

JFK's Troubles With Women

By [Naomi Wolf](#)

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The 50th anniversary of the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy provides an opportunity to consider the shifts in consciousness in the U.S. that have occurred in the half-century since his death. In particular, though Kennedy has entered the pantheon of U.S. heroes, recent data show that women, especially, have been losing admiration for him as a leader. Why?

In some ways, Kennedy's legacy for women was as progressive as his legacy on race and poverty. One genuinely visionary move was to ask Eleanor Roosevelt, a longtime feminist, to chair the first President's Commission on the Status of Women. The commission, which included both male and female political leaders, was a real, rather than cosmetic, effort to assess the workplace bias that women faced, what legal protections they should have, and what could be done to end gender discrimination — a concept that did not yet even have a vocabulary.

JFK's had a mixed
record on women.

While he was
praised
for addressing
the issue
of workplace bias
against women,
his numerous
extramarital
affairs tarnished
his image.

Indeed, when Kennedy convened the President's Commission on the Status of Women, U.S. women could be excluded from juries, lacked access to oral contraceptives and abortion, and could not even secure credit in their own names. The same year that Kennedy was killed, U.S. writer and feminist Betty Friedan published "The Feminine Mystique," igniting a firestorm of debate about "the problem that has no name" — women's dissatisfaction with their limited roles. The commission's report, issued a month before Kennedy's assassination, could have been a watershed had he lived.

But despite his progressive stance, U.S. women's reassessment of the 1960s in general has not left Kennedy's reputation unaffected. Once an icon of heroism, personal charm and the quest to overcome longstanding injustices, Kennedy's reputation has been badly damaged by tales and testimonials about the scores of women who rotated through White House bedrooms or hotel rooms when the president traveled.

Indeed, memoirs by some of these women — including Mimi Alford, a 19-year-old intern in the White House press office — have dimmed Kennedy's halo, if not completely darkened it. So has reporting that addresses his liaisons with Marilyn Monroe and Marlene Dietrich. Other women, such as his self-proclaimed mistress Judith Campbell, reportedly had sexual relationships with Mafia figures as well.

The sense of entitlement that sustained such male fecklessness has been steadily eroded ever since, a process that, like so much in American culture, has played out on television. Popular series like "The Good Wife" show the pain and suffering of the political spouses who are expected to keep a stiff upper lip and a ladylike demeanor in the face of behavioral double standards. Similarly, the series "Mad Men," with its dashing advertising executives who consume women like lunchtime cocktails, plumbs the emptiness of 1960s male sexual prerogative.

This reassessment of male sexual privilege and irresponsibility in the 1960s has occurred in other arenas as well, reinforcing the transformation of Kennedy's image from charming playboy to dangerously compulsive predator. The biography of U.S. writer Norman Mailer — notorious for saying, as feminism began to stir, that "all women should be locked in cages" — has just appeared. Mailer's irredeemable womanizing comes in for a serious critical re-evaluation.

Perhaps most revealingly, while Kennedy's aura among women has dimmed, his wife's reputation has grown. Jacqueline Kennedy's dignified and substantive last decade as

an accomplished book editor — an icon of the modern working, even feminist, woman — has supplanted the image of her as a doll-like hostess showing television cameras the White House, or as the archetype of the shocked, grieving widow behind a black veil. Her deliberately constructed-for-posterity taped conversations in March 1964 with the historian Arthur Schlesinger, published in 2011, have added to her posthumous renown.

Jacqueline Kennedy's rising star and JFK's increasingly tarnished one — at least when it comes to his private life and the uses to which he put his personal magnetism — reflect the U.S.' own social evolution. The shift in Americans' understanding of icons like the Kennedys highlights the change — I would say for the better — in Americans' own needs, values and wishes concerning women and the relationship between the sexes. JFK's creation of the President's Commission on the Status of Women suggests that he saw what was coming, even as he remained very much a man of his time.

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