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The young Jack Kennedy was not a very impressive figure. There was little reason to think that the scrawny, chronically ill second born child would someday rise to become POTUS, other than the fact that he was the son of a powerful and fiercely ambitious king-maker. He was not a particularly good student at Harvard, and to all outward appearances he seemed more interested in having a good time with his buddies and many girlfriends than in preparing himself for the highest office in the land. His major claim to fame grew out of his wartime exploits on P.T. Boat 109 (an incident that father Joseph puffed into a front page story in the New York Times to further his son’s career) and the publication of his senior thesis, *Why England Slept*. His early literary success too was mostly the product of his father’s many connections in the media.

It was apparently during his twenties that Jack became what later psychologists would label a “sex addict.” His obsession with women would become central to his personality, and follow him for the remainder of his short life. Now, of course, most young men are drawn to sexual adventure, but Jack allowed his libido to carry him into very dangerous territory. He risked his health and political career by indulging in a morass of tawdry affairs, consorting with strippers, prostitutes, mob molls, movie actresses, White House staffers, and not infrequently with total strangers. For several months he carried on an affair with a German woman who possibly had links with the Soviet KGB. Had this story broken—and it very nearly did—his presidency could have crashed in ruins. But nothing could curb his lust. He often remarked that if he didn’t have sex with a different woman at least every two days he would get terrible headaches. One could explain this wild behavior by saying that Jack was simply a hedonist in the mold of a Regency Rake, but this seems superficial and inadequate. Many of his liaisons were hurried, furtive encounters, and one wonders how *pleasurable* these conquests actually were. No, something other than physical satisfaction was at work in this driven, manic quest. What could then explain such reckless behavior in a man who wanted desperately to go down in history as a truly great President?

Thurston Clark, one of Jack's most admiring biographers, offers several intriguing theories for his promiscuity in his book *JFK's Last Hundred Days*. Some of his friends speculated that his near-death experiences in the war left him addicted to danger, and that aside from his habit of driving his car like a man possessed (a trait that would be shared by Bobby and Ted) illicit sex was the riskiest behavior available. Call him an "adrenalin junkie" if you will. Others claimed that Jack had a visceral aversion to boredom, and sex was the quickest antidote. Perhaps it was the steroids he had to take daily to combat his Addison's disease amped up his sex drive. His poor health led him to believe that he was not destined to live a long life, so perhaps he felt that he had to cram all the excitement he could into his few remaining years. (He once told journalist Joe Alsop "I've got this slow-motion disease which they say gets you when you're forty.") Other more fanciful explanations hold that Jack had been traumatized as a child when he caught his father in bed with film star Gloria Swanson, and that for some inexplicable reason he had to emulate his father's exploits. Perhaps the simplest theory is that his father encouraged all his sons to have sex with as many women as possible. The boys took everything their father said as gospel, so maybe one need look no further.

Having said all that, one might—and many do—say "So what? His private life was his own business. All of this womanizing had nothing to do with his political principles." (Essentially, the Bill Clinton defense) Well, perhaps. But for centuries, political philosophers have maintained that *character* counts in assessing a leader's fitness for office. Can one be a moral statesman in his/her public life, and a complete rogue during off-duty hours? Can a President lead a nation to a higher plane of Justice if he cajoles a nineteen year old virgin to service him in the White House swimming pool? (A very convincing claim made by a White House aide referred to only as "fiddle"—her counterpart was called "faddle.") Are such terms as "morality" and "justice" even relevant in the political realm? I will leave it to you to answer these hard questions for yourself.