Post 6-20-69

Real RFK

"ROBERT KENNEDY: A MEMOIR"

By Jack Newfield

(Dutton, 304 pp., $6.95)

Reviewed by Hays Gorey

Gorey, a correspondent for Time magazine, covered Sen. Kennedy's presidential campaign.

De-fanged—as it certainly should have been—the public image of Robert F. Kennedy as it is being preserved for history faces a new peril: premature calcification.

In dispelling the image of ruthlessness which dogged Kennedy to his grave, the late Senator's biographers to date—have studiously avoided encomiastic extravagance. In death, as always in life, Kennedy's warts are receiving adequate attention. Yet in bringing the ruthless bit under control, writers are being caught up in a side effect, much in the manner of a doctor who learns how to arrest cancer but brings on a paralysis in the process.

In the search for the real Robert F. Kennedy, the real Bobby Kennedy may be lost.

Jack Newfield's *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir* goes far towards correcting this recent trend. Indeed, it would be surprising if it did not, for Newfield, chronicler of the New Left and assistant editor of the Village Voice, was one of the first reporters to sense in RFK the existentialist politician. But Newfield is less than wholly convincing in making that point, perhaps because he is dealing with the least existentialist period of Kennedy's career—his tormented decisions not to run, and then to run, against Lyndon Johnson for the 1968 presidential nomination of the Democratic Party.

Newfield's perceptive and substantive *Memoir* effectively rescues Kennedy from the Valhalla of Machiavellian political manipulators, where he does not belong, but it does not fully extricate RFK from the stony, stiff aura with which he is being surrounded less than a year after his death.

One who never knew him might by now suspect that the "ruthless" brush was applied to Kennedy in undeservedly broad stroaks, but at the same time he is in danger of thinking of the Senator as a grim, dour, uneasy individual, who never laughed, who couldn't possibly have played all that touch football, who was pliable to an extreme in the hands of every journalist, staff member and friend who drew near. Kennedy's worst enemies—and he had plenty—never faulted him in these respects, at least.

Newfield, whose fondness for Kennedy was fully reciprocated, was privy to the back-and-forth discussions which kept Kennedy out of the 1968 primaries when he should have gone in, and put him in at the most graceless possible moment, when the ink proclaiming Eugene McCarthy's magnificent showing in New Hampshire was not yet dry. Thus we have a clear and in some instances a first-hand account of where Ethel Kennedy, Adam Walinsky, Peter Edelman and others stood, and just who was arrayed against them (Ted Kennedy, Ted Sorensen, for a time Arthur Schlesinger, and others).

What we lose in these priceless accounts is Robert Kennedy himself. Adam Walinsky, RFK's foremost speechwriter, used to disdain praise for a Kennedy speech on the ground that even though Walinsky might have put it together, it was Kennedy who tore it apart and decreed how it was to be reassembled. Were the situation otherwise, were the final product not more Kennedy than Walinsky, "then I ought to be the candidate, he the speechwriter," Walinsky would say. Thus it is hard to reconcile the picture of Kennedy which emerges—buffeted first one way and then the other. A mind of his own was a Kennedy hallmark, which should not be denied him.

In all other respects, Newfield has produced a book which goes further than any in understanding Robert Kennedy, who, in Newfield's phrase, "was misunderstood to the end." Clearly, Newfiled was drawn to Kennedy without, in the beginning, fully sensing why. The reason clearly was the same as that which was to attract thousands of ghetto-dwellers, young and others of the alienated to RFK. In him they saw a public figure whose words they could understand, who could act even better than he could talk, who spoke crisply and directly (most often), something hardly typical of a politician.

It is not surprising that Newfield and the ghetto-dweller should settle on the same hero. Newfield was born in a ghetto. He recounts that RFK once told him: "I'm jealous of the fact you grew up in a ghetto."

In tracing Kennedy's period of most rapid growth—the period following the assassination of John F. Kennedy—Newfield sees an analogy which seems to stretch matters a bit. RFK, says the author, underwent a period much like that which afflicted the survivors of Hiroshima after the atomic bomb exploded there in 1945. Guilt-ridden by the death of his brother, Ken-

nedy was "like the hibakusha," Newfield writes, in that he "also suffered 'survior guilt,' a feeling that if fate were fair, he should have died, and the President should have lived. He also began to feel a sense of community with other victims, like the poor and the powerless."

To some extent, perhaps all this is true. But Kennedy always had an identity of sorts with the underdog, because for so much of his life, he was an underdog himself—the smallest of the Kennedy brothers, the least

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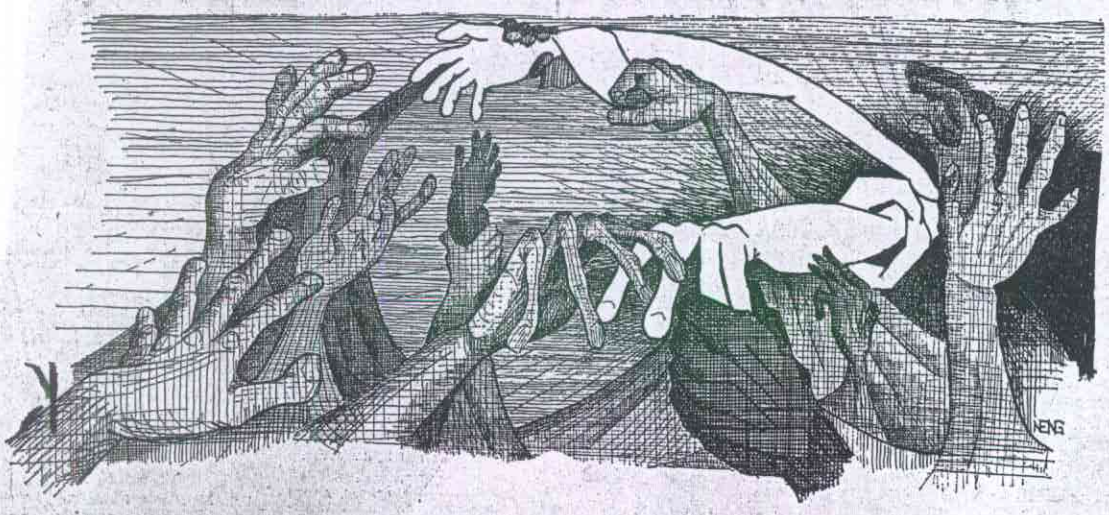

likely to have won a football letter in college, and yet the first one to do so. His near-complete absorption with the problems of the poor in the last years of his life, one suspects, stemmed less from a new sense of mutual deprivation than from the fact that he saw misery and suffering firsthand in those years, and he was deeply moved.

The Mississippi Delta, the Indian reservations of the Far West, the Appalachian area of Eastern Kentucky became much more real to Kennedy when, as a Senator, he saw those conditions first hand, and was in a position to do something about them.

Watching Kennedy, perceiving the meaning of his words and actions, is where Newfield is at his best. His subject does not lend himself to either analogy or psychoanalysis.

And at his best, Newfield is splendid indeed.