

ROBERT F.
KENNEDY, JR.

American Values

Lessons I Learned from My Family



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With rich detail, compelling honesty, and a storyteller's gift, RFK Jr. describes his life growing up Kennedy in a tumultuous time in history that eerily echoes the issues of nuclear confrontation, religion, race, and inequality that we confront today.

In this powerful book that combines the best aspects of memoir and political history, the third child of Attorney General Robert Kennedy and nephew of JFK takes us on an intimate journey through his life, including watershed moments in the history of our nation. Stories of his grandparents Joseph and Rose set the stage for their nine remarkable children, among them three U.S. senators—Teddy, Bobby, and Jack—one of whom went on to become attorney general, and the other, the president of the United States.

We meet Allen Dulles and J. Edgar Hoover, two men whose agencies posed the principal threats to American democracy and values. Their power struggles with the Kennedys underpinned all the defining conflicts of the era. We live through the Cuban Missile Crisis, when insubordinate spies and belligerent generals in the Pentagon and Moscow brought the world to the cliff edge of nuclear war. At Hickory Hill in Virginia, where RFK Jr. grew up, we encounter the celebrities who gathered at the second most famous address in Washington, members of what would later become known as America's Camelot. Through his father's role as attorney general we get an insider's look as growing tensions over civil rights led to pitched battles in the streets and 16,000 federal troops were called in to enforce desegregation at Ole Miss. We see growing pressure to fight wars in Southeast Asia to stop communism. We relive the assassination of JFK, RFK's run for the presidency that was cut short by his own death, and the aftermath of those murders on the Kennedy family.

These pages come vividly to life with intimate stories of RFK Jr.'s own experiences, not just with historical events and the movers who shaped them but also with his mother and father, with his own struggles with addiction, and with the ways he eventually made peace with both his Kennedy legacy and his own demons. The result is a lyrically written book that is remarkably stirring and relevant, providing insight, hope, and steady wisdom for Americans as they wrestle, as never before, with questions about America's role in history and the world and what it means to be American.

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From Reader Review American Values: Lessons I Learned from My Family for online ebook

Helen T says

This is a loving insightful portrayal of a unique family and their contributions to the US and the world as well as the Kennedy family. I am a Canadian who was born in the 1960s so I came to this book with out a lot of background information. During my reading of this book, I put it aside and read Larry Tye's biography of RFK which I found more clariying in terms of actual historical events. However, when I went back to this book, I realise how much I enjoyed RFK Jr's writing, the tales of his family. I also have fallen in love with both RFK and his inimitable wife Ethel. As a parent, there was so much here for me to ruminate on. I appreciate the author's candid storytelling and enjoyed his beautiful writing style. I borrowed this book from the library but I will be purchasing it so I can share it with my family and friends. If you're looking for gossip and salacious dirt, you won't find it in this book. I honestly am not interested in those details as I don't believe anyone is without issues or skeletons. But this book showcases something I believe is lacking right now in our media and society - a certain moral dignity and integrity. I hope others will read it and enjoy it as much as I did.

Carol says

Robert Francis "Bobby" Kennedy (November 20, 1925 – June 6, 1968) was an American politician and lawyer who served as the 64th United States Attorney General from January 1961 to September 1964, and as a U.S. Senator from New York from January 1965 until his assassination in June 1968. Kennedy was a member of the Democratic Party and is often seen as an icon of modern American liberalism.

Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, the seventh child of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. and Rose Kennedy. After serving in the U.S. Naval Reserve as a seaman apprentice from 1944 to 1946, Kennedy returned to Harvard University and graduated in 1948. He received his law degree from the University of Virginia and was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1951. He began his political career the following year as the manager for his brother John's successful campaign for the U.S. Senate. Prior to entering public office himself, he worked as a correspondent for The Boston Post and as an assistant counsel to the Senate committee chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy. He gained national attention as the chief counsel of the Senate Labor Rackets Committee from 1957 to 1959, where he publicly challenged Teamsters President Jimmy Hoffa over the corrupt practices of the union and authored *The Enemy Within*, a book about corruption in organized labor.

Kennedy resigned from the committee to conduct his brother's campaign in the 1960 presidential election. He was appointed United States Attorney General after the successful election and served as the closest advisor to the President from 1961 to 1963. His tenure is best known for its advocacy for the civil rights movement, the fight against organized crime and the Mafia, and involvement in U.S. foreign policy related to Cuba. After his brother's assassination, he remained in office in the Johnson Administration for several months. He left to run for the United States Senate from New York in 1964 and defeated Republican incumbent Kenneth Keating. In office, Kennedy opposed racial discrimination and U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. He was an advocate for issues related to human rights and social justice and formed relationships with Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez.

In 1968, Kennedy was a leading candidate for the Democratic nomination for the presidency; he appealed especially to poor, African American, Hispanic, Catholic and young voters. He had defeated Senator Eugene McCarthy in the California and South Dakota presidential primaries. Shortly after midnight on June 5, 1968, Kennedy was mortally wounded by Sirhan Sirhan, a 24-year-old Palestinian, because he had advocated American support for Israel following the 1967 Six-Day War. Kennedy died the following day and Sirhan was sentenced to life imprisonment. As with the assassination of his brother, Robert Kennedy's assassination has been the subject of widespread analysis and numerous conspiracy theories.

Early life

Robert Francis Kennedy was born on November 20, 1925, in Brookline, Massachusetts, the seventh child of businessman/politician Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. and philanthropist/socialite Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy. His older brothers were Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. and John F. "Jack" Kennedy, who was elected the 35th President of the United States in 1960. His younger brother was longtime United States Senator Edward M. "Ted" Kennedy. All four of his grandparents were children of Irish immigrants.

His father was a wealthy businessman and a leading Irish figure in the Democratic Party. After he stepped down as ambassador to the United Kingdom in 1940, Joe Sr. focused his attention on his oldest son, Joseph Jr., expecting that he would enter politics and be elected president. He also urged the younger children to examine and discuss current events in order to propel them to public service. After Joseph Jr. was killed during World War II, the senior Kennedy's hopes fell on his second son, John, to become president. Joseph Sr. had the money and connections to play a central role in the family's political ambitions.

The Kennedy family at Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, in 1931 with Robert on the bottom left in a jacket Kennedy's older brother John was often bedridden by illness and, as a result, became a voracious reader. Although he made little effort to get to know his younger brother during his childhood, John would take him for walks and regale him with the stories of heroes and adventures he had read. One of their favorite authors was John Buchan, who wrote *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, which influenced both Robert and John. John sometimes referred to Robert as "Black Robert" due to his prudishness and disposition.

Unlike his older brothers, Kennedy took to heart their mother Rose's agenda for everything to have "a purpose," which included visiting historic sites during family outings, visits to the church during morning walks, and games used to expand vocabulary and math skills.[10] He described his position in the family hierarchy by saying, "When you come from that far down, you have to struggle to survive." As the boys were growing up, he tried frequently to get his older brothers' attention, but was seldom successful.

In September 1927, the Kennedy family moved to Riverdale, Bronx, New York, and two years later, they relocated 5 miles (8.0 km) northeast to Bronxville, a small town in suburban Westchester County. During his childhood, Kennedy spent summers and early autumns with his family at their home (rented in 1926, then purchased in 1929) in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, and Christmas and Easter holidays at their winter retreat in Palm Beach, Florida, later purchased in 1933.

He attended Riverdale Country School—a private school for boys—from kindergarten through second grade. He then attended Bronxville Public School in lower Westchester County from third through fifth grade. He repeated the third grade.[14] A teacher at Bronxville reflected that he was "a regular boy". She added, "It seemed hard for him to finish his work sometimes. But he was only ten after all." [11][15] He then attended Riverdale Country School for the sixth grade. Kennedy would later recall that during childhood he was "going to different schools, always having to make new friends, and that I was very awkward...[a]nd I was pretty quiet most of the time. And I didn't mind being alone." [16] He developed an interest in American history. He also decorated his bedroom with pictures of U.S. presidents and filled his bookshelves with

volumes on the American Civil War. He also became an avid stamp collector and once received a handwritten letter from Franklin Roosevelt, who was also a philatelist.

In March 1938, Kennedy sailed to London with his mother and four youngest siblings to join his father who had begun serving as Ambassador to the United Kingdom. He attended the private Gibbs School for Boys in London for seventh grade. In April 1939, he gave his first public speech at the placing of a cornerstone for a youth club in England. According to embassy and newspaper reports, his statements were pencilled in his own hand and were delivered in a "calm and confident" manner. Bobby returned to the United States just before the outbreak of World War II in Europe.

One of his first relationships was with a girl named Piedy Bailey. The pair was photographed together when he walked her home after chapel on a Sunday night. Bailey was fond of him and remembered him as being "very appealing". She recalled him being funny, "separate, larky; outside the cliques; private all the time". Soon after he transferred to Milton, he pressed his father to allow him to enlist, as he wanted to catch up to his brothers who were both serving in the military. Kennedy had arrived at Milton unfamiliar with his peers and made little attempt to know the names of his classmates; he called most of the other boys "fella" instead. For this, he was nicknamed "Fella". Most of the school's students had come in eighth or ninth grade and cliques had already been formed. Despite this, his schoolmates would later say the school had no prejudice. He had an early sense of virtue; he disliked dirty jokes and bullying, once stepping in when an upperclassman tried bothering a younger student. The headmaster at Milton would later summarize that he was a "very intelligent boy, quiet and shy, but not outstanding, and he left no special mark on Milton".

This was a most inspiring book. I've been very attracted to read and learn of the Kennedy's over the last 5-10 years. They are an amazing family. I haven't always approved of their lifestyle and their relationships, but they still are an amazing family in their own way. Highly Recommend.

Socraticgadfly says

This may be the most mendacious book I've ever read. (Now, I don't read true wingnuts' political books, and I do no more than grok conspiracy theory ones, so, I've cut some avenues off. Still.)

I'm going to start with and focus on Vietnam and Dallas, given that they are the center of the Camelot mythos, which is itself bullshit, and then to Cuba.

(Some of this comes from an actually very good new bio of Bobby, Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon.)

First, Dallas. Without directly saying he believes in a conspiracy (why not, Robert, after that loony antivaxxer screed you wrote a decade ago), he clearly does. He mentions CIA connections in Dallas being plenty (there's a subset of CIA conspiracy theories around Mayor Cabell and his brother, the military-industrial complex in Dallas being plenty, the Klan and racism, and throws in mob angles, too.

Well, Junior Boy? The CIA recruited from early on heavily at Ivy League schools. You know, the ones in New England, including near Boston. Military industrial complex? Raytheon, General Electric and plenty of other folks in Boston today and their predecessors were there 50-60 years ago. Maybe the Klan didn't march in Boston, but racism? Ask Bill Russell about some of your fellow Boston Irish Catholics. Or look for an anti-Semitic bone or two in your old granddad with his "sheenies" and "kikes" comments. The mob? Boston

was and is plenty mobbed up. And with Irish, not Italians. Whitey Bulger, anybody? Or some of your grandpa's anti-Semitic comments

That's finis to that smear job on Dallas.

Nam? Bobby claims the old claim that Jack would have withdrawn by the end of 1965.

Nope. First, as Rick Perlstein, Noam Chomsky and others have noted, that claim was aspirational only. And, if necessary to get your dad elected in 1968, had Jack been alive and in office (his poll numbers were sinking throughout 1963), he would have sent new troops over.

Second, how does Jack's known infatuation with Special Forces/Green Berets square with his absolute peace-loving.

Third, he's very publicly on record as late as August 1963 in articulating his belief in the domino theory, including worrying about more dominoes falling on his watch.

Bobby said the same in 1962, telling press in Saigon:
"We are going to win in Vietnam. We will remain here until we do win."

Then, there's the even bigger lies of RFK Jr about who we were fighting.

Page 324, he claims the North Vietnamese Army had 20,000 troops in South Vietnam in 1968, supplemented by a "few thousand" Viet Cong. He uses this claim to justify how bad South Vietnam was. Reality? NVA had 130K at Tet along with 160K VC. Overall in 1968, NVA + VC had 400K troops in South Vietnam.

So, Bobby Jr has lied by a factor of 20-fold, or else allowed himself to be misinformed by a factor of 20-fold.

The reality is that the Pentagon was talking about war expansion possibilities at the time Jack was shot. How much of the details Jack knew, we don't know, but he surely knew the general outlines. When LBJ got his Tonkin Gulf green light, he had those expansion plans all at the ready.

But there's other mendacity here.

Ditto for Jack's knowledge of Operation Mongoose against Castro. He didn't know, and didn't want to know, and didn't need to know, details of every CIA plot against Fidel. But the idea? And that it was being developed. Of course he knew. And Bobby was totally hands on, but Bobby Jr. doesn't discuss this at all.

Bobby also speculated about the U.S. committing a false flag event at Guantanamo, as an excuse to invade Cuba.

Speaking of ... At the start of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Bobby was a hawk — enough of a hawk to be willing to support an invasion. Later, in his "Thirteen Days" book, he overrated McNamara (ignoring that Mac also supported invasion at the start) and totally dissed Dean Rusk to the point of mendacity at the level of his son in this book. The JFK White House tapes also reveal that Bobby was continuing to look at Mongoose stuff before and after the Missile Crisis. His actions afterward violated at least the spirit, if not the letter, of the no-invasion pledge to Khrushchev.

Bobby Jr., in cases like this, where there's too much public info that he and other Camelot mythicists can't

explain away, just try to talk around it.

Ditto on LBJ. He can't totally slime him, so he slimes Dallas and tries to claim the Vietnam War was being fought against minimal opposition, even though that, too, is publicly refutable. He undercounts LBJ's activity in the ExComm during the Missile Crisis, and also doesn't tell us that LBJ never knew about the "Trollope option," the pulling of US missiles from Turkey. Had Johnson known this, he might have been less hawkish on Nam, thinking that Jack had been that nuanced and compromising on Cuba.

And, I haven't even mentioned other things about the "peace-loving" Jack that Bobby Jr. omitted, like him lying about a missile gap he knew didn't exist.

Basically, it seems like Junior Boy's stance is that he figures he can throw whatever he wants at a wall and get away with it on Camelot true believers accepting it.

Dave Scrip says

I enjoyed this book. It was well written and honest. Despite some editing errors it was honest and cleared up some disinformation that has disparaged the legacy of JFK and RFK.

David Ward says

[American Values: Lessons I Learned From My Family](#) by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. (HarperCollins Publishers 2018) (Biography). When I picked up this autobiography, I knew nothing about Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. except who his father was. After reading this book, I now have almost no additional information about the author. The only salient facts I picked up about Bobby Kennedy, Jr. are that (1) he was one of eleven children of his parents' marriage; (2) he was a budding naturalist as a child who kept wild animals as pets; (3) he is a master falconer; and (4) he and his mother were in a state of open warfare when he was growing up. In fact, he left the family home as a young teen when his interpersonal conflicts with his mother Ethel Skakel Kennedy became so tumultuous that he moved out of the family house. Strangely, sadly, and unsatisfyingly, the author provides no real explanation for these conflicts.

This book actually has little to tell about Bobby, Jr. or even about his father. For some strange reason, the book devolves into a restatement and summary of Jack Kennedy's policies and challenges as President of the United States. The greatest portion of this book is about Uncle Jack. There's nothing wrong with that except for the fact that I had selected a book about a different Kennedy; if I had sought a book about Uncle Jack, I'm certain that there are more qualified and more authoritative volumes available than this one.

At the end of the day, this one left me disappointed. My rating: 6/10, finished 7/6/18.

Roger Smitter says

This is a very engaging bio about the Kennedy family, even the grand-father and his lack of emotion with the children. The Kennedy women get a lot of attention — at last. The retelling of the days of in the White House gives us a boost in how we think about our leaders. The chapter on the JFK funeral is exceptional for details and emotion.

My generation will like the early parts of the parts of the book. Other pieces of the book are not as good. But in all, a good read.

J R says

This should be required reading for all young students and adults. The world would be a much better place if the Kennedy's had not been assassinated.

Thanks RFK Jr for sharing the Kennedy family history.

Gwen Mayer says

really liked this book!
