



## Curses: Foiled Again

The tragic death of John F. Kennedy, Jr., on July 16, 1999, sparked renewed claims of a “Kennedy curse”—only the latest in a series of alleged popular hexes such as the Hope Diamond jinx and the curse of King Tut’s mummy.

During live CBS coverage of the search for Kennedy’s missing airplane, Dan Rather (1999) referred to “the alleged Kennedy curse,” while after the bodies of Kennedy and his wife and sister-in-law were recovered, *U.S. News & World Report* (July 26, 1999) ran a front-cover story unequivocally titled “The Kennedy Curse.” A *Buffalo News* headline spoke more factually of a “litany of Kennedy tragedies” (Anthony 1999), a list that varies from source to source but generally includes the following misfortunes in the family of Joseph and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy:

1941: Daughter, Rosemary, is institutionalized due to retardation and the effects of an unsuccessful lobotomy.

1944: Son, Joseph, Jr., dies in airplane explosion in World War II.

1948: Daughter, Kathleen, dies in plane crash in France.

1963 (August 9): Grandchild, Patrick (son of President John F. and Jacqueline Kennedy), dies after premature birth.

1963 (November 22): Son, President

John F., is assassinated.

1964: Son, Edward, is injured in plane crash that kills an aide.

1968: Son, Robert F., is assassinated while campaigning for Democratic presidential nomination.

1969: Son, Edward, narrowly escapes death when car plunges off bridge on Chappaquiddick Island, killing a passenger.

1973: Grandson, Joe (son of Robert and Ethel), overturns a Jeep, paralyzing a passenger.

1973: Grandson, Edward M. Kennedy, Jr., has leg amputated due to cancer.

1984: Grandson, David (son of Robert and Ethel), dies of drug overdose.

1991: Grandson, William Kennedy Smith (son of Jean Ann Kennedy), is charged with rape but acquitted in trial.

1994: Daughter-in-law, Jacqueline, dies of cancer.

1997: Grandson, Michael (son of Robert and Ethel), is killed in “ski football” accident.

And this is only a partial list. Senator Edward Kennedy’s son Patrick sought treatment for drug addiction in 1985 and Michael Kennedy, before his fatal accident, was disgraced due to an alleged affair with a 14-year-old baby sitter (Davis 1984; Thomas 1998; Anthony 1999; Salkin 1999; Kelly and Walsh 1999).

Certainly the list is as long as it is filled

with tragedy. But is it evidence of a curse? What exactly is meant by the term?

Actually a “curse”—also known as a “hex” or “jinx”—is an alleged paranormal assault that can supposedly result in physical or mental injury or illness—even death. Known to New Age mystics as a “psychic attack” (Guiley 1991), a curse is an ancient concept said to have either human direction (as from a sorcerer) or a supernatural one (such as by angry gods, demonic spirits, or the like). As an example of the first, in the Old Testament when Noah became displeased by his son Ham, he placed a curse on him (Genesis 9: 21–27); and, as a supernatural example, Jehovah dealt with an intransigent pharaoh by visiting upon him ten plagues (Exodus 7–12).

Various occurrences could spark belief in the existence of psychic attacks. For example, although the plagues on pharaoh are not mentioned in any source other than the Bible (Asimov 1968), and some see the account as pure allegory (Graham 1979), such phenomena can occur naturally. (Proliferations of locusts and frogs, for instance, are not unknown, and the water turning to “blood” could be equated with a “red Nile” wherein flood waters are colored by lake deposits [Keller 1995; Acquistapace 1991].)

A phenomenon that can actually simulate a psychic attack is the “hag syndrome.” Typically the “victim” awakens to feel a weight pressing on the chest and to see bizarre imagery (e.g. an “old

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hag," incubus, vampire, or the like). Known from ancient times, and estimated to occur presently in some fifteen percent of the world's adult population (Guiley 1991), the syndrome is popularly termed a "waking dream" and occurs in the twilight between being asleep and awake (Nickell 1995). Because such an experience may seem quite real to the "victim," it could appear to prove to that person that he or she was actually accursed.

Apart from such dramatic "evidence," however, essentially belief in curses is simply a superstition—that is, "a belief that some action not logically related to a course of events influences its outcome" or "any belief, practice, or rite unreasonably upheld by faith in magic, chance or dogma" (*American Heritage* 1981). As with other superstitions (such as the fear of Friday the thirteenth), once the idea of a curse is planted, it can take root in the imagination so that any harmful occurrence is counted as evidence for the jinx, while beneficial events are ignored. In this way superstitious or magical thinking tends to start with an answer and work backward to the evidence, in contrast to scientific or rational thinking that allows evidence to lead to an answer.<sup>1</sup>

This process of focusing only on negative evidence clearly perpetuates many popular "curses," including alleged "Jinxed Seas" like the so-called "Devil's Triangle" of the Atlantic where ships and planes supposedly vanish without a trace. In fact, however, as Lawrence David Kusche demonstrated in his investigative classic, *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery Solved* (1975), the disappearances are actually tragedies involving a combination of bad weather, heavy sea and air traffic, equipment failure, human error, and journalistic exaggeration and misattribution. (Many incidents attributed to the zone in fact occurred elsewhere.)

Another such example is the site near

Niagara Falls known as "Devil's Hole" that is allegedly "cursed with an aura of sheer bad luck." Indeed, asserts one writer,

Those ghost hunters who wish to explore Devil's Hole must do so at tremendous personal risk. Only those blessed with extremely good luck or

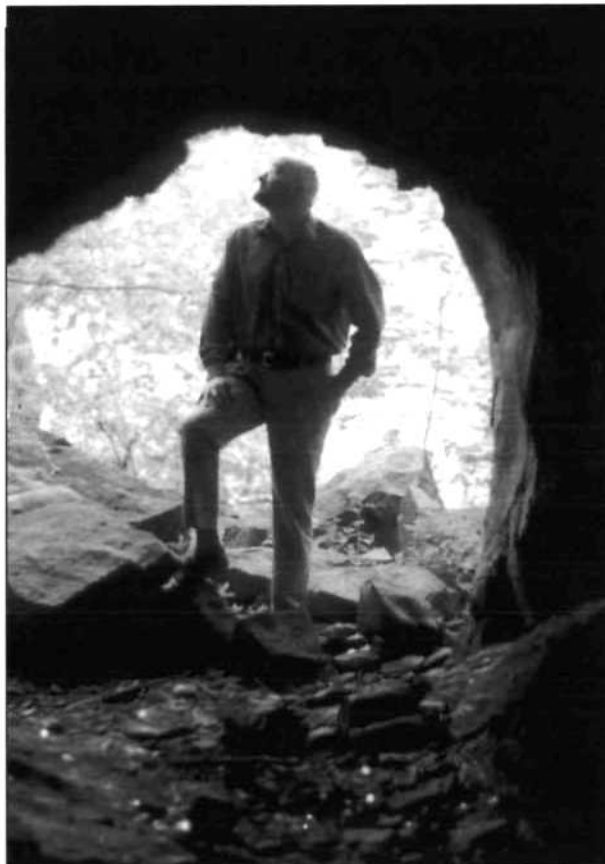


Figure 1. Cursed cave? SKEPTICAL INQUIRER Managing Editor Ben Radford tempts gloomy Devil's Hole near Niagara Falls. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

who feel that they have nothing left to lose should even attempt to study this site. The forces at work in this area are so strong and unpredictable that even experienced ghost hunters with extraordinary climbing, survival, and caving skills are likely to fall victim to the cave's intense aura (Blackman 1998).

Actually, SKEPTICAL INQUIRER managing editor Ben Radford and I challenged Devil's Hole on May 20, 1999 (see figure 1) and lived to tell about it. (In fact, park official Barry Virgilio told us there was not a high incidence of injury in the area despite heavy pedestrian traffic, and that accidents were typically due to risky behavior.)

Other examples of "curses" involving a selective focus include those attributed

to King Tut's tomb and the infamous Hope Diamond. After the discovery of Tutankhamen's lost burial chamber in 1922, expedition financier Lord Carnarvon died of blood poisoning from an infected insect bite, and in 1926 his former nurse died in childbirth. The archaeologist who discovered the tomb,

Howard Carter, lost two assistants to what newspapers began to call "King Tut's Curse." They reported that there was an inscription over the tomb's entrance that read, "Death shall come to him who touches the tomb." Over the years some archaeologists and tourists became ill or even died after they visited the site. Some have suggested that a mysterious bacterium or fungus in the tomb causes people to become ill.

In fact, there was no curse inscription on or in the tomb. In 1980 the site's former security officer admitted the story of the curse had been circulated in order to frighten away would-be grave robbers. As to the misfortunes, there was no pattern to them, the "victims" dying of a variety of causes. Some may have been ill anyway, and the added effects of travel, climate, and other stressful factors may have contributed to any illness-related deaths. In fact, balancing the

list of misfortunes is the fact that ten years after the pharaoh's tomb was opened all but one of the five who first entered it were still living. Carter himself lived on until 1939, dying at the age of sixty-six. Lord Carnarvon's daughter and others associated with the tomb, including the photographer and Egypt's Chief Inspector of Antiquities, lived normal life spans. And Dr. Douglas Derry—the man who actually dissected the mummy of Tutankhamen—lived to be over eighty years old (Nickell 1989).

But has the Hope Diamond—a.k.a. the "Diamond of Doom"—indeed "left a trail of death, debt, and disaster among its owners" ("Diamond" 1976)? The seventeenth-century French trader

Jean Baptist Tavernier, who first acquired and sold the magnificent blue gem to Louis XIV for a king's ransom, later suffered financial ruin. Louis XVI, who cut the diamond into the shape of a heart, gave it to his queen, Marie Antoinette, before both were taken to the guillotine by French revolutionaries. Stolen by thieves, the gem—or rather a portion of it, cut to its present oval shape—surfaced in London where it was bought in 1830 by a rich banker named Henry Thomas Hope.

The faceted stone then passed through a succession of owners who reportedly suffered such misfortunes as bankruptcy, suicide, and even murder. In the obituary for one alleged victim who died in 1947, a United Press story declared, "The Hope diamond has a long reputation as a 'jinxed' stone whose ownership carries with it a cloud of tragedy" (MacDougall 1983).

As with "King Tut's curse," however, support for the "Hope diamond jinx" is built on selective evidence. According to Curtis D. MacDougall in his *Superstition and the Press* (1983), "Study of the complete history of the fabulous jewel reveals that at least half of those who owned or used it seemingly were not affected by any curse. How unusual is it for about half the members of any family to experience bad luck?" Moreover, he says, since acquiring the stone in 1958, "... the Smithsonian Institution has not suffered from fire, theft, or death as a result of its famous possession. Because of the prominence of many of the diamond's owners the press has kept alive the myth of a curse, translating every untoward occurrence to fit the pattern" (see figure 2).

Interestingly, once the selective process changes focus—as happened with the quartz effigy known as the "Crystal Skull"—so do the imagined consequences. Once said to have the power to cause death (Mitchell-Hedges 1954), a claim utterly lacking support (Nickell 1988), the erstwhile "Skull of Doom" has become a talisman to New Agers who now "channel" hopeful messages from it and credit it with wonderful psychic "energies," even placing their own crystals next to it to supposedly

"charge" them (Bryant and Galde 1991).

A similar process of selection and hype helps promote "the Kennedy curse." In 1984 *Newsweek* continued a long journalistic tradition of describing the family as a "star-crossed dynasty" (Beck et al. 1984) and later headlined a report on Michael Kennedy's accidental death "The Camelot Curse" (Thomas 1998). In reporting on the John F. Kennedy, Jr., tragedy, one wire service story proclaimed that "The legendary



Figure 2. Jinxed jewel? Once allegedly doom-laden, the Hope Diamond now reposes serenely in the Smithsonian. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

Kennedy family curse had struck again" (quoted in "Irresponsible" 1999).

Actually, the Kennedys themselves have helped foment the myth. For example, in his television address to the people of Massachusetts in the wake of the Chappaquiddick tragedy, Ted Kennedy (1960) admitted that among his "irrational" thoughts of the period had been the question of "whether some awful curse did actually hang over all the Kennedys." And Michael Kennedy had said of Robert Kennedy's assassination, "It was as if fate had turned against us. There was now a pattern that could not be ignored" (Kelly and Walsh 1999).

Despite the hype, there has also been much appropriate skepticism. A

German daily editorialized: "A plane crash is a dreadful, horrible banality. But when a member of the Kennedy dynasty crashes a plane, the accident becomes a sign of inescapable destiny . . . and the global infotainment industry has its raw material—the curse of the Kennedys" (quoted in "Curse or hubris" 1999). Commendably, the Wichita Falls, Texas, *Times Record News* had this to say:

The notion that a family is cursed harkens back to the Dark Ages or the early days in this country when women were burned at the stake because they were believed to be witches and men were drawn and quartered because they were believed to be inhabited by evil spirits. Yet, even if educated reporters and editors don't actually believe in the fact that a family or an individual can be cursed, we see that idea promoted to a public that borders on scientific illiteracy already and, as proven by the popularity of all sorts of magical, mystical cures for ailments, the popularity of horoscopes and psychic readings, that is pretty darn gullible.

The editorial went on to indicate various factors that were actually responsible for the alleged curse and concluded that, for the notion to be entertained, "there needs to be proof that's more reputable than the zero proof offered right now. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof" ("Irresponsible" 1999).

The *Times Record News* editorial writers joined other skeptics in pointing out the real factors that can lead to the perception of a curse. Tacitly acknowledging selectivity, *U.S. News* conceded that the Kennedy family was "blessed and cursed all at once" (Kelly and Walsh 1999). And former JFK special counsel Ted Sorensen (1999), wrote: "The Kennedys are not accursed but blessed. True, they have endured, with remarkable religious faith, more than their proportionate 'share' of pain (though that is never allotted by the law of averages anyway). But they have also been endowed with good genes, good brains, good looks, good health, and good fortune, with both instincts and opportunities for serving their country and helping those less fortunate."

In addition to the selective process, there is the sheer size of the Kennedy

family. With nine children producing twenty-nine grandchildren, there have been increased opportunities for tragedy. Observes Temple University mathematics professor John Allen Paulos (1999), "If we look at large families we can sometimes find more death, disease, and tragedy than is generally expected."

Still another factor is the common tendency to connect the unconnected. Much like the impulse that prompts us to see pictures in clouds or other random forms, there is the impetus to find dubious relationships between events—a sort of connect-the-dots tendency that the *Times Record News* observed "seems to be one characteristic of human nature." Asks the editorial, "When traffic accidents cluster around one intersection, would we blame our luck on the curse of the car gods or would we recognize that congestion or some other factor might play the major role in the number of accidents occurring there?" ("Irresponsible" 1999).

The *News* joined others in pointing out the evident Kennedy "propensity for risk-taking" (Paulos 1999). Although Sorensen (1999) insists the family is characterized by an adventurous rather than foolhardy spirit, the line between the two often blurs. Michael Kennedy died as a result of the risky family pastime of "ski football"—a game the Aspen, Colorado, ski patrol had warned against (Thomas 1998, 23). And a friend of JFK Jr. stated that the son of the thirty-fifth president "loved to dance on the edge" (Barlow 1999), a tendency that may have been involved in his chancing a nighttime flight. Apart from mere adventurousness, simply seeking political office obviously brings increased risk of assassination—a factor that belies the notion of a curse in the deaths of President Kennedy and his brother, presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy.

And speaking of assassination there is another factor that aids the perception of a curse: visibility. Paulos (1999) notes that "When a celebrity's private life and death become public, news gets disseminated so rapidly and so thoroughly that we're blinded to everyone else's lives"—

as happened with JFK's assassination. Also, the Kennedy family's involvement in various aspects of American society—an involvement that increases the family members' visibility—can help foster "the perception of more misfortunes" (Paulos 1999).

Especially when taken together, these factors may help promote superstitious belief in a Kennedy curse, although it is never stated who or what has cursed the family or why. But as presidential histo-

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rian Doris Kearns Goodwin (1999) said of the cumulative tragedies, the Kennedys' willingness to carry on demonstrated "a love of life that's just the opposite of giving in to a curse." And conservative columnist William Safire concluded (1999): "There is no curse that hangs over anybody. It's against our idea of free will, whether you buy the Hope diamond or enter King Tut's tomb."

## Note

1. This contrast in approaches is illustrated with regard to the Shroud of Turin in my column "Science vs. 'Shroud Science,'" *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* 22(4), July/August 1998: 20–22.

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