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# Principalities & Powers

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by Samuel Francis

## John-John Is My Co-Pilot

Aside from the non-resignation and non-ruin of President Clinton and the non-campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, the biggest non-event of 1999 was undoubtedly the non-survival last summer of John F. Kennedy, Jr., who, true to the traditions of his family, managed to seize international headlines when his own recklessness and incompetence led to disaster—this time not only for other people, which historically has been the major accomplishment of the Kennedy clan, but also for himself. His death was indeed a sad occasion. Gifted with fame, looks, and legend, if not with any discernible talent, John-John was best known to the American public as the small boy who was made to salute his father's funeral cortege on that bare and bitter day in 1963. But that, indeed, was the extent of the young man's achievement. Being dubbed "The Sexiest Man Alive" by *People* magazine and founding a frothy gossip sheet for fashionable Manhattan coffee tables would, for any serious person, be not so much achievements as embarrassments; but for John-John, they were the pinnacles of his grown-up vocation. His death was sad because he seems to have been entirely harmless, much like any other victim of a plane accident, but not because of any significant future that his mind or character had promised.

National mourning of the death of an attractive celebrity who happened to be the son of a former president would have been entirely appropriate, but the propaganda organs of the Ruling Class were unable to leave it at that. From the moment of John-John's disappearance off the Massachusetts coast, the establishment press set off such a howl of grief and so protracted a yelp of pain that one would have thought that Pearl Harbor, the Alamo, and the Holocaust Memorial Museum had all suddenly been vaporized in a nuclear attack by white supremacists from Idaho. The *Washington Post* ran a banner headline about Kennedy's plane crash the day after it happened, and staff writer Michael Grunwald set the tone and pace

of what would quickly become a national mania. "John F. Kennedy, Jr., the dashing celebrity who represents the best-known link to his father's Camelot era, is missing at sea," Mr. Grunwald moaned in what passes at the *Post* for a news story, and Kennedy's apparent death was "another startling blow for the star-crossed family that has become America's version of political royalty."

And so it went in newspapers and on news shows all over the world for a solid week and more. Not since the murder of Gianni Versace had a death in the United States brought so much lachrymose foam to the jowls of the chattering class, and not since the death of Princess Diana in Paris had the mob that pays attention to the mewlings of the chattering class had a chance to wallow and cavort in so much manufactured grief. That the mass mourning for John-John was manufactured is incontestable. For all his cosmetic prettiness and personal harmlessness, the young Kennedy was simply not much of an object of popular affection or even interest. Spontaneous mass grief for the deaths of Elvis and Jimmy Stewart, even of Diana herself, makes sense. For John-John, it just doesn't.

There were many reasons why the death of yet another Kennedy represented a swell opportunity to manufacture yet another mythical hero, not the least being the sheer volume of sales that the fabrication engendered. But there was also a political purpose, which was to formulate yet again the mythology of Camelot as the incarnation of what America is supposed to be but has never been able to become because the vast right-wing conspiracy of assassins that murdered John and Bobby keeps shooting anyone who might make it reality. The latest death of a Kennedy was thus the occasion not only for inventing another hero as fake as the one that crawled out of PT-109 during World War II but also for pouring the old myth into a new bottle from which the mass mind of the New America will be able to swig its fill of cultural and political fantasy.

One of the more interesting, if rather bizarre, reformulations of the Kennedy legend popped up in a long essay on "The Kennedy Myths" by Norman Pod-

horetz in the *Wall Street Journal* of July 29. Mr. Podhoretz, the retired editor of *Commentary* magazine, one of the founders and chief articulators of "neo-conservatism," and now in his old age the *paterfamilias* of a vast spawn of talentless dimwits even less gifted than the Kennedy family, showed little interest in the death of young Mr. Kennedy but a good deal in the image of his father and his father's political legacy. As is not uncommon with neoconservatives of any generation, Mr. Podhoretz mainly managed to distort and miss the real point of that legacy, though not so much from thick-headedness, perhaps, as from a desire to repackage the Kennedy legend in a way that will be useful to neoconservative political purposes.

It was the main burden of Mr. Podhoretz's argument to claim that, while John Kennedy and his politics seemed to Mr. Podhoretz in his radical phase during the early 1960's to be a betrayal of, and an obstacle to, serious social and political change, they seem now, in the maturity of Mr. Podhoretz's wisdom as a neoconservative sage, to be not especially liberal at all. "Indeed," Mr. Podhoretz wrote, "shocking as it may sound on first hearing, the policies advocated by John F. Kennedy made him more a precursor of Ronald Reagan than of his two younger brothers"—i.e., the brutal and swaggering Bobby and the oafish Ted.

It is indeed shocking at first hearing, but Mr. Podhoretz makes a reasonably good case for this claim. Like Reagan, Kennedy campaigned in 1960 on promises of a tax cut, an arms build-up, and a committed antagonism to communism. In Mr. Podhoretz's view, it was not John Sr. who sired the leftism that now struts up and down the cultural and political power centers of the country but his brothers:

So little did Ted's views have in common with those of JFK that it was as though Sir Lancelot had returned from his quest for the Holy Grail and revealed that he had renounced Christianity and become a pagan.

But the resemblance between Ken-

nedy and Reagan is largely superficial, due in part to the fact that most political figures since Kennedy, whatever their professed beliefs and parties, have been influenced by his political style and strategy and in part to the fact that most politicians who got elected president during the Cold War generally won by campaigning on much the same platform—that they would cut taxes, maintain military power and security, and smack down the Russkies if they stepped out of line.

Moreover, Mr. Podhoretz's claim that the Kennedy myth "wildly exaggerated the liberalism of its leader" is perhaps intended to reformulate the image of Kennedy himself as an icon useful for neoconservatives—more useful than Reagan, who is today largely forgotten outside the conservative cheerleader squad. But whatever Mr. Podhoretz's purpose is making this claim, he is simply wrong, and wrong in a way that suggests that he has totally failed to understand some of the major contours of American political culture today and how John Kennedy helped shape them.

It's true the Kennedy administration accomplished little in the way of legislation, federal programs, or foreign policy achievements and that most of what was accomplished politically in the early 1960's was the work of the Johnson administration after Kennedy's death. In that sense, you can't blame the liberalism of the Great Society on Kennedy, though that's a bit like saying you can't blame Lenin for the crimes of Stalin. Lenin may not have committed the same crimes, but he had no objection to doing so and would have done so had he felt the inclination or possessed the power. There is virtually nothing the Johnson administration ever did in domestic or foreign policy that John Kennedy would not have wanted to claim for his own administration.

But the deeper sense in which Mr. Podhoretz is wrong is that he misses the major impact that Kennedy had. If he accomplished nothing else, John Kennedy—or at least the spin artists, cosmeticians, hairstylists, speechwriters, ghostwriters, and just plain con men whom the Kennedys have always employed—effected a profound and enduring change in the popular culture of American politics. He did so in part by his (so I'm told) authentically charming personality and wit, in part by the social and intellectual sophistication he affected, and in part by the informality he art-

fully synthesized with the silly and ponderous sonorities that he habitually unboomed in his oratory. The change Kennedy effected was the popularization of utopianism as a serious premise of American politics, and the carefully crafted Superman image of war hero, athlete, patrician, historian, intellectual, statesman, Catholic, and family man that he projected was designed to legitimize and normalize the utopianism he preached. The image suggested that the utopia he demanded and into which he sought to dragoon the nation was neither unattractive (JFK's personal charm) nor unpatriotic (war hero) nor unmanly (athlete) nor achieved at the expense of American institutions (family and faith) nor unlettered (intellectual, historian, Harvard graduate) nor low-class (patrician) but rather one fully in harness with American tradition, aspirations, and good taste. Kennedy, in short, manipulated the imagery of conservatism to legitimize utopianism. That is why the Arthurian Camelot, a manly and martial utopia, was such an appropriate metaphor for the utopian vision that Kennedy and his crew wanted to project.

It is precisely because he was successful in doing so that the virus of utopianism soon came to shape the Great Society as well as the New Left (to whom Kennedy remained a martyr) and has now infected the bloodstream of American political culture to the point that it is all but impossible for any American politician to succeed unless he endorses it. Lyndon Johnson's drippy and pedestrian political rhetoric simply took for granted the legitimacy and desirability of the grand utopian designs that Kennedy had unleashed. Reagan himself regurgitated much the same vision in his rhetorical indulgences of the "City on a Hill," an image of millennialist utopianism directly derived from a gnostic New England Puritanism, and the neoconservatism that has by now all but displaced the pre-Kennedy conservatism of Robert Taft, Joe McCarthy, and the young Barry Goldwater has also absorbed it to the degree that most of its younger exponents are not even aware that utopianism and conservatism are not compatible. Today, all politicians are supposed to see "visions," a term unmistakably connected to utopianism, and to intone neat slogans that encapsulate those visions. One of the few American politicians who did not seem to share this common utopian orthodoxy was George Bush, Sr., whose dis-

taste for the "vision thing" betrayed his own, quite healthy view of politics as mere administration. Unfortunately, it was a view that Mr. Bush more likely acquired through his cultural illiteracy and dull sensibilities rather than any serious reflection on the nature of political man and the constraints of the human condition.

Whatever Mr. Podhoretz's purposes in trying to assimilate Reagan to Kennedy (much as Kennedy sought to assimilate his own utopianism to the imagery of conservatism and tradition), they can achieve no good result. Most of what is wrong with American politics today derives precisely from the monopolization of political dialogue by one species of utopianism or another, and all derive directly and most immediately from John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's utopianism was equivalent to a refusal to govern the nation in accordance with the rules and limits of conventional politics and is closely related to his whole family's refusal to govern themselves or others by the same rules and limits that constrain everyone else—a refusal that may help explain, more than any conspiracy theory, why so many Kennedys get shot or drive off bridges or kill themselves and their wives by flying planes they are not qualified to fly in conditions even experienced pilots would refuse to fly in.

Their utopianism, in other words, derives from the same impulse that generates the delusion that, because they are Kennedys, they can do whatever they please, and whatever costs accumulate can always be paid by somebody else. As long as the Kennedys confine the consequences of their impulses to themselves and their families, no great harm is done beyond what is visited upon those incautious enough to risk their own lives by associating with them, but their injection of the utopian virus into the assumptions and habits of American political culture has only contributed to the corruption of the nation's politics and rendered its citizens more vulnerable to the fraudulence and dangers that invariably accompany the enthronement of political fantasy. Thanks largely to them and the propaganda organs that sustain their false legend, the entire nation is now permanently embarked on a flight into a utopian haze no less impenetrable than the one John-John encountered last summer, guided by pilots no more competent than he was and no less indifferent to the dangers they invite.

## Letter From the Northwoods

by JoAn Melchild

### Just East of the Indian's Nose



Eleven years ago, I moved to Northwest Wisconsin, a region called the Wisconsin Indianhead because it is shaped like the profile of an Indian chief. I live just east of the nose.

After a career of publishing magazines and editing newspapers in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, I decided to take a retirement job editing a newspaper in a small Wisconsin town of fewer than 2,000 people. How pleasant it would be to leave the hustle, bustle, and high crime of the city! No more daily struggles with traffic. A place where I could retire in the quiet beauty of rolling woods and lakes. I even rented a cabin near a lovely little lake eight miles from town, where my young collie and I could commune with nature.

But it didn't take long to discover that Northwest Wisconsin was a foreign country, totally unlike anyplace I had been before. And my idyllic surroundings soon revealed some problems. There were wood ticks, not the regular kind, but tiny little deer ticks that passed on Lyme disease if you weren't vigilant in getting them off. The collie got Lyme disease and could barely walk until I took him to a vet for treatment. The dog also tangled with a porcupine and got quills in his nose, got sprayed by a skunk, and raccoons kept swiping his dog food after carefully washing each piece in his water dish. A sturdy, determined, and large family of mice who had been making the cabin their home for a couple of years defied every attempt to get rid of them. A gentle doe and her two fawns came to visit frequently.

The next thing I discovered was that editing a newspaper in a highly volatile community wasn't exactly a piece of cake. If I printed anything that people disagreed with, I received an angry phone call. Some letters to the editor would have been the basis for a libel suit

if I had printed them, and when I didn't print them, I received more angry phone calls. I had half of the town mad at me one week and the other half the next. Fortunately, the previous owner of the paper, who had been the editor for many years, stopped by daily for coffee and helped me avoid many pitfalls. I also discovered I did not have a nine to five job. I started receiving calls at my residence as early as 7:00 A.M. on Sunday.

Many people assume that if you are here, you have always been here, and therefore you don't need addresses or directions—other than “turn where the old cheese factory used to be, you can't miss it.” For most of its lengthy lifetime, the paper had run ads without addresses, and I met some resistance from the staff when I insisted on an address for each ad. After all, I explained, some dumb out-of-towner like myself might want to find the business, and the area could use the tourism dollars.

My first deer-hunting season was memorable. Close-shaven men suddenly turned into bearded characters sporting flannel shirts and boots. As I was living in a densely wooded area, I was warned by the natives to wear orange and tie an orange scarf around my collie's neck. Or, better yet, stay indoors. When the season started, I felt like I was in a war zone. Bearded men wearing camouflage suits and blaze orange hats and carrying guns passed through my yard. Guns went off in the distance, and a few were entirely too close. I wore a bright orange sweatshirt to travel the 20 feet from the cabin to the garage. The dog was scared to death. Hunters who had shot their deer draped the animal on the fender or put it in the back of the pickup truck and stopped by a saloon in town to do a little celebrating and show off their trophy.

Then winter settled upon the Northwoods. I had only moved 90 miles north-east of the Twin Cities, but that short distance added two months to winter. It was snowing by the end of September, and the ice was still on the lakes at the first of May. The first day that the temperature was way below zero, the bathtub in my rented cabin spouted a gusher of ice and dead leaves from the drain. When I tried to call the owners, their son told me they were on a sailboat trip off the southern coast of Florida. It seems the bathtub and laundry tubs drained through a pipe onto

the ground alongside the cabin. A little heat tape fixed the situation. The electric heat was a bit iffy, too, and I often came home to a very cold house. I spent a lot of that first winter on the couch covered with a heavy quilt. Sweatsuits, long underwear, wool socks, and a pair of Alaskan reindeer slippers were standard at-home apparel.

But native northwestern Wisconsinites who are snowmobilers love the snow. Snowmobile trails, all carefully groomed and marked with miniature highway signs, crisscross the area and connect with other trails in northern Wisconsin. One hearty group of men made an annual 200-mile snowmobile trip to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The restaurants and bars near the snowmobile trails do a land-office business during the snowmobile season. Rural dances bring the snowmobilers out, and I have watched them dancing the polka in their snowmobile boots, their snowmobile suits unzipped to the waist to allow ventilation, their empty sleeves twirling to the music.

When the ice thickens, ice-fishing shacks appear on the numerous lakes in the Wisconsin Indianhead region. A large lake near where I live hosts the Wisconsin state ice-fishing tournament, which attracts 1,200 fishermen. Each person is allowed to drill three holes in the ice; they may bring sleds and portable icehouses as well as their vehicles. A beer garden, weighing station, and bratwurst stand are also set up on the ice. I was extremely nervous that first winter and wouldn't drive my car out on the ice. I really expected to see the entire entourage sink into 90 feet of water, but it hasn't happened yet.

I lived through that first winter, but the cabin was sold in the spring, so I bought a 100-year-old house in town and rehabbed it. Then the newspaper was sold, so I found other work, but I stayed in Northwest Wisconsin. There are too many things going on that I would miss. There are still bears up here, and while I have only seen one (from the safety of my car), I had empathy for the man in Cameron, Wisconsin, who let his poodle out early in the morning and had a bear grab the dog from the deck. The owner tried to defend the poodle but got mauled himself. The bear took the poodle into the woods, and the dog hasn't been seen since. Another man had his