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## Where the Myths Began

Hollywood player, Wall Street buccaneer, New Deal miracle-worker, father of a president: Joseph P. Kennedy was one of the great 20th-century American characters.

By **Edward Kosner**  
Nov. 16, 2012 5:16 pm ET

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It sometimes seems that the bookshelves are stacked against Joseph P. Kennedy, the notorious sire of the political clan. Over the years, as David Nasaw writes, he has been "vilified and dismissed as an appeaser, an anti-Semite, a Nazi sympathizer, an unprincipled womanizer, a treacherous and vengeful scoundrel who made millions as a bootlegger and Wall Street swindler, then used those millions to steal elections for his son."

But was he actually a good man, after all?

In modern memory, Joe Kennedy is an old ruin bound to a wheelchair, eyes darting with anger and frustration, whimpering in anguish after being told of the assassination of his son John. But in his Jazz Age and Depression heyday, he was a wonder boy—Hollywood savior, Wall Street buccaneer, miracle worker for the New Deal, ambassador to wartime London—one of the great characters of 20th-century America.

### THE PATRIARCH

By **David Nasaw**  
The Penguin Press, 868 pages, \$40



Sire and Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy at his home in London, in March 1938, with his wife Rose (to his left) and children Kathleen, Edward, Patricia, Jean and Robert.

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In his panoramic book, "The Patriarch," Mr. Nasaw, the admired biographer of Andrew Carnegie and William Randolph Hearst, aims to take the portrait of Dorian Gray out of the closet and paint a more nuanced new one. He spent six years poring over letters, transcripts, memos, diaries, clippings and more, many unearthed for the first time. Scrutinizing everything, he writes, he discarded any yarn, claim, anecdote or factoid that he couldn't substantiate. He embarked on the project at the behest of the Kennedys, and they, he attests, only helped. It's unclear whether the family read the manuscript, but, he says, they never tried "to censor" it.

They must have been tempted. Never before has Joseph P. Kennedy's conduct been documented in such damning detail, and never before has the verdict on his character been rendered so persuasively. If you think of him as essentially a rogue, you will find ample evidence here. The parallel case Mr. Nasaw makes for Kennedy as an insatiably striving East Boston Roman Catholic outsider trying to crash the inner rings of the WASP establishment is equally persuasive, but no excuse for his wretched excesses.

Kennedy had his virtues: He could outwork anybody and had an almost mystical ability to make money out of anything he put his disciplined mind to. He was, to use an antiquated phrase, a man's man—fiercely loyal to his friends, many of whom spent more time with him than did his wife, Rose. And he was a devoted parent to his nine children and score of grandchildren, writing them long, loving, hortatory letters, supervising their educations, getting them plum jobs, dropping everything to rush to their sickbeds, endowing them with trust funds and bankrolling their political campaigns. Still, he also orchestrated a devastating lobotomy on his disabled daughter, Rosemary, then expelled her from his life.

The Kennedy story is, of course, a resonant American family epic. Joe Kennedy's grandfather, a barrelmaker named Patrick, came to Boston from Dunganstown, Ireland, in the late 1840s. Within two generations, young Joe was ensconced at Boston Latin School, the best in the country, en route to Harvard, although dismal grades on the Harvard entrance exam almost sank him. In Cambridge, he majored in first base, made a lifelong friend of a Jewish classmate, Arthur Goldsmith, and graduated to find the proper Bostonian banks closed to an Irish Catholic. Instead, he signed on as a state bank examiner and, at 25, used his father's connections to become the youngest bank president in the state. The next year, he married Rose Fitzgerald, the demure daughter of boisterous ex-mayor Honey Fitz, and he was launched.

Over the next decade, he built his first fortune. He dodged service in World War I by taking a key job at a shipyard, where he contracted out the food business to his own firm—the first example in a lifetime of not-strictly-kosher self-dealing. Back in banking and finance, he made enough money to swap his Ford for a Rolls-Royce. (Despite the legends, Mr. Nasaw reports that there is no evidence of Kennedy dealing in bootlegged liquor, except once, at his 10th Harvard reunion.) He nibbled at the edges of the movie business, then pounced.

Kennedy's gaudy Hollywood adventures—the conquest and near-bankrupting of Gloria Swanson, the succession of Hollywood studios he ran openly or covertly, his crusade to be the Christian savior of the business from the Jewish ex-furriers and garmentos whose racy pictures inflamed the censors—were recounted three years ago in Cari Beauchamp's "Joseph P. Kennedy Presents." Mr. Nasaw adds fresh detail to the tale, but tiptoes around some of the gamier scenes.

He quotes extensively from Swanson's memoirs and even her scribbled notes to her ghostwriter but oddly underplays the big sex scene. Swanson wrote that Kennedy sent her husband out deep-sea fishing, then arrived at her bedroom moaning, "No longer, no longer! Now!" and ravished her. Primly, Mr. Nasaw records only that Swanson would later "claim" Kennedy had sex with her that day for the first time. The author also writes off Kennedy's crusade to wrest control of the studios from their Jewish moguls—a campaign of nativist slogans ("American films for Americans") and anti-Semitic innuendoes—simply as "branding" for Kennedy's cause.

For all the tumult he stirred, Kennedy spent barely three years in Hollywood. In 1928, while he was vacationing in Deauville, France, the studios and theater chains he ran were sold out from under him by his backers to David Sarnoff, who amalgamated them in RKO. Kennedy laughed all the way to the bank, netting the equivalent of \$200 million today.

Always a financial bear, Kennedy flourished during the Depression, doubling his fortune between 1931 and 1932. At first, President-elect Franklin Roosevelt snubbed him, but Kennedy wormed his way into FDR's tepid favor by cultivating Roosevelt's son Jimmy. Kennedy loved to excoriate the president behind his back, then suck up to him with fawning letters and memos. Finally, in 1934, Roosevelt named him to run the new Securities and Exchange Commission, reasoning that a shark like Kennedy knew all of Wall Street's tricks.

Indeed he did. Working so slavishly that he sometimes slept in the office, Kennedy did a spectacular job at the SEC but, characteristically, quit after only 15 months. After helping FDR win a second term in 1936, he returned to Washington to resurrect the American shipping industry so that trade could survive the war that was threatening to engulf Europe and Asia. The SEC and the Maritime Commission jobs were the zenith of his career in government. Ignominy was to follow.

In a world facing war, Kennedy's problem was that he was an America First isolationist by nature and an appeaser by strategic conviction. He believed his friend Charles Lindbergh's assessment that Hitler's air force would obliterate the British and was terrified that the United States would be drawn into the war to save them. He idolized Neville Chamberlain and couldn't get enough of Lady Astor and her Cliveden set of Nazi sympathizers, who thought the pushy German Jews had brought retribution on themselves. "Kennedy is too dangerous to have around here," FDR concluded—and sent him to London as U.S. ambassador, perhaps as a token of his promise that he would never take America to war in Europe.

Kennedy's shambolic 2½ years at the Court of St. James's were a fiasco. After meeting with Kennedy, the German ambassador to London cable Berlin: "He understood our Jewish policy completely." On the eve of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, he predicted that Hitler was bluffing. He argued that the British and Americans should essentially jolly Hitler into letting the Jews escape Germany with the clothes on their backs. He was keen on resettling these prospective refugees in Kenya or perhaps South America.

It got worse. Kennedy, Mr. Nasaw writes, "showered Washington regularly now with Cassandra-like predictions of the end of civilization, capitalism and representative government in Europe." He argued that "there was no way to save the British from defeat—and it might not be worth trying to do so." During the Blitz, he told a friend: "I bet you . . . Hitler will be in Buckingham Palace in two weeks."

On his return to the United States, Mr. Nasaw writes, Kennedy found a ready scapegoat for his downfall: "The Jews opposed him and orchestrated the attacks on him, he convinced himself, because he was committed to finding a way to live at peace with Hitler, and they were committed to going to war." But Kennedy never needed a rationale for his anti-Semitism—it was encoded in his psyche. He always had Jewish friends, especially "topside Jews" like Bernard Baruch, Felix Frankfurter and Irving Berlin, but he still couldn't restrain himself.

His philandering was equally unappetizing. "He enjoyed the company of other women," Mr. Nasaw writes, "hundreds of them over his lifetime: actresses, waitresses, secretaries, stenographers, models, stewardesses, and others." He never considered his straying incompatible with his loving marriage to Rose, who took endless vacations and relentlessly ignored his infidelities, or with his standing as a devout Catholic and Vatican insider. "Joe believes you can wipe the slate clean just by going to confession," marveled Gloria Swanson.

Kennedy never mellowed. When FDR died, he proclaimed it "a great thing for the country." As the Cold War intensified, he argued for appeasing Stalin and lectured Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower. His favorite Americans were the Hoovers, Herbert and J. Edgar, and Joe McCarthy. He devoted his last active years to husbanding his fortune and making his oldest surviving son, the sickly Jack, president of the United States.

He masterminded and subsidized JFK's campaigns, starting with his race for Congress in 1946. The paternal zeal and bankroll came at a price: all sorts of bad advice on what offices to seek and what positions to take. Devoted as he was to his father, Jack Kennedy took the money and then ran things his own way—all the way to the White House.

Those who detest Joseph P. Kennedy and believe in divine retribution might consider the last stage of his life a fitting coda. After playing golf on Dec. 19, 1961—11 months into his son's only term in the White House—Kennedy was felled by a stroke that left him twisted and speechless for the nearly nine years he had left. He outlived four of his children: Joe Jr., who was incinerated over Europe during the war; daughter Kathleen (known as Kick), who died in a plane crash; John and Robert, assassinated. He spent his final days watching television from his wheelchair, a husk occasionally erupting in a tortured cry, "No, no, no!"

—*Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.*

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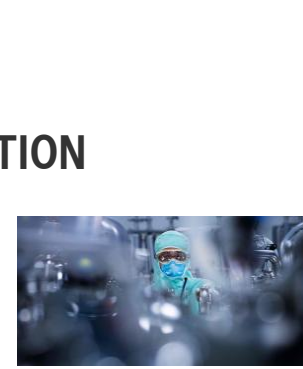
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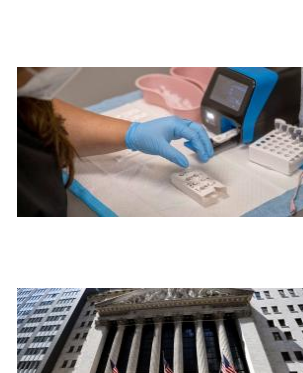
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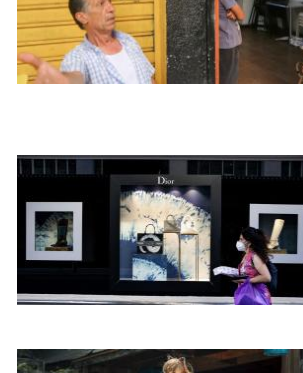
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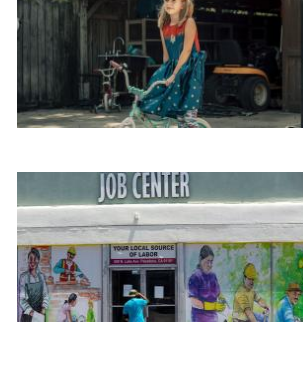
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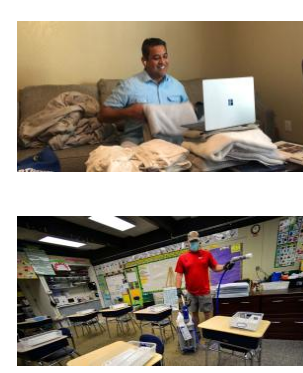
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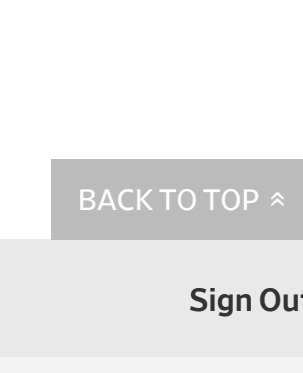
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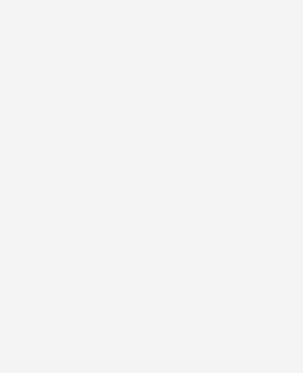
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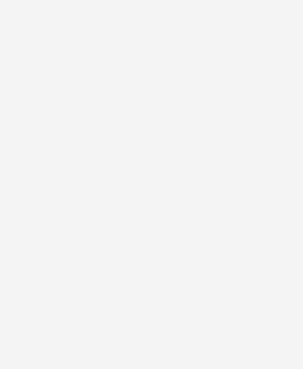
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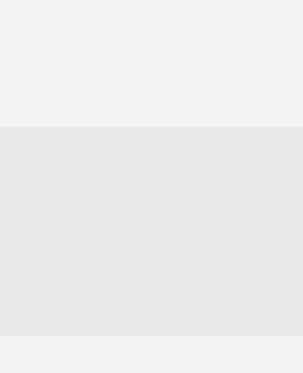
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