America's Newest Game

"LET'S TEAR DOWN JACKIE KENNEDY!"

By Leslie Valentine

America's newest game sensation is played wherever people gather—in living rooms and restaurants, trains and buses, in offices and at cocktail parties. Husbands and wives play it with (and against) each other, as do perfect strangers. Like Scrabble or Jotto or Geography or Ghost, it is a word game. Unlike these relatively sedate diversions, it is vituperative and nasty. Its main action (and indeed its main satisfaction) consists of verbally tearing down (or up) a woman well known to all the players. Only a short time ago this woman could do no wrong; she was universally acknowledged to be the most revered, admired, and respected woman in the world. Her name, of course, is Jacqueline Kennedy.

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Three years ago the game (called Slap-Jackie by aficionados) would have been not only unplayable but unthinkable. It would not have been possible in 1964 or 1965 or even in the first half of 1966 for a newspaper to print (as a Florida newspaper did) a headline blaring "MRS. KENNEDY'S BEING IMPERIOUS AGAIN!" Or for a reader to write to a columnist, "How much were you paid by the Kennedys to write that nauseating, sloppy article praising Jacqueline Kennedy as if she were a queen?" Yet in 1967 such a letter was not only written but was published in a widely read daily.

No, for three years we were all playing a different kind of Jackie game—call it Pedestaling or Deification. Fresh in our minds was the picture of Jackie as the black-veiled, tragic widow, and it was tantamount to blasphemy to hint that she was anything less than a goddess. To criticize her openly was to invite expulsion not only from the game but from polite society, which was busy playing the Pedestal game with vigor, praising, exalting, and magnifying Jackie's virtues. Even the usually cynical press joined in. Picture editors refused to publish unflattering photographs of the goddess. Columnists formerly known for their acidity vied to see which of them could assume the most abject posture of worship. The people of

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New York (the city to which Jackie moved early in 1964 to escape the masses of faithful who were making pilgrimages to her Washington, D.C., home) swore a blood oath to respect her desire for privacy.

Pedestaling, however, was doomed. Though it had its satisfaction (we glowed in the reflected glory of international acclaim for our own homebred heroine), it can now be seen that its real function was to serve as a necessary prelude to Slap-Jackie. *Newsweek* columnist Kenneth Crawford made this point recently when he wrote, "Anyone who commands our intense and more or less unanimous approval at one time is foredoomed to equally intense disapproval, if not vilification, at another." Undoubtedly, the tremendous success of Slap-Jackie, as compared to previous games of the genre, like Slap-Ingrid (Bergman) and Slap-Elizabeth (Taylor), is due to the fact that no one in modern times has ever been so perfectly prepared by Pedestaling for an ensuing Slap game.

THE BASIC technique of Slap-Jackie is for players to demonstrate their skill by being the first in their circle to observe hitherto unsuspected failings in the erstwhile goddess. Triumphantly they announce their "discovery" that Jackie is a chain-smoker (it is interesting that none of the tens of thousands of

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Pedestaling photographs published shows her with a cigarette in her hand), that her enjoyment of fox-hunting (well known for years) is barbaric, that she is a jet-setter (guilt by association with her sister Lee), that she wears mini-skirts (not only undignified but revelatory of less-than-perfect legs).

More sophisticated players score points by citing as faults those qualities that were once considered the goddess's prime virtues. In their version of the game Jackie's previously laudable passion for privacy becomes "aloofness, looking down on the masses." Her efforts to protect her husband's memory—"treating history as her private property." Her elegance in clothes—"vanity and extravagance." A year ago an admiring mother might have remarked, "I see Jackie is taking her children abroad with her again"; this year she says accusingly, "I see she's dragging those poor kids all over the globe again!" At the time of the assassination we were flattered when foreign dignitaries referred to Jackie as "queenly"; today Jackie is no longer termed "imperial" but, as we have seen, "imperious." Another frequently used gambit is to indict Jackie for having courted our belief in her perfection while secretly knowing all too well that she was less gold than glitter; this brands her not only as imperfect but insincere.

On the surface it would appear that the new game was stimulated

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by Jackie's attempt to stop author William Manchester from publishing the book *Death of a President,* which she was willing to commission him to write. Journalists, most of them former Pedestaling experts, joined forces against her. "The tragedy of Dallas . . ." said columnist Kenneth Crawford, "is not the negotiable property of the Kennedys." "She [Jackie] has decided to be the sole arbitor of what is history and what isn't," said author Jim Bishop. "History is no man's personal property," editorialized the New York *Times.* "She has been accused of tampering with history and writers' integrity . . ." wrote reporter Mary McGrory. At the height of the uproar in the press, a Harris poll showed that one out of three Americans thought less of Jackie as a result, and a Gallup poll showed that three out of four believed that "her image had been tarnished."

Undoubtedly Jackie had erred in commissioning an authorized version of a national tragedy, in denying other writers (like the incensed Jim Bishop, whom she prevented from preparing his own version) access to important witnesses, in attempting to have the completed manuscript censored, in refusing to read it herself until late in the controversy—and it is understandable that members of the Fourth Estate should have taken offense at the apparent threat to freedom of the press. But what the Battle of

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the Book theory does not explain is why such writers went on to attack Jackie, not only for her stand on that issue but on other, seemingly irrelevant grounds. Drew Pearson told his readers that Jackie was not "as demure as the people think she is," that she has "a temper as explosive as the first Queen of England and a vituperative vocabulary," that she "has had almost no women friends." William Manchester compared her to "Marie Antoinette, completely isolated from the world around her by her court." Mary McGrory accused her of being "accustomed to having her way." Robin Douglas-Home, a British writer who was once a close friend of Jackie, claimed that Jackie's "emotional balance went" when President Johnson's prestige began to overshadow J.F.K.'s. Other writers used the printed word to charge her with being headstrong, hard-headed, iron-fisted, and—scraping the bottom of the barrel—with having gotten her own way too often as a child!

If the Battle of the Book doesn't fully explain why all these professionals should have turned on Jackie with such fury and indignation, still less does it explain why ordinary Americans, to whom freedom of the press is a fairly unemotional issue, should have answered the call to arms and joined the attack so eagerly.

The truth is that the Manches-

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ter affair was not the cause of the public's anger at Jackie but rather the excuse we needed to voice a resentment that had been smoldering beneath the worshipful surface for some time. (If Manchester had not existed, it would have been necessary, sooner or later, to invent him!) As soon as the first crack appeared at the base of Jackie's pedestal, the public rushed to topple her from it.

Why? Here is how a noted psychologist explains it:

"As President and First Lady, the Kennedys represented an American dream-come-true. They were what the rest of us dream of being—young, attractive, vital, successful. We imitated them, identified with them, and their success became our success. Many of the qualities which we now cite as proof that Jackie has feet of clay were never any secret—but we rejected the knowledge because it didn't happen to fit our dream.

"After the assassination Mrs. Kennedy became an even more powerful symbolic figure. When her husband was murdered in the prime of his life, we all felt the shock of our own mortality; all our suppressed fears of death came into play. We all want to believe that we'll never die; that's why we erect permanent headstones on our graves, name our children after ourselves. This gives us some feeling of immortality. We feel that as long as we are not forgot-

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ten, we can't be truly dead. For several years Mrs. Kennedy's deep mourning proved to us that this kind of immortality can be bestowed on the dead by the living. If she had remained frozen in grief, we would have gone on adoring her.

"Instead, like any healthy young woman, she passed through the worst of her grief and, perhaps to her own surprise, began to enjoy life again, traveling, smiling, even wearing short skirts and dancing in the modern, frankly sexual manner. And though we make a show of applauding her happiness, we are unconsciously appalled by her betrayal of *our* needs, which require that she mourn forever. Our precious dream evaporates. Our security vanishes. If a 'saint' like Jackie stops mourning, wouldn't our own mates, our own children do the same? So we must prove that she was never a saint, even that she was a bad person all along. We turn on her, finding fault, tearing her down, because the worse we make her out to be, the safer we feel."

Once given emotional carte blanche to desecrate our fallen idol, we find it is exhilarating, it is fun. It is also useful. Jackie b comes a convenient scapegoat fc resentments that have nothing t do with her. A husband who re sents his wife's extravagance ca complain about Jackie's expensiv tastes, releasing his anger harm lessly and making his point with

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out giving his wife an opportunity to defend herself. A woman whose marriage is failing can take pleasure in simply spreading the rumor that Jack and Jackie Kennedy separated several times in the course of a stormy union, shrugging off her own responsibility for failure with, "See, marriage is impossible even when you're rich and famous!" The discovery that some of Jackie's friends regard her as "a cultural lightweight" who prefers musical comedy to grand opera is ammunition for the person whose own lack of culture is a source of embarrassment to him. By citing Jackie's supposed cultural deficiencies, he is really saying, "All intellectuals are phonies."

THE GAME ADAPTS itself readily to the psychological needs of every player. Take, for example, the following exchange between a husband and a wife:

SHE: I see Jackie's canceled her trip to Cambodia; she's going to Antigua again. You'd think she'd go to places where she could do the country some good instead of all those exclusive resorts. (What she is really saying is: "See what a prize *I* am—patriotic, up on current events. Why doesn't anything ever happen to *me*? I never get to go anywhere.")

HE: She doesn't sit still for a minute. But when Kennedy was alive, she wouldn't go out of her way to campaign with him. ("Women are all selfish. All they

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think about is having a good time. Why don't you help me with *my* problems?")

SHE: Well, with a wardrobe like hers—she must spend more in a week than I do in 20 years—you've got to go places to show it off. Did you hear about that broadtail dress she bought for $5000? ("*I'm* not extravagant. *I* wouldn't dream of spending a lot of money on myself. Anyway, you can't afford to buy me the things I want.")

HE: I hope to God it covers her knees. Those mini-skirts she wears are undignified. ("Some men like to look at women's legs, but not me. Why don't you appreciate me more?")

In this version of the game, both players win. They have expressed some of their grievances against each other without running the risk of precipitating an argument.

However, the game can also be played as a contest. Probably the most challenging bouts take place when one member of the group still feels a tie of loyalty to the Jackie of Pedestaling days. When this happens, the other players join forces and bombard the hapless Defender with every nasty word they have ever heard about Jackie. Sometimes they score points by making up gossip on the spur of the moment. Harried Defenders rarely notice. But the highest scores go to those who find a way to use Jackie's own words against her. For example, if a Defender points out that Mrs. Kennedy

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never asked to be made into a saint and wishes only to be left alone, neither deified nor vilified, he can be reminded that once, when asked if she minded being mobbed whenever she appeared in public, Jackie replied, "No, I'm all they have left now." This shows not only that Jackie revels in the public's adulation but that she is implying that all we ever had was J.F.K. In this context, Jackie-Slappers usually add that almost half of the people wanted Nixon for President, and J.F.K.'s record wasn't so much anyhow.

Another way to demoralize Defenders is to point out that their heroine is not worth the effort. This can be done by comparing Jackie's accomplishments as First Lady to those of Eleanor Roosevelt. This point must not be belabored, for a quick-thinking Defender may observe that Jackie had only three years in the White House while Eleanor had 12—and no small children to raise.

Games involving Defenders sometimes develop into cliff-hangers, for there is always the dangerous possibility that a Defender might win, in which case the game is a failure in the same way that a bullfight is a failure if the bull wins.

Satisfying contests can take place even when no Defender is present; Slappers then try to outpoint each other, as in bowling. A favorite version, known as My-Insights-Are-Profounder-Than-Yours, was in-

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spired by Robin Douglas-Home's published amateur "psychoanalysis" of Jackie. Play usually begins with one attacker observing that Jackie cannot be blamed for her behavior because she is a victim of psychic trauma. Even her much-admired performance during the funeral was due to "shock" rather than innate courage and dignity. How else can one explain Jackie's adding her own and Jack Kennedy's name to the plaque in the White House Lincoln bedroom (equating her husband with The Great Emancipator) or her insistence on an Eternal Flame at Arlington (which should have been an act of Congress, expressing the will of the people)?

IN THE AWKWARD silence that follows these revelations another parlor psychiatrist quickly jumps in and quotes Douglas-Home on the subject of Jackie's guilt complex. It was not the shock of the events in Dallas that traumatized Jackie but her belief that she had tailed her husband in life (ethical players will only mention her refusal to campaign with him in this context). So obsessed was Jackie with the need to atone that she devoted herself to his memory and to fostering the political ambitions of Bobby Kennedy, who served as a "husband-figure" in her subconscious mind. A truly skillful player can probe still deeper by asserting that Jackie's guilt feelings stem not from the dramatic events of her adult life, but from those of

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her childhood; having lost her father (divorce), she was unconsciously convinced that her own inadequacies had driven him away, and she attemped to recapture him by marrying J.F.K., a man 13 years her senior. When her father died, and then her husband, the old guilt overwhelmed her, making her believe herself to be an unfit mother. This is why she asked Bobby Kennedy to take her children into his home early in 1964. The Insights game can go on indefinitely, unless a real psychiatrist happens to be present during the conversation. This invariably puts a stop to it.

And so the game grows in popularity, gathering momentum with every new revelation from Jackie's former friends, servants, and associates (who turn out to be the most talented players of all). The time may come, of course, when players will begin to ask themselves if the game is worth the candle, whether playing it doesn't reveal more about the players themselves than about their victim. A few lone voices are already crying in the wilderness: William Buckley who never learned to play Pedestaling came to Jackie's defense in the Manchester affair by saying approvingly, "Mrs. Kennedy insists that her private emotions belong to her and not to the Library of Congress or Mrs. Grundy"; newswoman Doris Fleeson insists that "the public must bear some of the blame for the situation. . . . In its

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grief and sense of guilt, it helped to create a flawless John F. Kennedy legend and enshrined his widow as its caretaker."

But for the most part, Americans ignore these voices, remaining for the moment deaf to any sound save the one that poet John Milton (in *Paradise Lost*) called:

A dismal universal hiss, the sound
Of public scorn.

"Dismal" is, without doubt, the word for it. ■■

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