

The spirit of '76

'Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye'

Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.
By Kenneth P. O'Donnell and
David F. Powers with Joe McCarthy.
434 pp. Boston:
Little, Brown & Co. \$8.95.

By CHARLES L. MEE Jr.

Kenneth O'Donnell, David Powers and Joe McCarthy are practitioners of an old and honorable literary form. Neither history, nor literature, nor memoir, it is rather the public-relations release or direct-mail, sales-brochure form — here executed in epic length, sold through retail outlets just as though it were a real book, and currently insinuating its way up the best-seller lists.

As a form, the epic P.R. release is most commonly applied to movie stars. Yet its political uses have long been recognized: thus the familiar "campaign biography" of political candidates that appear just before election time. "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye'" is a variation of the campaign biography, but in this instance it takes on the nature of "institutional promotion," since Teddy's campaign does not officially open until 1976.

It is as pointless to treat this sort of work as history as it would be to expect Errol Flynn's memoirs to be a historical record. Who is to say whether Flynn's recollection of smoking opium with Ting Ling on the Street of Happiness was fact or fiction? And who can know what John Kennedy said, or meant by what he said, to O'Donnell when they were alone in the bathroom at the Biltmore during the 1960 convention in Chicago? The new insights on Kennedy in this book have a disarming way of having sprung from very private conversations.

Who is to know whether Kennedy privately praised Stevenson for courage when the latter risked being thought an "appeaser" during the Cuban missile crisis? Who can verify what Kennedy privately told O'Donnell, or whether he meant it, about getting out of Vietnam "after I'm

re-elected." What is the point in arguing the merits or cynicism of Kennedy's remark that to get out of Vietnam was "Easy. Put a government in there that will ask us to leave."

The historical worth of a book such as this is not in what it wishes to seem to be. If it is remembered in 50 years, it will not be for its historical record of John Kennedy's Administration but for its continuing

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promotion of the Kennedy name in anticipation of the 1976 election.

O'Donnell and Powers have successfully invoked all the old Kennedy wit, grit, dash, style, grace and elegance. Beyond all this, however, the essential purpose of the book is to show Kennedy as "the most skillful politician of his generation."

John Kennedy's career is therefore seen as that of a man who dealt gracefully with old-line political bosses and fresh-faced reformers, from his first Congressional race in 1946 to preparations for re-election in 1964. Kennedy showed he could whip up enthusiasm and organize an infinity of tea parties; he "enjoyed" the old-line bosses, though if he had known of the dealings his father had with them on his behalf his "hair would have turned white"; in the campaign against Lodge he showed he could organize an entire state and deal toughly but amicably with bosses; in the fight against Onions Burke for control of the Massachusetts machine he showed he could kick the stuffings out of a back-room competitor and lie like Lyndon.

At the 1956 convention he learned to be a "total politician"; in Wisconsin and West Virginia he showed he could turn an election contest into a triumphal parade, leaving gored but friendly bodies of rival political bosses along the way; in 1960 he showed he could take Lyndon on the ticket and invent a dozen rationalizations for his liberal followers to let them know he had contempt for Johnson. For the rest, we see Kennedy behaving courageously during the Cuban crisis, insisting he had no

intention of sending ground troops to Vietnam, and being quoted as liking Rusk, having no debts to Dick Daley, and otherwise smoothing any re-remaining cracks in the Kennedy image.

At a time that the Democratic party has either tarnished old pols or bumbling poseurs to run for the Presidency, our triune author offers the perfect solution: a politician with style and earthiness, appeal to varied voter groups, an image of warmth, passion and idealism, and an understanding that "you don't get far in politics until you become a total politician. That means you've got to deal with the party leaders as well as with the voters. . . . I'm going to be a total politician." The party needs a Kennedy like that.

It will not have escaped the notice of the national Democratic party that the only state the Democrats won in the last Presidential election was Massachusetts — and that a Kennedy won it even though he had to carry McGovern as the official candidate. Nor will the party fail to notice this book's climb on the best-seller lists. They are both elements in another well-orchestrated Kennedy campaign. If not that, they are nothing. ■

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