# Source 2 – First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy

## **Procedures**:

Read the following sources and answer the questions below.

## "A Wife's Experiences" from the "Commemorating Camelot: Three Women Who Shaped JFK’s Legacy" Site Bulletin. John Fitzgerald Kennedy National Historic Site

Jacqueline Kennedy became heavily involved in planning her husband’s funeral, planning nearly every aspect including the plot and eternal flame at Arlington National Cemetery.

One of Jacqueline Kennedy’s next efforts to commemorate her husband was through a series of interviews with historian and presidential advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in which she described her experiences as First Lady. The *LIFE Magazine* article derived from these interviews emphasized the comparison she drew between the Kennedy administration and King Arthur’s Camelot because of the promising but fleeting nature of both eras. This comparison would profoundly shape early efforts to commemorate President Kennedy by establishing a particular view of his life and legacy.

Jackie urged President Lyndon B. Johnson to change the name of Cape Canaveral and the surrounding space center to honor President Kennedy. Cape Kennedy would hold that name for 10 years before opposition from local Floridians reverted the name back to Cape Canaveral. The John F. Kennedy Space Center continues to honor President Kennedy who "lighted the imagination of our people when he set the moon as our target and man as the means to reach it."[[1]](#footnote-1)

Planning for the National Cultural Center began during the Eisenhower administration, but failed to gain traction and funding. Still in the planning stages during the Kennedy administration, Jackie and former First Lady Mamie Eisenhower served as honorary co-chairwomen, spearheading the process and putting the prestige of the administration behind it. President Johnson signed the John F. Kennedy Center Act in 1964, officially changing the name to honor the late president.

Continuing her work outside of Washington DC, Jackie oversaw the creation of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. She sought to capture the sense of potential that characterized her late husband’s presidency so that future generations could better understand and feel inspired by it. Over the next fifteen years, she worked hard to make this vision of the library and museum a reality. Perhaps most notably, she selected the young and relatively obscure I. M. Pei from a pool of many qualified candidates to be the site’s head architect. Despite his lack of experience, she believed that he was full of promise and capable of imagining a structure that would reflect the ideals with which she wanted her husband to be associated. The building Pei designed is best known for the open glass-paneled space that visitors enter after viewing the museum exhibits. Pei designed this space to foster personal reflection after learning about President Kennedy’s life and contributions.

Jackie also encouraged the establishment of Harvard University’s Institute of Politics with funds raised by the Kennedy Library Corporation in order to create a space that would facilitate the continued study of politics and public affairs.

## An excerpt from *For President Kennedy: An Epilogue*, Theodore White's December 1963 interview with Jackie Kennedy

“When Jack quoted something, it was usually classical,” she said, “but I’m so ashamed of myself—all I keep thinking of is this line from a musical comedy.

“At night, before we’d go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records; and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record. The lines he loved to hear were: Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.”

She wanted to make sure that the point came clear and went on: “There’ll be great Presidents again—and the Johnsons are wonderful, they’ve been wonderful to me—but there’ll never be another Camelot again.

“Once, the more I read of history the more bitter I got. For a while I thought history was something that bitter old men wrote. But then I realized history made Jack what he was. You must think of him as this little boy, sick so much of the time, reading in bed, reading history, reading the Knights of the Round Table, reading Marlborough. For Jack history was full of heroes. And if it made him this way—if it made him see the heroes—maybe other little boys will see. Men are such a combination of good and bad. Jack had this hero idea of history, the idealistic view.

”But she came back to the idea that transfixed her: “Don’t Let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot—and it will never be that way again.”

## Questions:

What was “Camelot” and how did it become associated with John F. Kennedy’s presidential administration?

The interview was conducted less than a month after the President’s assassination. What impact do you think this timing had on Jackie Kennedy’s responses?

## Additional Resources:

[Commemorating Camelot: Three Women Who Shaped JFK’s Legacy](https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/commemorating-camelot-three-women-who-shaped-jfk-s-legacy.htm#Jackie) is available through the National Park Service:

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/commemorating-camelot-three-women-who-shaped-jfk-s-legacy.htm>

The full article[*For President Kennedy: An Epilogue*](https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/THWPP/059/THWPP-059-009#folder_info), as well as [Theodore White’s notes](https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/THWPP/059/THWPP-059-013) about the interview, can be found at the John F. Kennedy Library:

<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/THWPP/059/THWPP-059-009#folder_info>

<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/THWPP/059/THWPP-059-013>

Additional Reading [Jackie Kennedy’s Post-Assassination Interview with LIFE](https://www.life.com/history/jackie-movie-life-magazine/):

<https://www.life.com/history/jackie-movie-life-magazine/>

1. Exec. Order No. 11129, 3 C.F.R. 794 (1959-1963) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)