It gives us a look at the cabinet the same way Goodwin wrote about Lincoln's White House in "Teams of Rivals".

Dallek doesn't seem to be in love with his subject and tend to focus almost exclusively on foreign policy intrigues. Mainly The Bay of Pigs fiasco, the nuclear summits with Moscow, the Berlin Wall, Laos, the Missile Crisis and Vietnam.

I read the book because I was interested in knowing better key players such as Robert MacNamara, Walter Rostow, Dean Rusk, Kenneth Albright and George McBundy. The author is great at depicting how all those men were competing for the President's attention and approval.

Rick says

As if the reader is in the room with the advisers...

Dallek prioritizes diplomacy over domestic affairs, perhaps because that is his specialty and because the latter is so dramatic. The takeaway is that a leader must listen to advisors and then make up his or her mind independently, and that even the best and the brightest are usually going to argue with one another, leaving the president no more certain than before. Kennedy's native instincts saved the world from nuclear holocaust but led to an ambivalence on Vietnam that was only relatively less disastrous. If you believe that personalities make history, this book is for you.

Washington Post says

It is tempting to say of Robert Dallek's latest book that there's nothing really new here. The basic story line in "Camelot's Court" will seem familiar to even casual readers of the vast Kennedy oeuvre, and the major themes struck by Dallek, chiefly that JFK was served badly by his advisers, were sounded by David Halberstam's "The Best and the Brightest" more than 40 years ago.

Nonetheless, Dallek, whose "An Unfinished Life" (2003) first exposed the severity of JFK's medical condition, is an assiduous digger into archives, and he writes with a kind of granular authority. He doesn't labor to spell out lessons of leadership, but he doesn't need to. The story of how a glamorous but green young president struggled with conflicting and often bad advice while trying to avoid nuclear Armageddon remains a gripping and cautionary tale of the loneliness of command.

Dallek's account does not finally redeem or exalt JFK, but it does make you want to elect presidents who are not easily fooled by the so-called experts.

See also:

The Best and the Brightest

Read our review here:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinion...>

Caroline says

The basic premise of this book - looking at the Kennedy presidency through his interactions with his chief policy advisers - is certainly an interesting one, but having finished it I'm not convinced that it really contributed anything new to the already overwhelming number of books on Kennedy's thousand days in the White House. Dallek is author of one of, in my opinion, the best biographies of Kennedy available - John F Kennedy: An Unfinished Life - and with such a title already in his portfolio I'm not sure this one was necessary.

Another criticism (and really, it seems as though I didn't enjoy this book with all this carping, and I did!) is that it focuses almost exclusively on foreign policy issues. This is understandable, as foreign policy has always been one of the few areas where Presidents can flex their muscle, so to speak, where, short of war, they are relatively independent of Congress. And Kennedy faced some particularly pressing foreign policy issues in his short presidency - Cuba, Vietnam, the Soviet Union. But a book ostensibly looking at Kennedy's White House whilst devoting just a few throw-away lines to the Civil Rights Movement is really doing history a disservice.

That said, this is a good book. Dallek is a very good writer, clearly thoroughly familiar with the era and the personalities, and he draws heavily on much recently-released material on the Kennedy years - tape recordings, interviews, memoirs - to give a real in-depth insight into the psychology of many of the decisions made. It is fascinating that Kennedy, whilst surrounded by so many brilliant minds, decisively and determinedly charted his own path; and it is entirely to his credit that he knew when to listen to their opinions and when to disregard them. It is frightening to think what may have happened to the United States and the world at large had Kennedy listened to some of his military advisers over Cuba or Vietnam.

Ugo Marsolais says

An excellent account of the most important political moments of the Kennedy White House, seen through the interactions of JFK's closest advisers with the President himself. The focus is overwhelmingly on foreign policy, mainly Vietnam, Cuba (both Bay of Pigs invasion and missile crisis), Berlin, and Nuclear Tests Ban negotiations. Not much is covered on domestic issues, except for brief accounts on civil rights.

On Vietnam, the account strengthens the view that Kennedy would most probably haven't dragged the U.S. into the open-ended commitment Vietnam got under LBJ. Kennedy was quite skeptic about the necessity of supporting Saigon and preventing the fall of South Vietnam. Dallek makes a good case that the main reason why Kennedy didn't pull out from Vietnam was for... domestic political considerations: Kennedy was very anxious about not being branded as "soft" on communism and being accused of having lost Vietnam as Truman "lost" China at the end of the 40s.

On Cuba, Kennedy had clearly indicated he wouldn't commit US soldiers along the Cuban exiles at the Bay

of Pigs, but the Joint Chiefs thought that, like most presidents, Kennedy wouldn't allow the venture to fail and would commit itself to a full-fledged U.S. invasion of Cuba if things were to go wrong. To their surprise, Kennedy refused to commit U.S. soldiers even when told that the landing of the Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs was failing. Kennedy felt deceived and manipulated by the Joint Chiefs into something that they knew had a high probability of failure without active support of the U.S. military. The drama happened only a few months into his presidency, and he never trusted the military after.

On the October 1962 missile crisis and also on negotiations with the Soviet Union on nuclear tests ban, Kennedy was often aghast by the lack of restraint from the Joint Chiefs about using nuclear weapons, like those weapons were just bigger conventional bombs. He clearly perceived and was always preoccupied about the risk posed to mankind by nuclear bombs. On the October 62 missile crisis, although he did not want to have Soviet nuclear warheads in Cuba, it remains to be seen how far he would have gone if Khrushchev wouldn't have blinked first and ordered his vessels back. Any outcome was better than nuclear conflict, and even if in the end he traded a pledge of non-invasion of Cuba against the removal of the missiles, he was also ready to give up on the Jupiter missiles in Turkey if needed.

In conclusion, you see a sensitive and thoughtful man, often tortured by his doubts and his concerns about balancing all sides of a problem, in the midst of an inner circle made of highly intelligent men who did not however always provide him with the best advice and support.
