Chris Matthews paints rosy portrait of JFK

BY GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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In a poll conducted in 2009, Americans selected John F. Kennedy as the president who most deserves to be added to Mount Rushmore.

A child of Camelot, who served in the Peace Corps in Swaziland from 1968-1970, Chris Matthews, the host of MSNBC's "Hardball," shares this love affair with our nation's 35th president.

In his charming and informative new biography, Matthews argues that Kennedy was a hero whose gifts - especially the ability to get to the heart of an issue and separate himself from the emotions of others - enabled him, even when nuclear war seemed likely, to evaluate conflicting advice and "cut coldly and clearly to the truth."

Matthews has interesting things to say about Kennedy's formative years, especially his relationship with his father and mother, his fascination with history, and the impact of his illnesses on his character and temperament.

Given to bouts of self-improvement, he indicates, Kennedy learned the names of Democratic activists in every state - and worked with David McClosky, a vocal coach, to change the timbre of his voice, barking like a seal in the bathtub. In a profession packed with people who "kiss up and kiss down," Kennedy did neither.

In analyzing Kennedy's tenure in the House and Senate, his political campaigns, and his presidency, Matthews sticks closely to conventional wisdom. And his reliance on interviews and oral histories, virtually all of them adulatory, leads to some questionable claims.

Kennedy's performance at the Racket Committee hearings, for example, did not make him a "heavyweight" in the United States Senate. Nor did his efforts to get Martin Luther King Jr. released from jail "move black America overnight to the Democratic side of the ballot." The percentage of the African-American vote Kennedy received in 1960, in fact, was less that of Adlai Stevenson in 1952 and Harry Truman in 1948.

Matthews does not address Kennedy's difficulties in getting his domestic agenda through Congress. He doesn't know if the president would have withdrawn American "advisers" from Vietnam had he been re-elected in 1964.

Emphasizing Kennedy's inspirational goals rather than his actual accomplishments, Matthew identifies with the passionate and partisan verdict of Theodore Sorenson, Kennedy's speechwriter, on his legacy.

Kennedy, Sorenson insisted, was a moral president who did not send combat troops abroad or drop a bomb, helped establish religious and racial equality in the United States, waged war on poverty, illiteracy and mental illness, encouraged Americans to serve their communities and help alleviate poverty in other countries, and restored the appeal of politics to the young.

We need heroes, of course, and when compared with his successors, John F. Kennedy looks pretty darn impressive. But his record - and his reputation - should remind us as well of the truth in A.E. Housman's poem, "To An Athlete Dying Young."

John F. Kennedy was a "Smart lad, to slip betimes away/From fields where glory does not stay."
"He does not and will not "swell the rout/Of lads that wore their honors out/Runners whom renown outran/And the name died before the man."

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