

Brief Shining Moments

Christopher Hitchens on Donkey Business in the White House

IN ARTHUR SCHLESINGER'S court history, *A Thousand Days*, John F. Kennedy in the White House, which might without unfairness be called the founding breviary of the cult of JFK, there appears the following vignette. Schlesinger had been asked to carpenter a 'White Paper' justifying Washington's destabilisation of Cuba, in which the high-flown rhetoric of the New Frontier might form a sort of scab over the fouler business of empire. This task he readily performed, scampering back to the Oval Office for a chat with the divine one:

As we finished, I said: 'What do you think about this damned invasion?' He said wryly: 'I think about it as little as possible.' But it was clear, as we talked, that he had of course been thinking about it a good deal. In his judgment, the critical point — the weak part of the case for going ahead — lay in the theory that the landings would touch off a mass insurrection against the regime. How unpopular was Castro anyway? I mentioned a series written by Joseph Newman, who had just visited Cuba for the *New York Herald Tribune*, citing a piece which reported the strength of sentiment behind Castro. Kennedy said quickly: 'That must have been the fourth piece — I missed it. Could you get it for me?' I sent it over that evening. In a short while he called back to ask that I talk to Newman and obtain, as hypothetically as possible, his estimate about Cuban response to an invasion.

Allowing for Schlesinger's retrospective, self-serving grace notes (one has to love the placing of the word 'wryly'), a conversation something like this one must have taken place in March 1961, just a few weeks after the bombastic, menacing 'Ask not...' inaugural address, and very shortly before the invasion itself. And even though Schlesinger was busily putting the arm on the press on Kennedy's behalf — persuading the *New Republic*, for example, to kill an accurate story about the training of Cuban mercenaries in Miami — he does want us to understand that he was always, privately, opposed to the folly of the Bay of Pigs. Let us suppose, then, that JFK had been hit by a bullet the day after he asked to read the Newman despatches. Let us further suppose that Lyndon Johnson, finding the plans already in place, had authorised the invasion of Cuba. There would now be a herd of revisionist historians and propagandists, all assuring us that if he had lived, 'Jack' would never have allowed the CIA and the Joint Chiefs to do anything so barbarous and stupid. Why, just the night before he fell to an assassin, he was wryly reconsidering...

I am not merely speculating here. During the last fresher of Kennedy-era retrospectives, there appeared a book also by a man named Newman, entitled *JFK and Vietnam*. John Newman is a minor military historian who unearthed some papers showing that Kennedy had a one-point-and-a-contingency plan for withdrawal from Indochina. He became the house intellectual on the Oliver Stone movie *JFK*, and his work was much cried up by the Schlesinger school of apologetics. Kennedy might have started the Vietnam War, covertly committed men and resources to the war, argued forcefully for the symbolic importance of the war — but would have called it all off had he been re-elected. So the war as we knew it, the actually-existing war, so to speak, was all the fault of LBJ in spite of (go softly on this

bit) his exclusively Kennedy-picked gang of warmongering advisers, not exempting the saintly Bobby.

There is no arguing with this kind of junk thinking. It all depends on an auto da fé among the intellectualoids. As he did so brilliantly with *Libra* a decade ago, Don DeLillo has caught the tone of unwholesome adoration in his aptly-titled *Underworld*, and put it into the caustic mouth of Lenny Bruce, found here delivering a monologue during the Cuban missile crisis: 'Kennedy makes an appearance in public and you hear people say, I saw his hair! Or, I saw his teeth! The spectacle's so dazzling they can't take it all in. I saw his hair! They're venerating the sacred relics while the guy's still alive.' Libertarians and anarchists tell us that the problem with humans is not the will to command, but the will to obey, and Lenny Bruce was, rightly, expressing contempt for the audience and not the demagogue. However, the charming Kennedy brothers conducted most of their business in secret and by deceit, so that much of the dirty work was done sub fusc. It has taken nearly four decades to establish the following facts beyond doubt.

Their political careers were bought for them by a nasty old patriarch with a pronounced sympathy for Fascism and a strong underworld connection.

They turned instinctively towards other crime families when there was any need for 'wet jobs' or ballot-rigging at home or abroad.

They were willing to risk nuclear warfare even for relatively short-term domestic purposes.

For these reasons, whenever I see a grinning television anchor describe the Kennedy gang as 'American Royalty', I nod in silent assent. Nor can one object, except aesthetically, to the silly term 'Camelot'. Mrs Kennedy did indeed tell William Manchester, for a fawning profile that he wrote just after the assassination, that her late husband — who loathed the classical music soirées that she arranged at the White House for artists like Pablo Casals — had thoroughly enjoyed the mediocre musical written by Lerner and Loewe where, 'for one brief shining moment', King Arthur had enjoyed absolute power over his knights. (And Sir Lancelot over their women.) You might think that an invocation of mythical yet absolute monarchy would put bow-tied American scholars and editors on their guard. But you would be dead wrong: 'Camelot' is always cited without a breath of irony.

One day I am going to drop everything and think exclusively about America and its celebrated 'loss of innocence'. I have read

that the country lost said innocence in the Civil War, in the Spanish-American War, in the First World War, during Prohibition, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, at the McCarthy hearings, in Dallas, in Vietnam, over Watergate, and in the discovery (celluloided by Robert Redford in *Quiz Show*) that the TV contests in the Eisenhower era were fixed. This list is not exhaustive. Innocence, we were recently and quakingly informed, was lost again at the bombing of Oklahoma City. Clearly, a virginity so casually relinquished is fairly easily regained — only to be (damned) mislaid once more. The same compound of the credulous and the ahistorical is to be noticed in the newest pile of Kennedy-era books. For the baby-boomers, the Kennedy-Nixon years represent the time when, for them at least, politics became vivid and real when, to borrow Auden's lapidary words, the menacing shapes of our fever were precise and alive. And it's fair to say that nobody will be poring over, for example, the Reagan-Mondale debates, a decade from now. Still less the Bush-Dukakis duel, and least of all the utter post-political vacuity that has descended since Bill Clinton became able (with the help of a fragment of archival footage) to proclaim himself the heir to a styrofoam Round Table and — one is forced to add — all the vulgar perks that went with it.

As with the flickering film shot by the accidental tourist Abraham Zapruder in Dallas on 22 November 1963, there exists a persistent and irrational desire to spoil back and see what really happened and also, as if halting the film might somehow restore or deflect the event — what might have

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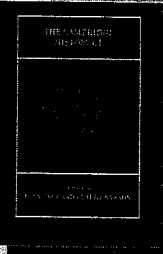
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the corn islands, their sweet songs, wild doings and brutal clearance by the Earl of Dunmore's agents.

My love the lovely island
Where the corn would grow

as a Pabbay woman called it in a song she made, is now owned by a Lloyd's broker 'for a help with his taxes'.

David Craig

Burton-in-Kendal

Rereading the Sonnets

Having read *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* from cover to cover (against Helen Vendler's advice), I believe there are disturbing implications in her approach, outlined in Tom Paulin's review (*LRB*, 22 January). Her reading and commentary rest on two pillars. The first is her premise that each sonnet must be read as 'a contraption made of "words"': Paulin approvingly quotes her: 'I do not regard as literary criticism any set of remarks about a poem which would be equally true of its paraphrasable propositional content.' The second is her shift of emphasis from the opening line to the closing couplet, to which she gives a primacy of place in the Sonnets which is revolutionary. For the common reader, these closing couplets have sometimes seemed artificially tagged on endings dictated by the structural constraint of the sonnet form, sometimes perfunctory, exit lines, such as, we find in the plays, and occasionally, marvellous, transcendent resolutions of the contrary pull of the emotions in the preceding 12 lines. For Vendler, the couplets are not just the terminus ad quem of the Sonnets but it would seem, their very raison d'être. For this reason, she constructs an elaborate edifice of keywords, 'coupleties', 'defective key words' when the key word does not occur in the couplet, and 'coupleties of a hidden sort', which can be discovered only by 'noticing some anagram, or collocation, of identical letters within words. This connects with a third tenet, a proposed disjunction between the historical Shakespeare who wrote these poems and 'Shakespeare's speaker', a fictive self. In speaking about the relation of quatrain to couplet, one must distinguish the fictive speaker from Shakespeare the author. A subsidiary point is the emphasis given to the Quarto text, especially to Elizabethan spelling and typography, 'for these are essential to Vendler's view that the sonnets involve an elaborate, self-delighting play on sounds; anagrams and reversed and scrambled letters, and on rhymes which are purely visual'. The flavour of the whole enterprise can be seen in the commentary on sonnet 29. In its absorption in Shakespeare's joyous play with sounds, what the commentary entirely omits is the play on the meanings of the key word 'state'. The poem begins in abject despair ('I all alone beweep my outcast state'), where 'state' means 'condition, manner of existing', or even possibly, 'a dirty, disorderly or untidy condition'. Then, as the memory of love returns, the speaker is transformed from an outcast into a man so 'wealthy' that he scorns to change his 'state' - status, high-rank, pomp - with kings. Shifting from mean-

ing to meaning of the same word, the poem effects a revolutionary change of mood. None of this would cut any ice with Professor Vendler, however, for 'meaning' sucks us back into the 'paraphrasable propositional content'.

Vendler's alternative view of criticism is still more evident in her commentary on sonnet 15. The 'key word' is said to be 'you', even though it doesn't occur in the first quatrain. 'I suggest', writes Vendler, 'it is phonetically hiding in "huge", chosen precisely for its anticipation of you. Why is night "sullied" in the same sonnet? I have no doubt that night... is sullied because the young are youthful and time is wasteful.' Vendler adds: 'the sonnet is bound together by one of those alliterative, assonantal and anagrammatic semantic strings in which Shakespeare delights.' If there is any delight here I doubt if Shakespeare has a hand in it.

The entire undertaking is based on a single proposition: the rejection of an urgent, personal voice which has drawn generations of common readers back to these endlessly readable poems and to the palpable pressure of a voice which is saying something that we respond to. 'I remember sitting in the cramped apartment of a dissident poet in Moscow in 1962 when he produced a gramophone record, an "underground" recording of a poetry reading somewhere in the Soviet Union. One of the voices on the record was that of Boris Pasternak, reading sonnet 66 in a Russian translation, possibly his own. His deep voice nearly cracked when he came to the line, "And art made tongue-tied by authority." There was no scope for delight in the sound or texture of the original, but every word was freighted with a burden of personal meaning.

Dipak Nandy

Nottingham

Tom Paulin states that W.B. Yeats wrote only one sonnet. But in *Collected Poems*, as well as 'Leda and the Swan' and 'Meru', there is 'At the Abbey Theatre' (after Ronsard).

Richard Poole

Coleg Harlech
Gwynedd

Ancienne Vague

Melissa Benn (*LRB*, 5 February) says that Natasha Walter is 'one of the first mainstream British feminists who can properly claim to be a daughter of the second wave - that is, of the women's liberation movement of the late Sixties and Seventies - because she has spoken of her mother as Spare Rib-reading activist of the old school'. What about Kate Figes, author of *Benjane of Her Sex* (1994), daughter of Eva Figes, author of *Panama and Amadeo* (1976)?

Anyway, Natasha Walter in her Acknowledgments says, 'Thank you first to my parents', not just her mother, and I can state on first-hand authority that it was her father, a son and grandson of the first wave - that is, of the old feminist movement of the early 20th century - who was the Spare Rib-buying (and-writing) activist of the old school.

Nicolas Walter

London N1

happened. In the years between 1960 and 1968, there was a cultural and political revolution in the United States which altered everything for everybody. Kennedy, Nixon and Johnson form the enchanted or bewitched triad or triangle which still exerts power and fascination. Dr Martin Luther King is the slain hero and absent knight who - though they 'don't' teach you this in school - fell victim to the swords of all three.

NOW THIS is a fairly routine passage from Seymour Hersh's new book, will-advvisedly (and unironically) entitled *The Dark Side of Camelot*.

Even aboard Air Force One, the President was forced to wear a stiff brace that stretched from his shoulders to his crotch - the aftermath of an errant poolside grab while he was on a campaign trip to the West Coast. Two months before the end, Hugh Sides, *Time* magazine's White House correspondent, recalled in an interview for this book, a woman acquaintance of Sides's, 'came to me and told me how Kennedy tried to put the make on her at the pool. She wrenched away and [the President] fell into the pool, hurting his back.' The brace would keep the President upright for the bullets of Lee Harvey Oswald.

Makes you wonder about the lighter side of Camelot. Here, at any event, is a suggestive minor-key connection between hubris and narcissism - or between Kennedy's frantically sordid private life and the events that punctuated and then terminated his sorry term in office. Nobody denies any of the facts. And Hugh Sides - doyen of the old journalistic discretion, not to say journalistic whitewash - sold me five years ago on a television panel that nobody dared print such things at the time. Yet, for proposing any correspondence between the crime family Kennedy and the serial fornicator Kennedy and the Kennedy of Cuba and Vietnam, Hersh has been pelted with dead dogs and old shoes from one end of Georgetown to another. It's true that he expended some effort on a false trail about Marilyn Monroe, where forged papers were dangled to improve slightly on what authentic papers had already demonstrated. (Follow the money: was the great and crass back slogan to emerge from All the President's Men), but he did drop that line of inquiry just in time.

For the rest, Hersh's work makes harder and sharper and clearer what more scholarly books had already begun to assert. For example, in his splendid 1991 study, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960-63*, Michael Beschloss demonstrated that Kennedy had been privately relieved by the building of the Berlin Wall, had publicly almost refrained from commenting on it, and had waited until two years after it was safely built before using it as a sound stage for his 1.5th bin grand-standing. Hersh adds some more detail here, showing that Berlin was always subordinate to the sick Kennedy obsession with Cuba. Actually, almost everything became subordinate to that obsession. Again, we knew some of this already. In his book *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, Garry Wills showed elegantly that the Cuba crisis Mark II - the missile confrontation in October 1962 - was intimately connected to the Cuba crisis - Mark I - the Bay of Pigs and the incessant American-sponsored covert aggressions.

Kennedy knew, in other words, that the Soviet allegations about his invasion and subversion plans had the merit of being true. But he could not afford to admit this publicly, and thus had no choice but to go to red alert when the 'shocking' news of a Russian response became known. Even then, Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy opened the first meeting of his advisers by saying that the problem was principally one of American domestic politics. (That elusive, golden second term again.) It was Kennedy himself who secretly taped the meetings of this Executive Committee or Ex-Comm, so we can be fairly sure that he chose his own words with some care, and some eye for the record.

John J. McCloy, who implemented the decision to intern the Japanese-Americans after 1941, and who chaired the committee that decided on the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, and who ran occupied Germany as a satrapy after the war, and who was later to serve as a trustee on the Warren Commission, and who was in every other respect the hardest of imperial and Cold War hardliners, told Theodore Sorenson after the Bay of Pigs that 'even if the Soviet Union had missile bases in Cuba - which it hasn't - why would we have any more right to invade Cuba than Khrushchev has to invade Turkey?' This is the point to keep one's eye on, because it was based on the same pragmatic logic that Khrushchev himself was to employ. By applying pressure in Cuba, he secured the withdrawal of the roughly equivalent American Jupiter missiles in Turkey, but only at a huge and uncalculable risk and only on the condition that no such deal or quid pro quo was ever mentioned in public. The Kennedys lied about this deal to Congress, to the American voters, and to the then hapless Vice President Johnson. 'Face, you see, JFK placed a high value on face. Only the most servile massochist, it seems to me, can congratulate him on the "coolness" with which he defused a ghastly crisis almost entirely of his own making. But such was the relief that it can still be felt. So hysterical gratitude is still offered to the lordling who, in the end, decided that the human species and his own face could probably both be saved. (At some remove, however, this needless war of nerves was to assist Brezhnev and his allies in toppling Khrushchev. An uncounted cost of the Cuban adventure is that it cost the pre-Gorbachev reformist generation, which Eastern Europeans had to live through - and which the luckless Cubans still do.)

But it's very clear that Cuban democrats would not have been the winners if the Kennedy destabilisation had succeeded. Reading back to the Bay of Pigs from the newly disclosed material on the missile crisis, makes it clearer than ever that the White House and the CIA were relying on the most gruesome Cuban reactionaries, and on their allies in the Miami Mob. There would have been 'not a Cuban Spring', but another Guatemala. Or another Guyana: even Arthur Schlesinger has grudgingly confirmed what Hersh fleshes out - the increment of racial hatred and the use of sabotage and gangsterism to bring down the elected government of Cheddi Jagan. (There was a little help there from the London

cousins, too, as a gesture towards the 'special relationship'.)

Hersh helps clear up an old mystery, which involves Kennedy's famous reluctance to commit a second wave of air-cover to the hired goons he had landed at the Bay of Pigs. This decision, which only guaranteed an outcome already certain, has been used for years by the Right as evidence of a 'stab in the back'. It also, and not only for paranoics, furnishes a motive for lethal Kennedy-hatred among disaffected CIA and Mafia types, insofar as the two species may be distinguished. The explanation turns out to be relatively simple, and consistent with the known facts. Kennedy was waiting to hear that Castro had been assassinated in Havana. When he didn't hear, he calmly betrayed the mercenary force as the laws of realpolitik required of him. He forgot to confide in Arthur Schlesinger, but Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, in their authoritative 'One Hell of a Gamble', also state plainly that 'the Kennedy Administration had expected Castro to die before he could rally support for destroying the invasion'. The 'expect' bit did not depend on the advice of astrologers, and the verb 'to die' was being conjugated in the active, not the passive voice. The late Richard Bissell, who was Kennedy's personal Cuba hawk at the CIA, confirmed the plot on the record before his death. And the names and pseudonyms of known assassins and hitmen turn up in Bobby Kennedy's own office logs at the Kennedy Library. Garry Wills, who wrote with such contempt of Hersh's latest work in the *New York Review of Books*, might have had the grace to allow that these more recent findings amplify his own earlier ones.

Having made or bought the friendship of mobsters like Sam Giancana and Johnny Rosselli, the Kennedys seem to have acquired quite a taste for the quick fix of murder. How closely this was related to their simultaneous pursuit of sexual thrill and cheap glamour is good material for speculation. (That there was some connection is hard to doubt: Kennedy's best-documented affair was with Judith Campbell Exner, who was simultaneously entwined with the Mafia chief Sam Giancana, who was himself involved in the attempts to murder Fidel Castro. Ben Bradlee has told us of his horrified astonishment at finding that Ms Exner knew all of the secret telephone numbers for contacting the President out of hours. And of course Bradlee's status as a locker-room buddy of John Kennedy did nothing to dull the later rage of Nixonites when they found themselves manipulated by the Washington Post.) Anyway, orders were sent out from the Kennedy White House that Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam were, with a bare minimum of deniability, to be taken off the chessboard. In some way, this was rationalised as a demonstration of manly toughness in a dangerous world. Both brothers were addicted to the accusation that any one who had any scruples was inviting another 'Munich', and one remembers the enthusiasm of their terrible father for that pact — not because he was pro-Chamberlain so much as because he was pro-Hitler. (Franklin Roosevelt was right in saying that if Joe

Kennedy ever got power, he would institute a fascist form of government.) One also remembers what most American liberals have organised themselves to forget, which is the prominence of both Kennedy boys in the inquisitorial campaign of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

ONCE HAD A Latin teacher who assured me that if I did what in fact I never did, and applied myself thoroughly to Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* ('Concentrate, Hitchens'), I would discover that most of the great general's lauded victories were the anxious outcome of self-inflicted defeats. Since Caesar relied so heavily on the abortive expedient of partition, I am now sure without checking that this was so. Borrowing explicitly from the Joe McCarthy style, JFK in 1960 ran against Eisenhower and Nixon from the night — accusing them of selling out to Russia by allowing the development of a 'missile gap', and impugning them for being soft on Castro. He knew that he was engaged in lies and defamations, and that in both instances the truth was the reverse of what he claimed. He also, as Hersh shows conclusively, used gangster muscle and money to swing two or three key states. Very well, say all the clever spin-artists and sycophants, that's what it takes to get elected. But an unscrupulous campaign doesn't have to undergo much in the way of metamorphosis to evolve into an unscrupulous administration. When it became necessary to tell the truth in order to intimidate Khrushchev, Kennedy authorised his Deputy Secretary of Defence, Roswell Gilpatric, to make a minatory speech asserting the unadmitted nuclear superiority and its will (that bloody word again) to use it without compunction. (Kennedy reversed his demagogic election claims, also, when it

suddenly suited him to say that his Cuba follies had been bequeathed by the Eisenhower-Nixon Administration.) And in the meantime, keeping all his options 'open' while he squandered the substance of democracy, he stalled on civil rights and flattered the Dixiecrats and prepared for another test of machismo in Indochina. This astonishing show, and the adoring press coverage that it reaped, was watched open-mouthed by Richard Nixon, whose bent Presidency differs from other consequences of Kennedyism mainly in having been unintended. Everything that Nixon learned in 1968 and 1972, from the manipulation of foreign crises to the employment of underworld bagmen to the insinuation of treachery and weakness in high places, he had gleaned from his 1960 defeat.

Here one ought to pay a small debt of honour. Those of us who grew up despising Lyndon Baines Johnson don't have to take back very much. As senator and as President, he was a bully and a lout and an arm-twister, and at least as a senator he confused public and private monies on a heroic scale. But it is impossible to read Michael Beschloss's new book, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes*, without experiencing a revisionist pang. For all his gung-ho coarseness — so much deplored by the allegedly more fastidious Kennedy clique — Johnson was reviled by what he termed the 'god-damned Murder Incorporated' that his predecessors had been running from Miami. He had, as the missile crisis tapes now reveal, been remarkably sane during that episode of homicidal narcissism. He was also sure that the time was overdue to concede black Americans their natural rights as citizens, and used his coercive power on the Hill to see this explicit end: the first time in history that such clout had ever been employed in that

way. He threw away much of this gain by pursuing Kennedy's fantasy of standing tall in Indochina (where the military Neanderthals like Curtis LeMay, who had wanted pre-emptive nuclear war over Cuba, were allowed to test their strategic bombing theories on live subjects). He had to be ever-watchful of the pro-Kennedy fanatics who refused any deviation from 'Jack's' line and who seemed to think, as the partisans of Raul Castro now think, that the proper succession should anoint a brother and not a lowly Vice-President. But he had genuine, confused misgivings over the wisdom of the Vietnam 'commitment', and eventually resigned from public life over it. (It's almost touching to scrutinise the late-night conversations between LBJ and that old-reactionary shellback Senator Richard Russell, and to hear the two of them saying that this Vietnam War sure is a stupid proposition, and that it's high time to recognise 'Red China' — except who wants to be called a Commie sympathiser not just by Dick Nixon but by Bobby Kennedy?) Yet at least, on his way out, Johnson did leave behind a time-bomb that could and should have destroyed Richard Nixon.

Whenever Nixon sought to justify an illegality or an atrocity, he did so by envious and bitter reference to the charming Kennedy ability to commit such crimes and get away with them: Jules Witcover's new 1968 campaign journal *The Year the Dream Died* (another un-ironic title) is the record of one mainstream reporter and his appalled and belated recognition of the truth; it confirms earlier disclosures by Clark Clifford in his memoirs, and by Seymour Hersh in his biography of Kissinger and — indirectly but in detail — by Nixon's chief of staff F. R. Haldeman in his posthumous diaries. In plain words, Richard Nixon's direct subordinates went to the 'South Vietnamese military junta, in the waning days, of the Humphrey-Nixon election contest, and told them to sabotage the Paris peace talks and thus the main Humphrey peace plank.' Do this, Saigon was told, and the incoming Republican Administration will smile on your cause. President Thieu; thus advised by Henry Kissinger and others, pulled out of the negotiations a few days before Americans went to the polls. Johnson's White House, by legally dubious methods of bugging, picked up this treasonous traffic. It did not dare make it public, because that would have been to admit to electronic eavesdropping, but it did tell the Nixon people that they had been rumbled. And Johnson warned Nixon several years later, from his Texas ranch, that he personally would release the crucial evidence if Nixon tried to justify his own crimes by reference to Democratic ones: Nixon and Kissinger meanwhile kept the war going for four more years, at an excruciating cost in the lives of people better than themselves, before scuttling the enterprise on the exact terms offered by the pathetic Hubert Humphrey back in 1968.

It's fascinating, in reading the old and new Watergate tapes, to be able to discern and detect the outlines of this old skeleton. Whenever Nixon and his crew are scared of exposure, they threaten in their turn to go public with what they know about the Kennedys and the Democrats. Jerry Zeifman,

The following books were referred to in the preparation of this article:

Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers: A Documentary Collection, edited by David Barrett (Texas A & M, 906 pp., \$94, 23 June 1997, 0 89096 741 5)

Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes 1963-64, edited by Michael Beschloss (Simon and Schuster, 624 pp., £20, 6 April, 0 684 80407 7)

Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65 by Taylor Branch (Simon and Schuster, 746 pp., \$30, 2 February, 0 684 80819 6)

'One Hell of a Gamble': Khrushchev, Castro and Kennedy, 1958-64 by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali (Murray, 416 pp., £25, 11 September 1997, 0 7195 5518 3)

The Dark Side of Camelot by Seymour Hersh (HarperCollins, 497 pp., £8.99, 2 February, 0 00 653077 X)

Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes, edited by Stanley Kutler (Free Press, 675 pp., \$30, 1 November 1997, 0 684 84127 4)

The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis, edited by Ernest May and Philip Zelikow (Harvard, 740 pp., £23.50, 30 September 1997, 0 674 17926 9)

The Other Missiles of October: Eisenhower, Kennedy and the Jupiters, 1957-63 by Philip Nash (North Carolina, 231 pp., £34.70 and £14.40, 27 October 1997, 0 8078 4647 3)

Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Bobby Kennedy and the Feud that Defined a Decade by Jeff Shesol (Norton, 591 pp., £23.50, 14 January, 0 393 04078 X)

The Year the Dream Died by Jules Witcover (Warner, 512 pp., £25, 16 June 1997, 0 446 51849 2)

Without Honor: The Impeachment of President Nixon and the Crimes of Camelot by Jerry Zeifman (Thunder's Mouth, 262 pp., \$24.95, 22 November 1996, 1 56025 128 X)

chief counsel to the House Judiciary Committee, was visited many times during the Watergate inquiry and browbeaten with exactly this threat of reprisal. To Zeitman's disgust, this tactic was successful with several Democratic luminaries on the committee staff - among them the young Hillary Rodham - and as a result Nixon was able to leave power with the moral equivalent of a plea-bargain. One consequence of that period of moral and political leniency, misrepresented by self-pitying Nixonites as a lynch- ing, was that Nixon's estate kept hold of reels and reels of decisive Watergate tapes. Only thanks to Professor Stanley Kutler of the University of Wisconsin, who sued for the release of the tapes and has now edited and annotated them with great panache, do we now have something like a clear record. On the tape for 23 June 1972 - the day of the so-called "smoking gun" conversation between Nixon and Haldeman - not only do the two desperate men discuss using the CIA to cut off the FBI investigation of the burglary, but Nixon is heard clearly to say:

"When you get in these people, say, 'Look, the problem is that this will open the whole, the whole Bay of Pigs thing, and the President just feels that - without going into the details - don't lie to them to the extent to say there is no involvement, but just say this is sort of a comedy of errors, bizarre, without getting into it - the President's belief is that this is going to open the whole Bay of Pigs thing up again."

It was the politicisation of one state police agency, in the effort to suborn and corrupt another one, that in the end meant Nixon had to go. We used to have to guess at what dread secret from Camelot he used in his extremity. At least now our guess can be an educated one.

In *Pillar of Fire*, the second volume of Taylor Branch's biography of Martin Luther King, we learn more about the extreme domestic cowardice that was the domestic counterpart to the Kennedys' overseas imperial bluster. After the bombing of a black church in Birmingham, Alabama and the death of four small girls, JFK temporised like mad in the face of racism and intimidation. In a meeting with Birmingham's white leadership he denounced the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) and echoed the claim that they were "sons of bitches". He then sent a former West Point football coach as a "non-binding" mediator between the bombers and the bombed before declaring that, really, he could do no more.

King never really forgave him for this and other capitulations. He watched the President's funeral on television in a hotel room and, as the cameras showed Jackie sinking to her knees before the coffin, he was heard to remark: "Look at her. Sucking him off one last time." I say "heard to remark" because this very coarse - and very inapposite and inaccurate - crack was picked up by the FBI men who were maintaining their surveil-

lance of an official enemy. They lost no time in retelling the tale where it would do most harm.

I had almost finished writing this on the Martin Luther King holiday, the day after which Bill Clinton's own vulgar and exploiting and finally trivial past almost caught up with him. It's in reading Branch's biography of King that one may still lay hold of a worthwhile strand in the narrative. While a succession of insecure and dishonest statesmen committed high crimes and misdemeanours at home and abroad, always justifying themselves by a fear of being thought weak, or by a terror of being undercut by a rival, or by simple fear of the contents of J. Edgar Hoover's private dossiers, Martin Luther King rescued the language from their cloaked and conspiratorial style and made three ringing points: America had a bill coming due, to the descendants of its slaves, which it was morally obliged to redeem. There was unlikely to be domestic tranquillity, or the timely redemption of that bill, if a grossly expensive war of aggression was being prosecuted with a campaign of lies. And nuclear warfare, or the threat of it, was unpardonable because it would be suicide and genocide at the same time. For these views he went to jail in JFK's New Frontier, had his telephone tapped by Bobby Kennedy, and was blackmailed by the head of the FBI in a crude attempt to force him to commit suicide. What, then, is the linkage between the private life of politicians

and their public examples? There was certainly more on the King tapes than verbal obscenity. There is a great deal of foul-mouth talk on the Watergate tapes, much of it scabrously anti-semitic, but no sex. The Clinton tapes are of interest for serious purposes not because of the lipstick stains, but because of the possible use of lipstick subsidy (that of the Revlon Company, on whose board sits Vernon Jordan) to procure hush-money and soft jobs for friendly witnesses past and present. To take the two polar opposites, then, there is no discernible connection between King's lecherous indiscretions and his public persona, whereas there is at least a suggestive crossover between Kennedy's Mobbed-up sex-life and his thuggish foreign policy. Recall that Ian Fleming was one of his favourite authors. Bill Clinton has shown himself promiscuous about things like campaign finance and also about things like women met in a hurry along the trail. The two things may bear only an allegorical relationship. A baffled New York Times reporter noted from the heartland in the last days of January: "Time and again, people invoked the widespread reports of former President John F. Kennedy's infidelities as evidence that sexual conduct had little to do with leadership capabilities." This, as authors as different as Herbs and Wills have shown apparently in vain, is to get the personal and the political as confused as it is possible for them to be.

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