

Sarah v. JFK



Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin kicked off a national book tour today for her newly released “America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith and Flag.”

The tour comes one day after the 47th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic president and a man Palin charges with making religion such a private matter that it was “irrelevant to the kind of country we are.”

Here’s a snip from an AP review:

In a chapter on faith and public life, Palin addresses at length John F. Kennedy’s noted speech on religion during the 1960 campaign — a speech many saw as crucial to counter sentiment that his faith would hold undue sway over him if he became the nation’s first Catholic president.

“I am not the Catholic candidate for president,” Kennedy said at the time. “I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for president, who happens also to be a Catholic.”

Palin writes that when she was growing up, she was taught that JFK’s speech reconciled religion and public service without compromising either. But since she’s revisited the speech as an adult, she says, she’s realized that Kennedy “essentially declared religion to be such a private matter that it was irrelevant to the kind of country we are.”

She praises Mitt Romney, a Mormon, for not “doing a JFK” during his campaign for the 2008 GOP nomination. “Where Kennedy seemed to want to run away from religion, Mitt Romney forthrightly embraced it,” she writes. She attributes the gulf not just to the difference between the men, but to the distance the country has come since 1960. Now, she says, America is “reawakening to the gift of our religious heritage.”

Palin is not the first conservative to challenge Kennedy’s speech. Former Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania made similar remarks in September, saying he had

admired Kennedy's speech as a youth but later realized that "on that day, Kennedy chose not just to dispel fear, he chose to expel faith."

Historian Ted Widmer, who included the JFK speech in a Library of America anthology of the country's oratory, said he was surprised by Palin's comments.

"It's putting a negative spin on what was interpreted at the time as a sensible and uplifting message," said Widmer, himself a former speechwriter for President Bill Clinton. "JFK was trying to protect his own right to be a Catholic and to run for president."

Palin's potential presidential ambitions have been the subject of increasing chatter recently, with her every remark parsed for clues as to her 2012 plans. The former Alaska governor doesn't detail her plans, but speaks of a need for new leaders.

"We're worried that our leaders don't believe what we believe, that America is an exceptional nation, the shining city on a hill that Ronald Reagan believed it is," she writes. "We want leaders who share this fundamental belief. We deserve such leaders."