The ambiguous role of the Kennedy family in the history of modern liberalism is inseparable from the ambiguous role of the family as an institution in American culture. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the family has become the ideal U.S. citizen in the last half century. And while that achievement has been due largely to the late arrival of Evangelicals onto the political stage, it would be a mistake to imagine that defenders of secular and liberal values have not done their part in advancing the family as a rights-bearing subject. At the risk of confounding the issue beyond interpretive headway, we might even say that the hallmark of modern liberalism itself is its equivocal position between advancing social justice within institutional frameworks and advancing the business as usual of those frameworks as such. And we might add that the Kennedy family, with its bottomless coffers and sense of mission, a commitment scarcely distinct from paternalism, has embodied just this conflicted status in the post-1945 world. That the Kennedy name, now synonymous with liberalism, once signified a red-baiting jingoism and a lukewarm approach to civil rights testifies as much to the leftward shift of the Kennedy compound as to the rightward shift of American culture. It is a tribute to its by now largely symbolic stature that the Kennedys have succeeded in recasting liberalism in their own name and image – which is to say, a liberalism of image, and perhaps in name only.

Given the truism that governance is the business of compromise, it is fitting that the First Family of American politics has proved such a shrewd handler of its own frequently compromised identity. The Kennedy family is a novel blend of private sanctum and publicly traded company, both a bourgeois haven in a heartless world and a royal house. If the Kennedy family has become the most recognizable brand in modern politics, it is safe to say that John F. Kennedy, more so than his kingmaker paterfamilias, was that brand’s creator. For JFK not only surrounded himself with family members, in a manner unprecedented in presidential history, but also fused those ties with the media campaigns he brilliantly exploited. The Kennedys had
long been “something of a clan,” to borrow F. Scott Fitzgerald’s line about the Carraways, but it was JFK who made family values pay by making his own unimpeachably cozy nuclear unit appear seamless with what Protestant America saw as the never quite couth prolificacy of the Catholic household from which he arose. JFK’s canny awareness that the family could cover a multitude of sins was not incidental to the fact that his own family contained multitudes. Among American Catholics with any pretensions to public life, their faith’s demurral from family planning calls for the most gingerly public relations, lest it devolve into the spectacle of a fecundity that verges on class and even erotic impermissibility.

Later in this chapter, I shall consider the possibilities of appropriating the Kennedy family to a subversive or “queer” end, at least when its presumed excesses appear to threaten the abidingly puritanical norms of American life (a threat already implicit in the title of Alastair Cooke’s 1963 cover story in Show magazine: “Too Many Kennedys?”). Any such recruitment would have to account for the virtuosity with which JFK in particular managed to fashion the family as an alibi for the most outré behaviors in and out of the domestic pale. So enduring is the mystique of the Kennedy brand that one is unsurprised when the scions of its cadet branches demonstrate a credulous faith in the immunity conferred by the family arms. In the 2002 trial of Michael Skakel, accused of killing Martha Moxley, Gregory Coleman testified that Skakel bragged to him, “I’m a Kennedy. I’m going to get away with murder.” While Skakel’s faith in the Kennedy exemption was disproved by his actual conviction of the crime, and while the testimony of the unstable Coleman was perhaps less than sound, there is still some justification for the view that being a Kennedy grants a license, if not a get-out-of-jail-free card, for all manner of indiscretions. However much scandal accrues to individual Kennedys, after all, surprisingly little has attached to the family name itself, which circulates in the public imagination as the repository of tragic sympathy. We speak of the Kennedy curse but rarely of the Kennedy disgrace. Even its convicted murderers and accused rapists, to say nothing of its vigorous philanderers, seem incapable of tarnishing the brand beyond a surface blemish.

A large part of this seeming invulnerability is owing to the early association of the family business with power – or, more precisely, to the fortuitous and remarkably successful effort to launder the acquisition and wielding of power into its most idealized form: “public service.” Such renovations had long been incumbent on the Kennedy patriarch, whose move from Boston to New York coincided with the recasting of his family from Boston Irish to “semi-English,” to use Garry Wills’s term, and of the family fortune from bootlegging to finance. Yet the ability to harness power to the family brand...
has a special place among Joseph Kennedy’s makeovers if only because, unlike the Anglicization (which would always retain the mark of the striver), the family’s triumphant identification with American power placed it above the fray of the competitiveness (or simply bullying) for which, according to every observer of the family dynamic, the Kennedys were most known. In this respect, the coronation of JFK as president licensed the assumption, until very recently unquestioned, that a Kennedy who ran for office was simply going through the motions required of him before swearing his oath. Ted Kennedy’s 1980 takeover bid of the Carter nomination represents the reductio ad absurdum of the family hubris: “Edward rented a private ‘Air Force One,’ ” Wills writes, “and campaigned as an incumbent.”

However ruthless the rivalry on the lawn at Hyannis Port, the family’s united front sought to impress upon the world at large that, in the realm of politics, Kennedys favored a policy of succession. “They were all intensely competitive and at home vied with each other,” according to Kennedy speechwriter and hagiographer Ted Sorensen. “But when it came to competing with the rest of the world, the warmth of their solidarity strengthened Jack and awed his adversaries.” Such fortitude in turn grounded the attitude of both Kennedys and their admirers (“the network of honorary Kennedys,” to cite Victor Navasky) that election to office followed the rules of primogeniture rather than those of constitutional democracy. “Just as I went into politics when Joe died,” Sorensen cites JFK telling an interviewer, “if anything happened to me tomorrow my brother Bobby would run for my seat.” That blithe approach toward inherited privilege was echoed with somewhat more eagerness in a 1957 puff piece by Harold Martin in the Saturday Evening Post, which “confidently” – and accurately – predicted “the day when Jack will be in the White House, Bobby will serve in the Cabinet as Attorney General and Teddy will be the Senator from Massachusetts.”

Americans are supposed to frown on dynasts, of course, a fact that explains why JFK worked diligently to mute the image of an executive branch staffed with courtiers by drawing attention to the even more charmed circle occupied by his own wife and children. It was above all through the softening lens of the nuclear family that JFK was able to orchestrate his signature political gesture – the wearing of power as though it were a varsity sweater draped across his shoulders. The canonical accounts of JFK teem with references to his legendary “unpoliticianlike style,” as Kenny O’Donnell and Dave Powers put it in their memoir. Here is Ted Sorensen on the soon-to-be First Couple: “They lived in a fashionable but unpretentious house and avoided the Washington cocktail circuit to an unusual degree. Both strongly preferred small groups of friends to large crowds.” Here is Arthur Schlesinger on JFK’s “charm and grace”: “His ‘coolness’ was itself a new frontier. . . .
It promised the deliverance of American idealism.” It promised the deliverance of American idealism.” That this style was in fact deeply self-conscious – “he not only could objectively measure his own performance,” Sorensen notes, “but also cared deeply about how that performance would be measured by future historians” – makes all the more brilliant its pretense of what O’Donnell and Powers call “unpretentious restraint.” “Even his faking,” Schlesinger observes in a revealing sentence, “had to stay within character.”

If “there is nothing easy about effortlessness,” as the sociologist David Riesman noted in 1952, there is nonetheless a significant reward for those equal to the rigors of projecting casualness in any situation, as JFK did. The “careless and purposeful” manner with which he wore his clothes and parsed his diction, the leisurely esprit with which he escorted his wife and played with his children, spoke to the ease with which he took the assumption of nearly absolute power for granted. This is only to point out one of the more frequent refrains in Kennedy lore: JFK was the first celebrity president, embodying what Theodore White called “a ‘star quality’ reserved only for television and movie idols.” The implications of this persona were neither faddish nor innocuous, for it is arguable that JFK’s Hollywood-flavored charisma inaugurated the conversion of the national press into a publicity department of the executive branch. “His style, finally, began to capture even the newsmen who had heard all he had to say long before,” White writes of JFK on the campaign trail, “but continued to listen, as one continues to return to a favorite movie.” White might just as well be describing the press conferences of Ronald Reagan or Barack Obama.

Like any superstar, JFK perfected his own fame because he was himself a true believer in celebrity, or rather in the virtues of what Philip Fisher calls the “high visibility” bestowed on luminaries by the value-added technologies of consumer culture. The regime of high visibility, according to Fisher, divides the world into cynosures and spectators, somebodies and nobodies, with the catch that the somebodies must continually perform their exalted function – whether the mastery of folksiness (as with Mark Twain) or the mastery of statesmanship (as with JFK) – in an ongoing “process of mutual conferring of reality” between viewer and viewed. There is the added complication that, in an officially egalitarian society, the celebrity must also act as though he is in essence, but for the blessing of the limelight, a nobody. Celebrities: they are just like us, only better. Nothing captures the presidential couple’s tightrope act of distinction and accessibility quite so vividly as the effort to make the grand-touring socialite Jacqueline Bouvier, at home among that transatlantic elite for which Wharton and James served as ethnographers, into the all-American housewife: Camelot by way of Leave It to Beaver.
In managing this improbable rehabilitation, it helped that Jackie herself was not immune to the lures of fandom. If “the ethereal Jacqueline,” as Wills notes, “was more than half in love with Hollywood,” this starstruck quality served her in good stead as she pursued what Schlesinger calls “her perfection of style,” an impression management delicately poised between divinity and approachability. Though she “found the Kennedys ‘terribly bourgeois’” to cite W. J. Rorabaugh, she nonetheless recognized that bourgeois sold well in a social order whose regnant ideology maintains the universality of middle-class identity. What Rorabaugh calls “the desire many women had to be like Jackie” issued in part from the First Lady’s astute application to her own life of the signature middle-class dynamic of emulation: “Within six weeks of the inauguration, the ‘Jackie look’ had swept the country. Department store advertising featured drawings of women who looked remarkably like Jackie.” Such mirror effects go a long way toward explaining the First Family’s paradoxical appeal. The chain of analogies through which the Kennedy presidency forged its enduring embrace of the body politic begins with the uncanny doubling of the given name itself. Jack and Jackie, reciprocating each other, cinch the family circle in the image ideal of companionate marriage. That both Jack and Jackie are diminutives further mitigates the hihborn status of their possessors. The Francophile Jacqueline, with her decidedly un-American appanage, is spared the charge of hauteur by a handle that transforms her into the girl next door. “Honorary Kennedys” are in fact unimaginable without nicknamed Kennedys. The Schlesingers and Sorensens require the Jackies and Bobbies and Teds (not to mention John-Johns) lest the whole enterprise degrade into vassalage – in other words, lest it appear that there is anything more than informal about the family’s prerogative to knight outsiders and compel their fealty. It is of the essence that Kennedy diminutives ring with none of the recherché onomastics favored by the preppy elite; you will find no Scooters or Otters or Muffies in the Kennedy family album. Jack, Bob, and Ted are derivative – and, to that extent, populist – nicknames, even when they belong to individuals who are anything but ordinary.

Although Jackie’s resemblance to a suburban homemaker always seemed a stretch, we need only remind ourselves that televised housewives circa 1960, from June Cleaver to Samantha Stevens, were given to accessorizing their impeccably tailored housecoats with pearls and diamonds. If the aprons they wore over their finery bespoke their domestic rounds, such toil was nevertheless surprisingly hard to pin down as drudgery. For the imaginary family of network television, as for the slightly less imaginary family that occupied the Kennedy White House, meals come already prepped to the table, rooms are immaculately neat and clean, and the only women’s work...
that is never done is shopping for the home. “The only way that the young housewife was supposed to express herself, and not feel guilty about it,” Betty Friedan writes in *The Feminine Mystique*, “was in buying products for the home-and-family.” 25 Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the nuclear family of post–World War II America scarcely embodied a return to traditional values. It was a radically new formation that, while absorbing the customary roles of male breadwinners and female homemakers, advanced a powerful “progressive” ideal. “Faith in a mass consumption postwar economy,” Lizabeth Cohen argues, “stood for an elaborate, integrated ideal of economic abundance and democratic political freedom, both equitably distributed.” 26 “Department stores,” according to Friedan, thus aspired “not only to ‘sell’ the housewife but . . . to satisfy the yearning she has, alone in her house, to feel herself a part of the changing world.” 27 While Jackie Kennedy “lacked dishpan hands,” as Rorabaugh observes, it is not the case that “nobody really believed” that she was a “housewife.” 28 For she became the standard-bearer of Cohen’s “Consumers’ Republic,” 29 whose home economics consisted precisely in choosing and acquiring things for the house rather than homemaking as such.

Thus while she might have found the Kennedys a rather déclassé crew, Jackie had in common with them an unimpeachable taste – an eye for the right cut of suit, an ear for the right music (Stravinsky and Casals both played après-dinner concerts at the White House). Like the Catholic Kennedys, the Catholic Jackie launched a stealth assault on the Protestant ascendancy by way of connoisseurship. She was just cultured and cosmopolitan enough to permit identification across class divides while radiating an ecumenical cultural sensibility that, measured against the cramped exclusivity of the WASP establishment, looked positively demotic. This is why the charge that JFK bought the presidency, like the charge that his father bought Pulitzers, ambassadorships, or SEC chairs, ultimately has little force: there is nothing un-American about purchasing power. Indeed, to the degree that JFK was an educated consumer, he duplicated rather than differed from his smart shopper of a wife. For just as female labor was all but invisible in the postwar programming of domestic sitcoms, so the male labor that allowed televised households to be so nicely provisioned was always off camera. In performing the high visibility of the Oval Office, JFK performed a version of leisure-class retirement – the presidential term as permanent weekend, or at the very least a position that entitled its holder, like his spouse, to work from home.

This is only to say that what Elaine Tyler May calls the “restructuring” of the family as “a liberating arena of fulfillment through professionalized homemaking” applied as much to men as to women, including the First
The freedom that the family promised, and for which the Kennedy White House served as a kind of aspirational model home, was precisely the autonomy of the professional class, those brainworkers who stand above and apart from partisan ideologies in the pursuit of self-justifying and rewarding intellectual labor. No less remarkable than Jackie’s transition from blue-blooded equestrienne to middle-class homemaker was JFK’s own shift from playboy of the Western world to the father who knows best. Perhaps the oldest chestnut regarding JFK’s 1960 victory over Nixon is the presumption that he won the televised debates “by addressing himself to the audience that was the nation,” as Theodore White puts it, rather than to his opponent. Yet it might be more accurate to say that JFK’s highly telegenic presence proved winning because it hewed so closely to those of the sitcom fathers preapproved by home audiences. He was both orchestrator and beneficiary of a feedback loop between the small screen and the national stage. To quote the political scientist Larry Sabato, “The World War II generation came of age with television and a made-for-TV family named the Kennedys.” In keeping with the gift for conventional wisdom that has made him a cable news fixture, Sabato’s phrasing implies that serendipity rather than adroit calculation was at the root of the First Family’s televisual appeal.

May observes that JFK “seemed to embody the American domestic ideal par excellence: the tough cold warrior who was also a warm family man,” yet that his “rhetoric, emphasizing vigor and the promise of change, encouraged Americans to embrace political activism and risk.” To the extent that it treats JFK’s family idyll as somehow at odds with his exhortations to social engagement, this characterization ignores the degree to which JFK’s charismatic authority radiated outward, not least in the direction of an attention-getting “youth message,” from the basis of his infallible fatherhood. The “warm family man,” manifesting the soft power JFK used to impel intellectuals and other “honorary Kennedys” into the orbit of his governance, did not compete with either the Cold Warrior or the proto-1960s figurehead. He was, rather, their progenitor. If the Kennedy White House was a technocrat’s paradise, it was also an extended family, with JFK as its easygoing yet never less than imperious head. The relaxed and jaunty style was the outer lining of his imposing command.

That JFK could rescue his undemocratic pedigree by fixing on a patriarchal appeal shot through with “candor and humor,” “wit and resolve,” speaks to the Kennedy administration’s frequently lauded rhetorical deftness. If the sacral myth of JFK after his assassination was all but assured by the presence of many gifted and devoted writers in his inner circle (Sorensen and Schlesinger above all), it was no less the case that those
same handlers, as keenly attuned to midcult cues as Jackie was to high-
brow ones, positioned JFK as the consummation of the “culture of daddy-
hood,” Ralph LaRossa’s term for the “modernization of fatherhood” that
proceeded apace in the decades on either side of World War II.\textsuperscript{36} In contrast with the distant patriarchs of American myth (like JFK’s own father, “absenting himself much of the time”\textsuperscript{37}), dads prided themselves on quality time with the kids. Whereas Herbert Parmet notes that “Jack and the other children were raised largely by their mother and hired help,”\textsuperscript{38} JFK himself embodied what LaRossa calls “fatherhood with a happy face.”\textsuperscript{39} “It was in the White House . . . that the President truly discovered his chil-
dren,” Sorensen observes. “How best to rear children . . . suddenly became
one of his favorite topics of discussion.”\textsuperscript{40} JFK’s updating of old-school roles like fatherhood is of a piece with his oxymoronic messaging, his monotonous reference to novelty despite his unshakeable commitment to the inertial frameworks of the American establishment. The instrument for getting across this mixed message was the same television set that disseminated “New Fatherhood” as a way of life.\textsuperscript{41} The White House in which JFK learned to love parenting, Sorensen notes, “also became the focal point of numerous television . . . presentations which took the public behind the scenes.”\textsuperscript{42}

To say, with David Halberstam, that Kennedy “was the first of a new kind of media candidate flashed daily into our consciousness by television during the campaign” is to risk redundancy, for television itself entails the eternal return of newness. Halberstam understands Kennedy’s media savvy as coming “at a price”; television affords JFK a connection to the public, but it can only be temporary, since the gap between how television works and how the real world works is so wide that not even the most dashing politician can surmount it. If television’s “unbelievable velocity,” capable of “exciting desires and appetites” and “changing mores almost overnight,” is out of sync with “the slowness of traditional government institutions,” the candidate whose victory was a tribute to television was bound to renege on the optimistic rhetoric of his campaign.\textsuperscript{43} But this is to underestimate both television’s co-optive powers and those of JFK himself, whose speechwriters (the very “new men to cope with new problems and new opportunities” he invoked in his acceptance speech at the 1960 Democratic Convention\textsuperscript{44}) seemed more than up to the task of writing his presidency as a serial drama starring a preternaturally youthful leading man. We might register this mod-
ulation by noting the regularity with which JFK’s flacks invoked the word “fresh” when describing his tenure (as when Pierre Salinger describes his former boss as “a fresh voice in American politics”\textsuperscript{45}). Freshness is television’s preferred state. The medium might trumpet newness, but it never
really flouts tradition. It is by now certain that the revolution will never be televised.

The reformist impulses that have long been the hallmark of broadcast television mirror the reformist impulses of the Kennedy White House, which was neither so radical nor so reactionary as later political minorities of different leanings would make it out to be. (“On . . . television,” as the medium’s great critic John Leonard once put it, “the Enlightenment is far from dead.”) One need not deny the Kennedys’ obvious and far-reaching appeal to recognize that the Kennedy mystique succeeded in part by generating the appearance of broad acclaim in the absence of unanimity. Far more than its anodyne politics, what JFK’s presidency had in common with the fare of network television was the latter’s inbuilt mechanism for inundating the culture with what Daniel Boorstin, in his 1962 book, The Image, called “the rising tide of pseudo-events,” those public rituals that, though they exist merely to be reported on, are simultaneously capable of quickening the most “extravagant expectations.” Boorstin clearly wrote his book with the thirty-fifth president in mind; JFK’s outsized political stardom made him the exemplary “human pseudo-event.” At the same time, Kennedy had a gift for recognizing the powerful fantasy that television effected: the possibility that even nobodies could be inflated into somebodies. “Reporters . . . in the 1960 Presidential campaign,” Boorstin writes, “noted how many of the ‘supporters’ in large crowds that were being televised had come out because they wanted to be seen on the television cameras.” If “television reporting allows us all to be the actors we really are,” part of JFK’s genius was to open the extended family to an indefinite number of walk-on roles: even a viewer like you can become an “honorary Kennedy” simply by showing up at a televised rally.

This is perhaps too cynical a take on the sense of purpose that Kennedy-as-father inspired, particularly in the young. “For many years,” Stanley Meisler reminds us, volunteers for the Peace Corps (spearheaded, of course, by JFK’s brother-in-law Sargent Shriver) “were known in some Latin American countries as los hijos de Kennedy – the children of Kennedy.” Such a tantalizing patrimony, in which JFK could serve as everyone’s dad, was arguably incompatible with the tightly guarded stronghold that was the reality of the Kennedy White House. As Parmet observes, JFK favored the view that in their heart of hearts his fellow citizens wanted nothing more than to be managed. “Democracy,” Parmet says, “was something Kennedy had to put up with.” Then, too, even apart from the “revelations” about JFK’s prodigious adultery, the simulacrum of conjugal bliss projected by the Kennedy White House was bound to be a brittle formation in any event. For the shift in the ensuing decade away from the family structure, subject to
permanent critique by the whole panoply of New Left causes, did not arise as a rash assault on the harmonious rewards of domesticity; it proceeded from the discovery that such rewards were nonexistent, or bore at most a tenuous relation to many people's lived experience. We do not need the muckraking of The Feminine Mystique to confirm what numerous Americans understood at the time. Far from enforcing a monolithic stay-at-home role, according to Joanne Meyerowitz, the print media of the early 1960s teemed with “articles [that] subverted the notion that women belonged at home, presented a wide variety of options open to women, and praised the women who had chosen to assert themselves as public figures.”

Using sources cognate with those of The Feminine Mystique, Meyerowitz sets out to debunk the partiality of Friedan's own pop-cultural archive and concludes: “Her forceful protest against a restrictive domestic ideal neglected the extent to which that ideal was already undermined.”

One could argue that the Kennedys similarly neglected the erosion of the domestic ideal when they transformed the family romance into the groundwork of a new American idealism in general. Yet this conclusion may be shortsighted. And given JFK's success in making only partially welcome ideas appear like universal values, it may also be irrelevant. It is a common move among scholars of queer theory to look at institutions like the family as containing within themselves, in a more or less dormant state, the very means of their own undoing. In the case of JFK, we would not have to look far for such contradictions. What Seymour Hersh somewhat primly calls Kennedy’s “incessant womanizing” during his residency in the Oval Office was the great open secret of his presidency, indeed one that it ironically fell to an embarrassed Secret Service to manage. Given the ceaseless parade of “hookers” and “bimbos” shunted in and out of the White House, not to mention the copious off-site affairs in which JFK indulged, often with his own aides’ wives, virtually every member of his staff assumed that a “public scandal . . . was inevitable.”

There is a temptation in the face of such raucous sexual exploits to see past the obvious equation between male power and female objectification to the ludic surplus of JFK’s erotic appetite, whose disruptions must then be checked by quite dubious norms of decency. We might push this thinking slightly further and say that the threat of a public scandal reflects worse on the public itself than on its target, given that any liberal society worthy of the name would surely have to include freedom of sexual expression among its ideals. As Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan argue in their introduction to an anthology of essays on the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, “scandal” is a problematic concept when it comes to such basic constitutional protections as the separation of powers, not to say church and state. “Scandal enabled
long-term political differences to be played out as distinctions of moral hierarchy,” they note in rehashing the forty-second president’s famous indiscretion. “It became plausible to think that moral disgust was a politically serious enough response to warrant the president’s impeachment.”

From Berlant and Duggan’s point of view, which rejects the “conservative notions of sexual normalcy and propriety taken for granted in the public sphere,” JFK might appear not so much a lecher as a harbinger of an affirmatively deviant jouissance. This louche and Dionysian Kennedy is no doubt preferable to the tormented sex addict who slinks through the reproachful pages of Hersh’s Dark Side of Camelot.

Whereas JFK may now be ripe for a revisionist sex-positivity, Jackie has long proved to be a cherished object of camp affection, sex-positivity’s boon companion. For the camp aficionado, Jackie’s homemaking is a transparent charade, “a role whose hollowness and constrictions,” according to Wayne Koestenbaum, “she could not deny.” Left cold by the myth of her wifely decorum (“Jackie’s wife persona was,” if anything, an exercise in “defamil­iarization” [110]), Koestenbaum instead commemorates “a perverse Jackie” (14), a “spy on a dangerous mission” (24), “Jackie-as-dandy” (182). Jackie under My Skin records Koestenbaum’s fathomless transference onto the late First Lady and his discovery in her of an equally oceanic reservoir of challenges to the status quo. One the one hand, “she can function as a subversive figure (an instrument of longings we can’t name),” and, on the other hand, “by refusing to behave like an ordinary 1950s political wife, she subtly broadcasts shifts in female protocol and possibility” (17). The gnomic politesse with which she telegraphed such cues is a testament as much to Jackie’s sphinxlike reticence as to the more or less closeted affinity she had with those venturesome women and gay men over whom she “continues to hold sway” (18). Those groups feel especially hailed by her because, equipped with the subaltern’s X-ray vision – the heightened alertness demanded by a world that does not guarantee their safety – they can unfold the subtext beneath the surface of her glittering life. “Jackie was a show,” Koestenbaum writes, “but its plot was buried” (19). Her “palpably ungenuine” persona (52), he suggests, not only “awoke longing for a different life” (19) but also lighted the way for her “constituency” (60). If we embrace artifice with “her superior sense of irony” (54), her refusal to be “held accountable to one identity” can be ours, too (24).

The problem with these sorts of readings is that – even as they pay heed to a politically desirable alterity, a more commodious libidinal economy, or a radical performativity – their authors rely in the final reckoning on an ideal of relatability, an ideal that ranks the acknowledgment of personal identity among the chief ends of social justice. Where the half-ironic title of Berlant
and Duggan’s book insists on the political urgency of identification (Our Monica, Ourselves), Koestenbaum’s title, Jackie under My Skin, is a cheeky reclamation of the old canard about male homosexuals as women trapped in men’s bodies. These are very knowing forms of identity politics, but their sophistication should not blind us to their devout commitment to the politics of recognition as such. It is not news that this is the default politics of our culture, the shape that liberalism has taken since approximately 1960. That JFK “gave public expression to the private thoughts of millions,” as Rorabaugh puts it, is the go-to cliché in virtually every account of his presidency. His gift for relatability, for forcing recognition to the front lines of consciousness, was inseparable from the fact that he presented himself as a kind of universal relative. “It makes perfect sense that most Americans told pollsters in the wake of November 22,” Sabato writes, “that they were grieving as though they had lost a member of their own family.” If one of the lasting bequests of the Cold War consensus was the “effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members’ personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life,” as Elaine Tyler May puts it, we might locate the epicenter of this project in the Kennedy White House. And while the nuclear family has obviously gone in and out of ideological fashion since the early 1960s, the political value accorded to an “expressive personal life,” or of giving “public expression to private thoughts,” has remained remarkably stable.

To the extent that it means to trivialize its accomplishments, then, the frequently bruited charge that the Kennedy administration represented “the triumph of style over substance” neglects how profoundly motivating the Kennedy style turned out to be. Out of the reach of millions (precisely because it was funded by the family millions), JFK’s style nonetheless found countless aspirants in the “new generation” to which he passed the torch in his celebrated inaugural address. For the New Left practitioners of what Douglas Rossinow calls “the politics of authenticity,” after all, style was the cornerstone of a politically substantive program. “The ‘problem of ourselves,’” according to one student activist, “was the problem of what perspective, vision, effort, and courage we can call forth to embody competence and authentic style.” This mission statement could easily have been scripted by Ted Sorensen or Arthur Schlesinger Jr., both of whom understood – long before it became a motto of the women’s movement – that the personal is political.

In the wake of second wave feminism’s decisive critique of patriarchy, the family might seem the last place one might expect to find oneself. But as May argues, far from repressing subjectivity, the midcentury family offered up self-expression as a live possibility. That the family confined
persons (particularly women) in predefined roles is not in doubt; but the discontent to which such confinement led was a consequence of the family’s double-binding insistence that personal identity should be fulfilling. This point was hardly lost on *los hijos de Kennedy*, who rejected the suburban lifestyle of their parents not because it was antithetical to expressive authenticity but because it was an insufficient guarantor of it. In his brilliantly jaundiced account of JFK and his brothers, Garry Wills depicts the Kennedy family as a scene of “imprisonment” (it features in the title of his book). Yet this description is one-sided. For it is hardly the case that JFK sought to escape either his family of origin or the family of his own making. Indeed, far from confining him, the family afforded the thirty-fifth president almost boundless opportunities for personal discovery (writer, statesman, sexual Olympian). The form of life we inhabit by contrast, infused with the Kennedy family’s still captivating example, is one in which self-expression has become a mandatory life sentence.

NOTES

4 Ibid., 295.
7 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 35.
16 Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 91.
18 Ibid., 326.
20 Ibid., 132.
24 Ibid., 129.
38 Ibid., 15.
42 Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 328.
44 Cited in Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 60.
48 Ibid., 3.
49 Ibid., 45.
50 Ibid., 28.
52 Parmet, *Jack*, xvi.
54 Ibid., 250.
56 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
63 Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days*, x.