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## Overcoming Disability: JFK and the Aryan-Style Culturally Dominant Ideal

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### Citation

Heddema, L. (2022). *Overcoming Disability: JFK and the Aryan-Style Culturally Dominant Ideal*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# OVERCOMING DISABILITY

## JFK AND THE ARYAN-STYLE CULTURALLY DOMINANT IDEAL



Master's Thesis

North American Studies

University of Leiden

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Date: 02-07-2021

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## **Introduction**

A man wakes up, in pain. He tries to get up but his back hurts too much. Although it is not so bad as other days, when he forgets the wooden plank under his mattress. Not only that, he also has to take his daily dose of medicine to ensure that his body will not shut down. His stomach hurts because of the food he ate yesterday. At a weak moment he decided to indulge, but feeling his irritable bowel syndrome he is not glad he did. Slowly he puts on his clothes and back brace and the physician walks in with another cocktail of different painkillers and medicine. Throughout the day he is bombarded with information from his aides and employees while sitting in his rocking chair. They are telling him that the Soviet Union has placed missiles on Cuba. He has to think about his next steps carefully. He needs to focus and is glad that the drugs are doing their work. Life on a daily basis for President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) was not easy. The strain of the presidency in a critical time during the Cold War was not made easier with his chronic pain, illnesses, and cocktails of different drugs and painkillers.

JFK's medical records were released in 2001 to historian Robert Dallek. These records showed the extent of his health and physical problems throughout his life and political career. JFK suffered from a number of ailments. His chronic back pain, which he hoped would go away after undergoing two life threatening surgeries, irritable bowel syndrome, which had to be managed with a specific diet as to not upset his bowels. One of his ailments he tried to hide from the press: Addison's disease. Addison's disease was probably caused by his overuse of steroids to manage other chronic ailments and pain, is a defect in the adrenal glands, resulting in the body no longer producing stress hormones. It also makes the body prone to infection, and makes infections difficult to fight off, which is why surgeries were a risk for JFK. Besides the risk for infections, Addison's also required treatment through cortisone supplements. Without these

supplements the body would go into an Addisonian crisis, which could be deadly if not treated early. In order to keep Addison's disease under control, one has to make sure to keep up with one's medicines.

JFK first discovered that he had Addison's when he went into an Addisonian crisis in his twenties. Addison's disease had the stigma of being deadly and JFK has stated many times that it would be unwise for a person to run for President if they had Addison's disease. "No one who has the real Addison's disease should run for the Presidency, but I do not have it" (Schlesinger 19). To combat the pain, JFK used several different drugs and other practical aides like a rocking chair and crutches. Yet, the stigma surrounding Addison's Disease and the fact that previous presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Franklin Roosevelt also dealt with health issues proved to be a valid reason for President Kennedy to pass as able-bodied and thus to hide his health problems with the help of his family, aides, and others in his protective context. This thesis will research the paradox between the impairments of JFK, the way he presented himself as able-bodied, and how he was and still is perceived as the ideal straight white male body.

Most authors focus on JFK and his image but neglect the role of his impairments. In many biographies the influence of his father is contributed to JFK's image-making. However, JFK's impairments are not added to the equation of his image. By focusing on JFK's impairments in a broader context of an Aryan-style culturally dominant ideal a bigger question can be asked about the stakes of image-making and passing as able-bodied.

This thesis will use the term Aryan-style numerous times. Due to the negative connotation of Aryan, it is important to explain why this specific term fits best into the context of a culturally dominant ideal. As I will argue in this thesis, I use the term

‘Aryan-style’ as a beauty standard influenced by prevailing ideals of eugenics and U.S. immigration. Aryan meaning in this sense, Northwestern European and it is not just a sub-category of whiteness, but also adheres to the able-bodiedness of the individual. Using a term like white supremacist only refers to the color of one’s skin and a racial ideology but does not touch upon beauty standards. Although JFK was Irish American, a discriminated group of immigrants in the U.S., he did appeal to the public with his Aryan-style looks, meaning: blonde hair, blue eyes, white skin, and seemingly able-bodied. Even though Aryan-style carries the painful connotation of Nazism, it does fit the best into the context of this thesis.

### **Chronic Illness, Disability, and the Male Body**

In “Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities,” Susan Wendell argues in her article that chronic illness might not seem like an obvious disability, even though those that are chronically ill do experience similar conditions and limitations as those that are disabled (160). The distinction between impairment and disability is important to consider, according to Wendell. “Moreover, recognition of impairment is crucial to the inclusion of people with chronic illnesses in disability politics. Chronic illness frequently involves pain, fatigue, dizziness, nausea, weakness, depression, and/or other impairments that are hard to ignore. Everything one does, including politics, must be done within the limitations they present” (165). Based on Wendell’s assessment of chronic illness and disability, we need to consider that people with chronic illnesses can be just as impaired like those that have physical disabilities. Thus, facing similar limitations and considerations. JFK chronic illnesses caused him to be impaired and limited in such a way that he had to use different drugs, painkillers, and

practical aides to function as able-bodied. Therefore, JFK was impaired and faced situations where his impairments limited him.

Jeffrey Brune and Daniel Wilson argue in *Disability and Passing* that most people with a disability have to decide whether to hide their disability or emphasize it, while also realizing what it means once other people overlook their disability. “Going to the root of a disability identity, their decisions weigh issues of stigma, pride, prejudice, discrimination, and privilege but rarely put the matter to rest. (...). Furthermore, the importance of passing extends well beyond the individual and has larger social, cultural, and political implications” (1). An important aspect of disability and passing are the factors surrounding the person in question. In the case of JFK, it is a matter of privilege and also the dominant cultural ideas in the period he became a politician.

By the end of the Second World War, a new standard of masculinity prevailed. Christina Jarvis argues in *The Male Body at War* that the use of hyper muscular male bodies in promoting the army during the Second World War, generated a cultural emphasis on able-bodiedness. “Over time, a powerful male ‘body politic’ emerged, as federal, business, and military officials, as well as portions of the American populace, utilized hypermasculinized male bodies in public images to reflect the United States’ rising status as a world power” (5). The U.S.’s rise as a world power extended far beyond the Second World War. The growing tensions between the East and West positioned the U.S. as a global power and leader of the Free World. The U.S. emerged after the Second World War as a leader of the free world, so by applying Jarvis’ argument to the Cold War it means that whoever was in charge of the U.S. had to portray an image of a strong man that could lead a world power.

## **Sources and Limitations**

To answer my research question, I will look at a number of sources. A number of biographies have been written about the life of JFK; this thesis will analyze four of them. Two of these are written by historians Fredrik Logevall and Robert Dallek. Logevall's biography is an in-depth look at the first 39 years of JFK's life and analyzes his position in his family, the world, and his health. Dallek's biography focuses on JFK's medical records and analyzes his life by looking at the health difficulties he struggled with and hid from the public. The Kennedy family gave Dallek access to these records and permission to write about them. The other two biographies are written by JFK's close aides, Ted Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Sorensen started working for JFK in 1953, when he was a senator. The biography focuses on JFK's policies, his personal life, his time as President and how he was perceived by the country and the rest of the world. Schlesinger's book focuses on the JFK's thousand days in office. By combining what historians have written about JFK based on archives and those that have known JFK personally I will be able to analyze a more complete image of what JFK disclosed about his health to those who knew him personally and what the status of his health was overall.

The people around JFK, his protective context including Ted Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., contributed to his image-making as a healthy man. By 'protective context' I mean the people that are close to the individual and can consist of family, friends, or coworkers. This context protects the individual's image. After JFK's murder in 1963, the Kennedy Library started recording oral history interviews with the people that knew JFK personally in some way. These interviews included people who were his close personal aides, members of his cabinet, friends, or physicians. Therefore, I will also analyze the available transcripts of these interviews

to further establish his protective context and what they knew of his ailments and what they did to protect him from the press.

Television, newspapers, and photography also played a key role in helping JFK to construct his image. So, I will analyze news reports on JFK's health and his overall image. JFK understood the power of images and frequently appeared on the cover of *LIFE* magazine with his family, which contributed to the glamour of the Kennedy family. Moreover, during the first televised presidential debate between Nixon and JFK, JFK and his team were aware that his image was just as important as performance in the debate and his stance on policies. These sources established JFK's presence in the media and contributed to his image as a young and healthy man. Interviews with his family members, close aides, and friends denouncing claims about his health and positioning him as a family man show that JFK was surrounded by a protective context which also helped him to pass as able-bodied during his years in public service.

The sources this thesis analyzes are second-hand experiences of what JFK told his aides, what his family knew, and what the doctors knew. It is evident in the letters that JFK sent to his friends and family that he was open about his health difficulties up until the Second World War. After the Second World War JFK does not write or talk about his ailments. That makes it difficult to understand the full extent of what he went through. Therefore, on an individual level it might be difficult to get the full picture of what JFK personally did to pass as able-bodied. Another limitation is that the oral history interviews in the archives of the Kennedy Library in Boston are only partly available online.

Despite the limitations of this thesis due to fact that not much is known about JFK's individual experience, passing as able-bodied is not an individual experience. Most people that knew JFK personally have described their experience working with

him and elaborated on their knowledge of his impairments. Many biographies have been written by close aides of JFK and there have been interviews with the people close to him after his murder. Biographers have accessed archives and written about their findings. In the case of JFK there is no shortage of information to find.

### **Thesis Outline**

After this introduction, the remainder of this thesis will be divided into four chapters. In the first chapter I will establish the theoretical framework which will support my thesis. This theoretical framework is set up the following way: it will establish what the culturally dominant ideal of the time was and its origins in eugenics and Progressive Era reform, and how the Second World War set up a post-war body politic to which the president had to adhere. This post-war body politic meant that anyone not fitting into the culturally dominant ideal of the time was forced to fabricate their image to pass. This chapter will establish the intersectionality between disability, image, and masculinity. The theoretical and intersectional framework will be the lens through which I will look at my sources for this thesis.

In the second chapter I analyze how JFK fit into an Aryan-style culturally dominant ideal. Based on aspects of his life, like religion, race, gender, sexuality, and able-bodiedness, and what JFK has said about these things, I am able to research whether JFK fitted into this ideal. During the Second World War JFK had an accident with his patrol torpedo boat (PT boat). The accident was employed as an explanation in the media for his health struggles. This exposes an ideological vision on the position of (wounded) veterans and a perceived weakness towards those that are born with disabilities or develop a non-war related disability at some point in their life. Many such media representations expose a notion that disability is something one can and should

‘overcome.’ Placed in a broader societal and political context of the Cold War, where the idea prevailed that whoever was in charge of the U.S. had to prove himself to be a strong leader by displaying characteristics attributed to masculinity.

In the third chapter I will analyze the protective context around John F. Kennedy and how that changed over the years. Passing as able-bodied, especially as a public person, is not something that is done individually. JFK’s family and their wealth enabled a social context that protected him and refuted allegations about his health. Kennedy aide Ted Sorensen writes in *Kennedy: The Classic Biography* that when JFK was on the shortlist to become the candidate Vice President on Adlai Stevenson’s ticket for the Democratic Party in 1956, Sorensen encountered and refuted all the rumors on JFK’s health. Based on the biographies by the two Kennedy aides and the other two biographies by Dallek and Logevall it is evident that Kennedy did not disclose everything to his aides. His experience in the Second World War and the accident with the PT boat were put forward as the cause of his back problems and other ailments when these were mentioned in the press or by other politicians. This took the attention away from JFK’s health issues and put the focus on his image as a war hero. Moreover, this protective context helped to sell the image of JFK and was also a stakeholder in the success of that image.

In this third chapter I will also look at the media and President Kennedy’s public image. Mark Wright argues in “The Art of John F. Kennedy” that public images were more important to JFK compared to other Presidents. JFK managed to skillfully craft an image that the American public found appealing. In spite of depictions on television and in newspapers, which were not always controlled by JFK, he still managed to maintain his image in the way he wanted. Wright argues that JFK was very much in control of his image on an individual level. His biographers, Fredrik Logevall and

Robert Dallek attest to that as well. The media received this image and reported on it. The question that has to be asked in this situation is whether they were critical of this image or printed it the way they received from JFK and his surrounding context.

In the conclusion I will give an overview of my findings and will conclude my argument. Also, I place my argument in a larger context. FDR and JFK were both very aware of their image. JFK was one of the first politicians to actively involve other media outlets like *LIFE* in his personal life to promote his image. He set a precedent for all politicians to come, not only based on his grand scale operation with volunteers during the elections, but also the way he was in complete control of his image. He did not need to intervene to contradict claims because his image as an Aryan-style culturally dominant ideal was maintained through media.

## **Chapter One: Theoretical Framework - The Relationship between Eugenics, a Post-War Body Politic, and Image Fabrication**

### **Introduction**

The Second World War changed the perception of the U.S. President and the idea of the body politic. Although President Roosevelt was left partially paralyzed due to a polio infection, he still managed to proliferate himself as a strong leader that would lead the U.S. and the Allied Forces through the Second World War. The contrast between the Great Depression and the Second World War and the way the U.S. viewed men is stark. The Great Depression wore men down into what can be called a confidence crisis, because of their role in the traditional gendered household as providers. During the Second World War the strength of men was emphasized to not only promote a life in the army but also as a symbol of U.S. values like freedom and democracy. So men went from not being able to provide for their family due to unemployment caused by the Great Depression to a picture of strength and American ideals during the Second World War.

This thesis will use Christina Jarvis's assessment of the body politic *The Male Body at War*. "Thus, embodied symbols of the nation both reflect and influence prevailing gender, racial, and other cultural norms. (...). In keeping with centuries of artistic representation of heroic male bodies, the symbolic muscular, youthful (often white) male body of serviceman offered a more easily interpreted image of national strength and power (...)" (14). Jarvis adds to the already existing idea of a body politic that it is more than one person and is symbolized by prevailing cultural ideas. Jarvis also argues in *The Male Body* that "during World War II the American military, government, and other institutions shaped the male body both figuratively and physically in an effort to communicate impressions of national strength to U.S. citizens

and to other nations” (4-5). JFK came of age during the 1930s and did not suffer the hardships many people faced during the Great Depression. His father’s wealth ensured that the Kennedy family did not suffer from poverty and could lead their lives similar to what they did before the Great Depression. The transition from the presentation of the male body and the symbolism behind it influenced the body politic, key aspects of masculinity, and the dominant ideal of men. Another aspect of what I will argue is an emphasis on health in the post-war body politic, as an unintentional consequence of President Roosevelt’s unexpected death.

In this chapter I will firstly establish the culturally dominant ideals of the early twentieth century and the relation between eugenics and the Progressive Era, secondly I will elaborate on the theoretical aspects of the post-war body politic and the masculine ideals that fit into it. Thirdly, this chapter will explore the consequences of this post-war body politic and how it influenced U.S. leadership culture. It will specifically focus on gendered characteristics of weakness and strength. Finally, image fabrication and fashioning and how to maintain an image is explored. As mentioned before, the image of JFK was so influential that even the media and other influential figures still discussed him from a perspective of positivity and awe without JFK’s instructions or interference. This final part of the chapter will look deeper into ideas like (auto)fabrication and elaborate on what those terms mean in the case of JFK’s image-building. Arguably, the fabrication of an image happens from the center of the individual, however the rise of the power of mass media in the early twentieth century has added another factor into fabrication. In later chapters this thesis will discuss the relationship between the media and JFK, but for the theoretical framework it is valuable to look at an earlier President and their relationship with the media. In this case I will analyze how FDR managed to fabricate his image and how the media responded to this fabrication.

Chronic illness, in the case of JFK, causes impairment which leads to similar discomforts and limits that people with disabilities experience. Susan Wendell's definition of the relationship between disability and chronic illness underlines the fluidity between illness and disability. Wendell articulates a difference between healthy and unhealthy disabled people and what this distinction means for people that are chronically ill. "The paradigmatic person with a disability is healthy disabled and permanently and predictably impaired. Both attitudes toward people with disabilities and programs designed to remove obstacles to their full participation are based on that paradigm. Many of us with chronic illnesses are not obviously disabled; to be recognized as disabled, we have to remind people frequently of our needs and limitations" (164). In this context, healthy disabled means that these people are, for example, partially paralyzed and are healthy. Yet still face challenges because they are in a wheelchair, whereas those that are chronically ill might look as if they are not disabled because there are no physical markers. They are still impaired and are not able to function like other able-bodied people. In the case of JFK, he had no physical signs that he was impaired because of his chronic illnesses. In contrast, FDR used a wheelchair, which for many people was an important marker of disability. So in this thesis it is important to recognize that chronic illnesses, as Wendell formulates, can impair people up to the point they face the same limitations and needs as those that are physically disabled. Perception matters in able-bodiedness. Thus people that are chronically ill have to take measures to function like other able-bodied people.

Personal health mattered to the image of the American President. The Cold War underlined the importance of that aspect. After the Second World War had ended and Roosevelt had died, the tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union led to a world divided in two. Where the Soviet Union represented the East and communist ideals, the

U.S. represented the West and portrayed itself as a leader of the Free World. The U.S. President had to be strong enough to be leader of the Free World. Image is key and the post-war body politic put an emphasis on the ideological terms of masculinity and the male body which makes the public image essential.

### **Eugenics in the Progressive Era and an Aryan-Style Culturally Dominant**

#### **Ideal**

Academic interest in eugenics and later efforts during the Progressive Era to democratize the U.S. led to increased inequality. By the mid-nineteenth century, after Charles Darwin published his book on *The Origin of Species*, the interest in evolution theory applied to the human race increased. Francis Galton coined the term eugenics and defined it the following way: “the science of improving the human stock” (Bodmer 567). Eugenics did not only apply to physical hereditary traits like hair and eye color. It also included abilities like intelligence. Edgar Schuster elaborates on that definition in *Eugenics*: “Eugenics has for its ultimate object, no less than other means by which civilization advances, the betterment in body and mind of the human breed” (23). Schuster goes on to say that instead of trying to influence someone’s nature internally, eugenics looks at exterior factors that can be influenced. One of the ‘practical’ solutions that Schuster offers includes sterilization “preventing the birth of feeble-minded children” (248). Numerous examples come from U.S. states passing legislation to ensure a physically and mentally stronger society. “(...) by the middle of the 1930s, more than half of the states had passed laws that authorized the sterilization of ‘inmates of mental institutions, persons convicted more than once of sex crimes, those deemed to be feeble-minded by IQ tests, ‘moral degenerate persons,’ and epileptics” (Friedlander 8). During the Progressive Era at the end of the 1800s and early 1900s,

there is a clear implementation of eugenics on a national level through immigration policy. Thomas C. Leonard looks at how the Progressive Era reconstructed the state and the role of experts and academics during this era. Groundbreaking democratic legislation was passed, like women's voting rights, while at the same time highly discriminatory legislation passed in several states like Jim Crow. "The progressive goal was to improve the electorate, not necessarily expand it. (...). By choosing quality over quantity, the argument went, democratic deliberation among the remaining voters was improved" (50). Progressives, with the help of eugenic ideals, were convinced that society could be made and shaped to a larger extent than was thought before.

Eugenics contributed to the formation of an Aryan-style ideal. Not only in the U.S. but also in other parts of the Western world like Great Britain and Germany, eugenics influenced other fields of academics like biology, psychology, and criminology. Henry Friedlander argues in *The Origins of Nazi Genocide* that the Eugenics movements in both the U.S. and Germany were similar until the end of the first world war. Although German interpretations of eugenics culminated in Nazi ideology and the U.S.'s lost its popularity at some point by the 1930s. "The early moderation on questions of race did not apply, however, to people with different skin colors, because the German eugenicists believed as strongly as their American colleagues in 'the racial and cultural superiority of Caucasians'" (11). This Aryan-style ideal centered around white men with Northwestern European roots; the people that did not fit into this label were dismissed as disabled. E.D. Cope, a paleontologist from the U.S., identified "four groups of lower human forms." These groups included women, nonwhites, poor people, and Jews (2). The groups that were included in this stigma of "lower human forms," were all perceived as disabled. A prevailing stigma was that women could not be intelligent like men, because of their smaller brains. This Aryan-

style ideal favored people from Nordic and Germanic countries and positioned them as superior compared to other races.

Through immigration policy, U.S. officials tried to ban people who were deemed unfit to participate in U.S. society. Eugenics enabled social scientists and policy makers to rethink the human race. The role of genetics and other factors were also included like race, gender, sexuality, and able-bodiedness. These ideas about collective improvement of the population had individual consequences. During the mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth century, there was a surge of immigrants entering the U.S. Between 1836 and 1914 more than thirty million European migrants entered the U.S. (Evans 70). Practically speaking there was enough room for migrants and many helped to build the nation, like the Chinese migrants that helped build the railroads. However, through quotas and exclusive policies the U.S. established a racial hierarchy which influenced overall stereotypes and ideas about these different nationalities. One of the exclusion policies that had an impact is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prevented Chinese migrants from entering the U.S. Other restrictions on immigration included the Immigration Act of 1917 which banned people who were deemed homosexual, held anarchistic beliefs, or had a physical or mental disability. This act allowed immigrants to enter based on a literacy test they had to pass. This was followed by the 1924 Immigration Act, which tried to lessen the stream of immigrants entering the U.S. from Southern and Eastern Europe. “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act)” states that the quotas were deliberately based on the 1890 census. Even though the percentages of immigrants allowed to enter were the same, the number of people entering from Western Europe and the British Isles was much higher compared to Southern and Eastern Europe. Immigrants trying to enter from Asian countries were still banned under this act.

The act was mainly passed to maintain the U.S.'s racial homogeneity and to make sure that those that did enter were able to contribute to society. Although the U.S. was mostly a racially diverse country these acts were mostly passed to stop the flow of unwanted immigrants. Moreover, immigration officials also checked whether the men and women entering the country had enough money (a higher amount for men than for women). Men had to prove they were financially independent. Additionally, in some cases a thorough physical check-up was done if a man appeared to have a feminine look or other markers for deviancy (Canaday 34). Thus, government legislation established a racial hierarchy. This legislation was influenced by prevailing ideas about race and able-bodiedness as a result of social scientists and their overall interest in eugenics and it promoted an idea of whiteness that was clearly factored into immigration policy.

Disability was connected to prevailing prejudices around race and gender through eugenics. Douglas C. Baynton argues in "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," that disability was used to exclude people from citizenship in the U.S. For African Americans it meant that they were perceived as not being smart enough to fully participate in society. "As an evolutionary concept, normality was intimately connected to the western notion of progress. By the mid-nineteenth century, non-white races were routinely connected to people with disabilities, both of whom were depicted as evolutionary laggards or throwbacks" (20). This fits into the overall ideas of eugenics that are based in the evolution theory. For women fighting for suffrage, it meant being characterized as emotional, weak, and irrational. "(...) one of the rhetorical tactics of suffrage opponents was to point to the physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws of women, their frailty, irrationality, and emotional excesses. By the late nineteenth century, these claims were sometimes expressed in terms of evolutionary progress; like racial and ethnic minorities, women

were said to be less evolved than white men, their disabilities a result of lesser evolutionary development” (24). Moreover, as previously mentioned disability was also used to label people deemed unfit to enter the U.S. Baynton contends that the notion of ‘normal’ was coined in the mid-nineteenth century. “The criteria for excluding disabled people were steadily tightened as the eugenics movement and popular fears about the decline of the national stock gathered strength” (26-27). These stricter criteria gave more reign to officials and their determination of whether the person in front of them was disabled or not. Based on these three examples Baynton illuminates in his article, it is evident that prevailing notions around evolution, and as a consequence eugenics, fueled arguments around equality for all races, genders, and disabilities.

Eugenicists thought that people belonging to lower socioeconomic classes could not fully participate in society. The gap between higher and lower classes based on income widened due to urbanization. Social scientists that considered economic reform during the Progressive Era made a clear distinction between higher and lower classes and their abilities to participate in society by voting. Leonard establishes that social scientists did not consider themselves egalitarian and argued that the elite should have the ability to vote and decide over the future of the country. For them it was about the quality of the voters and not the quantity (50). On the other hand, social reformers like Arnold Gessel, who focused on children’s hygiene and egalitarianism, applied eugenics in his ideas. Ben Harris argues that based on Gessel’s ideas and published work, that socialism and eugenics fit together during the Progressive Era. The ideal to better society came from eugenics, and wanted to try and eliminate threats to society by trying to help and provide children for example with good education. Although these plans were positively motivated it still posited that those who grew up in lower classes in poverty were a threat to a civil society.

By the time the Great Depression hit, the U.S.'s ideas about poverty slowly changed and the New Deal plans to financially help families contributed to that transition. FDR passed legislation to create more social security for Americans. The Great Depression caused people to migrate by themselves or with their families to look for work. FDR aimed to help these migrants through legislation like the FTP (Federal Transient Program) and the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps). These two legislative acts created camps and shelters for people to stay in, that was the aim of the FTP, the CCC gave young people jobs around conservation projects to prevent them to migrate (Canaday 92). According to Margaret Canaday the fear of the government in regards to migrating single men also had to do with their fear of homosexuality and “sexual perversion” (91). Economic policy before the Great Depression did not interfere in the economic market. FDR decided to invest in the country and also provide Americans with social security to help them get back on their feet. Poverty in the 1930s was seen as something people had no control over. However, poverty was perceived to be equal to idleness and even ‘feeble mindedness.’ “The prejudices of the scientists themselves led them to conclude that the wealthy and the educated inherited greater intelligence than the lower socioeconomic classes” (Friedlander 2). These beliefs in the superiority of the wealthy and those with high education stigmatized those that did not have financial wellbeing and stimulated the notion that people from lower socioeconomic classes were a burden to society, thus not being able to fully participate in society. Despite the financial help from New Deal programs.

Eugenics and immigration policy also created labels around gender, sexuality and gendered characteristics. Most of these labels applied to men who were seen as homosexual based on their physical characteristics or the way they acted. Moreover, eugenics focused on creating a perfect population where men that were homosexual

were seen as disabled and not able to fully function in society in their traditional gendered role as provider of the family. In immigration policy, officials also looked at what a migrant would be able to contribute to the country. Women were not necessarily appreciated in that vicinity. Immigration officials also did a physical check-up of the men entering the country to be able to constitute whether these men would not pollute the country. These kind of policies and prevailing ideas about gender and feminine characteristics led to culturally dominant ideas about what the role of men and women were in society, moreover what it meant for men and women that were homosexual or had physical characteristics of the opposite sex. Margaret Canaday explores immigration policy around sexuality in *The Straight State* and argues that Progressive Era immigration officials tied poverty and economic dependency to overall ideas of ‘perversion’ meaning homosexuality in this context. “Immigration officials understood this as a bidirectional relationship: a lack of economic resources indicated susceptibility to perversion; perversion was in turn taken as a sign of likely poverty. As important, the public charge clause also connected early twentieth-century ideas about sexual perversion to the particular way that economic dependency was gendered and racialized during these years” (25). These gendered ideas around economic dependency related to the overall idea of the man being a provider of the household and that the woman was supposed to be economically dependent. If not, she would carry the stigma of immoral behavior, similarly to men that were economically dependent and thus more likely to fall in to acts that were perceived as perverted at the time.

The Progressive Era and reforms based on eugenics set up an overall Aryan-style culturally dominant ideal in the U.S. This ideal consisted of a white, able-bodied, economically independent man with Northwestern European roots. Through migration policy the plan was to influence population by letting people enter that were able to

contribute the country. Any person that deviated from this norm, either by not being white, displaying physical characteristics of the opposite sex, being economically dependent as a man, or economically independent as a woman was seen as a threat towards the goal of creating a homogeneous population. This Aryan-style ideal was modeled after an idea of disability, meaning not being able-bodied enough to function in a eugenicist society. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder write in “The Eugenic Atlantic: race, disability, and the making of an international Eugenic Science, 1800-1945” that eugenic ideologies spread across the Atlantic and influenced perceptions around disability and what it meant to be disable. “Disability as the master trope of disqualification in modernity prefaces an understanding of inassimilable racial and ethnic differences by providing an empirical designation for ‘unfit’ bodies. (...). Either through intensified and state-sanctioned reproductive restrictions imposed on the right of ‘defective’ bodies to procreate or through efforts to systematically exterminate undesirables, semi-productives, and non-assimilables once and for all, the modern eugenic states of the Eugenic Atlantic shared a desire to purify otherwise distinctive collectives of a shared social menace” (861-862). This meant that anyone who did not fit into the Aryan-style ideal was not fit to participate in society or be a part of it. Furthermore, set up around this culturally dominant ideal worked through during the Great Depression in the 1930s, the Second World War in the 1940s, and the post-war world in the late 1940s and 1950s.

### **The Second World War, the Male Body, and Masculinity**

The Second World War changed the perception of the body politic and led to an inclusion of masculinity and health in the body politic. The Great Depression and the Second World War established a need for men to be strong and to provide for their

families and fight for their country. Before the Second World War there was a bigger focus on establishing the gender roles in the West. Kyle A. Cuordileone argues in *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* that in the years before the Second World War there was a rising idea among academics that Western civilization became emasculated by modernity, security, and comfort (13). The Great Depression put the pressure on men as providers for their families and the Second World War added another dimension to manhood, namely that of someone that fights for their country. Christina Jarvis shows that besides the pressure on men to be soldiers, the way the male body was presented also changed. Men were pictured as the epitome of fitness and masculinity: “(...) a more sustained national imaging campaign was needed to help transform millions of still unemployed men and their thin physiques into muscular, able-bodied servicemen” (11-14). Combining Cuordileone and Jarvis’s arguments on the physical and psychological state of men during the Great Depression shows that the Second World War called for not just the creation of a strong able-bodied ideal as Jarvis argues, but it also had to make sure that men felt confident in their role.

Although the Second World War established a shared body politic consisting of soldiers and other service men, the President still had to embody the cultural aspects of the body politic. Jarvis explores a universal body politic established during the war and pre-war period which embodied American men. As a result of the mass male image building, an ideal related to health and strength became part of a larger sense of masculinity and the body politic (14). Jarvis highlights the fact that President Roosevelt (FDR) had to be the Commander in Chief of the nation that was part of the Allied Forces that had to beat Nazi-Germany and Japan, while also being the first President that used a wheelchair. Jarvis argues that FDR carefully maintained his image and his “skillfully orchestrated body politic.” Using image-making that carefully maintained the idea that

FDR was able-bodied and that there existed ‘two bodies,’ the individual (or body natural) and the public (or body politic). FDR’s image mattered during the Second World War because he represented and embodied American values.

The period after the Second World War established a clear binary between feminine and masculine character traits within leadership. By the time the Second World War was over in 1945, there was a shift in American consciousness and the idea of the male body. Firstly, the U.S. proliferated itself as one of the great victors of the Second World War. As Cuordileone and Jarvis established in their respective books, the Great Depression led to a crisis in confidence for many men in the U.S. and the Second World War rebuilt their confidence by showing men as strong and muscled protectors of American values. This masculine ideal of the U.S. instilled itself in the tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Bevan Sewell argues in “John Foster Dulles, Illness, Masculinity and US Foreign Relations, 1953-1961” that U.S. officials felt the need to reaffirm masculine ideals of strength as to not come across as weak (714). The reaffirmation of heteronormative ideas of gender became a large part of U.S. foreign policy and influenced the approach of the U.S. towards communism. Any sign of weakness would work in favor of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the active prosecution of homosexuals in the late 1940s and 1950s further associated homosexuality and feminine characteristics with communism. Several U.S. Representatives made this association shortly after Joseph McCarthy actively plead for prosecuting suspected communists in U.S. Government (Shibusawa 724). As a result, the fear of communists in government also extended to homosexuals and further cemented the ideology that the U.S. represented masculine characteristics like strength and toughness. These gendered ideas heavily influenced the foreign policy techniques of the U.S. and the body politic.

Secondly, the idealization of the male body as a result of war propaganda contrasted with the reality that many men had wounded bodies after the war. The contrast of the male body during the Great Depression is considerable compared to that of the Second World War. Jarvis highlights the masculine make-over of Uncle Sam, the American symbol. The focus on Uncle Sam as a symbol of the U.S. led to the U.S. aligning itself to a masculine ideal (35). As mentioned before health, youth, and strength became key factors of the idealized version of a male body. The reality of the post-war situation was that many men had returned wounded, traumatized, and some did not return at all. The paradox is evident. The male body was idealized and sexualized, but it contrasted with the reality that many of the men that returned were wounded.

These physical and psychological changes towards masculinity inhabit the post-war body politic. Roosevelt, who kept his health problems to himself and died unexpectedly in the eyes of the American public, gave unintentionally a focus on the health dimension of the body politic. The circumstances post the Second World War were different, because the U.S. actively proliferated itself as a leader. These events shaped and underlined a need for the President of the U.S. to be physically able, fit into the cultural dominant image, and embody the masculine characteristics to lead the country.

### **The Post War Body Politic, Passing, and Image Fabrication**

The notion of a body politic encompasses more than just the able-bodied person. A person has to embody the dominating cultural norms and ideas of a country. The theory behind the body politic has been around since the middle ages. Ernst H. Kantorowicz analyzes the body politic in *The King's Two Bodies* through medieval king Frederick

the Second and Shakespeare's play Richard III. The body politic consists of two bodies, one is of the individual which can get sick or die of old age. The other is the symbolic body of the king, which is immortal and will be inhabited by whoever will succeed the king (ix). The idea of the body politic was mostly defined through religion and the position of kings and queens as chosen by God to rule the country. So, this notion of the body politic specifically talks about the role of the king and its perception, it still holds ground if we look at a twentieth century adaption of this theory on U.S. Presidents. The body politic also includes dominant cultural ideas and the king or President has to portray those ideals as well in public.

The president had to avoid stigma around disability to fit into the post-war body politic. Jeffrey Brune and Daniel Wilson argue in *Passing and Disability* that passing as able-bodied is not only a matter of hiding 'social markers of impairment' in order to prevent being stigmatized as a disabled person, it also applies to the way people create and manage their identities (1). These social markers change through time and the way disabilities are perceived changes with them. David Houck looks in *FDR's Body Politics* at the way FDR managed to hide his disability from the public but also the way the public perceived disability. "Disability is not written in the stars – or on the body; rather, disability is a construction, defined and negotiated by a culture at a given point in time. It means different things to different people at different historical moments" (5). Obviously, there is a clear cultural component to disability and the perception of disabled people. FDR managed to keep the extent of his disabilities secret through good relations with the media and with the help of his family and close aides, to create an image of himself as able-bodied. As one of the first, Roosevelt actively tried to avoid the stigma connected to his disability. Erving Goffman made a compelling argument about the relation between stigma and passing. "Because of the great rewards in being

considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent” (74). In the cases of both Roosevelt and JFK there is a clear reward for passing as able-bodied, the U.S. Presidency. Moreover, both of them had the ability and position to pass. This relates to their socioeconomic status due to their family’s position in U.S. society and their wealth. The stigma around disability leads an individual to pass as able-bodied, which is what FDR and JFK had to do.

Passing as able-bodied is not done by the individual themselves, rather it is an orchestrated effort to maintain a certain image by the context surrounding the individual. The context surrounding a public person, in this case JFK, consists of a number of people. In the first place it is the individual themselves, who has to maintain the image as an able-bodied person. However, this person is not capable of maintaining this image individually once they become part of public life. As argued in earlier paragraphs, there was a need for any person (white men) that wanted to become President to adhere to the dominant post-war body politic. In the second place, the individual needs their family, friends, and close aides and employees to corroborate and confirm that they are indeed able-bodied. In the third place in successfully passing as able-bodied concerns the media and the way they portray the individual as able-bodied without the individual actively interfering in the process. This concerns a concept called ‘fabrication’ and ‘self-fashioning.’ These two respective terms coined by Peter Burke and Stephen Greenblatt include not only the individual’s effort at image-making and control but also the context surrounding the individual.

Image is key in passing as able-bodied, so the ability to fabricate an image and to manage it is essential. Peter Burke attends in *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* that King Louis of France’s image was vital during his time ruling France. Burke argues that the people around the king helped to maintain his image and created his public image from

the center, which means his advisors and ministers helped. Burke makes a comparison between the times of Louis XIV and the twentieth century and claims that the rhetoric around leadership has changed. The main change is that the distance between the public and the leader is much closer due to voting and the idea that power is granted by the people. “The illusion of intimacy with the people is necessary, the fireside chat, handshaking for hours at a time and so on. Dignity is dangerous, because it implies remoteness. The emphasis is now on dynamism, youth and vitality” (203). This translates back to how U.S. Presidents like FDR and JFK maintained an exterior image of able-bodiedness. The goal of fabricating an image in the age of Louis XIV was different to fabricating images in the twentieth century, yet also similar. The stakes for Louis XIV were to create almost a god-like image of himself whereas both FDR and JFK had to fabricate their image to appeal to the American public.

The way FDR dealt with his disabilities shows the power of his image fabrication. FDR had visible disabilities due to his bout of polio in the early 1920s. As a result, he was forced to sit in a wheelchair. Once, FDR got stronger and learned to walk with a cane and leg crutches he managed to stage photos where it looked like he was walking and healthy. Peculiarly, there were worries about his disability and ‘lady-like’ manner, but in the end, it was not his physical disability but his medical issues that were a surprise to people when he (un)expectedly died in 1945. Even his Vice President was not aware of the extent of Roosevelt’s medical issues. FDR managed to fabricate an image during his run for the Presidency and kept up this image throughout his terms in office. His image was so influential that most of the press chose not to question his health. Moreover, FDR’s personal physician denied claims about his bad health. FDR’s disability as a result of polio was successfully hidden from the public. Another aspect of FDR’s ability to pass as able-bodied successfully is the fact that with his surrounding

context (family, aides, and physicians) he managed to hide his illnesses from the public. Both gave FDR the ability to pass as able-bodied and maintain his image as an able-bodied man that was able to be commander-in-chief of the U.S. during a war. “The cover-up of Roosevelt’s illness had been so effective that even his increasingly fatigued, haggard appearance at the Yalta conference did not trigger general alarms” (Evans xiv). FDR’s image fabrication was indeed so strong that many people were surprised he died. Yet had they known about the extent of his impairments, it would not have been a surprise at all. FDR and his protective context of family and physician’s successful fabrication of his image shows that the body politic not only consists of hiding physical disabilities, but also deals with hiding illness and the severity of it.

### **Conclusion**

Eugenics helped to clearly formulate existing ideas into a culturally dominant ideals which were applied in Progressive Era reforms and were included into the post-war body politic. It was important that if a man were to think of running for public office it was in their favor to fit that ideal, specifically being white, economically independent, and have Northwestern European (Aryan) roots. Moreover, the Progressive Era also underlined the role of the man as a provider for a traditional household which further influenced gendered ideas around the role of men and women. Through immigration policies a preference was articulated of what a man’s body was supposed to look like. Physical checks on men that had feminine characteristics or displayed behavior that was perceived as sexually deviant at the time, helped to maintain this preference. These ideas were intricately linked with poverty and socioeconomic class. Another aspect of the culturally dominant ideal is the notion of eugenics and how race and disability were related to each other. Most disabilities at the time were connected with race or

prevailing ideas that minorities were feeble-minded and did not have the same intelligence and abilities as white people. This originated from eugenicists perspective on the world from a white and western point of view. As a result, eugenics influenced immigration policy, the position of men during the Great Depression, and expectations of gender roles in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The symbolism of the male body during the Second World War, FDR's unexpected death, and the masculinization of U.S. foreign policy in the early stages of the Cold War led to a complicated body politic that not only forced those that were President to uphold that body politic, it also gave room for U.S. media to maintain that body politic. The transition from the Great Depression to the Second World War caused increased pressure and symbolism on the male body. Although, the Great Depression led to a crisis of confidence due to the position of the man as a provider in the household, the Second World War pressured men to embody the symbolic male body. The male body as liberator symbolized U.S. values like freedom and democracy. Men that were unable to join the army due to physical inabilities or medical ailments faced prejudice for being weak or not man enough. The President, as leader of the U.S., was expected to embody this physical ideal of masculinity. The public was aware that FDR had suffered from physical disabilities due to polio. Yet FDR managed to fabricate an image of able-bodiedness. As a result of this fabrication, it came as a surprise to the U.S. public when he died due to complications of hypertension and other heart problems. It instilled an expectation in those that were in government, the media, and the public that the person that was to lead the U.S. was healthy enough to deal with the stress and strain of the Presidency while also embodying the U.S. and Western values in the Cold War binary.

Combining the importance of health with the masculinization of U.S. foreign policy and a gendered look on the Cold War, led to a post-war body politic. This post-war body politic established that the U.S. President had to be healthy and able-bodied, to be an image of masculinity and an Aryan-style cultural ideal. During FDR's Presidency the U.S. media were careful not to report or raise questions about his health or physical disabilities. The Cold War binary and the post-war body politic led to a fear that when the U.S. President could not uphold these ideals the U.S. would lose its authority as leader of the western world.

## **Chapter Two: JFK and the Culturally Dominant Ideal**

On November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1963 the *New York Times* wrote the following in its obituary about President John F. Kennedy (JFK), a day after his tragic death in Dallas: “The personal loss is deep and crushing: the loss to the nation and the world is historic and overpowering. John F. Kennedy was a man of intellect as well as action. He represented the vitality and the energy, the intelligence and the enthusiasm, the courage and the hope of these United States in the middle of this 20<sup>th</sup> century.” Although JFK might have represented the vitality of the U.S. at this point in time, it begs the question: How did he represent the vitality of the U.S., was he able to represent it, and to what extent did he fit the mold of the culturally dominant ideal of the time? At the time of his death JFK was only 46 years old and was perceived by many as a young and vital man. This could not be farther from the truth. JFK struggled with ailments and chronic illnesses for most of his life, notably chronic back pain, and Addison’s disease.

This chapter will analyze JFK and the culturally dominant ideal of the time. The culturally dominant ideal of the 1950s was an Aryan-style, white, wealthy, able-bodied, heterosexual man, preferably a veteran. Firstly, I will dissect this culturally dominant ideal by analyzing JFK through each of these lenses. Through these lenses I will also look at other factors that could influence JFK’s embodiment of this culturally dominant ideal. Finally, I will look at JFK’s ability to inhabit the post-war body politic by analyzing his personal image control.

### **Questions around Race and Religion in an Elite Socioeconomic Class**

Eugenics established a connection between race and able-bodiedness. This thesis argues that eugenics influenced overall ideas about race and ableism in the U.S. and to a greater extent also influenced immigration policy. JFK was evidently a white man.

However, he had Irish roots from both his mother and father's side and the overall perception in the U.S. about Irish Americans and their whiteness has been questioned. In the mid-nineteenth century JFK's ancestors came to the U.S. because of the potato famine in Ireland. Timothy Meagher argues in *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* that the Irish embraced their whiteness and assimilated as much as they could in order to be accepted (217). In the mid-nineteenth century, eugenics formulated overall ideas about race and different skin colors and other physical characteristics. This also applied to whiteness. Mathew Jacobson argues in *Whiteness of a Different Color* that racial language specifically targeted Irish immigrants and their able-bodiedness in the mid-nineteenth century. "Ultimately such racial conceptions would lead to a broad popular consensus that the Irish were 'constitutionally incapable of intelligent participation in the governance of the nation'" (48). Noel Ignatiev argues in *How the Irish Became White* that Irish immigrants gained acceptance and assimilated in the U.S. by racially oppressing African Americans (178). By doing so, the Irish managed to rid themselves of most stereotypes linked to their able-bodiedness.

Discrimination that was fueled by the differences among different white immigrants got redirected at other immigrants arriving in the U.S. from less desirable countries. JFK's grandfather was elected to Congress in 1894 and later became mayor of Boston as the first Irish Catholic man. Favoritism towards different European nationalities and their ability to assimilate were hailed. Yet did the Irish in America face racism? Based on what scholars, like Jacobson and Meagher have argued in regards to whiteness it seems like a matter of perspective. The Irish entering the U.S. were white and did not face racism based on the color of their skin. They did face discrimination based on their nationality similarly to what South and Eastern European immigrants faced. Eugenicists based their beliefs on the ability to progress and a white,

western experience. In this case, despite tensions in the U.S. around Irish Americans, there were no doubts about their abilities to assimilate.

Due to the influx of Irish immigrants, who were mostly Catholic, existing prejudices around Catholicism increased around U.S. Protestants. During the 1850s these prejudices culminated in the Know-Nothing Party: a party aimed at excluding Catholics from U.S. society (Allitt 29). Patrick Allitt argues in “Ambiguous Welcome: The Protestant Response to American Catholics” that the “period between the Civil War and 1920 witnessed a persistent anti-Catholicism on the one hand, but a rising philo-Catholicism on the other” (34). Anti-Catholicism existed mostly among lower- and middle-class Americans, whereas the philo-Catholicism existed mostly among the more elite and higher educated Americans in the cities. The increase of immigrants from other parts of Europe, like the Southern and Eastern countries, made the Irish Catholics part of an older group of immigrants. The passage of time ensured that the second and third generation Irish Catholic immigrants had assimilated in the U.S. This transition is evident in the Kennedy family, where both JFK’s grandfathers either created a name for themselves through business or politics. JFK’s father took it to another level by amassing a lot of wealth and political influence and ended up being FDR’s Ambassador in London by the end of 1930s.

Although it was accepted for Catholics to take regional and state-wide office, the Presidency was a step too far for some. Al Smith was the first Roman-Catholic to be nominated as a Presidential candidate in 1928. Due to anxieties surrounding the Catholic church and a fear of influence from the Pope in Rome, campaigns by Protestants and the Ku Klux Klan aimed at Smith and his Catholicism did not help his campaign. In the end, he lost by a landslide to Hoover. Thus showing that although the Irish Catholic immigrants were favored over Southern and Eastern European

immigrants for their ability to assimilate, the U.S. was not ready to have a Catholic in the highest office of the country.

JFK grew up in an Irish American, Catholic family. Anxiety around Catholicism and the influence of the Catholic church were a concern during JFK's Presidential campaign. Robert Dallek describes JFK's annoyance while campaigning during the Democratic primaries in Wisconsin against Hubert Humphrey: "Kennedy kept track of how often newspaper accounts mentioned his religion, and he had not missed the fact that two days before the primary, the *Milwaukee Journal* had listed the number of voters in each county under three headings: Democrats, Republicans, and Catholics. (...). When CBS newsman Walter Cronkite asked Jack after his Wisconsin victory whether being a Catholic had hurt him, Jack's annoyance with Cronkite was unmistakable" (251). JFK's annoyance was mostly aimed at the fact that his loyalty to the country was being questioned by raising questions around his Catholicism. In the end, JFK won the Democratic primaries in Wisconsin and West-Virginia, both crucial states that were overwhelmingly Protestant.

JFK's attempt to face the religious issue head on confronted prejudices around Catholicism. As an official candidate for the Democratic party, JFK made a speech in September of 1960 in Houston to shed light on his relationship with the Catholic church, due to estimates that expected that he would lose around 1,5 million votes if he did not address the issue (Dallek 283). In this speech he stated the following: "But because I am a Catholic, and no Catholic has ever been elected president, the real issues in this campaign have been obscured (...). So it is apparently necessary for me to state once again not what kind of church I believe in (...) but what kind of America I believe in. I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no

Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; (...). This is the kind of America I believe in, and this is the kind I fought for in the South Pacific, and the kind my brother died for in Europe. No one suggested then that we may have a ‘divided loyalty,’ that we did not ‘believe in liberty,’ or that we belonged to a group that threatened the ‘freedoms for which our forefathers died.’ (...). For the contrary to the common newspaper usage, I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic party’s candidate for president, who happens to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me” (NPR). In this speech JFK states that his religion and loyalty to the U.S. was not questioned during his time in the army, which helps in this case. As Christina Jarvis argues in *The Male Body at War*, the Second World War put soldiers on an ideological pedestal and it also influenced the overall position of veterans in a so-called post-war body politic. According to Dallek the issue around religion became muted for a while (284). Kennedy aide Ted Sorensen attests that the issue certainly did not die and many people who approved of the speech still wanted to see a letter from the Pope to prove that there was no influence from Rome, whereas others thought that JFK was not honest in his speech (193). Even though JFK tried to explain his relationship with his religion, people were still wary.

Sorensen and Dallek analyze the outcome of the election and whether Catholicism had worked in JFK’s favor. While there is not a clear answer to that, Sorensen argues that JFK had won “in spite of instead of rather than because of the fact that he was a Catholic” (219). Dallek argues that the small margin between Nixon and Kennedy happened because of the fear of a Catholic in office and that JFK had won the presidency with a minority of Protestant voters for the first time (296). After JFK had won the presidency doubts around Catholics and the presidency went away. “(...) the

phenomenon of public anti-Catholicism, potent in the nineteenth century, disappeared almost completely after the 1960s” (Allitt 21). Although the concerns around JFK’s Catholicism might have caused worry and as a result gave him a small margin during his election. By confronting the ‘religious issue’ head on in the Houston speech JFK hoped to remove doubts around his religion. Also relating it to his experience in the Pacific during the Second World War and through supporting legislation that was not typically in favor of Catholicism, like not allowing Catholic school to be funded with public money, JFK managed to take away any worries that the public might have about a Catholic as American President.

The wealth of the Kennedy family helped to further JFK’s position in life and added to his overall appeal. By the time JFK’s father, Joseph Kennedy Sr., died in 1969 *The New York Times* estimated his wealth to be around 500 million dollars (PBS). His father’s wealth helped to further his career, since there was no need for him to go into business and make a living. He aimed for his children to enter public and political careers. Another aspect of the Kennedy family wealth is the fact that they were able to fund their political campaign, from JFK’s run for Congressman, to Senator, to President. During the Democratic primaries in 1960, JFK’s opponent Hubert Humphrey publicly complained about JFK’s wealth and how it gave JFK an unfair advantage. “I don’t think elections should be bought. ... American politics are far too important to belong to the money men,” Humphrey had said on occasion during the Wisconsin primary (Dallek 256). JFK’s wealth meant that prevailing ideas about poverty established by eugenics were not labelled on him.

The wealth of the Kennedy family also helped JFK in relation to his ailments and other impairments. Fredrik Logevall describes in *JFK* that when he was around two years old, he contracted scarlet fever. The hospital nearby refused to admit him because

he was contagious. His father enlisted the help of JFK's grandfathers to admit him in Boston City Hospital, where he was not a resident. In the end he was treated by one of the leading doctors on scarlet fever (44). This was not the only example of the Kennedy family wealth enabling better care for JFK. During his time in Choate prep school he suffered from many undiagnosed impairments and went to hospitals for different treatments. Through his family's financial means JFK was able to get different types of experimental treatments to see what would work (Dallek 35). One aspect that ties together the wealth and influence of the Kennedy family with JFK's personal chronic impairments is his army draft, which cemented his position as a war veteran in his later political career and provided for his chronic impairments (which he had before the war). Both Logevall and Dallek describe JFK's ambition to join the navy, but not managing to do so based on his medical examinations. JFK failed to get into the army and the navy, based on these examinations. However, his father managed to get him into the navy, while he was struggling with chronic back pain and chronic bowel and stomach problems. JFK was cleared by a medical committee that did not even mention his stays in the hospitals and other medical information that would be relevant while spending time in the navy. So, JFK enjoyed the benefits of his position in a wealthy family with political influence. It helped lay the groundwork for his life in public office and added to his overall appeal as a war veteran.

### **JFK's Able-bodiedness, Manhood, and Position as War Veteran**

JFK was not an able-bodied man as evidenced by his medical records. As mentioned before in this thesis JFK suffered from a number of ailments and chronic impairments. Addison's disease is the most notable in this case. For most of the 1930s JFK was in and out of hospitals and wrote extensively about the treatment he received to his friend

Lem Billings. These treatments were focused on fixing his stomach and bowel problems, figuring out his anemia, and back problems. Once JFK had entered the navy, these problems worsened and the strain of being in a war zone did not help. All this culminated in a 1944 surgery which made his back problems worse (Logevall 372). After being elected as Congressman, JFK endured an Addisonian crisis in 1947: his condition was so severe that a priest gave him the last rites. Again in 1951 on a trip to Asia he became seriously ill, probably due to another Addisonian crisis. His brother Robert said that everyone expected him to die (Logevall 495). Aside from Addison's disease, back problems were also a big a big impairment for JFK. Through three different surgeries he hoped the pain could be helped. However, the first surgery in 1944 made the situation worse, the second surgery in 1953 to help relieve pain cause by his cortisone intake led to a life-threatening infection, and his last surgery in 1954 was to take out the metal plate placed in 1953 out of fear that it was infected (Dallek 197). These medical problems continued to haunt him up to and during his presidency. After a tree planting ceremony in Canada, he injured his back and was forced to walk with crutches. To help support his back he also sat in rocking chair in the Oval Office.

Kennedy also used pain medication and other drugs to help combat fatigue. Dr. Janet Travell also administered injections with procaine into his back and in the early 1960s he also took amphetamine pills to help fatigue and depression from Dr. Jacobson, also known as 'Dr. Feelgood' (Dallek 398). JFK was not in a good shape physically speaking, contradictory to what people commented that he looked vital, youthful or good. JFK's willingness to have the pain relieved and his back problems resolved are evident in his willingness to undergo surgery and take drugs that might help relieve it. All in all, based on these medical facts, JFK did not embody the able-bodiedness part

of the culturally dominant ideal at the time and to a greater extent the post-war body politic.

JFK embodied masculine ideals in a post-war world. The state of manhood or what was seen as 'masculine' by the twentieth century, differed from the era before. People's lives were influenced by consumerism and there were more opportunities to reach a higher socioeconomic class. This focus on individualism became ingrained in the male psyche in the early twentieth century. Another aspect of masculinity is the way the man presents himself. E. Anthony Rotundo argues that there are four ideals of male expression and the way a man chooses to present himself. These four ideals range from the team player, existential hero, pleasure seeker, to the spiritual warrior (286-287). The common theme is there some type of drive for competition, assertiveness, and aggression in these four ideals. These traits were ascribed to men and men were expected to possess these traits. If a man was more in touch with his emotional or tender side it would establish an idea that this man might be homosexual. JFK fits the mold of the 'pleasure seeker.' "A pleasure-seeking middle-class man can become a consumer connoisseur, pursuing the finest clothes, the finest cars, the finest art and entertainment, or the finest women. One form of this ideal has found expression in *Playboy* magazine. Its pages make explicit what is only implied in other commercial media – that sex and beautiful women are consumer products, accoutrements to the good life" (287). JFK was known for his womanizing which through the ideals Rotundo provides, shows that a sense of masculinity surrounded JFK through the way he presented himself.

JFK's experience in the Second World War also underlined his embodiment of masculine ideals of the post-war world. In 1943 a Japanese destroyer sunk JFK's PT boat. JFK, together with his crew, managed to swim to an island nearby and JFK saved the lives of his men. This story was used to portray JFK as a war hero during his

elections as Congressman, Senator, and President. JFK's health problems were also attributed to his time in the Pacific. Jarvis argues in the *Male Body at War* that "wounds were often presented as badges of honor or as tangible marks of masculinity proved on the battlefield" (186). This ties in with the overall strategy of JFK and his context (which I will elaborate on in the next chapter) to connect his ailments to the war. "The tale of wartime heroism played extremely well before these audiences – and, crucially, could be used to explain, and lionize his various infirmities. Yes, voters would learn, the candidate suffered from ailments, but they could be attributed to the PT 109 ordeal or to the malaria he contracted while in service" (Logevall 374). This shows the overall standing of veterans in U.S. society and the fact, as Jarvis contends, able-bodiedness was not a major factor of the culturally dominant ideal if the disability or ailment originated from the individual's time in the war.

JFK's image as sexually potent, together with his appearance as a family man dispelled any rumors about homosexuality. For the first six years of JFK's Congressional career, he was an unmarried man and established himself as a sought-after bachelor in Washington D.C. The year after he got elected as Senator of Massachusetts, he married Jacqueline Bouvier. Bouvier was twelve years his junior and their engagement was accompanied by a photoshoot in *LIFE Magazine*. These photos contributed to remodeling JFK's masculinity by emphasizing his role as a family man. He was also on the cover of *LIFE* after both of his children were born, further controlling that image. During his Presidential campaign there were attempts by his opponents to direct the narrative in the media around his womanizing and thus his disloyalty and unfaithfulness to his wife. These claims did not stick around JFK in a significant way. However, the infamous birthday song rendition by actress Marilyn Monroe for his birthday in 1962 did fuel rumors around their alleged affair, but it again

did not necessarily harm his image. JFK managed to maintain a balance of expectations around manhood, so his ability to provide for his family, be a doting husband while also having an aura of sexuality that spoke to women around him that did not harm his relation with the public. This was also due to his relationship with the press and the fact that he managed to tone the rumors down with the help of his aides (Dallek 478). Moreover, the overall ideology around masculinity at the time was that any sign of feminine characteristics could raise questions around his sexuality and the alleged stories about his affairs debunked any doubts that he might have been a homosexual.

These masculine ideals were further established in foreign policy and the Cold War binary. JFK reminded the public during his run for the Presidency that President Eisenhower had allowed the U.S. to look weak in the world by not gearing up with enough arms to handle an eventual war with the Soviet Union. JFK also maintained a staunchly anti-communist stance and did not dismiss Senator McCarthy's attempts to hunt down perceived communists in the government. As mentioned in the first chapter, there was a clear relationship between communism and femininity, and capitalism and masculinity. JFK positioned himself as a man that could lead the U.S. and someone who was definitely not a communist by using language that reminded the public of his position of toughness. Robert D. Dean argues in "Masculinity as Ideology" that JFK not only used language infused with masculine sounding words like toughness, masculinity was also actively implemented by his administration. Throughout his Presidential campaign and his Presidency JFK emphasized that the U.S. had to be tough in the fight against communism. "He deployed an image of youth, 'vigor', moral courage, and 'toughness.' Kennedy both shared and exploited popular fears that equated a perceived 'crisis' of American masculinity with the decline of American power abroad, using them to frame his presidential campaign and his programs in office" (29).

This ties in with the post-war body politic. The U.S.-Soviet Union binary caused an overwhelming approach by U.S. officials, from the Truman administration onwards, that toughness was an important characteristic in foreign policy. Moreover, Senator McCarthy, who gained attention as a fierce anti-Communist, further ingrained set gendered ideas into U.S. Politics. Communism was inexplicably linked to weakness, femininity, and homosexuality. JFK also presented himself as tough on communism and did not dismiss McCarthy's working methods. According to Sorensen this was due to support for McCarthy in Massachusetts (48). However, JFK did believe in the "get tough with Russia" approach (Logevall 431). Thus, by actively implementing toughness in foreign policy on the Soviet Union and communism, JFK positioned himself as a figure of masculinity that would lead the U.S. in an ideological battle which positions him in the post-war body politic.

### **Personal Image Control and Fabrication**

JFK knew how to present himself and seemed to be aware of what his audience expected of him. In the mid-1930s JFK wrote of sexual conquests to his friends in school; one of his schoolmates mentioned the following about these stories: "I think he was making it up,' (...). 'That was the masculine ethic. And I think he made up three quarters of it. And I don't hold it against him.' Jack was telling his friends, telling himself, what kind of man he sought to be and could be. He projected an image of himself as a lothario well before he actually became one" (Logevall 129). JFK's aide Ted Sorensen describes as similar awareness of image in his book. "He was not free from vanity about his appearance. He knew that good pictures were the lifeblood of politics, and he resented photographers who waited to snap him brushing perspiration from his brow during a speech" (29). Sorensen goes on to describe that JFK ordered

that more timely Senate portraits were sent to newspapers for them to use, because he did not like the photos from his early days in Congress when he was young and quite skinny. JFK wanted to distance himself from these photos to present himself as more mature.

After Kennedy wrote *Profiles in Courage* during his recuperation after his surgery in 1954, he published a piece in the *Washington Post*. He describes what realizations he went through during his convalescence. “I would not wish to exaggerate the compensation of being ill. It is better by far to be well. But if illness strikes, though we may grumble at first about the long days away from our normal work and routine – if we recognize the potential opportunities those long days make possible, we will realize that our disability – whatever its pains and discomforts – may in some ways have been a blessing in disguise” (Kennedy). JFK describes his own impairments in this piece by mentioning pain and discomforts in the context of disability, while also positioning himself as someone who has overcome these impairments. His position fits into an overall idea of disability as something that one should overcome. It places disability in a context of either winning or losing. By focusing on overcoming his impairments, JFK made himself a winner. Another aspect of his impairments is that it also reminded the public of his time in the Pacific during the war. So, JFK was a war hero, who became disabled and told the public he overcame it. So, he was a hero and a winner.

JFK managed to personally fabricate and control his image. Elaine de Kooning, a painter that focused on male sexuality, was commissioned to paint a portrait of JFK. She described these sessions as sexually charged, because of some very suggestive poses of JFK he initiated himself. Mark Wright argues in the *Presidential Image*, “Kennedy was meticulous, indeed brilliant in his understanding of image and how to

fashion it so as to impress. (...). In a televisual era, image has really mattered to presidential credibility. (...). Such was the power of Kennedy's image that when others did influence it – individuals beyond his control – their depiction of him was usually flattering. This was the case with many journalists but also those major artists who portrayed him. This added sheen to his already dazzling image" (112). Image fabrication also applies to the context around the individual, yet JFK was also heavily involved in fabricating his image. Both Dallek and Logevall point out several times in their respective biographies that JFK's main fear was the press extensively reporting on his health issues that would deconstruct his carefully build-up image. Peretti writes in *The Leading Man* that JFK bridged the gap between movie stars and politics by implementing the glamour, allure, and wish fulfillment of Hollywood into his presentation (3). JFK inhabited the post-war body politic ideals on an exterior level while also adding a new level of a Hollywood movie star to his political persona. Although JFK had help from his surrounding context, which I analyze in the following chapter, his individual level image fabrication was strong and it seems that he was, up to a point, in complete control of his public image.

### **Conclusion**

Physically speaking, JFK did not represent the vitality of the U.S. However, his public image did make the public and press believe that he did. In a time where the culturally dominant ideal constituted that the person in power had to be a white, wealthy, able-bodied, heterosexual man and a war veteran, JFK fits into five of these six labels. There was no question around his race and although questions around Irish Catholic Americans and their whiteness had been raised, in the end JFK managed to overcome these issues, specifically the religious issue. Through his election he cleared the way

for other Catholics who wanted to run for public office and put an end to questions of loyalty to the U.S. and Catholicism.

The Kennedy family's wealth put him in a position of privilege. JFK went to exclusive prep schools and universities and did not experience the Great Depression in a significant way. Moreover, the wealth of his family enabled his ability to treat his chronic ailments and gain access to specialized doctors. In the end, this also helped him to maintain an image of able-bodiedness. There had not been any questions about JFK's sexuality, because of his notorious womanizing and image as an eligible bachelor in his early years in Congress. After his marriage, he also gained a label of a family man and balanced his image between sexual allure and the stability of a family man. Last but not least JFK was a war veteran. This fact ties together some of the aspects of the culturally dominant ideal. Through wealth and his father's political ties by sponsoring political campaigns JFK entered the navy. Without these means he could not have entered based on his medical examination, however his father got him a medical clearance. His time in the Pacific was used as a reason for his chronic ailments while also establishing him as a war hero. This positioned him as embodying masculine ideals of the time. By using his wartime experience as an excuse for his chronic impairments, questions about his able-bodiedness are removed. Thus, enabling JFK to fit into a culturally dominant ideal. Through his speeches on toughness in U.S. foreign policy JFK infused masculine characteristics into his politics, which made him fit into a post-war body politic. Although, JFK does not completely fit into the culturally dominant ideal, his ability to control his image makes him fit and establishes him as someone that could demonstrate the U.S. post-war body politic on a national and international stage.

## **Chapter Three: Invested in an Image**

Embodying a culturally dominant ideal depends on how those at the receiving end of this ideal respond to it. JFK managed to pass as able-bodied and to keep information about his impairments and the extent of them mostly from the press, who accepted it without critique. Although JFK did establish his image and was aware of the importance of a convincing image, he did not maintain it by himself. Daniel J. Wilson writes in “Passing in the Shadow of FDR: Polio Survivors, Passing, and the Negotiation of Disability” that FDR could not have passed successfully without the help of his advisors, family, and the press that was complicit and accepted it without critique (13). This is similar to the situation of JFK. His wealth enabled him to gain access to treatment and doctors. However, his family, friends, and his colleagues and employees helped him to cover-up the extent of his medical issues and impairment. The press also plays a complicit role in this situation, since they assisted in maintaining the image of JFK. Finally, his political opponents did try to sow doubts about his health but never stuck with it. JFK’s image was that of a white, Aryan-style, healthy, able-bodied, heterosexual man, who was also a war hero. This Aryan-style ideal is still associated with JFK today despite the fact that there is more known about the extent of his impairments.

This chapter will analyze two contributing factors to JFK’s image-making and passing as able-bodied: his protective context and the media. His protective context consisted of the people around him and helped to send the message of JFK’s embodiment of the Aryan-style culturally dominant ideal. The media is another factor in the image-making process. Both factors are stakeholders in this and rely on the success of it. They function as receivers and help to send this ideal into the world. As

receivers it is the media's job to analyze this ideal and critique it if it needs to. However, as receivers the media did not critique his image.

JFK's protective context consists of three different types of people. The first type is his family, this means anyone that is related to JFK by blood or through marriage. For this group I will look at biographies written about JFK's family members or interviews they have given about JFK and his health. The second type consists of people that are considered friends of JFK. There is an overlap between those that were his friends and those that work for him. However, for this type it is important that there is a type of intimacy and awareness of JFK's health problems. For the people that fit into the second type, I will look at oral history interviews that have been conducted for the Kennedy library. The final type are JFK's aides and employees. This last type consisted of people that only knew him through work and mostly worked for him. So, there was a power dynamic at play and it could mean that these people were not as aware of the extent of JFK's impairments. In this case, I will look at Ted Sorensen's and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s biographies, oral history interviews, and interviews given in the media at the time about JFK's health. As for the media, I will look at a number of outlets, specifically *LIFE Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. One of the reasons for choosing these outlets is the fact that they are available in the public domain.

### **The Stakeholders that Contribute to an Ideal**

The Kennedy family's approach to health difficulties was to hide them. JFK's sister had a lobotomy to treat her mood swings and her learning disabilities. This lobotomy was done in secret and left her institutionalized in a home for people with mental disabilities. Logevall describes the Kennedy family as one that "fetishized the

appearance of unbounded success” (314). Everything that questioned this appearance was denied. JFK’s brother Robert Kennedy (RFK) was his campaign manager throughout his political campaigns. When Lyndon Johnson’s aide told the press that JFK had Addison’s disease, his brother quickly responded by showing a doctor’s statement on JFK’s perfect health (Tye 111). Robert Kennedy always denied claims about JFK’s health throughout his political career. Most of the claims about JFK’s health came from Lyndon Johnson and these were time and time again fiercely denied by RFK. Peculiarly, RFK did mention these impairments in a new edition of JFK’s book *Profiles in Courage* (Billings). It shows that only after JFK had died, his brother could talk about it. Overall, the Kennedy family did not discuss any of JFK’s impairments in public and vehemently denied claims about Addison’s disease. Moreover, his father assisted him in getting medical clearance, after failing several medical examinations, to enter the navy. Although JFK did not want to discuss his impairments it is evident in the way that the Kennedy family dealt with anything that might tarnish their image of good looks and success was to deny it. So, JFK’s passing as able-bodied was done for him from a young age.

The oral history interviews show that those that knew JFK personally never questioned his able-bodiedness. Kirk LeMoyne Billings became a friend of JFK in the mid-1930s. During this period JFK spend a lot of time in hospitals and wrote letters to Billings to describe his experience and feelings about it. Billings was aware of most of JFK’s health difficulties. In Billings’ first oral history interview he remembers that during their time in school JFK was in hospital most of the time, got diagnosed with leukemia, and at some point, nearly died in the 1930s. During JFK’s run for Congressman, his health was not a worry for Billings. “It never crossed my mind, until this moment, whether he was sick during that period, whether he had a bad back,

whether he had malaria, or whether he had this or that or the other thing.” Billings goes on to point out that JFK worked long days. His pace was difficult to keep up with for people that were healthy. The pace of JFK’s campaign was intense based on what Billings remembers, since it did not make him question JFK’s able-bodiedness.

Other people that considered themselves friends of JFK, like Paul Fay, Mary Lasker, and Joe Alsop were aware of JFK’s impairments to an extent. Paul Fay mentions in his interview that after JFK came back from the Pacific, he looked sick and Fay witnessed JFK putting cortisone pills underneath the skin on his legs. Fay only discussed this with JFK years later and found out he could take the pills orally (Fay). Mary Lasker heard that JFK was suffering from malaria and tried to help him get malaria medication. Lasker mentions that she does not know whether JFK actually took the medication. Based on this interview it is apparent that this is all Lasker knew of JFK’s impairments (Lasker). Joe Alsop was told by JFK that he was diagnosed with some sort of slow form of leukemia and that he only had ten years to live (Alsop). This admission by JFK is quite rare, since it is not known whether JFK actually suffered from this type of leukemia. These three people all have a different view about JFK and his impairments. None of them knew the full extent of them and JFK never disclosed the full extent of these ailments to those that were considered his friends. The overall consensus is that he did have health issues but whether these were life-threatening or influenced his ability to function like other able-bodied people were not known to them – nor did they question them.

JFK’s aides were in the frontline to deny any health claims, yet JFK left most of them in the dark about his health. JFK’s secretary during his time as Congressman and Senator, Grace Burke, said the following about JFK and his time in the hospital: “He’d be in the hospital quite a bit, and he didn’t want the reporters to know he was up

there, because they'd put it in the paper. He'd call up, and I sometimes wouldn't know he was up there" (Burke). JFK went to great lengths to keep his hospitalizations secret from his aides. Ted Sorensen joined JFK in 1953 as a legislative aide. From first-hand experience Sorensen writes that JFK did not discuss the details and the possible consequences of his life-threatening back operations in the mid-1950s (39). Moreover, Sorensen also mentions that JFK preferred to not mention his Addison's disease at all instead framing it as "'partial mild insufficiency' or 'malfunctioning' of the adrenal glands which had accompanied the malaria, water exposure, shock and stress he had undergone during his wartime ordeal" (39). According to Sorensen, JFK played a big part in how his impairments were to be framed. Sorensen actively refuted rumors about JFK's health. The pace of the campaign silenced any doubts there might have been about JFK's health according to Sorensen (85, 109). When Arthur Schlesinger joined JFK in 1959, he denied that he had Addison's disease by pointing out that anyone who actually had it should not run for president (19). Sorensen was particularly close to JFK and his health issues, since he joined as an aide during JFK's first term as Senator. Schlesinger joined in the run-up to JFK's presidential campaign. Both these men had different experiences working with JFK and his health issues and JFK did not disclose that much about his health after his operations in the mid-1950s. Sorensen did refute rumors without knowing the full extent of JFK's health and in Schlesinger's case he did not even know about JFK's impairments so could only refute based on his knowledge.

To counter doubts around JFK's health, his campaign team gave a statement about his perfect health and promoted an accompanying article. JFK's personal physician denies allegations about JFK's impairments in this article. In 1955 Dr. Janet Travell became his personal physician after his surgeries. Travell helped JFK to manage

the pain in his back by administering injections of novocain. Moreover, she also actively helped JFK pass as able-bodied by denying any claims about JFK's impairments. In her correspondence with reporter Ernest Barcella, she attempted to conceal the truth about JFK's impairments. Barcella sent her a number of questions based on a book called *The Remarkable Kennedys*, which Travell and the JFK campaign team saw as book containing many inaccuracies. She actually referred Barcella to JFK's campaign biography and dismissed any claims about the serious illnesses JFK had as a child. We know that he suffered from scarlet fever and that brought him to the brink of death. Moreover, Travell also provided a list to JFK with 'facts' that he could use if there were ever questions, including a statement that mentions that he did "not have the classical Addison's disease" and that "in recent years the function of your adrenal glands has shown recovery". JFK's adrenal glands could only function because of his daily cortisone intake, so they did not recover at all. Peculiarly, JFK's other White House physician Dr. Burkley also states that JFK was a healthy and vital man, while also stating that JFK did take a lot of medicine to control his Addison's and other chronic pain (Burkley). JFK relied on his physicians, Travell and Burkley, to maintain his image as able-bodied. Travell also answered journalists and denied any rumors about JFK's illnesses. Both two doctors were willing not to disclose any details about his impairments, which made his passing all the more convincing.

All in all, through his protective context JFK managed to pass as able-bodied. The Kennedy family established from an early age an idea that a good image was vital to presenting oneself to the world. His sister's mental illness and consequences of her lobotomy were hidden from the world. The same went for JFK and his impairments, passing as able-bodied was part of JFK's life growing up. His decision to pursue public office only further stressed his ability to pass. RFK, as campaign manager, made sure

that there was evidence of medical clearance by doctors to contradict claims about his brother's health. Moreover, JFK did not disclose any of his medical information to those that were his friends or aides. Although Lem Billings had known JFK since the 1930s and was aware of his many health issues throughout that time, JFK presented himself in such a way that Billings did not once question whether JFK was able-bodied enough to pursue public office. Paul Fay describes a similar feeling, that JFK's pace was grueling enough for a healthy man so he did not question JFK's impairments. JFK left his aides in the dark, up to the point his secretary did not know he was in the hospital at times. JFK actively passed as able-bodied in such a way that his staff and his personal friends could vouch for him whenever an argument was made to refute JFK's able-bodiedness. He could uphold the culturally dominant ideal of the time with the help of his protective context.

Those that were in JFK's protective context were stakeholders in upholding his culturally dominant ideal. Although JFK did manage most of his identity by himself, he also relied on his protective context to further spread that identity. This way his protective context also functions like stakeholders. As stakeholders, they also benefit from maintaining JFK's embodiment of the Aryan-style culturally dominant ideal, whether because of their jobs, power, or position. Lempert and Silverstein argue in *Creatures of Politics* that politicians rely on spreading their political persona. "In fact, Message (...) does not refer to a politician's communication about Issues so much as what the politician seems to communicate about his or her identity and personal values through selectively taking up some Issues and avoiding others, (...). A politician's persona becomes visible as a collage-in-motion of communicative Issue events: through becoming identified in this way with Issues, he or she acquires political persona" (2). JFK's political persona consisted of his image and its appeal. The stakeholders had to

ensure that this persona was maintained through dismissing claims about his health and making sure that there was ‘evidence’ to refute these claims.

### **Relationship with the Media**

JFK’s relationship with the media, in particular *LIFE Magazine*, allowed him uphold his Aryan-style culturally dominant ideal. As established in previous chapters, JFK, with the help of his protective context, fitted into the Aryan-style, culturally dominant ideal of the time. However, JFK and his surrounding context are not the only ones contributing to upholding this ideal, it is vital to look at how the media treated JFK and JFK’s relationship with the media. His protective context helped send the image, whereas the media played the role of receiver. As receivers it is important to consider whether they were critical of this message or refuted it. *LIFE Magazine* was one of the biggest magazines in the U.S. during JFK’s time as a politician. JFK allowed *LIFE* to be present in his public and his private life, something that politicians had not really done before. Starting with a family picture of the Kennedy’s in 1937, *LIFE* made around 430 photos of JFK in his life. JFK allowed unprecedented access for *LIFE*, which helped to spread his image throughout the U.S.

The changing media landscape contributed to the influence of *LIFE*. Cameras became portable and were easier to use for journalists. During the Great Depression, photos helped to show the consequences of mass unemployment and migration from states like Oklahoma to California. This led to the creation of *LIFE Magazine* by Henry Luce, a friend of Joseph Kennedy Sr. *LIFE Magazine* sent reporters all over the world during the Second World War and cemented itself as one of the most popular magazines of the mid-twentieth century. This shows that *LIFE* made good use of their connection

with JFK, helped to cement his image, and never questioned his ability to fit into the Aryan-style, culturally dominant ideal of the time.

Papers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* do not make a critical point about JFK's impairments, instead focusing on JFK's new style of campaigning and the influence of his image. Although there are several reports on JFK's surgeries in the mid-1950s, these reports function like announcements where either JFK's father, other family members, or aides mention that he was "doing good" or went down to Palm Beach, Florida "to recover" ("Kennedy Going South"). None of these articles focus on the actual situation JFK found himself in, namely on the brink of death. Yet one of these quote JFK's father after an inquiry on his health situation after his surgery in 1954: "The elder Kennedy, former Ambassador to Great Britain, said he made the statement to scotch 'unfounded and disturbing rumors that are being circulated, especially in Washington,' which implied that the Senator's condition would not permit him to resume his Senate seat. 'Such reports, (...), are not in accordance with the fact.' (...). The Hospital for Special Surgery in New York, where Senator Kennedy underwent a spinal operation last month, reported his condition 'very satisfactory' last night" ("Statement on Kennedy"). Moreover, other reports mention that JFK's progress was either "reasonably good," "fairly satisfactory," or "progressing nicely." None of them mention that JFK was fighting off an infection or was nearly dead. Another aspect of these reports is that they always mention that JFK underwent surgery to fix an injury he sustained during the war. This relates to the culturally dominant ideal of the time, where veterans were held in high regard and their injuries were seen as wounds of war heroes. It excused them from not being completely able-bodied.

A *New York Times* article on JFK's campaign for the presidency also makes a point of highlighting JFK's effect on women. The reporter describes JFK's arrival to

places as similar to that of singer and actor Frank Sinatra, further highlighting: “On his tours through upstate New York earlier this week, teen-age girls leaped into the air and hugged themselves at the sight of him. (...). The feminine element in the crowds that lined the streets of central and western New York cities seemed particularly imbued with a desire to touch to Senator” (“Kennedy Dazzles Women on Tours”). The article is accompanied by a picture of JFK with his daughter, which exposes the paradox around JFK’s image in the media. First of all, JFK is a politician. Second, he suffers from impairments which the media related to his time in the Pacific, thus making him a war hero. Finally, JFK is desirable to women of all ages while also being a family man. JFK’s position is established as an Aryan-style, culturally dominant ideal as a politician and veteran through his desirability and family life.

JFK and his campaign team capitalized on his image during the first ever televised debates in 1960. One of the telling anecdotes about this first televised debate is the fact that the people who listened to the radio felt that Richard Nixon was the winner of the debate, whereas those that were watching TV saw JFK as the winner of the debate. This had to do with his presentation during the debate. In the run up to the debate, Nixon was trying to visit all fifty states which resulted in a pale and underweight appearance in the first debate (Donaldson 109). Nixon underestimated the importance of image during this debate and chose not to wear makeup whereas JFK made sure he looked tanned in the run up to the debate. The temperature in the studio was also accommodated to JFK’s standards. Gary Donaldson analyzes in *The First Modern Campaign* that the public expected more from their politicians and that voters treated politicians as public figures, which meant that politicians had to show more of themselves than just their stance on issues and policies (142). JFK presented himself as a candidate that could do just that.

The media functioned as receiver and helped spread JFK's image. As receiver, it is evident that the media helped spread it without critique. *LIFE* was one of the biggest magazines at that time and helped to provide a platform for JFK's image. This also had to do with JFK's popularity and appeal to the public, so, *LIFE* benefited from receiving and spreading this image without critique. *The Washington Post* let JFK publish an article to reflect on his recuperation and present himself as someone who overcame impairments. *The New York Times* published articles on JFK where they only mentioned what his family or aides said about his impairments. Lempert and Silverstein argue the following about the relationship between the press and politicians: "In particular, politicians in the institutional order of mass electoral politics have always had an interdependent relationship 'to the press' or 'the media,' precisely because of their utility in publicity, tantalizingly available for strategically attempting to shape reportage on behalf of a political interest, group, or figure" (201). The media functioned like a protective context for JFK's image as well, because they did not provide a critical insight in any of their reports on JFK. By functioning as a protective context for JFK's image, the media also were a stakeholder in his image.

### **Conclusion**

Media outlets and JFK's surrounding context helped to maintain his image. Gary Donaldson argues that JFK's image fabrication was impressive during the first televised debate with Nixon, when JFK arrived looking tan, wearing a fitted suit, and looked healthy. The moderator later described JFK looking like an Adonis and the photographers immediately flocked around him (114). JFK understood the appeal of his image to the media. Letting *LIFE* photographers take photos of his private life and family, establishing intimacy with the reporters by inviting them to his home, and

making himself into an overall attractive person for the media. Mark White makes a poignant observation in “The Art of John F. Kennedy:” “By the time Kennedy was elected president on 8 November 1960, Americans saw him as a war hero, man of letters, man of faith, sex symbol and family symbol. He seemed perfect. Although he had White House aides to advise him on relations with the press, he was essentially his own image guru” (95). JFK got to be all these things because the press and media functioned like a protective context for him. They put him on a pedestal to carry out these images of himself, together with the those in his close circle denying any rumors that he was impaired in any significant way. Image-making and fabrication is done right when the great majority agrees on the image that they are shown. Moreover, it is done even better when the press and media still present this image without interference from the individual or their surrounding context. JFK’s surrounding context would not interfere because they also functioned like stakeholders invested in JFK’s image. Based on these findings about JFK’s surrounding context and press reports it is evident that this is the case. Passing is not an individual undertaking, yet in this case it looks like JFK was still very much in control.

## Conclusion

Would John F. Kennedy's image still have the same appeal if it were not for his tragic murder in 1963? We have never seen JFK as an old man, which gives his image an aspect of eternal youth. I have analyzed JFK during his life, his image-making after his death also plays into it. After his death, Jackie Kennedy, together with his family and close aides and with the help of media outlets, created an image of JFK connected to what would be named Camelot. Jackie Kennedy talked about JFK's love for the 1960 musical Camelot, based on the legend of King Arthur. By describing JFK's administration during his presidency as 'Camelot' it also connected it to the symbolism and underlying ideas of the Arthurian legends. Although King Arthur started out as a Celtic myth, it became infused with Christian symbolism, as time passed, through his quest to find the Holy Grail (Loomis 7). Thus King Arthur became the epitome of Christianity and its ideals and JFK's connection to Camelot made it seem that he was too.

Even after his death he remained an image of style, masculinity, and power. Yet, with his impairments this image could not be farther from the truth. This thesis has researched the paradox between JFK's impairments and his embodiment of a culturally dominant ideal. In the almost sixty years since his death there have been countless documentaries, biographies, movies, and other types media exposure remembering JFK's life and celebrating his image. "No president, before or since, has been savvier in his use of mass media to promote his career or agenda. (...). JFK's visage, energy, picture-postcard family, and soaring rhetoric filled the small screen as perfectly as any Hollywood star has ever been able to do on the big screen. (...). The true test of Kennedy's success is passed daily: When a critic of JFK's policies or personal behavior sees the young president again on film, he is drawn in anew, wrapped up in the action

and eloquence, separating and subordinating his dim view of the low morals and poor judgement of the lesser, hidden John Kennedy” (Sabato 419-420). It is evident that JFK’s image alone is so compelling that it has stood the test of time despite information that could trouble that image.

Prejudice around disability is infused in the Aryan-style, culturally dominant ideal. In this thesis I have argued that eugenics influenced perceptions around disability and connected it to prevailing ideas around race, class, gender, and sexuality. Eugenics focused on the betterment of the human race and established an Aryan ideal where people from Northwestern Europe were perceived as the ‘perfect able-bodied race.’ Together with changing perceptions about the male body and its representation of American values during and after the Second World War an Aryan-style, culturally dominant ideal was formed. This ideal required that anyone who wanted to fit in had to be white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, and preferably a veteran. The focus on masculine heterosexuality also infused itself into U.S. politics and targeted anyone with feminine characteristics as un-American and disabled. The Cold War binary between the U.S. and the Soviet Union exposed a gendered prejudice where there was only place for traditional roles and characteristics for men and women. Anyone who could not uphold the masculine ideals of the U.S. was perceived as weak and this weakness translated itself to a notion of disability. Moreover, the fetishization of the male body as a bearer of American values and its celebration of able-bodiedness disconnected with reality. Many of the men that fought during the Second World War came back impaired. Their position as war veterans excused them from not upholding the able-bodied ideal.

At first glance JFK does not fit into the Aryan-style, culturally dominant ideal. He grew up in a country where discrimination against Catholics was a regular occurrence. Also, his grandfathers still faced prejudice because of their Irishness. In the

end, the ability of Irish immigrants to assimilate into U.S. society by placing themselves into a racial hierarchy helped to take some of the prejudice away. By the time JFK ran for office, his Catholicism was one of the bigger issues to overcome. As a white man with impairments, it could have been difficult to fit into the ideal. Yet his position as not only a veteran but a war hero took away any doubts around his impairments. War veterans were glorified in the period after the war and JFK reminded the public often of his experience in the war. Moreover, in one of the few public articles he wrote on his impairments he framed them as something he had overcome. Clearly using language that suggested that disability and impairments were something one could get rid of and could win or lose against. JFK infused masculine ideals into his ideas about U.S. foreign policy and mentioned in his speeches that the U.S. should be tougher and not look weak into the eyes of the Soviet Union. He carried these ideals about masculinity in his image as a desirable, good-looking, athletic, family man and exploited this image to take away any doubts about his impairments. If we look at the facts about JFK it is evident that he would not have been able to fit into the Aryan-style, culturally dominant ideal. However, by focusing on the aspects that overlooked any questions about his ability to fit in, he positioned himself as the man that could inhabit this post-war body politic.

Both JFK's surrounding context, as messengers, and the media, as receivers, were stakeholders in the success of JFK's image-making. On an individual level JFK presented himself in such a way that his surrounding context helped to further spread that image. This surrounding context consisted of family members, friends, and aides and they were all stakeholders in the success of this image. JFK gained more power by spreading his image and the same goes for those around him. Based on oral history interviews, it is evident that JFK carried himself in such a way that none of the people around him questioned his able-bodiedness and helped refute any rumors about his

impairments. The media received this image of JFK as an Aryan-style, culturally dominant ideal without questioning or critiquing it. JFK understood the power of pictures and had a relationship with the media that was not seen before. *LIFE Magazine* contributed the most to spreading the image of JFK as an ideal. JFK opened up his home for *LIFE* photographers to take pictures of his family, engagement, marriage, and children. The media bought into the Hollywood glamour that JFK provided as a politician without questioning it. Moreover, newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* framed JFK's impairments as a result of his time in the war and quoted family members and aides that refuted any questions about the severity of these impairments. The media functioned as well like a protective context for JFK. The relationship was such that they also gained from the exposure of JFK's image. In that sense, both his surrounding context and the media were stakeholders in upholding JFK's image.

JFK set a precedent for politicians to come with his media relationship and his ability to maintain his image. Whenever there are elections, the people participating always try to fit into a culturally dominant ideal. This ideal changes over time and some aspects become more important than others. When JFK ran for office, he called out any opponent that had not fought in the war. Today that is different. Yet questions of able-bodiedness still plague presidential candidates. During the 2020 elections both Joe Biden and Donald Trump were eager to prove their virility to take away any doubts about their able-bodiedness in regards to their age. "Aware of the concerns, Biden's campaign released a medical report last December saying he is a 'healthy, vigorous, 77-year-old male, who is fit to successfully execute the duties of the presidency'. Trump, meanwhile, 'remains healthy' according to the results of his latest physical exam, which the White House made public in June" (Smith). Both candidates tried to

make a point of their able-bodiedness regardless of their age. In a changing media landscape, where social media enables everyone to post a picture or video to confront claims about able-bodiedness it might be difficult to keep up with one's image. If we examine JFK's image-making we can conclude that it was almost perfectly done. Every aspect of his life that might have denied the image he presented was refuted. His image-making was so impressive that even after his death in 1963 he is still regarded as one the greatest presidents ever (Sabato 3). Moreover, he is still perceived as an Aryan-style, culturally dominant ideal despite the fact that we now know more about his impairments. Even more so, it has even added to the already incredible appeal of his life since it also shows to people that despite these impairments, he managed to become president of the U.S.

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24 April 2020