

## BOOKS IN GENERAL

## The Life and Death of Kennedy

CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN

In Britain one is, I suppose, either a politician or not; in America the line is not so clear. There, the cabinet-member or trusted adviser of one government does not usually go into opposition on the fall of that government; he goes back into private life, often with hope of returning to politics when the government changes again. Normally, such hopes hinge on the alternations of the parties in power. At present it is not so much a question of Democrat or Republican; there is an air of *fin de république* around; a dynastic loyalty stirs; the servants of the murdered Caesar have much good to say of young Octavian. John Kennedy, Mr Schlesinger\* tells us, 'was particularly proud of his brother, always balanced, never rattled, his eye fixed on the ultimate as well as on the immediate.' 'Bob's unique role,' says Mr Sorensen† in his first chapter, 'is implicit in nearly every chapter that follows.' And Mr Sorensen also reminds us of a pertinent observation made by John Kennedy in his senatorial days: 'Just as I went into politics when Joe died, if anything happened to me tomorrow my brother Bobby would run for my seat.'

We can hear him running now, if we listen; Schlesinger and Sorensen are listening. Nothing in either of these important and valuable books is inconsistent with the hypothesis that both authors expect to serve, before long, in the administration of President Robert Kennedy. I believe that this expectation exists, is reasonable and honourable, and is a limiting factor on the candour, and therefore the value to the public, of both books. Mr Sorensen has written a dry book, even a dull one; he could certainly produce a blaze if he chose, but his fires are banked; there is nothing in these sober pages that could embarrass or hamper a future Secretary of State. Granted the length of the book, the subjects treated, and the considerable amount of information conveyed, this feat is in itself a proof of Mr Sorensen's formidable talents.

Mr Schlesinger, on the other hand, is entertaining, easy, sometimes witty; there is a touch of Pepys, of Boswell, even of Pooter about him, as he revels in it all. He is too much the writer, the don, even the ham, to be capable of Mr Sorensen's iron discretion. So much the better Mr Schlesinger's book, so much the more remote, I suspect, Mr Schlesinger's person from the future throne. Happy consequences, both.

*A Thousand Days* has been much condemned, in America, for its 'indiscretions', and notably for disclosing that Kennedy planned to drop Dean Rusk ('Drop Rusk on Hanoi,' said one of the peppier placards at the last Washington march). All indiscretions are indiscreet - 'if he did it once he may do it again' - yet some indiscretions have an in-built teleological discretion at their core. This

particular disclosure is a flaming indiscretion in the view of the Johnson administration since it diminishes what is called the 'credibility' of an already sufficiently improbable Secretary of State. But what is scandalous under Johnson, damaging to Johnson, may be helpful to the second Kennedy, and pardoned by him, with the obvious reservations. In any case, entertaining as the book is, it certainly could have been much more entertaining: there are moments when one seems to hear

the muffled struggle as some lively anecdote is suppressed for the time being. Nothing is here that could hurt any Kennedy candidature, no scarves are plucked from Caesar's images.

Not that that particular Caesar had any real need of scarves. Both these books on Kennedy, which complement each other, record the emergence of an unmistakably great man: a powerful mind and indomitable will at work, steadily divesting themselves of the inherited and unnecessary, and beginning, towards the end, to master the multiple, unruly energies of the greatest power in history. The natural momentum of this power-system is towards world-domination: throughout the world 'power-vacuums' 'have' to be filled, dependents advised or admonished, potential enemies bought, besieged or destroyed. This sheer momentum dragged Kennedy through the Bay of Pigs and left him, on the far side, a sadder, dirtier and very much wiser man.

That salutary fiasco shattered, as these books show, all the idols of the Establishment - the Joint Chiefs, the State Department, and especially the CIA - and led Kennedy to depend increasingly on his own judgment, and on those whom he chose to consult informally. The momentum remained: he sought, with increasing success, to control it. That the attempted installation of Russian rockets in Cuba was answered not by invasion but by selective blockade, is proof of the degree of control he had won. What the momentum will do when not under the control of a human mind we have seen in the case of the Dominican Republic, invaded on a Texan reflex. Mr Sorensen's account of the Cuban missile crisis is sober, detailed and lucid; it is also a first-hand account and thereby to be preferred to Mr Schlesinger's. In the first Cuban crisis Mr Schlesinger was present for the critical decisions, and Mr Sorensen was not; in the second Cuban crisis Mr Sorensen (working closely with Robert Kennedy) was involved in shaping the decisions, and Mr Schlesinger was not. As Mr Schlesinger says, President Kennedy grew while in office.

It should be impossible to read Mr Sorensen's account of those fateful 13 days without

immense admiration for the President's combination of nerve and prudence, his concern for leaving a way out open to his adversary, his refusal to posture during the events or to gloat after them.

Did I think so at the time? No. I did not. I resembled in this respect 'the British' who, Mr Schlesinger says, greeted Kennedy's speech - announcing the presence of the missiles - 'with surprising scepticism'. Mr Schlesinger, of all people, has no call to be 'surprised' that people should treat with scepticism American announcements about Cuba. In this very book he himself describes the miasma of mendacity which the American official agencies spread around their Bay of Pigs operation. He himself played an active part in the creation of that miasma: in response to a challenge from the *New York Times* - arising from discrepancies between

\* *A Thousand Days*. By ARTHUR SCHLESINGER Jr. *Deutsch*. 55s.  
† *Kennedy*. By THEODORE SORENSEN. *Hodder & Stoughton*. 63s.

the version given in *A Thousand Days* and announcements of his own at the time of the Bay of Pigs - he has admitted (on Thanksgiving Day, 1965) that he lied to the public about the scale and nature of that operation. He did so in the national interest, of course, but the trouble about that is that one never knows when the national interest may not again require such a sacrifice.

I heard the late Adlai Stevenson make his statement to the Political Committee of the United Nations, explaining the authentically and uniquely Cuban nature of the 'revolution against Castro': this statement relied for its facts on what is now admitted to be the faked evidence of the CIA and for its ideology on Mr Arthur J. Schlesinger Jr's doctrine of 'The Revolution Betrayed'. One of the odder things about that shadowy world of credible and incredible images in which Mr Schlesinger's mind sometimes likes to move is that Harvard, always turns out to be the best judge not only of how a revolution in a place like Cuba should be run, and of when it has been 'betrayed', but also of how a Cuban counter-revolution should be run and presented. Thus Mr Schlesinger tells us how the unfortunate émigrés in whose name the CIA ran the invasion prepared a manifesto to their compatriots and supporters. They addressed themselves, quite sensibly from their point of view, I should have thought, to those who had lost as a result of Castro's victory and Batista's fall: 'the foreign investor, the private banker, the dispossessed property-owner.' Their manifesto had very little to say, Mr Schlesinger points out reprovingly, to 'the worker, the farmer or the Negro'. Mr Schlesinger therefore scrapped this insufficiently Cuban and inadequately revolutionary document and invited two Latin American specialists from Harvard to produce something more authentic. Shortly

afterwards the Cubans who had failed to produce a manifesto capable of arousing Harvard were simply shut away in the deserted airbase of Opa-Locha while revolutionary propaganda, about which they were not consulted, continued to be issued in their name by a public relations expert employed by the CIA. It is disappointing that Mr Schlesinger does not tell us how 'the Negro' in Cuba responded to the calls of freedom coming from Florida.

After the sinister buffooneries of the Cuban crisis of 1961, it is in no way surprising that when the 1962 crisis broke, according to Mr Schlesinger, 'the British Ambassador, mentioning the dubious reaction in his own country, suggested the need for evidence.' This time the evidence was there: it was the Russians who were lying and who had to climb down.

By the end of the second Cuban crisis Kennedy had little more than a year to live. He did not use his time in exploiting the immense 'Cold War' advantages which were his once the Russian cargo-ships had turned back and the missile-sites had been dismantled: he used his time and his advantage to re-examine the assumptions he had inherited and to seek accommodations, tolerable not only for America but for the rest of the world. He worked for and achieved the test-ban treaty; he began to feel his way, as these books show, towards a new relation with Castro's Cuba; Castro himself observed to Jean Daniel, in the autumn of 1963, that the President had 'come to understand many things over the past few months'. On Vietnam, too, a problem on which, as Mr Schlesinger observes, he had hitherto had

'little time to focus', he began towards the end to concentrate his attention. Kennedy was clear at least on one important principle which his successors have ignored: 'The war in Vietnam could be won only so long as it was *their* war. If it were ever converted into a white man's war we would lose as the French had lost a decade earlier' (Schlesinger). He planned to see Ambassador Lodge on Sunday, 24 November, 'to discuss his most vexing worry, Vietnam'. But on Friday, 22 November, the President who had 'come to understand many things' was murdered. '*Es una mala noticia*,' said Castro.

Who killed Kennedy? Mr Schlesinger does not attempt this question. But Mr Sorensen's comments are of interest, coming from so discreet and far-sighted a man. He pays the ritual tributes to the Warren Commission's 'painstaking investigation', accepts also 'the conclusion that no plot or political motive was involved'. But in his summing-up he also uses some less orthodox words: 'we can never be absolutely certain whether some other hand might not have coached, coaxed or coerced the hand of President Kennedy's killer.' Long before President Johnson's successor is inaugurated it will have been seen, I believe, that this observation of Mr Sorensen's was wiser than his endorsement of the Warren Commission Report. Mr Mark Lane has

shown me the proofs of his forthcoming book, provisionally entitled *Rush to Judgment*, which is a critique of the Report, based on a detailed study of the published evidence, supplemented by private inquiry. In an argument of devastating, cumulative force, Mr Lane demonstrates that in case after case the Commission ignored or twisted the evidence before it, in order to reach a pre-ordained conclusion, and that, in particular, it ignored a substantial body of evidence which seemed to point in the direction of conspiracy. The details of this cannot be discussed here and now; there will be ample opportunity to discuss them when *Rush to Judgment* appears in a few months' time. When it does appear, I believe it will be demonstrated that the Warren Report bears the same relation to the facts about Kennedy's assassination as Adlai Stevenson's report to the UN bore to the reality of the Bay of Pigs.