The Weather

Today—Mostly sunny, high in 40s. Monday—Rainy and cool. Saturday's temperatures—High, 46 degrees at 2:30 p.m.; low, 33 degrees at 6:15 a.m.
Weather Details on Page B15

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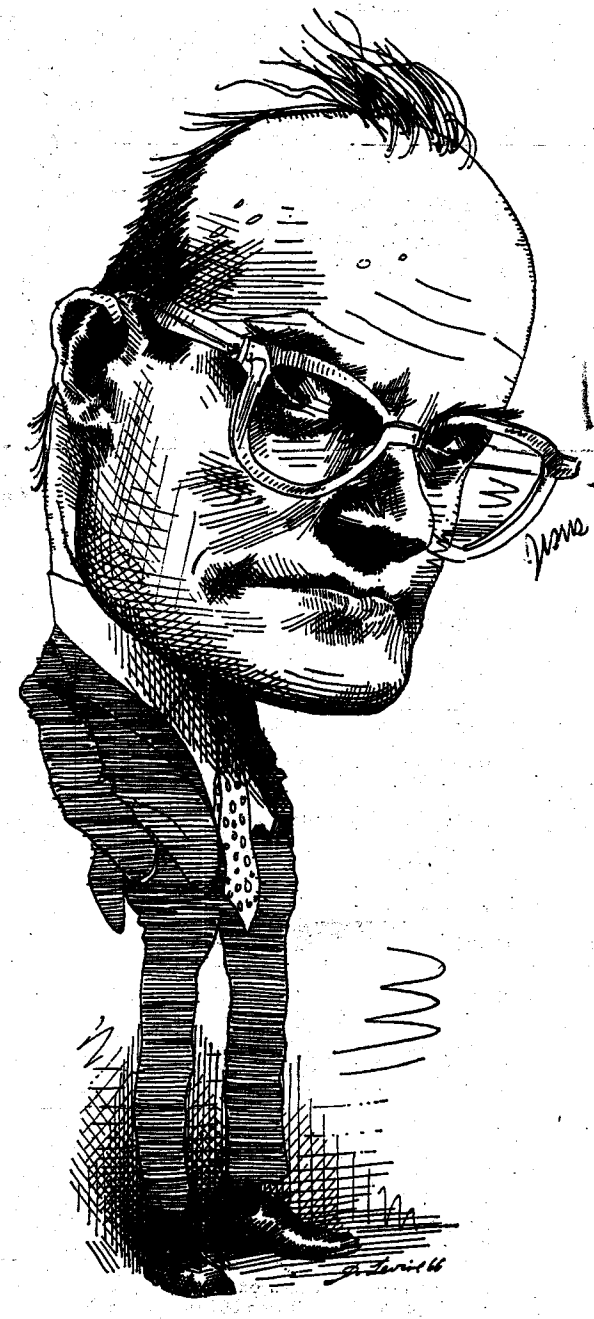
'Very Charming and Very Tough'

McGeorge Bundy: The End of an Era

Post 2/27/66

By Arthur Schlesinger Jr.



Drawing by David Levine for The Washington Post.

It is, as they say, the end of an era. Tomorrow when Mac Bundy leaves, the last of the Kennedy White House will have gone. We were, for better or worse, a distinctive group. Kennedy always wanted to bring together the world of power and the world of ideas, and he turned more systematically than any other President to the universities. Bundy suited his theory and his needs perfectly.

The dean of the faculty of arts and sciences at Harvard combined the wide-ranging and imaginative mind of a professional intellectual with the instinct for hard judgment of an administrator who had become a top lion in the academic jungle. I think too it amused the President to enlist a man who was not only a Boston Brahmin but a representative of the Stimson-Lovett-McCloy mob in New York, for which Democratic Presidents have always had an amiable weakness.

Bundy, at once so spirited and so realistic, fitted superbly into Kennedy's mode of operation. He knew everybody, feared nobody, respected the President's power of decision, stated each side of an argument better than the protagonists and was always cool, swift, lucid, precise and funny. He had too the indestructible personal vitality Kennedy enjoyed so much. Nothing seems to tire him. It used to madden Mike Forrestal and me, hardly able after a late night to drag ourselves to his morning staff meeting, to watch Bundy, who had been working or relaxing as long as we had and, in addition, had played an hour of tennis before breakfast, bounce into the room, pink-faced and merry, emitting a rapid fire of bulletins, instructions, questions and jokes.

Not everyone liked Bundy. He was very charming and very tough. People resented his air of confidence and impregnability and thought him cold and ambitious. Though warm and thoughtful in private relations, he could be ice in official contacts, and his wit sometimes declined into sarcasm in dealings with the press and the public. Like his mentors in the New York establishment, he united his commitment to public service with an evident appetite for power.

But these traits, real or fancied, hardly decreased his effectiveness. He served two Presidents brilliantly and faithfully, giving them the assistance they needed to retain their personal control over foreign and defense policy in the age when policy out of control could mean the end of the world. He brought them a wider range of alternatives than the traditional departments were ready to propose, a trenchant and fertile intelligence and a deep sense of responsibility to history. He was a great public servant.

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