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John F. Kennedy An Unfinished Life

By Robert Dallek

Robert Dallek spoke at an event co-hosted by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies and the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum on October 2, 2003. Following are his remarks about John F. Kennedy's medical troubles.

After 40 years, the Kennedy Library felt it was time to open John F. Kennedy's medical records previously hidden from the public.... When we opened them, we saw that Kennedy had been hospitalized nine times between spring of 1955 and fall of 1957: once for nineteen days, twice for a week, several times for three or four days. We found that he had spastic colitis and that as a boy, when he was 17 years old, he was sent to the Mayo Clinic. And in 1937 they began giving Kennedy steroids which his father, because he was a very wealthy man -- one of the wealthiest in America -- was able to afford.

The steroids were at the center of any of Kennedy's later medical problems according to my medical colleague. He had Addison's disease, the failure of his adrenal lines. Now, there apparently is an inherited component because one of his sisters had Addison's disease, but I'm told that it's more than likely that the steroids contributed to the destruction of the adrenal lines. Kennedy's back problems were not the consequence, primarily, of a football injury at Harvard or of a PT-109 episode -- but rather they were a consequence of the steroids. We had ten boxes of x-rays and my colleague pointed out to me that he had osteoporosis of the lower spine, the lower back, and he suffered terribly. He couldn't turn over in bed at night. He couldn't pull a sock or shoe on his left foot. He couldn't go up a staircase.



Robert Dallek in Grand Valley's
University Club

As a consequence, they were shooting him up with procaine and other pain killers. And when he went through various crises, what we found in the records is that they increased the dosages of cortisone and salt tablets to allow him to deal with the tension that he was under. He was also on testosterone, not to heighten his libido -- he didn't need that -- but he was losing weight all the time. There were charts of his weight going up and down and they were giving him the testosterone to beef him up. And apparently this drove up his cholesterol; he had cholesterol at one count of 412. Often the readings on his cholesterol were in the 300's; the lowest I saw was 276.

Now people have asked me, 'Would he have lived through a second term?' My guess is probably. He would have only been 51 when his second term ended, but who knows how much longer he would have lived after that.

If he hadn't been wearing a brace for his back on November 22, 1963, the first bullet that struck him several inches below the neckline would have knocked him over. But the back brace held him erect, and as a consequence the next bullet that found its mark tore open the back of his head and killed him.