

Tratto da: BBC History

## JFK: Style over substance?

In popular opinion, JFK is regularly ranked among the best American presidents, but how well does his record stand up to historical scrutiny? On the 50th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination, Mark White considers how we should view him today.

The elements of what occurred on the streets of Dallas on 22 November 1963 are indelibly burned onto the world's memory. The motorcade, the gunshots, the Texas School Book Depository building, the grassy knoll, the conspiracy theories. And a dead president, father and husband.

A week after witnessing the murder of her husband on Dealey Plaza, John F Kennedy's widow, Jackie, invited the journalist Theodore White to interview her for *Life* magazine. Taking place just four days after the state funeral, the timing of the interview might have been surprising, but clear-eyed reason underpinned the invitation. John Kennedy had always worked hard at cultivating a powerful and alluring image. Up until 1961, his father, Joseph Kennedy, the driven businessman who had served as US ambassador to Britain, had helped his son in the polishing of his image. In late 1961, however, Joe Kennedy suffered a massive stroke that left him incapacitated, so the protection of JFK's image was bequeathed to the grieving widow.

In the interview, Jackie Kennedy handled this responsibility with immense skill. Shrewdly, she informed White that, on evenings, her late husband had enjoyed listening to *Camelot*, the musical about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table written by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe. A particular set of lyrics had been especially meaningful to JFK: "Don't let it be forgot/That once there was a spot/For one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot." Accordingly, White's feature for *Life* took Camelot as its motif.

Jackie Kennedy suggested to the American people that it was appropriate to think of JFK in mythological terms: he had been a noble, graceful, inspiring leader who evoked the Arthurian legend. Grief-stricken over the death of their glamorous young president, the American people were receptive to Jackie Kennedy's message and were prepared to accept her argument that he had been a genuinely great president.

In the development of Kennedy's image since his assassination, this *Life* interview remains the key text for historians. Film and television have sustained JFK's seductive image over the years, but nothing has had as much impact as his widow's interview with White where she succeeded in ensuring her view of her husband's leadership prevailed.

As historian Stephen Ambrose put it: "She certainly wanted to take control of history and in so many ways she managed to do so." Despite the attempts of various historians since the 1970s to challenge the 'Camelot' interpretation of JFK as an outstanding president, many Americans have continued to support the idea of his greatness. A Gallup poll taken in April 2003 showed that the American people regarded him as the second greatest president in US history, behind only Abraham Lincoln. In a 2010 Gallup poll, he was rated the best of the nine most recent presidents. Jackie Kennedy had countered any sober historical assessment of JFK by advancing an interpretation based on Arthurian mythology – and myth has proven to be more powerful than history.

For if one attempts to get beyond the Camelot mythology, what emerges is not a record of greatness that can be favourably compared to that of Lincoln who won the Civil War, kept the American nation as one and ended slavery, or of Franklin Roosevelt who brought the United States through the Great Depression and the Second World War. Rather, Kennedy's record is mixed in both foreign and domestic policy.

#### Robust action

Ever since writing his undergraduate thesis at Harvard on the British appeasement of Hitler (subsequently published in 1940 as a book, *Why England Slept*), Kennedy's greatest interest in public affairs was foreign policy. Since his death, Kennedy has often been viewed not only as a great president but as a moral, progressive one – a leader intent on reducing Cold War tensions and on tackling racial inequality at home. In truth, Kennedy was more a pragmatic centrist than a liberal ideologue. In world affairs, his study of British appeasement made him believe that a democracy like the US needed to be tough in dealing with totalitarian foes by increasing its military power. This hard-line conviction would shape his presidential foreign policy.