Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Stain on Camelot Won't Last Forever | Opinion - Newsweek  
  
In 2006, Sweet Briar College invited Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to speak about environmentalism. As a Kennedy scholar there, I volunteered to serve as his Sherpa for the event. From the moment I collected him at the airport, the traits that he would display in his recent campaign were on display.  
  
No, we didn't stop to collect roadkill on the 50-mile drive to the rural Sweet Briar campus. Bobby had business to attend to on the phone, including calling New York's governor. As we turned into the college's grand entrance he asked if the school was "all chicks." I responded that we referred to our students as "women."  
  
RFK worked out in the college gym, but when I returned at the appointed time and place to meet him there, he was missing. A colleague reported that Bobby was sitting behind the building chatting on his phone. We hustled to a seminar, with his shirt untucked and one shoe untied, like a disheveled little boy.  
  
He was respectful to the students and offered them his vast knowledge on the environmental movement. At the reception in his honor, I noticed another personal trait. Everyone who approached him had a poignant story to share about his father, Senator Robert F. Kennedy Sr., or his uncle, President John F. Kennedy, both victims of assassination. "I once saw your father!" "I shook your dad's hand!" "I admired your uncle so much!" Bobby patiently listened, but he didn't engage with the well-wishers. How sad to be reminded constantly of his father's and uncle's tragic ends and flash back to the tender ages (14 and 9) when he attended their funerals in 1968 and 1963.  
  
Six hundred attendees filled the college theatre for RFK's talk, in which he gave previews of his anti-vax position (perhaps they cause autism) and the story of his mercury poisoning (from eating tainted seafood). He had not yet encountered the brain worm! No antisemitism surfaced that evening, as it would during the COVID pandemic, with his insensitive remarks about Anne Frank. But his grandfather, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., was accused of appeasing Hitler and lacking sympathy for Jews when he served as U.S. Ambassador to England. Bobby sold many of his books on environmental policy and a children's reader on St. Francis of Assisi that night. He stayed late, signing every book purchased by audience members.  
  
On the long drive to the hotel, Kennedy remarked, "You seem very rule oriented." I embraced the label. His response? "My mother told us, 'If you're playing by the rules, you're missing all the fun!'" He wanted to know if I indulged in alcohol or drugs: "Have you ever been so drunk they had to bring you home in a shopping cart?" Nope, I don't even like the taste of alcohol. And no drugs for me, thank you. Bobby waxed nostalgic about his well-known addiction to "narcotics," from which he had recovered. Although a political scientist, not a psychologist, I couldn't help but link the sadness I saw in his eyes when people mentioned his dad and a desire to escape that pain through pharmaceuticals.  
  
On the drive, Kennedy had a warm phone conversation with his then-wife Mary, but arriving at the hotel, he invited me to "watch a movie" with him. Declining the invitation, I cleaned out the jetsam he had deposited in my pristine car and told him I would return at 9 a.m. the next morning outside the hotel for his ride to the airport. Naturally, he wasn't there, so I tracked him down to his room, which was strewn with clothes. "My room is a mess!" he smiled, his hair still wet from a swim or shower. He complied with the order to be at the car in five minutes or miss his flight.  
  
I was heartened when he related that he had thought about my attachment to rules and the fact that I didn't seem "judgmental." Yet that time spent with a scion of the Camelot dynasty seemed to predict the extremes to which RFK Jr. has gone, both in his unsuccessful presidential run and now with his endorsement of former President Donald Trump. Both men descend from wealth, exhibit a sense of entitlement, are thrice-married womanizers (Bobby's second wife Mary took her life in 2012), embrace the anti-vaccine movement, reject U.S. support for Ukraine against Putin's invasion, speak nonsensically at times, and seek the spotlight on center stage, which they now share. How these two preening politicians will make room for each other remains to be seen. Bobby wants to follow in his father's footsteps with a Cabinet post and says he will assist Trump in staffing his second term.  
  
No wonder RFK Jr.'s siblings and cousins have repudiated his record. His sister Kerry noted that her father would reject everything his namesake and Trump are advocating. Cousin Jack Schlossberg, President Kennedy's grandson, has posted comedic videos disparaging Bobby and his embarrassing presidential run. I have met Kerry, Jack (indeed saw his grandfather at a rally in 1960), Bobby's sister Kathleen, and her late daughter and grandson. They, along with JFK's daughter, Ambassador Caroline Kennedy, and the Shrivers (who support the Special Olympics, established by Eunice Kennedy) have represented the family with grace, humanity, intelligence, patriotism, and generosity. Their light will outshine the temporary tarnishing of Camelot's legend, especially if RFK Jr. exits the drama with a Trump loss.