'The Patriarch,' by David Nasaw
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The Patriarch
The Remarkable Life and Turbulent Times of Joseph P. Kennedy
By David Nasaw
(The Penguin Press; 868 pages; $40)

The very word "Kennedy," Harry Carr reminded readers of the Los Angeles Times in 1928, sent Hollywood executives "shrieking for the fire escapes." The Boston banker had a controlling interest in F.B.O. Studios and Pathé. Rumors had it that he was about to purchase Universal Studios. And since Carr had made no inquiries "during the last few minutes," he did not know whether Kennedy now owned Paramount, MGM and Fox.

Although his stint in the dream factory was short, and the films he made were not very good, Joseph P. Kennedy made a lot of money as a movie mogul. He made even more in the stock market. A multimillionaire at age 40, he retired - and held several important positions in the Roosevelt administration, including chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, chairman of the U.S. Maritime Commission and ambassador to Great Britain. Most important, of course, he founded one of the greatest dynasties in American politics.

In "The Patriarch," David Nasaw, a professor of history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and the biographer of Andrew Carnegie and William Randolph Hearst, provides an exhaustive - and at times exhausting - examination of Kennedy's public and private lives.

Nasaw acknowledges that there is some truth in allegations that Kennedy was a stock manipulator, an adulterer, an appeaser, an anti-Semite and an isolationist. He says, however, that Kennedy was a brilliant entrepreneur who overcame discrimination against Irish Catholics, a dedicated public servant and an outsider, whose "realistic, pragmatic, and non-ideological" foreign-policy positions had the (increasingly rare) virtue of consistency.

Nasaw is a scrupulous and skillful historian. He portrays Kennedy as a competent and complicated man. And Nasaw busts some myths about him. Despite persistent rumors, he writes, no credible evidence exists that Kennedy was a bootlegger, with ties to organized-crime figures. Nor did he swindle the actress Gloria Swanson, his mistress, through the deal he structured with Pathé and Gloria Productions.

Nonetheless, "The Patriarch" tends to leave intact the popular perception of Kennedy as dangerously wrongheaded. Nasaw's treatment of Kennedy's tenure as ambassador to Great Britain, which constitutes the core of the biography, provides detailed documentation of his response to the looming threat of Nazi Germany. His knowledge, flair for publicity, blunt candor and self-confidence, Nasaw indicates, did not serve him well in London. He broke State Department rules and protocols, and persisted in publicly airing his views, even when they were at odds with those of the Roosevelt administration.

Obsessed with the failure of the United States to recover from the Great Depression, Kennedy thought the American government should borrow methods from German and Italian fascists to control the economy. Having no doubt about the superiority of Germany's armed forces, he urged President Franklin Roosevelt to find a modus vivendi with Hitler while England and France were at war with him. Convinced that Jews had "unfairly, perhaps criminally," seized control of the news media and other industries, the ambassador did not even make their fate under Hitler "a consideration."

During the Cold War, Nasaw adds, Kennedy denied that the Soviet Union was committed to expanding territorially or that it posed a threat to the security of the United States. He recommended that the American military remain in the Western Hemisphere, even if it meant that Europe and Asia went communist. And he predicted that democratic institutions and economic freedom would be casualties of a protracted arms race in conventional and nuclear weapons.

As he faded from public view in the late 1940s and 1950s, Kennedy concentrated his time, energy, connections and money on boosting the political careers of his sons. He was indispensable, it seems clear, in helping John F. Kennedy get elected to the House of Representatives in 1946 and the U.S. Senate in 1952.

But since the advice he gave often wasn't very good, Nasaw's assertion that past experience convinced Jack Kennedy that his father "more often than not knew what he was talking about" seems a bit of a stretch. As do his claims that father and son approached foreign
policy in similar ways - and that the line from John Kennedy's 1961 Inaugural Address, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" bears a "striking resemblance" to Joseph Kennedy's lifelong insistence that his children commit themselves to public service.

Joseph P. Kennedy was a combative man, who rarely forgot and never forgave a slight to his family. When the American hierarchy of the Catholic Church failed to support Jack Kennedy's bid for the White House, for example, Joe saw to it that Cardinal Francis Spellman was not invited to the inauguration and withdrew a $1 million pledge to the diocese.

Kennedy took pride that he called them as he saw them. Although he chafed at times in his backstage role during the 1950s and '60s, we can take him at his word that he got "the thrills and excitement" he needed from the careers of Jack, Bobby and Ted. And, thanks to Nasaw, we can feel the devastation he felt when his children died, one after another.

"The Patriarch" provides all the details we'll ever need about Joe Kennedy's life and times. And with its title, Nasaw reminds us that if he deserves to be remembered at all, it's as a dad.

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