

The Man Behind the Legend

No Stern King He, But Earthy,

11-18-73

Phila Dec 14
INQUIRY

Witty, Sometimes Vulgar

BENJAMIN C. BRADLEE

Executive editor of the Washington Post and a long-time friend of President Kennedy. Author of "That Special Grace," a reminiscence about Kennedy.

THE LEGENDS of Camelot and King Arthur were largely laid upon the land in the 12th Century by one Geoffrey of Monmouth, described in my Encyclopedia Britannica as a "reckless forger."

The legends of Camelot and John Fitzgerald Kennedy were largely laid upon the land in the 20th Century by his widow Jacqueline in an interview with the skilled, sensitive — and in this particular case, reluctant — journalist, Teddy White, in Life magazine the week after JFK was murdered.



BRADLEE

To reread the Arthurian legends

more than 900 years after they were written as a reporter in the Washington of Richard Nixon, is to boggle the mind. Especially that knightly fellowship of the round table — Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell, Colson, Dean, Magruder, Ziegler, Stans?

But my mind is also stretched more than somewhat rereading "For One Brief Shinning Moment ... Camelot" in the Dec. 5, 1963 issue of Life.

"At night before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records, and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record," White quoted Mrs. Kennedy. "The lines he loved to hear were: 'Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.'"

"... And it will never be that way again."

Perhaps it is unfair to hold a woman, fiercely bereaved, to the judgements reached in a moment of awful pain. Certainly, it is unfair to question her commitment made in the same interview: "I'm never going to live in Europe. I'm not going to 'travel extensively abroad.' That's a desecration. I'm going to live in the places I lived with Jack."

BUT MY POINT is simply that John F. Kennedy was no King Arthur, and if the Bundy's, McNamaras, Sorensens seem more noble or knightly than most of their successors, the Kennedy White House was no Camelot. The legend that he was and it was has come back to haunt them ... in the rash of critical re-examinations that began with the first-rate "The Best and the Brightest" and has continued in most of the 10th anniversary reprises of those thousand days, which have labeled John F. Kennedy as long on promise and short on performance.

That may well be history's ultimate judgment of the man and his accomplishments, though surely the durability of that sense of promise, as strong today as it was 10 years ago, will make the next generation of historians careful.

But the point is that's no way to look at Jack Kennedy ... through Camelot lenses. King Arthur comes through 900 years of history as some kind of faintly noble, humorless sap, uninvolved in the minutiae of living, free from such vital human frailties as anger, fault-finding, sarcasm.

Not to put too fine point on it, this was not John F. Kennedy as I remember him. What follows are anecdotes culled from conversations I had with Kennedy while he was President. These conversations were transcribed generally within 24 hours, always within one week. They prove, I suppose, whatever anyone wants them to prove. To me they prove that he was earthy, human, witty, quick, graceful, sometimes pretty, bright, sometimes vulgar, funny, irreverent ... lightyears removed from some Middle Ages king at a round table.

February 14, 1962

AT A WHITE HOUSE dance a few days before, the President had told me a few minutes after midnight that the swap of Soviet spy Colonel Abel for the American U-2





pilot Gary Powers had just been completed. I had told Phil Graham, publisher of the Washington Post, who in turn had told his night editor. The post had a two-hour worldwide beat, and the rest of the press was furious. The President said he was about to order an investigation into the Powers leak, but thought it over for 24 hours and came to the conclusion that he didn't have to. "Plucky (Pierre Salinger) gets such a kick out of tracing those leaks back to me," JFK said, "I have to be more careful." He said he had blown his stack about the leak on the Cuban embargo and ordered Salinger to spare no effort in finding out who leaked that one. Salinger worked like hell for two days, finally reported back to the President that he had found the culprit.

JFK (eagerly): "Who was it?"

Salinger (gleefully): "You."

JFK (Crestfallen): "What do you mean?"

in turn had told his night editor. The post had a two-hour worldwide beat, and the rest of the press was furious. The President said he was about to order an investigation into the Powers leak, but thought it over for 24 hours and came to the conclusion that he didn't have to. "Plucky (Pierre Salinger) gets such a kick out of tracing those leaks back to me," JFK said, "I have to be more careful." He said he had blown his stack about the leak on the Cuban embargo and ordered Salinger to spare no effort in finding out who leaked that one. Salinger worked like hell for two days, finally reported back to the President that he had found the culprit.

JFK (eagerly): "Who was it?"

Salinger (gleefully): "You."

JFK (Crestfallen): "What do you mean?"

Salinger: "Didn't you tell (Sen. George) Smathers? Well, George told some friend of his on the Tampa Tribune."

February 14, 1962

O N VIETNAM: "The trouble is, we are violating the Geneva Agreement; not as much as the North Vietnamese are, but still. Whatever we do, we have to do in some kind of secrecy." He foresees the situation as fraught with political danger.

"... You can always find some broken-down Englishman or some NBC stringer to knock anything. I don't get all this crap..."

—President John F. Kennedy

"The Republicans want it both ways in Vietnam," he said. "That's the privilege of the party not in power. It's just like Korea. We should have taken the enemy across the Yalu, according to the Republicans, but it was always a Democratic war. Now the Republicans want us to defeat Communism in Vietnam by any means, but when we try to do it quietly, they howl that they are not being kept informed and that must mean we are not doing enough. Diem is Diem ... and the best we've got."

March 3, 1962

O N SECRETARY OF DEFENSE Robert S. McNamara: "He's one of the few guys around who, when you ask him if he has anything to say and he hasn't, says 'no.' That's rare these days."

March 29, 1962

O N NEWSWEEK'S coverage of Jackie Kennedy's trip to India. "That wasn't one of your better efforts, was it? She's really broken her ass on this trip, and you can al-

ways find some broken-down Englishman or some NBC stringer to knock anything. I don't get all this crap about how she should have been rubbing her nose in the grinding poverty of India. When the French invite you to Paris, they don't show you the sewers. They take you to Versailles. When we have distinguished visitors, we take them to Mount Vernon. We don't take them to some abandoned coal mine in West Virginia. Ken Galbraith (then U.S. ambassador to India) told me that Jackie took all the bitterness out of our relations with the Indians. If I had gone there, we would have talked about Kashmir and Goa, but Jackie did a helluva job."

March 31, 1962

O N THE NEWS that his brother Teddy had been involved in a cheating episode while a student at Harvard. "It won't go over with you WASPS. They take a very dim view of looking over someone else's exam paper. They go in more for stealing from stockholders and banks."

March 31, 1962

O N THE APPOINTMENT of Byron White as justice of the Supreme Court. "Whizzer was just the kind of guy I wanted on the Supreme Court. Freund (Professor Paul Freund of Harvard Law School) was the other choice, but it came down to a question of what the court needed at this time. I just felt it did not necessarily need at this time in history a legal scholar. What it needed was a man who understood the country, what it was about, and where it was going. He has led a broad life; he has had wide experience, and he is also an intellectual. And his judgment is good."

April 10, 1962

O N A NEWSWEEK story about the liberals who were criticizing him. He liked the story, asked who wrote it, but was worried about how Arthur Schlesinger would take the paragraph which has the President saying "boy, when those liberals start mixing into policy, it's murder." The President asked me ... "with your well-known tact" ... to let Arthur know that it was somebody else who said it. "Tell him it was Kenny (O'Donnell, JFK's appointments secretary). What breaks their (the liberals') ass, is that 78 percent popularity index."

June 14, 1962

JFK TOASTING his brother, the attorney general. "I was talking to (Thomas F.) Patton (president of Republic Steel) this afternoon, and telling him what a sonofabitch he was, and he was proving it, and Patton said to me, 'Why is it that all the telephone calls of all the steel executives are being tapped?' And I told him that I thought he was being wholly unfair to the attorney general, and that I was sure that wasn't true. He asked me why the income tax returns of all the steel executives in all the country were being perused. And I told him that, too, was wholly unfair, that the attorney general wouldn't do such a thing. And then I called the attorney general, and asked him why he was tapping the telephones of all the steel executives, and the attorney general told me that was wholly

untrue . . . but of course, Patton was right." Bobby Kennedy interrupted from the floor, saying "They were mean to my brother. They can't do that to my brother."

December 17, 1962

ON HIS TELEVISION interview with Sander Vanocur, William Lawrence and George Herman.

"Pretty good, what? Well, I always said when we don't have to go through you bastards we can really get our story over to the American people."