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From Saint to Sinner and Back Again: Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Rehabilitates Her Image

Kelsey Swanson

It is not uncommon for people to fall from grace due to a vast array of reasons, including divorce, crime, and debt. Can the fallen possibly redeem themselves in the eyes of those who matter most? The case of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis offers a powerful example of the role that the disgraced can play in rebuilding their images. On 20 October 1968, Jacqueline Kennedy, previously beloved as the brave widow of the slain President of the United States, shocked the world, not by wearing a new Valentino or trying out a new hairstyle, but by getting married. Headlines across the globe exclaimed: "America has Lost a Saint," "Jackie, How Could You?" and "Jack Kennedy Dies Today a Second Time."¹ What heinous act caused people around the world to recoil in disbelief and disgust? The beautiful, young widow of the beloved President John F. Kennedy did not remarry a youthful, handsome American. Instead, the thirty-nine year-old Jacqueline Kennedy married Aristotle Onassis, a Greek twenty-three years her senior.² Not only was Onassis older and extremely wealthy, but he was also foreign,

¹"Mourning, Motherhood, and Ari," *People Weekly*, 6 June 1994, 48-52.

²Aristotle Onassis's age is the subject of dispute. Onassis claimed that he was born in 1906, but that as a teenager he told Argentinean officials he was born in 1900 in order to get a job, making him either twenty-three or twenty-nine years older than Jacqueline Kennedy.

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short, unattractive, and overweight. The American public condemned the marriage as an insult to the memory of the assassinated President.

Jacqueline Kennedy had fallen from her pedestal; overnight she had gone from national icon to villain. Yet, by the time of her death in 1994, Jacqueline Onassis had once again found her way back into the hearts of the American public. What can account for such a turnaround? It was no accident or merely the result of Aristotle Onassis's death in 1975; it was the conscious effort of a woman determined to rehabilitate her image by giving the press an alternative focus beyond her wealth and unpopular second marriage.

This paper is an examination of the calculated role Kennedy Onassis played in the revival of her image, tracing her fall from grace to her death, based on contemporary popular newspaper and magazine accounts. It compares her portrayal in popular periodicals in the period following her marriage to Aristotle Onassis (1968-1975) to her portrayal in the years after his death (1976-1994). Kennedy Onassis will be revealed as a woman who controlled her image and consciously rehabilitated it, who learned the value of being perceived in a positive light, and whose actions were sometimes calculated to benefit her public persona.

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's celebrity status is unique in U.S. history. As First Lady, she was beloved for her youth, grace, and style. She was the lovely wife of the youngest President ever elected. The American public adored her as "the most beautiful and romantic

legend we had ever had in a First Lady.”³ It was not just Americans who were charmed: Charles de Gaulle, President of France, was smitten with her, as were other foreign heads of state and their populations. In fact, from 1962 until her remarriage in 1968, Jacqueline Kennedy, according to the Gallup poll, was the most admired woman in the world.⁴ Unlike her immediate predecessors as First Lady, Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower, Kennedy brought glamour, youth, and elegance to the White House, elevating the status of the Presidency. The Kennedys were the closest thing to American royalty. People seemed to relate to Jacqueline Kennedy, not just as the First Lady, but as “our” First Lady. After the assassination of her husband, she was depicted as the brave widow, holding the country together during its period of mourning. She became an American “saint,” clearly enduring heartache, but with the inner strength to remain poised and dignified.

As First Lady, she was admired for her selfless devotion to her husband and children. Her two children always came first, and she tried to make their childhoods in the White House as normal as possible. Her feelings about the importance of motherhood were clear: “If you bungle raising your children, I don’t think whatever else you do well matters very much.”⁵ She strove to provide her children with ordinary childhood

³Norman Mailer, “Jackie, the Prisoner of Celebrity,” *Esquire*, Dec. 1993, 188.

⁴Vivian Cadden, “Jacqueline: Behind the Myths,” *McCall’s*, July 1975, 79.

⁵Bill Adler, ed., *The Uncommon Wisdom of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis: A Portrait in Her Own Words* (New York: Citadel Press, 1994), 95.

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experiences despite their extraordinary family circumstances. She organized a nursery school in the White House and arranged for her daughter to ride her pony on the front lawn. While she was the President's proud wife and dedicated supporter, the shy Mrs. Kennedy stayed out of the political arena for the most part, preferring to protect her family's privacy.⁶ When it came to attending a political event or staying with her children, the First Lady would often choose the latter, endearing her to the American public. In addition to being the sacrificing family woman, Kennedy was a patron of the arts and a gracious host, organizing magnificent dinners and entertainment in the White House. Her pet project was the restoration of White House furnishings, including paintings, furniture, and sculptures, to remind Americans of their nation's history.⁷ She appeared on television in February of 1962 in "A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy" to explain the restoration to the public. She appeared endearingly shy, talking in her whispery voice. This TV special presented to the world a woman who cared about her family, carrying out the duties and responsibilities of home and country.

Jacqueline Kennedy's rise to fame and celebrity was not of her own choosing. She became famous for being the beautiful wife, and later widow, of a popular President. Unlike other famous women of her generation, such as Elizabeth Taylor, whose celebrity status was based on her outrageous lifestyle and beauty as

⁶Ellen Ladowsky, *Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis* (New York: Random House, 1997), 87.

⁷Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Wives: An Anecdotal History* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1988), 363.

much as her skills as an actress, Jacqueline Kennedy's celebrity was based on the man in her life, not on anything really remarkable that she had done in her own right. Consequently, she erased her virtuous image as Mrs. John F. Kennedy by remarrying. The American public was stunned and horrified, causing her popularity to come crashing down. They would not accept her as anything but the brave widow of President Kennedy, let alone the wife of a man who was his complete opposite by so many standards.

Kennedy, knowing how much the public loved her for remaining "true" to her slain husband's memory, married Aristotle Onassis anyway. Why did she take an action that would bring certain public disapproval? Robert Kennedy, President Kennedy's brother, was assassinated in Los Angeles on 5 June 1968. He was the person who had comforted and supported Jacqueline Kennedy after her husband's death. Since they had grown remarkably close, his death hit her particularly hard. After this tragedy, Mrs. Kennedy remarked, "I despise America, and I don't want my children to live here anymore. If they are killing Kennedys, my kids are the number one targets."⁸ Aristotle Onassis, who had provided her a safe, private haven in which to recuperate in August 1963 following the death of her son Patrick, was the perfect answer to her problems. With his immense wealth and power, he could protect her and her children and give them much needed privacy, especially with his army of 200 security

⁸In Christopher Andersen, *Jackie After Jack* (New York: William Morrow, 1998), 182.

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guards.⁹ The problem for the American public was that, in most ways, he was the antithesis of Kennedy's first husband. While John F. Kennedy was young and handsome, Onassis was old and ugly. He was not an American, but rather a Greek divorcee. He even had been arrested in the United States in February 1954 and charged with criminal conspiracy for illegally buying oil tankers.¹⁰ In the words of a seventy-year old retired bookkeeper: "She could have done better. To us she was royalty, a princess, and I think she could have married a prince. Or at least someone who looked like a prince."¹¹ In one simple act, Jacqueline Kennedy transformed herself from saint to despicable sinner.

During her marriage to Aristotle Onassis, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was portrayed as a spendthrift and a reckless woman. Aristotle Onassis was a shrewd businessman, having amassed close to a billion dollars in real estate, planes, ships, and art.¹² He owned Skorpios, a 500-acre island in the Ionian Sea, and the yacht *Christina*, both widely described in the press. The *Christina* reportedly featured forty-two telephones, faucets made out of gold, and a huge swimming pool, not to mention two El Greco paintings, a \$25,000 jade Buddha, and barstools covered with

⁹"The New First Lady of Skorpios," *Newsweek*, 28 Oct. 1968, 38.

¹⁰Willi Frischauer, "Jackie & Onassis—What Really Happened," *Good Housekeeping*, Aug. 1975, 36.

¹¹In Gloria Emerson, "Jacqueline Onassis at 45," *McCall's*, July 1974, 112.

¹²Linda Bird Francke, Seth Goldschlager, and Peter Mellas, "Legacy of a Golden Greek," *Newsweek*, 31 Mar. 1975, 32.

the foreskins of whales.¹³ He had additional homes around the globe, including a villa in Athens, a vacation home in Monte Carlo, a penthouse in Paris, and a hacienda in Montevideo.¹⁴ The couple regularly took exotic vacations to places like the Bahamas and Rome, as well as the routine flight between Greece and New York, where Kennedy Onassis still owned a fifteen-room apartment. This jet-setting woman, living ostentatiously in the lap of luxury was not the shy, selfless, and sacrificing mother the American public had come to respect.

Further proof, in the public's estimation, of Kennedy Onassis's turn to selfish materialism was her enjoyment of the lavish gifts her husband bestowed upon her. His wedding gift to her was \$1.2 million in jewelry, including two twenty-four-carat gold bracelets, a huge, heart-shaped ruby ring surrounded by diamonds, and a pair of ruby and diamond earrings that matched the immense ring.¹⁵ On her fortieth birthday, less than one year after their wedding, Onassis gave his wife a forty-carat diamond, one carat for each year of her life, estimated to cost between \$400,000 and \$1,000,000.¹⁶ In December 1969 *Ladies' Home Journal* published an article entitled "\$10,000,000 Jewels of Elizabeth Taylor and Jacqueline Onassis," which included a description of the many different pieces of jewelry Aristotle Onassis had given to his wife of, at that point, only fourteen months. Kennedy Onassis was so concerned with jewels that when she lost her

¹³"First Lady of Skorpis," 39-40.

¹⁴Liz Smith, "The New York Life of Jacqueline Onassis," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Feb. 1970, 56.

¹⁵"The Kennedys: Identity Crisis," *Newsweek*, 4 Nov. 1968, 42.

¹⁶"People," *Time*, 8 Aug. 1969, 35.

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wedding ring, she cried and Onassis had to console her.¹⁷ She did not weep during President Kennedy's funeral, yet she cried over lost jewelry. This was definitely not the brave, controlled First Lady of Camelot, but rather a materialistic, spoiled brat.

In addition to her obsession for jewelry were Kennedy Onassis's outrageous spending habits. Onassis gave her an allowance of \$30,000 a month to spend on whatever she liked, but he eventually cut it down to \$20,000 because she continually exceeded her limit.¹⁸ Still, \$20,000 was more than the average American made in an entire year. The \$60,000 sable coat, the 200 pairs of shoes she bought in a single outing, and the \$650,000 spent on a nine-day trip to Tehran, all noted in subsequent literature, were not written about in contemporary, popular periodicals. Other extravagant purchases, however, were detailed. Kennedy Onassis and her sister Lee Radziwill would often go shopping together in the most exclusive and expensive stores in New York, such as Lafayette on East 50th Street and Halston Ltd on 68th and Madison.¹⁹ Kennedy Onassis purchased mass quantities of furs, shoes, handbags, cosmetics, and antiques. In the first year of their marriage alone, the Onassises spent twenty million dollars, leading Fred Sparks to write *The \$20,000,000 Honeymoon: Jackie and Ari's First Year*, calculating that the couple spent an average of \$384,615.38 per week.²⁰

¹⁷Liz Smith, "\$10,000,000 Jewels of Elizabeth Taylor and Jacqueline Onassis," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1969, 142.

¹⁸Vivian Cadden, "Jacqueline: Behind the Myths," *McCall's*, July 1975, 119.

¹⁹Smith, "New York Life," 140.

²⁰Smith, "10,000,000 Jewels," 140.

It was as if Kennedy Onassis had no self-control or appreciation for anyone or anything beyond herself. She appeared to be the classic “shopaholic.” Although some journalists such as Gloria Emerson tried to present Kennedy Onassis as just a normal mother who took taxis rather than chauffeured limousines, even they discussed the lavish decorations in Kennedy Onassis’s apartment and the opulence of the *Christina*.²¹ Columnist Liz Smith especially tried to stress the normal aspects of Kennedy Onassis’s life, saying that she lived the “relatively simple life of any well-to-do New York matron,” yet even Smith devoted the majority of her article to Kennedy Onassis’s possessions, specifically the décor of her apartment, while noting that she had a maid, a cook, a nurse, and additional servants.²² As the marriage progressed, the couple routinely spent almost nine months out of the year apart, carrying out separate lives. It was clear to the American public that their relationship was not a love match. Onassis was Kennedy Onassis’s protector, while she was his trophy wife. Her habits confirmed the impression that she was a gold-digger who had cold-heartedly married Onassis for his money so that she could indulge in a decadent, hedonistic lifestyle.

The American public disapproved of more than just her self-indulgent materialism. She was also a “public sinner,” betraying her religion by marrying Onassis. A widowed Catholic, Kennedy Onassis violated church law by marrying the divorced Onassis. Onassis was Greek Orthodox, and the two were married in a Greek Orthodox ceremony. In an announcement covered

²¹Emerson, “Jacqueline Onassis at 45,” 91.

²²Smith, “New York Life,” 138-40.

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widely in Christian journals of the day, it was made clear by the Vatican that Kennedy Onassis could no longer receive the sacraments.²³ In the opinion of many Catholics, she had committed adultery by marrying Onassis, whose first wife was still alive.²⁴ Catholics chided Richard Cardinal Cushing, Archbishop of Boston, who defended the marriage by ridiculing assertions that Kennedy Onassis should be considered a public sinner.²⁵ As a result of the ongoing harassment by a public determined to denounce her as wanton, Cushing resigned at the end of the year. Even his status as bishop failed to protect him from the consequences of defending the despised Kennedy Onassis.

As Kennedy Onassis's spending habits began to take their toll on her relationship with her husband, she spent even more time in New York with her two children while he remained in Greece. There were rumors in the press that Aristotle Onassis was going to file for divorce, but when he died on 15 March 1975 in a Paris hospital, no legal proceedings had been initiated. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis received over twenty million dollars from his estate, placing her in a financially stable position as she started her life once again as a widow in New York.

Yet, Kennedy Onassis's life seemed to change focus from her previous materialism. Although she was by no means poor, her financial status was more constrained compared to the riches she had at her dis-

²³Barbara H. Kuehn, "Catholic Embarrassment Over Jacqueline Kennedy," *Christianity Today*, 8 Nov. 1968, 37.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵"Sequel to the Onassis Marriage," *Christianity Today*, 22 Nov. 1968, 41.

posal while married to Aristotle Onassis. She could not hide on Skorpios anymore, behind Onassis's small army of guards, or recklessly spend his money. She was now on her own. What else was she left to do but to get on better terms with the public, to become beloved once again? According to one relative, "She knows exactly what she wants, she's single-minded about it and she goes for it."²⁶ Jacqueline Onassis was determined to reclaim some of her previous exalted status. She began by giving the media a new focus. She would be more of a typical woman to whom regular Americans could relate—working, caring for her family, and becoming involved in charitable causes.

One of the first steps she took was to reinvent herself as a working woman. On 22 September 1975, she started as a consulting editor at Viking Press four days a week. For a salary of \$10,000 a year, she placed her own phone calls, made her own copies, and warmed her own coffee. Magazine stories proclaimed a "new" Jacqueline Onassis, who would no longer live in the shadow of her husbands, but would instead be her own woman.²⁷ Rather than focus almost exclusively on her still considerable expenditures, these articles were primarily dedicated to her work and family. When Kennedy Onassis's material goods were mentioned, they were discussed as an afterthought. *Ladies' Home Journal* was quick to point out that she

²⁶Paula Chin, Joe Treen, and Karen S. Schneider, "Camelot After Dark; Despite Pain and Humiliation the Kennedy Women Stood by their Men—Often at Great Personal Cost," *People*, 27 May 1991, 58.

²⁷Elizabeth Peer, Lisa Whitman, and Phyllis Malamud, "Jackie on Her Own," *Newsweek*, 29 Sep. 1975, 80.

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had not spent \$30,000 on clothes in 1975, but rather was now a pants and T-shirt kind of woman.²⁸

After leaving Viking, she began work at Doubleday in February 1978, reminding the public that she was still a hard-working woman. Working three days a week, initially as an associate editor at \$20,000 a year, she continued to be a pleasant co-worker, keeping the door to her “spartan space” always open.²⁹ This vision of Jacqueline Onassis stood in stark contrast to the woman who had relaxed on a spacious, 325-foot yacht, always trying to keep visitors out. The “new” Onassis also received praise from *Ms.* and *Publishers Weekly*, “serious” publications beyond the circle of magazines for middle-aged women that usually featured her.

Many mothers were entering paid jobs for the first time in the 1970s. As a member of the paid workforce herself, she was able to reconnect with the American public, especially women, by sharing a common experience. She explained in an interview with the feminist *Ms.* magazine, “There they [women] were, with the highest education, and what were they going to do when the children were grown—watch the raindrops coming down the windowpane?...Of course women should work if they want to.”³⁰ She was no longer the tragic widow or extravagant whore, with her identity determined by her husbands, but a woman with significant responsibilities. Although she would never be an average citizen, Onassis appeared more grounded and accessible. She could enjoy her three

²⁸Winzola McLendon, “The New Jackie,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Jan. 1976, 125.

²⁹“A Working Woman,” *People*, 18 June 1984, 97.

³⁰Gloria Steinem, “Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Talks About Working,” *Ms.*, Mar. 1979, 51.

million dollar beach house and continue getting her hair done at Kenneth's with impunity because she was performing paid work. Average citizens were now praising her, including a taxi driver who thought it was great that she worked even though it was not financially necessary.³¹ Entering the paid workforce was a major step in the rehabilitation of her image.

Even as she enjoyed the positive publicity generated by her new job, Jacqueline Onassis re-focused on her two children, who were eighteen and fifteen in 1975. Although her children had always been important, they seemed to take second place during her second marriage to her time spent in Greece and on her spending sprees. The "new" Jacqueline Onassis rekindled the mother-daughter bond with Caroline Kennedy, her eldest child. By 1986, an entire article was devoted to her approval of Caroline's Jewish fiancée, Edwin Schlossberg, emphasizing that she and her daughter agreed on wedding plans.³² Rather than the controlling mother of the bride who dictated every detail of the ceremony, she was the supportive parent behind-the-scenes. Following Caroline Kennedy's marriage, Jacqueline Onassis reportedly spoke to her by telephone often, visited her frequently, and doted on her daughter's three children.³³ She was no longer just a caring mother, but also a loving grandmother. In her relations with her son John F. Kennedy, Jr., she was portrayed as both a disciplinarian and a supporter. She advised him on his romances and studies,

³¹*Ibid.*, 52.

³²Sharon Churcher and Ellen Hawkes, "The Mother of the Bride," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Aug. 1986, 23-27.

³³Lester David, "Jackie Today," *McCall's*, Aug. 1988, 40.

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vetoing his decision to attend boarding school. When Kennedy graduated from prep school, she attended the ceremony, beaming as the proud mother.³⁴ However, when her son became interested in acting as a career, Onassis conveyed her displeasure, communicating what she felt was in his best interest.³⁵

The fact that her children turned out to be successful, well-adjusted adults, even after all the tragedies in their lives, was considered a testament to Jacqueline Onassis's maternal abilities, which were frequently praised in the press. She focused on being a more typical mother, bragging about her children, dealing with their problems, and giving motherly advice.³⁶ She had redeemed herself in the eyes of the average American as a giving, selfless mother.

Jacqueline Onassis also returned to her interest in historic preservation, serving as a board member of the Municipal Art Society. She led the "Landmark Express" train trip to gather support for the preservation of Grand Central Station, and the prevention of a proposed fifty-five-story office tower of steel and glass over the terminal.³⁷ Her association with Grand Central began in 1975, just as her marriage to Aristotle Onassis was unraveling. Whenever Grand Central was mentioned, her name also appeared, often accompanied by a quote explaining her involvement in this worthy cause. She also played an important role

³⁴Clyde Haberman, "A Kennedy Graduates," *New York Times*, 8 June 1979, C12, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

³⁵Caryl S. Avery, "Jackie, A Mother's Journey," *Ladies' Home Journal*, May 1989, 198.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 144-46.

³⁷"Celebrities Ride the Rails to Save Grand Central," *New York Times*, 17 Apr. 1978, D9, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

in obtaining landmark status for the Greek Revival buildings in New York's Snug Harbor, confirming her concern for preserving American culture, a subtle echo of the White House restoration project of 1962.

Jacqueline Onassis continued to rub shoulders with the rich and famous, but, so the American public would not object, she spent her money on charitable causes as well. Instead of attending events for social purposes only, she attended benefits for the Municipal Art Society and other worthy causes. She organized a dinner for the art society in honor of the artist Isamu Noguchi, serving as the gracious hostess, another similarity to her role as First Lady. Even her private dinner parties were smaller and less frequent than before. She was seen as a contributor to society, not just a voracious consumer.

Although people could relate to her through her job, her children, and her involvement in charitable organizations, it would always be her status as a Kennedy that was most endearing. Renewed involvement in the Kennedy family was another successful part of the rehabilitation of her image. She was involved in the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, attending a number of fund-raisers and dedications in her late husband's honor, and she also reached out to other Kennedys, utilizing her Onassis ties. She helped recruit Greek-Americans in support of her former brother-in-law Edward Kennedy during his presidential campaign, although she refused to speak on his behalf, limiting herself to handshakes.³⁸ She attended

³⁸Patricia Burstein, "A Handshake, A Whisper, A View of the Valentino: It's Jackie's Gentle Campaign for Ted," *People*, 17 Mar. 1980, 30-1.

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the marriage of her niece Sydney Lawford, and the wedding of another niece, Maria Shriver, to the actor Arnold Schwarzenegger. These renewed connections with the Kennedy clan helped to remind the public of her status as the beloved wife of her first husband, the martyr, and of the time when she basked in his reflected glory.

By the time of her death on 19 May 1994, Jacqueline Onassis's campaign to rehabilitate her image was so successful that she was internationally mourned and revered as one of the most celebrated women of the twentieth century. She had once again become a "saint" in the public's estimation, overcoming the disappointment and hatred engendered by her marriage to Aristotle Onassis. She was raised in high society and was never just an average citizen, but the American people found her down to earth as First Lady. They would not, however, accept Jacqueline Onassis, the rich, trophy wife of a Greek tycoon. Although in the later years of her life she dated Maurice Tempelman, another short, fat wealthy man, they never married, keeping their relationship very private. She had learned that for a former First Lady who was famous for being the wife of a popular man, remarrying was not acceptable, nor was spending huge amounts of money, unless she was employed.

After John F. Kennedy was assassinated, his widow told historian T. H. White to "rescue Jack from all the 'bitter people' who were going to write about him in history."³⁹ Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis also did not want to leave it to the biased court of public opinion to judge her life. She took the initiative, playing an active

³⁹T.H. White, "Camelot, Sad Camelot," *Time*, 3 July 1978, 46.

role in how she would be remembered. No one could ever forget her grace as First Lady or the shock when she became Mrs. Onassis. She could never totally control the press. However, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis knew that she had the ability to transcend previous press incarnations and define her life by her actions. By consciously focusing on her job, her role as mother, her commitment to the arts, and her first husband's memory as President, she remade her image. Although she was well bred and extremely wealthy, the average American could relate to her newly formulated life. She was no longer Jacqueline Onassis, the villain, or even Jacqueline Kennedy, the saint, but rather Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, a woman Americans could pity, love, and envy, yet respect all the same.