



One week after she lost her husband to an assassin's bullet, Jackie Kennedy met with a reporter at her Hyannis Port home. It was one of the few interviews she granted in the immediate aftermath of JFK's death.

LIFE Magazine was about to run a special issue on President Kennedy, and his widow wanted to help the reporter shape his part of that story (via an article entitled "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue").

We know what happened during the discussion—between Mrs. Kennedy and Theodore H. White—because the reporter donated his meeting notes to the JFK Library and Museum. His explicit instructions, which accompanied the gift, directed that his notes could not be made public until a year after Mrs. Kennedy's death.

Historians have traced the use of "Camelot," describing the Kennedy Administration, to that Hyannis Port meeting in late November of 1963. During JFK's lifetime, no one had made such a comparison.

What happened during that four-hour interview—and—why is President Kennedy's time in office still referred to as "Camelot?" To answer the first question, we look to White's handwritten notes (which Mrs. Kennedy edited).

Let's start with how the interview—which White later called "our sad conversation"—occurred. Jackie had summoned White to her home.

As a journalist who'd previously written favorably about her husband—especially in *The Making of the President 1960*, his book about Kennedy—White, who was also a friend, might positively respond to Jackie's purpose. She was "obsessed," he noted—using her word—with being sure her husband was remembered as a hero.

She was also worried that journalists would portray JFK in an unfavorable light—once the shock of the assassination had passed. Before that could happen, she wanted the Kennedy era defined with a culturally relevant term—one that was instantly recognizable from the success of a Broadway musical called "Camelot" (which premiered on December 3, 1960, starring Julie Andrews, Richard Burton and Roddy McDowall).

The "Camelot Documents"—as White's papers are known—reveal much about Mrs. Kennedy's thinking a week after her husband's death. She was still wrestling with the horrific events which had occurred in her presence:

- "All the ride to the hospital I kept saying, 'Jack, Jack, can you hear me, I love you, Jack.' I kept holding the top of his head down trying to keep the brains in."
- "I'm not going to be the Widow Kennedy in public."
- "When this is over I'm going to crawl into the deepest retirement there is."

Then Mrs. Kennedy told White what was foremost on her mind for his story:

I kept saying to Bobby, I've got to talk to somebody, I've got to see somebody. I want to say this one thing. It's been almost an obsession with me. This line from the musical comedy's been almost an obsession with me.

At night before going to bed . . . we had an old Victrola. He'd play a couple of records. I'd get out of bed at night and play it for him when it was so cold getting out of bed. It was a song he loved. He loved "Camelot." It was the song he loved most at the end . . . "don't let it be forgot that for one brief shining moment there was Camelot."

It took White about 45 minutes to write his essay (which he composed in a servant's room at the Kennedy house). The journalist let his subject read his story and make edits to the manuscript. After the Camelot quote, Jackie added these words:

...and it will never be that way again! (See [page 159](#) of the published "Epilogue.")

At the end of White's essay, the still-grieving widow made another edit emphasizing the uniqueness of the Kennedy-era Camelot:

And all she could think of was tell people there will never be that Camelot again.

LIFE ran its special issue on [December 3, 1963](#). Its normal circulation, at the time, was around 7 million copies. Soon thereafter, people were referring to the Kennedy years as "Camelot."

Although no serious JFK scholar would today refer to the Kennedy Administration with such a description, even Jackie came to think that the Arthurian metaphor had become too firmly rooted in the public's consciousness.

In using one legend, to create another, the whole modern myth of a presidential Camelot—between the years of 1961-1963—had grown into its own legendary proportions.

This image depicts the lead page of the "Camelot Documents," created by Theodore H. White and edited, in places, by Jacqueline Kennedy.

Click on the image for a better view.

Credits:

Image depicting the lead page of Theodore H. White's notes, online via the JFK Library and Museum. The Library notes the following as the "preferred citation" for this document: "Theodore H. White Personal Papers. Camelot Documents. Item I: White's handwritten notes of 29 November 1963 interview with Jacqueline Kennedy. THWPP-059-011. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum."

The Kennedy Library notes the following about the "Camelot Documents" which were given to the Library by Deed of Gift from Theodore H. White:

The “Camelot Documents” were originally created for and relate to the preparation of Mr. White’s brief “Camelot” article “For President Kennedy: An Epilogue,” which was published in the December 6, 1963 issue of LIFE. The article was based on an interview he conducted with Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, at her home in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, on the night of November 29, 1963, one week after the assassination of her husband, President John F. Kennedy.

The interview was the first of a very small number that Jacqueline Kennedy gave on the subject of President Kennedy’s death. The 1963 LIFE article represented the first use of the term “Camelot” in print and is attributed with having played a major role in establishing and fixing this image of the Kennedy Administration and period in the popular mind. Mr. White Donated this 34-page file, which he called the “Camelot Documents,” to the Kennedy Library in December 1969. In his deed of gift, he stipulated that it was to remain closed until one year after the death of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. She died on May 19, 1994.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Camelot-Using-One-Legend-to-Create-Another>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Camelot-Using-One-Legend-to-Create-Another>