

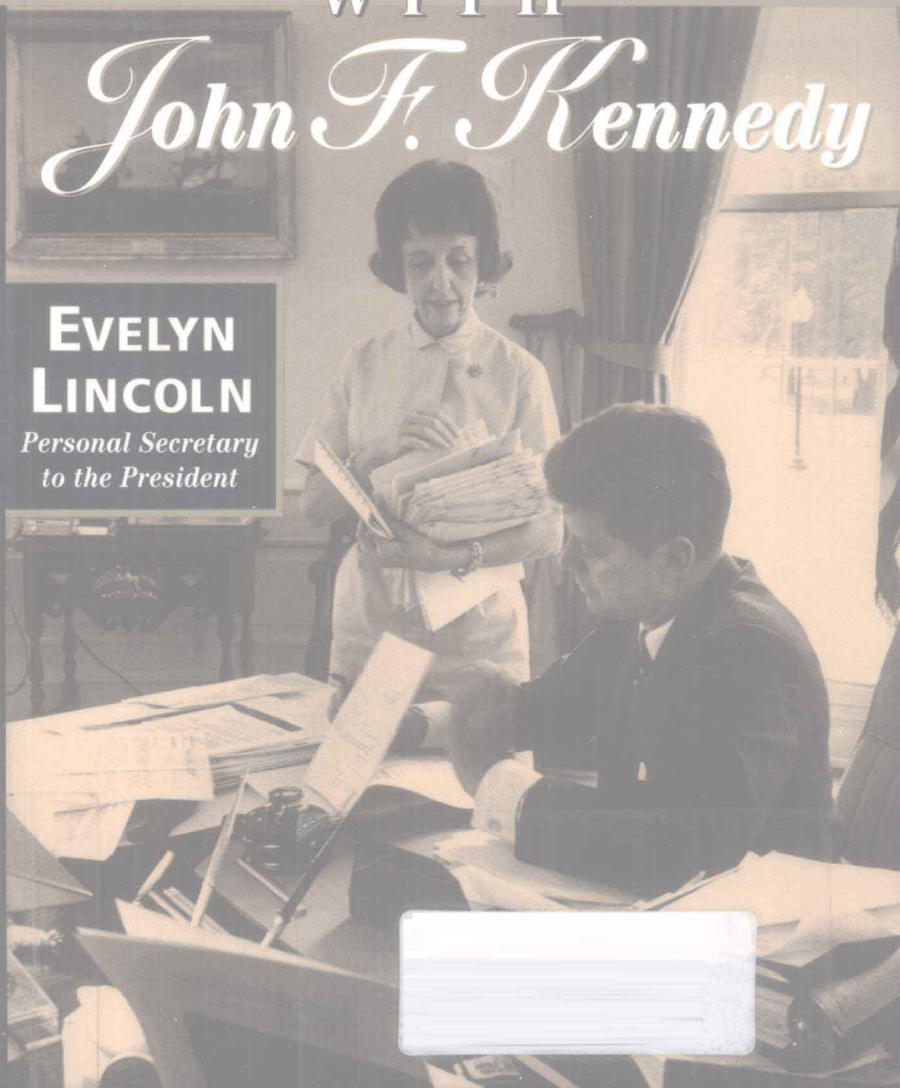
# *My Twelve Years*

WITH

# *John F. Kennedy*

**EVELYN  
LINCOLN**

*Personal Secretary  
to the President*



*Introduction by Francis G. McGuire*

# *John F. Kennedy*

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BLACK PEBBLES PUBLISHING

Boulder, Colorado

My Twelve Years With John F. Kennedy  
*Revised and expanded edition includes new index.*

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 65-24490

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John F. Kennedy photograph on half title page © 1963 Francis G. McGuire.

Black Pebbles Edition designed by Alan Bernhard.  
New index for this edition by Lisa Probasco.

Manufactured in the United States of America

BLACK PEBBLES PUBLISHING  
P. O. Box R  
Boulder, CO 80306-1936

ISBN: 0-9740798-0-4

*With Love*

To CAROLINE and JOHN

## *Acknowledgment*

I owe the original impetus toward writing this book to my old and trusted friends Jack and Blanche Kelly and the temerity to attempt it to the encouragement and helpful advice of Ray de Member and the late Basile Papdopoulos. I also want to express my appreciation to Marie Smith, Peter Rona, Tim Larkin, and Howard Cady, for the invaluable assistance in reducing and organizing the original manuscript to what I hope are readable portions covering my long and active life with the late President Kennedy. To Ruth Meehan, who patiently assisted in typing the manuscript, I say thanks.

To my husband, Abe, my debt is greatest of all.

EVELYN LINCOLN

## *Introduction*

### THE DEATH AND LIFE OF EVELYN LINCOLN

The End.

Two of us were with Evelyn when she died in May 1995.

Betsy, Evelyn's intensive-care nurse, quietly shut down the medical machinery while I watched. We exchanged few words in the half hour it took to provoke death.

"Just stay with her, Frank, and let me know when it's over," her husband had said after his decision to let her go. I nodded, leaving him with his thoughts. He knew she was in no pain.

Evelyn once wrote of the deepest pain of her childhood.

"When I was 11 years old someone said my father had died.

"I went outside in the snow on the Nebraska plains and just laid down, looking straight up at the sky.

"I didn't care if I died, too. I was lying there for a long time and finally someone came out and asked what I was doing.

"It turned out that I had misunderstood. It was my father's mother who had died.

"But I could never forget that feeling of loss, of desolation — that someone so close to me had been taken away so unfairly. I wanted to flee, to go to the farthest corner of the earth and hide from any God that could be so cruel and unfair.

"Many years later, on a November day in 1963, no corner of the earth was farther from God than Dallas."

Now, far from the Nebraska plains, Evelyn was nearing the time when she could ask God directly about fairness.

She was so much a Nebraska product that many who frequented the White House of President Kennedy wondered how an unsophisticated farm girl could become his personal secretary and hold the job in a vicious political world for nearly 12 years.

People expected suave. They expected sophistication. They expected blonde. They expected cool efficiency. What they got was the cool efficiency. She was not an intellectual, a beauty or a charmer. She was efficient, loyal and competent.

How Evelyn got the job was simple. The executive summary is that she researched it, applied for it, then persisted persisted. She then made herself so indispensable that John Kennedy would have been crazy to let her go. Which is not to say that he himself didn't marvel that she kept the job.

Kennedy was bemused by Evelyn, whom he never called by her first name. It was always "Miz Lincoln." Kennedy's aide, Ted Sorensen, tells of the time he was talking with the president in the White House living quarters when Kennedy telephoned to Evelyn in the West Wing with a message. After putting down the telephone, the president turned to Sorensen:

"Whatever I do or say, Mrs. Lincoln will be sweet and unsurprised. If I had said just now, 'Mrs. Lincoln, I have cut off Jackie's head, would you please send over a box?' she still would have replied, 'That's wonderful, Mr. President, I'll send it right away. . . . Did you get your nap?'"

Evelyn Norton, daughter of a Congressman, had been a school teacher in Nebraska when she fell in love with Harold Wayne Lincoln, a student four years younger. With a name like Lincoln, his nickname, of course, was "Abe."

On October 4, 1930, Abe and Evelyn ran off and married in Kansas—he borrowed money from her to pay for the ring—and eventually found their way to Washington, DC, where both attended law school until Evelyn dropped out to support them. They had agreed before marriage that there would be no chil-

dren. There never were, unless one counts Sputnik, their cat.

The story of Evelyn's life after she signed up as a volunteer for Congressman John F. Kennedy in 1952 is told in the main body of this book, which continues through her departure from the Oval Office just hours after President Kennedy died.

Evelyn was given the job of organizing President Kennedy's papers. She had a room in the Executive Office Building overlooking the West Wing of the White House, where she had happily spent nearly three years.

While in that job she wrote the first inside story of the Kennedy White House and published it in early 1965, titled *My Twelve Years With John F. Kennedy*. She continued her archiving task while promoting the book in her spare time, all the while researching and writing her second book, *Kennedy and Johnson*—which came out in 1968 during the buildup to the Vietnam War. Her account of the relationship between the president and vice-president did not make Lyndon Johnson happy with Evelyn Lincoln.

She became executive secretary to Rep. James Kee (D-WV) until she retired. For many years Evelyn refused to accept retirement benefits on grounds that others needed the money more than she, but eventually she acquiesced.

That first book by Evelyn in 1965 on the Kennedy White House caused a stir. Evelyn said Jacqueline Kennedy was angry because Evelyn had published without getting Jackie's approval or at least letting her read the manuscript in advance. While the president was still alive, however, Jackie had tried to require all White House staff members to sign a pledge that they would not publish anything without her prior approval. Evelyn showed the memo to the president, who told her to ignore it.

That first book also angered Lyndon Johnson because it strongly suggested that LBJ had become the Democratic vice-presidential nominee through a misunderstanding.

Notwithstanding her place in the center of national power, Evelyn Lincoln retained Nebraska's middle America values.

She wrote and sent 2,000 Christmas cards every year.



Evelyn and Abe went to a department store each autumn and she made her selection. Always an Americana theme.

One dollar each when she started. Then two dollars. Envelopes included. Not the stamps.

It had started after the assassination of President Kennedy. She heard from so many people around the world about their loss that she felt she had to do something.

Around the first of October she began with a blue ball-point pen, and she finished by the first week of December. She started earlier each year as her list grew, but she wrote a personal note in every card in her remarkably clear, precise script.

After 31 years Evelyn Lincoln still loved every minute and every card of it. They were her link to America. She loved the American people, though she thought they had gotten lazy and too easy on themselves, buying into the idea of a free lunch.

Evelyn, however, felt that if the late president stirred peoples' emotions, the least she could do was send them a Christmas card and a personal note.

Jackie may have been First Lady, but Evelyn Lincoln surely was the First Fan.

As far as she was concerned, JFK didn't know how to be immoral; if he did things that brought disapproval, well, it was just an understandable human failing.

It was her refusal to deal in scandal that cost her at least one book contract. The three of us—Evelyn, Abe and I—flew to New York on one occasion to talk with an agent about her latest manuscript, which the agent declined to represent. He said he understood how disappointed she must be, but all that would change if she would simply describe the goings-on in the Kennedy White House “as if you were a fly on the wall.” His meaning was clear.

Almost before the agent finished his sentence, Abe stood up, and Evelyn and I took our cue.

“I don't think you understand disappointment,” Abe quietly said to the agent. “When you've worked most of your adult life

for a great man doing great things for a great country ... and one day in Dallas it all disappears in a puff of smoke ... *that* is disappointment. This..." he brandished the rejected manuscript "...this is nothing."

We walked out, got a cab, went back to the airport and boarded a plane for Washington. I believe we were in Manhattan less than an hour. Evelyn never wrote another book about Kennedy because she knew what the publishing establishment wanted and she refused to give it to them. Let them find dirt somewhere else, she said.

Relations were not consistent between Evelyn Lincoln, various members of the Kennedy family and other members of the White House staff. With some, like the president's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, relations were very good because "Old Joe" was one of her champions in her role as his son's secretary. In Evelyn, he saw competence, loyalty and discretion, qualities which he thought his son, the president, needed more than he needed feminine charm. His son did not always agree.

On a hot June day in 1963, I was standing with other reporters outside a top secret Navy weapons laboratory in China Lake, California, waiting for the president to emerge. He was being given a briefing on the lab's work. The road from the lab to our helicopters was lined with families of scientists and engineers who were developing new weapons—many of which would soon see use in Vietnam. I overheard two newsmen talking and one said:

"See that woman?"

I turned to see who had caught their attention. About fifty feet down the road, waiting behind a barrier rope in the front row of the crowd waiting to see the president, was a tall, gorgeous dark-haired woman. She was in her early thirties, wearing black shorts and a tight white blouse.

"Kennedy's going to talk to her."

I looked at my watch; we were behind schedule and the woman was almost lost in the mass of people. There's no way

Kennedy can talk to her, I thought, we're already supposed to be somewhere else.

The president emerged from the lab surrounded by brass, nodded and smiled to us, made a casual remark and walked to his open top limousine. We scrambled into the press bus and the motorcade left.

Sixty feet down the road the motorcade stopped.

The president got out of his limousine and began shaking hands with people in the crowd, working to his right with a word or two for each admirer. He reached the woman in the white blouse and black shorts, held her hand for a millisecond longer than required for a political handshake, chatted and smiled, then waved to the others and got back into the limousine while generals, admirals and laboratory directors waited.

I picked up my dropped jaw and shook my head. Now that's power, I thought. Years later I told the story to Evelyn.

"Oh, he knew how to smell the roses," she said with a smile, and that was the attitude of most of Kennedy's staff. Authors have sometimes ridiculed the lengths to which Kennedy's circle would go to protect the president from scandal, but his loyalists often weighed presidential virtues against human failings and found the balance acceptable.

White House staff members may have found a common focal point in their loyalty to the president, but that did not necessarily apply to their views of each other.

Which raises the question of biases and personality clashes among White House staffers, and how such influences affect historical accounts by those in the center of power, particularly their sense of fairness and objectivity in describing each other and various events. How are we to judge credibility?

In one biography of a Kennedy aide with whom Evelyn had very cool relations, the published photo of President Johnson taking the oath of office shows the Kennedy aide's presence enhanced while Evelyn has been deleted from the picture.

Evelyn greatly disliked Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, being harshly critical of both. She once told me that President

Johnson had seen her on TV severely criticizing his decisions on the Vietnam War and said: "I ought to throw that black-haired bitch into the Potomac."

It is not surprising, therefore, that Evelyn Lincoln viewed the assassination of John F. Kennedy as a political coup d'état, carried out by Lyndon Johnson, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and the resources of the Central Intelligence Agency. She insisted it was the first successful coup in American history.

Evidence? There was none, even when I asked why she believed it. It came down to the fact that Evelyn was convinced, and that was that. This is not to dismiss the validity of intuition, however, for intuition often holds truth.

Shocked by the American people's election of Richard Nixon in 1972, Evelyn and Abe made a lengthy freighter trip to Africa with Sputnik, their cat. They returned as the Watergate hearings were being prepared. Evelyn felt vindicated.

It was a period in American history when tape recordings made in the Oval Office were the stuff of headlines throughout the world. When reporter Bob Woodward of the Washington Post visited Evelyn to discuss a rather bland topic, she claimed he waited until he was finished and almost out the door before asking if President Kennedy ever recorded conversations in the Oval Office.

Evelyn said Kennedy did indeed have a recording system, and she described it in detail. The next day the revelation got major attention in the Post and it was obvious that was the rationale for the interview from the beginning.

"Why did he have to beat around the bush about why he wanted to talk to me?" she wondered aloud. "All he had to do was ask about the tapes." The episode did not improve her view of journalists.

As years passed and the election of a new president became the focus of the nation, Evelyn supported Gary Hart, then Bob Kerrey of Nebraska. She was still in the game and loved it.

One evening in April 1995, we were sitting in a restaurant with several friends. As we talked politics, Evelyn was unusu-

ally quiet. A group of other friends walked by, among them a registered nurse. After the usual niceties, she came around and whispered:

“Get that woman to a doctor.” Abe said he would.

The following morning, he telephoned and asked me to come right over. They lived less than a mile away.

When I arrived, Evelyn was in bed, unable to move because of pain. We took her to a hospital with a splendid reputation. She died weeks later even though the original problem had been successfully resolved. One low-level employee’s blunder began a cascade of disasters leading to an irreversible coma.

Evelyn’s ashes went to a crypt at Arlington National Cemetery based on her husband’s military service in World War Two.

Harold W. Lincoln stopped taking meals and medications.

Forty one days after Evelyn’s death, her emaciated husband let his own life slip away so he could be with his wife.

His ashes were placed in the crypt alongside Evelyn’s.

Afterward, controversy erupted over ownership of Kennedy memorabilia in the Lincoln estate. Every lawyer sees it.

Such was Evelyn Lincoln’s death, but this book is about the core of her life as she bears witness to John F. Kennedy’s political and personal life, and to his leadership.

She unquestionably was the First Fan.

It is ironic that in a nation which complains of the decline in loyalty, discipline and integrity, the strongest criticism of Evelyn Lincoln has been her loyalty to John F. Kennedy.

I once saw a small sign on an office wall.

“People will forget what you say; people will forget what you do; but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

It was not merely the way President Kennedy made Evelyn Lincoln feel, it was how he made the nation and the world feel.

In a sense, this book is a love letter about John F. Kennedy to the rest of us.

With Evelyn Lincoln gone, loyalty no longer has an epitome.

FRANCIS G. MCGUIRE

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# PART I



