

History Extension Essay

Historians shed light on the past but that light can only reveal a partial, dimly-lit view

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To what extent do the contexts of historians shape historical debate? In your answer, make close reference to at least ONE area of debate from your chosen case study

Identify your case study at the beginning of your answer

Historians illuminate events of the past in antithetical lights due to the inherent bias and contextual periods from which they derive, thus they can only provide a partial, interpretative view of the past. President John F. Kennedy is a contentious historical figure, and the nature of his presidency is depicted in divergent lights in historiographical works over the past few decades. Such issues include the myths surrounding Kennedy as a man, his public and private perceptions and his involvement in the Cuban missile crisis, all of which have been discussed by historians. As Bickerton argues, historians, even if they strive for objectivity will ultimately be influenced by their context and thus can only, “reveal a partial dimly-lit view” of JFK as a historical figure due to the social, political contexts from which they originate. This is evidenced by the differing depiction of John F Kennedy by the three main historical schools - the Camelot, revisionist and post revisionists.

The contextual period of the Camelot School, of which historians Theodore Sorenson and Arthur Schlesinger are part of, was instrumental in painting JFK in a highly positive light. Their context is imperative as both Schlesinger and Sorenson constructed their histories only two years after the assassination of JFK, therefore their works are largely considered to be hagiography's - the biography of a martyr in addition to conveying the positive public sentiment at the time. These historians, in addition to being influenced by their historical context, are only able to provide a ‘partial, dimly-lit view’ due to their close personal relationships with the president and emotional attachment. Sorenson was a major speechwriter Kennedy staffer whom was a close friend of JFK, writing “the memoir that Kennedy never wrote”, whilst Schlesinger as close personal friend of JFK, perpetuated the Camelot myth portraying him as glamorous and reforming president who, “gave his country back to its best self” and ‘transformed the American spirit’ In order to perpetuate the Camelot myth, they overlooked Kennedy’s extramarital affairs and infidelity in favour of portraying him as a devoted family man who spend lots of time with his wife and children. They also accentuated his past as a WWII hero, neglecting his deteriorating state of his health, capitalising on his back problems to promote the image of a wartime hero with ‘old football injuries’ rather than more significant health issues and drug reliance as a result of Addison’s disease. Evidently their manipulation of information that would undermine the his image as the ideal American man and thus their context directly impacted on their historiography. Whilst these historians attempted to ‘shed light on the past’, their direct involvement in the Kennedy administration subsequently neglected and manipulated information that would undermine the his image as the ideal American man and thus, like Bickerton suggests ‘only reveal a partial, dimly-lit view’ of JFK as a historical figure.

Additionally, fighter for civil rights at home and freedom from communism, especially

The revisionist school of historians, of Richard Reeves sought to evaluate the myth created by the Camelot historians constructing a more realistic interpretation with Reeves arguing that his purpose was to “tackle the accepted interpretations of JFK”. According to Robert Dallek, Reeve’s portrait of Kennedy within *The Life of John F Kennedy* (1991) is a “compulsive womaniser, a liar, a bully and amphetamine addict - a ruthless, lazy corrupt, self-indulgent hypocrite”. Reeve’s suggested that perpetuation of Kennedy as a humble family man was untrue and rather he was, “hostile... towards marriage and the family. Women were at best sex objects.” Reeves argues that JFK “reckless liaisons with women and mobsters were irresponsible, dangerous and demeaning” putting national security at risk, “being reckless in the extreme” and “demeaned the nations highest office”.

This literature shifted away from the projection of President Kennedy as a flawless hero and expanded to accommodate criticisms.

Graham Allison in his 1971 book *Essence of Decision*, suggested that the President overreacted to a rational strategic endeavour

However, despite their well-intentioned motives – their socio political context ultimately distorted their representation. Hersch and Reeves wrote 30 years after the assassination of JFK, providing a climate for revisionist views of JFK's life to surface. This coupled with a significant loss of confidence in public office, post Reagan, Watergate and the Cold War resulted in a more politically cynical audience. Reeves and Hersch challenged this with Reeves arguing “evidence critical to Kennedy was either manipulated or ignored”. Instead Reeves applied a Rankean approach to his sources and evidence. Due to the negative sentiment regarding political leaders at the time, with most seeing them as amoral and corrupt, the revisionist school sought to question JFK's morality. Reeves interpretation is highly anachronistic, questioning his morality contriving an image of JFK as “being reckless, vain, selfish and lecherous”. Thus Reeve's purpose to uncover the real man and too challenge the Camelot myth misguided his methodology, evidenced in his book ‘A Lidfe of John F. Kennedy in which he states, “The real Kennedy – as opposed to the celebrated hero espoused by the Kennedy family, the media and the Camelot school –lacked greatness in large part because he lacked the qualities inherent in good character”.

POST- REVISIONIST HISTORIANS (DALLEK)

The biggest developments regarding the debate over the presidency of JFK involves the post revisionist historians, Dallek and Freedman. Like earlier historians, the revisionist school was also influenced by their socio-political context, however, not to the same extent providing a much more balanced and scholarly account. Freedman contributes a useful non-patriotic view, being Professor of War studies at Kings College London, being “more concerned with explanation than judgement”. Furthermore, Freedman is acutely aware of his position as the historian, writing with the benefit of hindsight, all of which “makes it much easier for an historian to develop interpretations based on evidence rather than speculation” being acutely aware of the influences of context on historians, the dangers and benefits of hindsight, understanding that any discussion of time also involves a need to understand and set the “intellectual as well as political context at the time”. Dallek similarly constructs a more balanced and scholarly study of the Kennedy Presidency, being almost Neo Camelot in his representation. Dallek argues that this is the most authoritative discussion to date on Kennedy, the man and his political career”. Dallek evaluates Kennedy based on his character, particularly his public and private life, whereas Freedman is more concerned with his actions during the Cuban Missile crisis.

Dallek is critical of Reeves who argues that his historical writings paint a portrait of Kennedy that “too fixed on Kennedy's failings to give us the full man”.

Freedman debates whether America's success during the Cold War, with “catastrophe was avoided”, particularly in Cuba was down to either “good luck or good management”. Freedman argues that Kennedy's aim was to “consolidate a peaceful coexistence” rather than win a military engagement concluding “Kennedy's achievement was that he could be remembered for crises rather than hot wars, and that he left the cold war in a far less dangerous state than he found it”. Freedman sought to “show how the crises would have appeared to Kennedy at the time”, taking into account his own retrospective context and the historical and political context of the Cuban Missile crisis. Freedman concludes that Kennedy was lucky in that he presided over a turning point in the cold war that how the missile crisis played out was not so much to do with American policy, rather that the Soviet challenge simply “ran out of steam”. However he still gives Kennedy full credit for demonstrating in words and deeds that the superpowers had to cooperate to prevent a nuclear catastrophe.

Dallek's perspective on the presidency of JFK writing in 2002 also has the advantage of the release of previously classified documents, arguing that his extensive use of sources enabled him to “penetrate the veneer of glamour and charm and reconstruct the real man as close to it as possible”. Dallek was given unique access to the Kennedy Library, including his medical files as well as soviet archives, oval office tapers and entire oral histories. However Dallek only considered the sources, not the context in which they were written, therefore his analysis should still be considered discerningly and not relied upon for a complete picture of JFK. Dallek

does visit the accusations of JFK's extra marital affairs effecting his presidency, portraying him as a flawed but never the less, brilliant political leader.

The debate surrounding the Presidency of John F. Kennedy has been significantly influenced by the context of the Camelot, Revisionist and Post Revisionist historians. The Camelot school, Sorenson and Schlesinger writing soon after JFK's assassination presented a highly positivist image of JFK due to the public sentiment of the time and asa result of their personal involvement in the presidency. Conversely, Revisionist historians Hersch and Reeves presented a highly negative view of JFK questioning his character and morality, consistent with the lack of support for public office during the 1970 's. However, the post revisionist school of Freedman and Dallek provide a much more balanced approach which not only examines sources but seeks to understanding the changing nature of events with their works coinciding with postmodernism rising to prominence. This is consistent with Russel's argument that history is "inevitably distinctive, individual, political and personal", illustrating how the historian can never be fully divorced from the socio-political or personal context.

