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## The home in 50 objects from around the world #43: JFK's rocking chair

*The rocker was just one of many attempts to ease the 35th US president's debilitating back pain*

By Rosalind Sykes

Impressions: 28,000,000



US presidents from Herbert Hoover to Barack Obama have sojourned at New York's opulent Waldorf Astoria. According to tradition, some have left keepsakes in the presidential suite, where a strange menagerie of items has accumulated, including Richard Nixon's wall sconces, Ronald Reagan's eagle-base table and John F Kennedy's upholstered rocking chair.

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The chair might seem an odd choice for Kennedy, the embodiment of modernity and vigorous youth. In 1961, aged 43, he became the youngest US president. Resembling a film star more than a politician, he seduced starlets and statesmen alike.

But the rocker speaks of another reality, one kept hidden by the Kennedys and gradually pieced together by researchers — that of a man navigating an era of civil unrest and nuclear threat through near-constant, debilitating pain.

On loan from the hotel to the JFK Museum in Hyannis, Cape Cod, the chair is one of several he owned to ease back pain from football and war injuries. He kept one at the White House, at Camp David, on Air Force One and at his summer home in Hyannis.

But the low seat, curved back and customised rubber-backed upholstery by Cape Cod local Larry Arata offered limited relief. Kennedy therefore submitted to a litany of treatments and surgery that worsened his health, detailed in a 2017 report by spinal neurosurgeons Glenn Pait and Justin Dowdy.

They included anaesthetic injections and “vitamin shots” laced with amphetamines from Max Jacobson, aka “Dr Feelgood”. (JFK told his brother Robert, “I don’t give a damn if it’s horse piss, it makes me feel better.”) In 1954, he had a lumbosacral fusion that led to a coma, during which he almost died and was read the last rites.

The chronic pain and drug cocktail had political consequences, suggest the authors, notably at the Vienna summit of 1961, after which Kennedy admitted that Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev “just beat the hell out of me”.

They concede it is possible that his death might have been prevented had Kennedy not been wearing a tightly laced back brace on November 22 1963. Without it, he might have slumped forward after Lee Harvey Oswald’s first shot, thus avoiding the second, fatal bullet to the head.

At Kennedy’s lying in state, it was Arata, the rocking chair upholsterer, who draped black fabric over the windows and chandeliers in the East Room of the White House.

It was the end of Camelot, and the end of JFK’s pain.

[jfkhyannismuseum.org](http://jfkhyannismuseum.org)

<https://www.ft.com/content/5891e024-251d-4a02-b88e-5bf3d5d2469f>