



In a Notebook

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Amid the sad furor over the Manchester book, there is the temptation to wonder what John F. Kennedy would have thought of it all. Such reflection inspired a former Washington correspondent to offer me a remembrance about Kennedy's view of history.

In the winter after the assassination, the Gridiron Club held its annual dinner and, when it was over, Kenny O'Donnell, the late President's dedicated deputy, sat around with some of the journalists. O'Donnell had already been besieged with offers to write a book, but he was still reluctant to commit himself.

He said each time he contemplated the project he recalled a peculiarly exasperating high-level conference in the Kennedy era. After tortuous discussion a decision was finally reached; when the chief participants had departed, the late President freely and somewhat profanely aired his irritation to O'Donnell. Then, O'Donnell recalled, JFK suddenly reverted to his familiar wry grin and remarked:

"You know, there is no history. Who in hell could purport to write what really happened tonight and what we've been saying here."

Kennedy, one gathers, was not referring to the issue of indiscretion—but to the difficulty of recording with precision the implausibility and frustration of some bureaucratic encounters.

O'Donnell is said to have offered a footnote of his own. Discussing any detailed portrait of the Presidency, he observed that it would probably be "improper" to recount "all the facts" about JFK's complex political operations.

"But if you tell a half-truth, what good does it do?" O'Donnell said.

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Speaking of history, there is a mystery story in the sequel to President Johnson's foreign-policy session at the White House last Friday. It is generally understood that the proposed U.S. letter

to U Thant authorizing him to "take whatever steps necessary" to achieve a Vietnam ceasefire was a major subject and that the President reached his decision over the weekend.

On Saturday morning the Washington Post carried a Page 1 story headlined: "Lodge Sees No Prospect of Viet Peace Talks Soon." It quoted the U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, who had attended the White House session, as disparaging any prospects of early negotiations.

Yet 48 hours later the U.S. was on record with its urgent plea to U Thant. Did Lodge misread the President's mind? Was he trying to downgrade any prospective move in advance to reassure his protege, Gen. Ky? Was he one of the unnamed officials who, after the Johnson-approved Goldberg letter was released, sought to discount its significance through well-circulated "leaks"?

Only one thing can be said with certainty. The coincidental conflict between Lodge's four words and the Administration's ensuing deeds hardly escaped the notice of those foreign journalists in Washington who revel in such signs of our split personality. Is Lodge our Ambassador to South Vietnam—or Ky's envoy to Washington?

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Another Christmas approaches; will it finally bring amnesty for Morton Sobell, who has already served more than 15 years in prison for his role in the Rosenberg case? I have never been persuaded that he was a victimized innocent. But he was essentially an appendage to the case. The late Judge Jerome Frank argued eloquently that he should have received a separate trial. And more than six years ago such anti-Communist figures as Sidney Hook, Dwight MacDonald and Norman Thomas, who did not question the conduct of his trial, urged his release on the ground that "10 years is an ample sentence for what Sobell actually did." They pointed out that there was no evidence of his link to atomic espionage; he was accused only of seeking military information for Moscow—then our wartime ally.

Now it is nearly 16 years. Sobell was officially eligible for parole in 1962; his case has to some degree been clouded by the tendency of some partisans to concentrate their efforts on the cry of frame-up rather than the fight for parole.

But the U.S. government should be wise and magnanimous enough to disregard diversionary issues. In this season of charity Sobell should not once again be the forgotten man.

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From the Insider's Newsletter:

"The coach of a Czechoslovakian girls' basketball team just back from Peking reports that every time the Chinese girls assembled at their end of the court, they would put Mao Tse-tung's picture or one of his books on the ball and swear an oath, with the referee presiding, to fight against imperialism and revisionism. Thus reinforced, the Chinese teams invariably won . . ."

Frankly, it sounds too simple. I tend to agree with Sinologist J. K. C. Turnbull that the triumphs are due to fundamentals: a modern Chinese basketball team is invariably made up of a left-of-center, two far-leftist forwards and two Red Guards.