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A Thousand Days

Rees Baxter, James P.

JFK: A MEMOIR AND MORE

A THOUSAND DAYS: John F. Kennedy in the White House. By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. 1,087 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. $9.

By JAMES MacGREGOR BURNS

MORE than any other people, perhaps, Americans like to leave issues to the "verdict of history." When some problem seems too opaque or some leader too inscrutable, we comfort ourselves with the thought that some day the historians will decide the merits of the case or take the final measure of the man. The trouble is that historians never come in with a final verdict; usually they are a hung jury. History is written by the survivors—but new generations bring new survivors.

The great historian combines the feel and immediacy of the participant with the distance and perspective of the critic who can put events in their broadest context, tap wide sources of data and judgment, and enjoy all the blessings of hindsight. He can accompany the main actors down the rutted, twisting road and feel—as well as record—the bumps and turns. But he can also step back, and, with his fellow historians as his jealous and watchful constituency, he can gain a perspective that sees a man and his era against the long prologue and epilogue of events.

Such a historian is rare. I doubt that Arthur Schlesinger Jr., with all his self-confidence, expected at the outset that he would write virtually a history of the Age of Kennedy. He describes his work as a "personal memoir by one who served in the White House during the Kennedy years," and one notes that he faithfully records his own background (O.S.S., Stevenson aide, etc.) and his own White House activities (mainly foreign relations) as well as his chief's. His work ends up, however, as a remarkable feat of scholarship and writing, set in the widest historical and intellectual frame—and all the more astounding for having been written in something less than 18 months.

It is exciting in this book to see the historian take over, to see the mere chronicler of events, at first content to use his limited and staccato exposure to great events, give way to the scholar of contemporary America. Certainly Schlesinger's presence in the White House helped give him *Verstehen*—that quality of being able to feel one's way into complex situations and to know, if not how things were done, how they could not have been done.

Yet I think that Schlesinger's achievement is due less to his having been a member of the Kennedy White House than being a member of the Kennedy era. He shared with Kennedy, though from a different perspective, the worlds of Boston, Harvard, military power, state and national politics, convention rooms, Washington. Like Kennedy, he was born during World War I, came of age in the Great Depression, knew, admired and criticized the New Deal, rejected many of the old liberal stereotypes, suffered through the platitudes of the Eisenhower years and embraced the politics of modernity.

In this long volume Schlesinger has caught both the sweep and the ferment of the thousand days. He has chonicled Kennedy's long and skillful nomination campaign, the battle with Nixon, the feverish preparations for office, the scintillating inaugural days, and then the burdens of power—Latin America, Berlin, Southeast Asia, Africa, and always Moscow and Peking; and at home, economic recovery, the civil rights revolution, the fight with Big Steel, and all the rest. Nor does he ignore the disappointments—the burning humiliation after the Bay of Pigs, the frustrations on Capitol Hill, and the immovability—as Schlesinger sees it—of the bureaucracy in general and of the State Department very much in particular.

The chronicle is fresh, vivid and informative, but what the historian has done is to re-create the historical, political and personal context in which the events take place. He reaches back into the Truman and Eisenhower years to dissect the web

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Mr. Burns is James P. Baxter Professor of History and Public Affairs at Williams College. He wrote "John Kennedy: A Political Profile" and "Presidential Government."

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of forces that variously empowered and constrained the Administration. He has a sure grasp of the party rivalries, factional quarrels, intellectual and policy differences and quirks of personality in which issues and policies were entangled.

His closeness to White House aides, bureaucrats, and Congressional politicians has not dulled the author's ability or willingness to portray them in diamond-bright vignettes. The result is a continuously fascinating but almost encyclopedic treatment not only of the big events and of the less crucial but still instructive topics like Laos, the Congo, the Skybolt missile mixup, Santo Domingo (Kennedy came close to occupying it), Goa, and even relations with South Africa.

Thus the United Nations: "Not until I began making regular visits to that great glass tower glittering above the East River did I start to grasp the intensity of the UN life. It was a world of its own, separate, self-contained, and in chronic crisis, where a dozen unrelated emergencies might explode at once, demanding immediate reactions across the government and decisions

> (or at least speeches) in New York. It had its own ethos, its own rules and its own language: delegates would argue interminably over whether to 'note' or to 'reaffirm' a past resolution, to 'deplore' or 'regret' or 'condemn' a present action. . . . Stevenson, presiding over this hectic outpost in American diplomacy, had a far more arduous and exhausting job than most Washingtonians appreciated; and, because he had the grace of making everything look easy and the habit of disparaging his own success, people in Washington did not realize how superbly he was discharging an impossible assignment."

Nehru: By 1961 "Nehru, alas, was no longer the man he had once been. It has all gone on too long, the fathership of his country, the rambling, paternal speeches to his flock, the tired aristocratic disdain in New Delhi, the Left Book Club platitudes when his face was turned to the world. His strength was failing, and he retained control more by momentum of the past than by mastery of the present."

The difficulty of opposing the Bay of Pigs: "The advocates of the adventure had a rhetorical advantage. They could strike virile poses and talk of tangible things—fire power, air strikes, landing craft and so on. To oppose the plan, one had to invoke intangibles—the moral position of the United States, the reputation of the President, the response of the United Nations, 'world public opinion' and other such odious concepts."

Robert Kennedy: "When, to the general indignation of the bar and press, he was appointed Attorney General, he was widely regarded as a ruthless and power-hungry young man devoid of principle or scruple, indifferent to personal freedom or public right, who saw life in rigidly personal and moralistic terms. . . . And Bobby's public bearing—the ominous manner, the knock-the-chip-off-my-shoulder look, the stony blue eyes, clenched teeth, tart, monosyllabic tongue—did not especially dispel the picture of a rough young man suddenly given national authority. I do not know of any case in contemporary American politics where there has seemed to me a greater discrepancy between the myth and the man."

It is not accidental that these examples relate mainly to foreign affairs, for so does the book. Schlesinger, being "only irregularly involved" in domestic matters, felt that he had less to say about them. This conclusion stemmed from a mistaken premise, as I see it, that the author could describe best what he had most witnessed. Here again, Schlesinger the historian is not dependent on Schlesinger the White House aide.

He handles domestic policies and politics superbly when he finally comes to them, but the treatment is relatively too brief. Schlesinger makes perceptive judgments about Kennedy's relations with Congress, the radical right, various groups and personages of the left, the leadership of labor, the intellectuals—but there is simply not enough background and depth. Incredibly, this long book is not long enough. Or perhaps it should be in two or even three volumes to do justice to the Age of Kennedy.

What manner of man emerges from these pages? Clearly, Kennedy was a hero to Schlesinger, as he was, evidently, to all his friends and aides (we have yet to hear from his valet). Like other biographers, Schlesinger was struck by Kennedy's detachment, coolness, restraint, self-control, distaste for emotional display. But these qualities, he feels, overlay deep feelings, involvement, commitment.

THE President feared to make an unnecessary display of himself, to seem to be histrionic or corny. He saw no sense in knock-down and drag-out fights if he did not win them. "There is no sense," he said, "raising hell, and then not being successful. There is no sense in putting the office of the Presidency on the line on an issue, and then being defeated." He would rather compromise and win a bill than lose dramatically and win a heightened moral issue.

Kennedy regarded crowds as irrational, the author says. He did not want to play on a mob's emotions, as Franklin Roosevelt had done so brilliantly and demagogically in his Madison Square Garden speech at the climax of the election of 1936. He was fearful of the proposed march of civil rights forces on Capitol Hill (but pleased when the rally around the Lincoln Memorial turned out to be one of the most luminous moments in the nation's life). He violated his own restraint only once, in Berlin *("Ich bin ein Berliner!")* and was afterward worried about it. Why this fear of arousing mass feeling, of using popular emotion as a tool in politics?

The author finds a more basic reason for this quality than the usual explanations of rationalism or pragmatism. The "basic source may have been an acute and anguished sense of the fragility of the membranes of civilization, stretched so thin over a nation so disparate in its composition, so tense in its interior relationships, so cunningly enmeshed in underground fears and antagonisms, so entrapped by history in the ethos of violence." It was this kind of sensitivity that Kennedy brought to civil rights. His relation to this issue in the 1950's, the author suggests, was more a matter of intellectual and political commitment than of emotional identification.

By the 1960's American Ne-

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groes were in a state of semi-revolution. Kennedy used a wide array of executive powers, but he used them slowly and prudently, and he did not come to command the nation's mood and conscience, as Franklin Roosevelt had done in coping with protest born of depression. "A sweeping revolutionary force is pressed into a narrow tunnel," Martin Luther King complained. Only after the crises in Oxford and Jackson and countless other Southern towns did the President take his place in the Negro revolution.

Schlesinger feels that his timing was right—that the President could act only after the nation's attention was focused on civil rights. Some Negro leaders still believe that Kennedy should have moved earlier and more boldly—that the leader must set in advance the moral tone that will inform a people's perspective and in turn strengthen the President's hand.

History will continue to render "verdicts" on such questions, as we try to learn more about the interrelations of Presidential deeds, the people's moods and the political process. History will also bring new evaluations of Kennedy the man, as we hear more, for example, from the "Irish mafia" types who saw Kennedy's robust, earthy and less cerebral side. History will reassess both the Thousand Days and "The Thousand Days." But I will offer one man's verdict now. This is Arthur Schlesinger's best book. A great President has found—perhaps he deliberately chose—a great historian.

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