

Not the least of the wonders of Robert Kennedy is that more than almost anyone else he understood both what America had become and what America could be, and that he set out to change not just specific policies but the way policies were made. He knew a great deal about the curious, contorted, non-ideological reality of power in the United States, understood it and decided to try to increase the influence of people some of whom had never really had any, and others of whom had barely noticed that they were losing what influence they had.

He had managed his brother's transactions with the political warlords whose help was necessary to put together a Presidency -- the operatives from businesses, unions, city machines, the media, and racial jive artists getting their "share of the action," and the rest. He knew the world of patronage and payoffs as well as he knew the world of slogans and issues and egos, and when he wasn't trying to reform something he was trying to use it. He dealt in jobs for uncles of Democratic committeemen, with dollars for minority ministers and saloon keepers and undertakers to run "registration drives," with estates for properly-connected lawyers to probate; dealt with these attractions of American politics with the same magnetic detachment that he reserved for reformers agitated about whatever revisions of the national agenda had currency at the moment.

He said he could breathe better north of the Bronx line where the air was freer, but he knew that even up there the toastmasters of Kiwanis luncheons and hostesses at Hadassah coffees were more likely to support him if they were stroked personally and helped with their sons' problems with the draft.

He made his way through these worlds that we all knew something about, first for his brother and later for himself, the celebrated ruthlessness concealing the reticence and humor that might have seemed weakness to people whom experience had taught him responded mostly to power.

But he knew as well about worlds the rest of us didn't know about -- worlds situated, as it were, above invisible barrage balloons that shield those below from glimpsing too clearly whatever might be influencing events from far overhead. And the more he learned about these shadowy forces, the more troubled he became.

He respected and wanted power too much to agonize over the necessary accommodations with the corruptions normal to the human condition, but what he discovered about the extent to which hidden influences affected the nation stunned and engaged him.

His early education must have been slow -- whiffs from some of his father's associations, McClellan Committee run-ins with intransigent figures invoking constitutional

strictures, and protected by high connections and endless quantities of untraceable cash.

Bullying and influence peddling, racketeering with roots deep in American life, he understood. Like Tom Dewey and Estes Kefauver, he set out to expose the worst of it, to try to arouse the public and the government, and so to reduce its scope. But somewhere along the way he discovered that the uses of illicit power went beyond buck-chasing, beyond bullying mom-and-pop stores, even beyond owning a few politicians here and there; and he decided that this power had become a threat to democratic process itself. The zeal of his hostility to this threat was to cost him the trust of some who saw in this zeal a greater threat to democratic process than they could detect in what seemed a few corrupt union officials.

He wrote a book, The Enemy Within, and those who thought the book was designed mostly to trumpet his own ambitions found in its fury a confirmation of their suspicion that he was in fact not very committed to democratic process, at least not where individual liberties stood in the way of his ambitions.

Even friendlier observers found the book overdrawn, a bit fanatic. A decade later it would sound more prophetic than fanatic; but by then Robert Kennedy knew that the source of the threats to democracy was much broader than he had realized when he wrote the book, and that those threats had become much more powerful over the years.

Above all, he had come to know that the word "threat" itself was misleading, because power exercised is not a "threat" but a fact.

Then suddenly he was the Attorney General, the chief of law enforcement, and he began to poke beyond the known parameters of illicit power, to become an explorer in the unknown blue yonder above the barrage ballons. Soon he was after Hoffa and Marcello, the Capo of New Orleans; and then after other Capos, other unions, other institutions -- on to Chicago, and Miami, and Las Vegas; and early on, when most people were just beginning to notice the charm and style that were known as Camelot, he was already into the soupy brew of exiles, gangsters, intelligence agents, and ideologues of all kinds that led to and from the Bay of Pigs. Always at hand were the peculiar and sometimes unfathomable workings of J. Edgar Hoover, ^{his} the field Marshall and presumed chief ally ^{in the} of his wars both to secure civil rights for racial minorities and to protect the interests of the general public by whittling away at an amorphous empire whose webs and tentacles stretched across the land and reached equally into its penthouses and alleyways -- an empire with many czars and would-be czars, not all of them known even to one another.

From these adventures emerged an Attorney General determined to stem the drain of power to ^{mysterious} invisible forces, working with a President too new, too narrowly elected, too vulnerable to risk head-on the consequences of his desire

to fire Hoover and cast the CIA "to the winds." And somewhere along the way started a new phase in the accelerating education of Robert Kennedy -- a stumbling across unexpected people in hidden alliances in high places, the uncovering of overlapping clandestine interests and operations; and so to a dawning glimpse of the full enormity of the unknown, an invisible empire allied to parts of an invisible government. Could anyone, even a President and his Attorney General brother, master anything so cloaked, so ubiquitous, so complementary and unreachable -- icons and hit men in holy league against communism; parts of Hoover, and Roselli and Giancana, and sometimes Allen Dulles; Howard Hughes and more money than most governments, John Rooney running the House subcommittee that financed Immigration, Commerce, Justice and the FBI; pension funds and real estate developers, Teamsters and Longshoremen, journalists and entertainers and folk heroes; more paleolithic than monolithic, built on greed and mistrust, battling over turf and spoils, scorpions in spidery embrace for fear of mutual extinction -- who knew where it all started or how far it all reached, must less how it could be tamed or its power balanced?

But it was clear where to begin, and Robert Kennedy began: from 40 underworld figures targeted for prosecution to 2300, a 400% increase in one year in the organized crime and rackets section of the Justice Department -- from

power, but rather from a great optimism about America. It was his central conviction that if people couldn't be roused to try to make a difference in what he saw as the effort to "reclaim" their country, they would make a difference anyway by not trying.

He knew more about the problems of reclaiming the country than any of his contemporaries. He understood the complexities and absurdities and paradoxes; almost alone he saw the nature of the lassoes that were hobbling the machinery of democracy, and he set out to weaken the hobblers and strengthen the hobbled. He must have thought of his brother even more than we understood at the time, and wondered if he would be able to do any more in this effort than his brother had. It was inevitable and magnificent that he decided to try.

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Robert Kennedy's death, like the Presidents, was mourned as an extension of the evils of senseless violence; events moved on, and the profound alteration that these deaths and the death of Dr. King brought in the equation of power in America was perceived as random, a whimsical fate inconveniently interfering in the workings of democracy.

What is odd is not that some people thought it was all random, but that so many intelligent people refused to believe that it might be anything else. Nothing can measure more graphically how limited was the general understanding of what is possible in America.