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Kennedy Up Close

George W. Ball

President Kennedy: Profile of Power
by Richard Reeves.
Simon and Schuster, 798 pp., $30.00

Richard Reeves's book is hard to classify. Presented as a critical political biography, it turns the whole genre on its head. Rather than reciting essential facts and then reaching an informed appraisal of the achievements of President John F. Kennedy, Reeves begins by assessing Kennedy's qualities as a human being, and then describes incidents of the Kennedy administration which he does not specifically relate to that initial assessment.

There can be no doubt about Reeves's own conception of his approach. He explains that he was influenced by a book by Ryszard Kapuscinski about the fall of the Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. In Kapuscinski's book each member of the Negus's court tells his own story of life in the court of the King of Kings, and Reeves's fascination with those stories persuaded him to try to write what it was like to be "at the center." On further reflection he pondered "what it was like to be President of the United States," and that led him to focus on John F. Kennedy.

Although Reeves never met Kennedy, there were, in his opinion, still "enough witnesses and enough records to try to reconstruct the world from his perspective." On the basis of those accounts he could conjure up "what [Kennedy] knew and when he knew it and what he actually did—sometimes day by day, sometimes hour by hour, sometimes minute by minute."

At the outset Reeves refers to what he calls "the two essential Kennedy books," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *A Thousand Days* and Theodore Sorenson's *Kennedy*. Both cover the whole term of Kennedy's administration, and Reeves notes that "both of these eyewitness books see his presidency as a tale of personal growth, with Kennedy making early mistakes, learning from them to gain a sure control of the power of his position, and then to go on to later triumphs." But, Reeves writes, he does not agree with these accounts. Kennedy, in his view, "certainly did not know what he was doing at the beginning, and in some ways never changed at all, particularly in a certain love for chaos, the kind that kept other men off-balance."

That was, Reeves notes, his own firm conclusion from documents and third-party interviews. Yet, for undisclosed reasons, Reeves does not point out the relevance of the incidents he recounts to validate his judgment. Almost all those incidents are selected to cast light on Kennedy's personality and personal qualities rather than on his competence for his job or the logic or consequences of his accomplishments.

Reeves makes clear the subject that most interested him in an article published in *American Heritage* in November 1993. That article was directed at answering the question whether, after completing his researches and interviews, Reeves liked or disliked Kennedy as a human being. In it he recounts many of the episodes included in his book. Yet, he also shows awareness of the limitation of his research method:

> I saw him as "The President," and I knew that his feelings—or even his "character," to use the word of current fashion—may have had something to do with his decision making but little to do with his decisions.

Reeves's book has more to do with Kennedy's "decision making," i.e., with the daily activities in the White House, than with the eventual soundness or weakness of the decisions on which history will judge his presidency.

In his *American Heritage* article, and to a lesser extent in his book, Reeves makes a great deal of the accusation that Kennedy was careless with his friends to the point of cruelty. But that does not correspond to my own observation. Far from being cruel to his friends, Kennedy treated them with the same robust playfulness—and often crude humor—to which all members of his boisterous family were accustomed. Reeves does not seem to understand the kind of behavior that is tough in manner but also affection-

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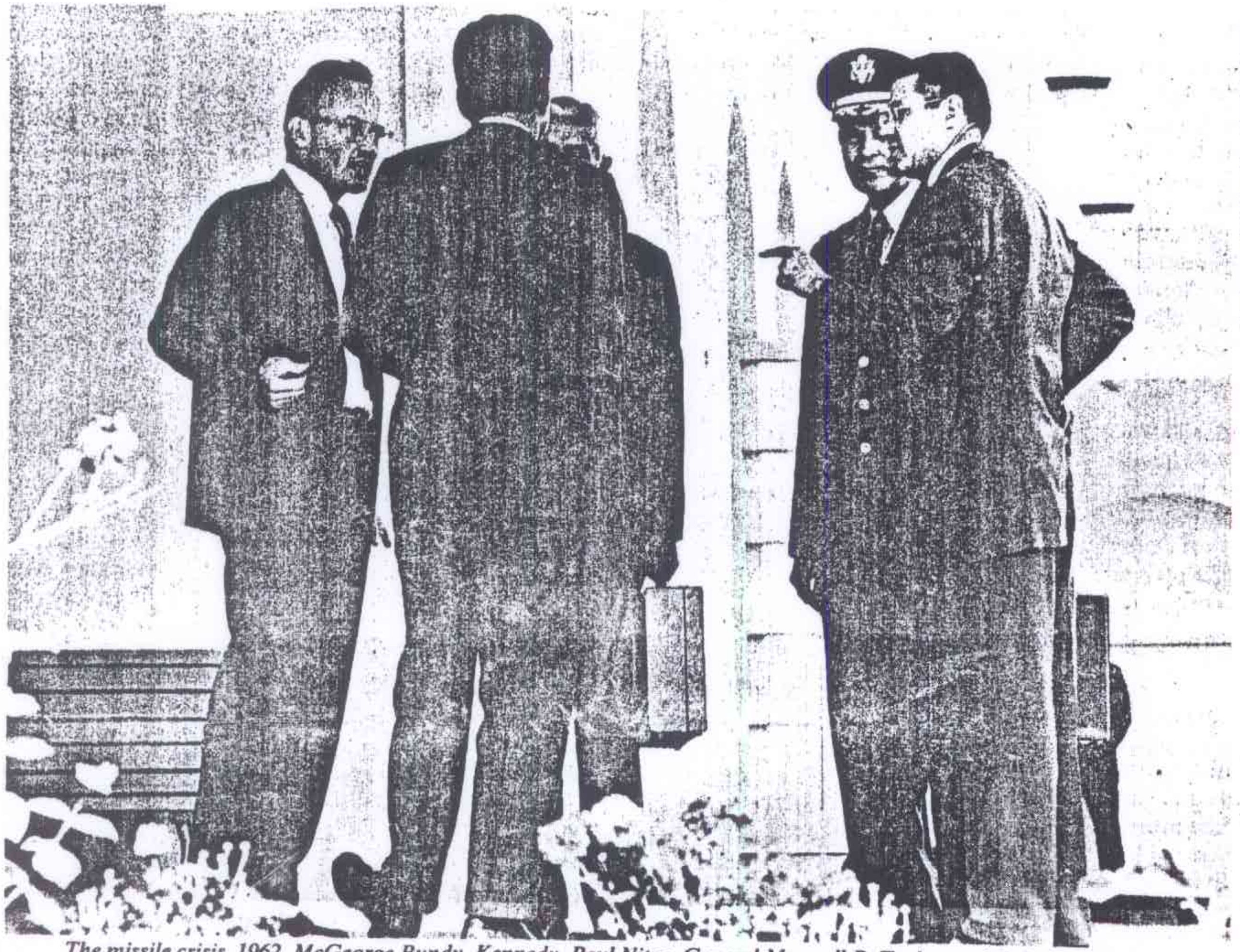

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The missile crisis, 1962. McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy, Paul Nitze, General Maxwell B. Taylor, and Robert McNamara

ate. I found Kennedy, rather than displaying cruelty, deeply concerned with other people's feelings and sensitivities to the point of being almost physically upset by having to fire anyone.

No doubt one can differ about Kennedy's treatment of his friends, but Reeves has little to say by way of analysis of Kennedy's political record. When I had finished reading the book, I felt uneasy until I had gone through it once again to try to discover the final judgments it contained even if only by inference.

What, for example, does Reeves regard as Kennedy's qualifications to hold the highest office in the Western world? He states that, in his view, Kennedy's only qualification for the presidency may have been "wanting it." But has there been any president in modern history who did not avidly wish the job? What man or woman would willingly submit to the degrading task of campaigning—and particularly of raising campaign funds—unless he or she was wholeheartedly committed to becoming president? The only man I ever knew who did not sufficiently want to be president was Adlai Stevenson—and, of course, he was not elected.

History seems to have taught us—and Reeves concedes the point—that the duties of the presidency can be effectively learned only on the job. The qualities needed for successful on-the-job training consist primarily of an avidity for political life, a bright and well-organized mind alert to new ideas, and a set of values in harmony with those of the society at the time—all of which Kennedy manifestly had. Coupled with this is a president's willingness and ability to surround himself with astute advisers and assistants; for that he should, as was the case with Kennedy, have possessed from the beginning a wide circle of well-informed and thoughtful friends and acquaintances (one thinks here for example of John Kenneth Galbraith, McGeorge Bundy, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Burke Marshall). Finally, he must be willing to ponder seriously the advice of those who have the intellectual qualities and historical understanding to extrapolate judiciously from experience. Only by drawing on these qualities can a president perceive significant trends that will enable him to put his day-to-day actions and reactions into a larger perspective from which an original policy will emerge. History is filled with undistinguished leaders who succeeded because they had a flair for selecting sound counselors.

No doubt some of the people around Kennedy also gave him poor advice. But Reeves does not undertake a serious evaluation of Kennedy's advisers or of his achievements as president; instead, he allots excessive space to Kennedy's health problems as well as to his activities as a sexual athlete. Indeed, there is hardly a chapter of Reeves's book that does not discuss Kennedy's painful illness at a particular point in his administration. Kennedy was cursed with a multitude of afflictions—he not only had Addison's disease but he also had an operation involving two spinal fusions to relieve back pain in 1954; and he hurt his back again at a tree-planting ceremony in 1961.

Reeves gives an impression of Kennedy's afflictions far darker than the facts of modern medical science justify. Until the 1930s, anyone with Addison's disease faced the grim prognosis of a brief life expectancy, but in 1939 it was discovered that cortisone could maintain patients in a relatively normal state of health. Reeves notes that Kennedy was subject to attacks of excruciating pain, but that was probably more the result of his back injury than of Addison's disease. Nevertheless, he could never travel outside Washington except with a coterie of doctors who often violently disagreed, while he was almost continually sustained in his official duties by the injection of one form or another of painkiller.

My own experience with him when I was briefly undersecretary of state for economic affairs and then the undersecretary (now known as deputy secretary) led me to conclude that Kennedy's illness did not diminish his competence to react; when he was in agony during periods of international tension, he bore that burden with gallantry and with no perceptible loss of alertness. Reeves writes in a characteristic passage that Kennedy "usually spent more than half of most days in bed. He retired early most nights, read in bed until 9:00 AM or so each morning, and napped an hour each afternoon." To this one might say that the vague word "usually" does not take account of the many occasions on which Kennedy worked very late indeed, and that in any case the practice of reading in bed in the early morning has much to recommend it.

The subject of Kennedy's health is therefore, in my view, only marginally relevant to the theme of Reeves's book. Indeed, until fairly recently, when reticence has itself acquired scurrilous overtones, the health of a president was normally left in the category of rumor. What first caused some revision of this convention was the experience of the last months of Woodrow Wilson's presidency when, after Wilson had had a severe stroke, few knew that he was only intermittently sentient and that the affairs of the government were managed almost exclusively by the President's wife with the assistance of his naval doctor, Admiral Cary T. Grayson.

With the beginning of the cold war, concern over a president's health shifted from anxiety that he might be disabled for an extended period to a worry that he might not be alert at any moment to react to a nuclear attack or the threat of such attack. No president went anywhere without quick access to a black box.

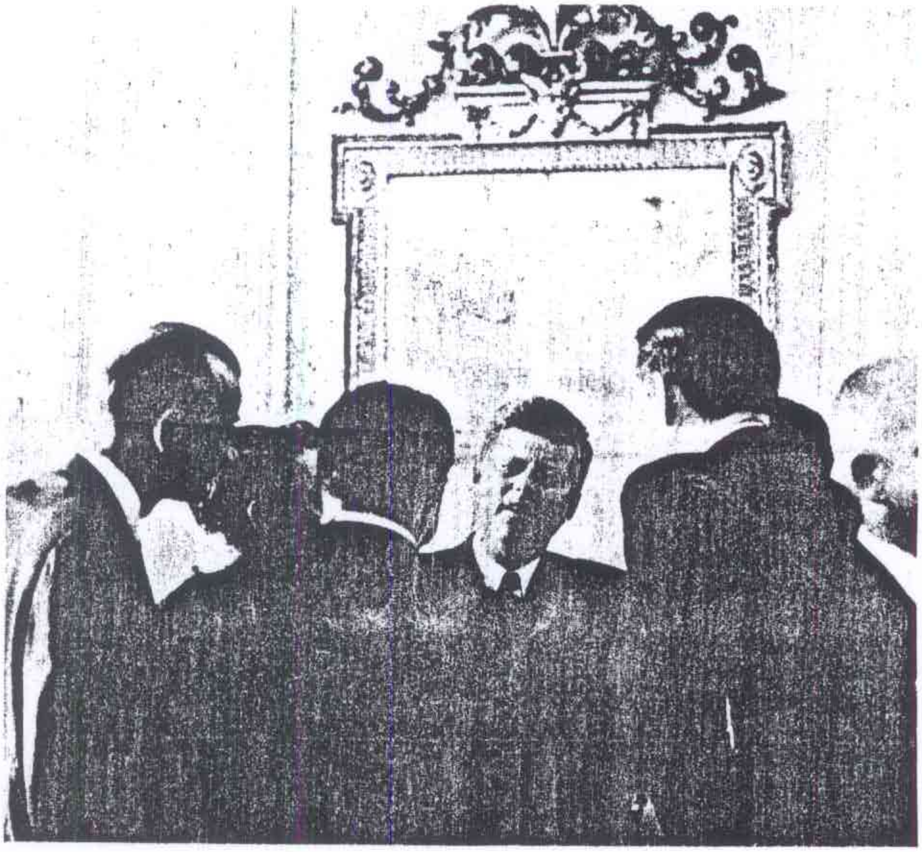
Though in recent years a president's health has been regarded as a compulsory subject for the attention of the media, a certain reservation still exists with regard to his sexual adventures. Perhaps the ultimate comment on the injection of tales of sexual indiscretions in a presidential campaign was made when Grover Cleveland ran against James G. Blaine in 1884. Since Cleveland had admitted that he may have had an illegitimate daughter, the Democrats argued that the real issue of the election was not the private conduct of a candidate but his public integrity:

> We are told that Mr. Blaine has been delinquent in office, but blameless in private life, while Mr. Cleveland has been a model of official integrity but culpable in his personal relations. We should therefore elect Mr. Cleveland to the public office which he is so well qualified to fill and remand Mr. Blaine to the private station which he is admirably fitted to adorn.

With one exception, a similar comment might be made with respect to Kennedy. Reeves has much to say about the number of liaisons in Kennedy's life, but we never really know the actual details of his behavior or how they might reflect on his character; the women he knew have been protective of him. The exception is Judith Campbell, who was the lover of the gangster Sam Giancana at the same time she was seeing Kennedy. The relationship was so reckless as to have compromised his presidency, not least in providing J. Edgar Hoover information he could use to intimidate the Kennedys.

Although Reeves puts a heavy emphasis on the issues of health and sex, Kennedy as president concentrated his most intense interest on United States foreign policy. There was good reason for this, since a president has far greater responsibility for shaping and administering foreign policy than he has for domestic affairs. Moreover, Kennedy's administration occurred when the containment of an expansionist Soviet Union was central to American survival.

Kennedy had great confidence in his capacity for personal persuasion, and from the outset he wanted to establish a sufficient acquaintance with Khrushchev that would enable him to appraise both the adversary's strengths and weaknesses. But, before he could meet with Khrushchev, his administration had been humiliated at the Bay of Pigs. That affair has been written about so much and in such detail that I need not describe it here. Its results were to kill or deliver to Castro thousands of Cuban émigrés recruited by America and to give the US the appearance of a bullying but failed imperialist.



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To be sure, Kennedy has since been faulted by his political enemies and critics in and out of the Pentagon for not committing American forces when leaders of the beleaguered expeditionary force called for them. In spite of the fact that he was under great pressure to do so, he wisely refrained; he had, after all, inherited the invasion scheme from the Eisenhower Administration, and the whole enterprise—fundamentally misconceived and based on wildly faulty assumptions—was doomed by incompetent intelligence, irresolute direction, inadequate means, and tragically poor planning. Had the President let the American forces be drawn fully into the fight, he could have involved America in a long, drawn-out struggle that might have proved a highly costly venture.

From the Bay of Pigs the President learned a serious lesson about trusting the military and the CIA, yet it was a tragically unfortunate preparation for Kennedy's first meeting with Khrushchev. That meeting finally took place on June 3 and 4, 1961, in Vienna, after Kennedy had made a triumphal visit to Paris.

According to Khrushchev's son, Sergei, Khrushchev was apparently impressed with Kennedy's realistic attitude. In his memoirs of his father (*Khrushchev on Khrushchev*) he wrote:

> Father returned to Moscow after the [Vienna] summit with a very high opinion of Kennedy. He saw him as a worthy partner and strong statesman, as well as a simple, charming man to whom he took a real liking. He considered Kennedy a sensible politician with whom one could do business.

But James Reston, who saw Kennedy immediately after the meeting, reports that the President was not fully satisfied with his performance. Kennedy was not prepared for Khrushchev's crude and assertive manner. Indeed, he said that his meeting with Khrushchev was the

> worst thing in my life. He savaged me.... We have to see what we can do that will restore a feeling in Moscow that we will defend our national interests. I'll have to increase the defense budget. And we have to confront them. The only place we can do that is in Vietnam. We have to send more people there.

The most important information that came out of the meeting was Khrushchev's plans with respect to East Berlin, which, having an open border with capitalist countries, was then suffering from continual emigration. An increasing number of East Germans were each day taking trains or buses into West Berlin, including the nation's most educated and skilled people. Khrushchev threatened that the USSR would sign a peace treaty unilaterally, thereby putting an end to all other rights of access to Berlin because a state of war would cease to exist. Once the treaty was signed, any violation of the sovereignty of East Germany would be regarded by the Soviet Union as an act of open aggression, with all the consequences ensuing therefrom.

Ultimately, of course, the construction of the Berlin Wall put an effective stop to the hemorrhaging of East Germany, and the issue became moot. Yet it is quite inaccurate to claim, as some have and as Reeves hints, that Kennedy actually encouraged the building of the wall. That was a decision Khrushchev made for himself, and for his own good reasons.

No doubt the high point in Kennedy's administration was reached in August 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but Reeves's account of it leaves much to be desired. He places great emphasis on McNamara's initial assessment that the emplacement of Soviet missiles in Cuba would not seriously affect the balance of power, but he omits the salient point that those missiles were put there by the Soviets in stealth and were the subject of deliberate lies to the United States. To have acquiesced in their installation, and to have accepted the deception involving nuclear warheads simply as a *fait accompli*, could have severely affected the political balance. The compulsion felt by the administration to get the missiles out was not, therefore, an excessive reaction but one essential to America's relations with Moscow. The Soviets' ultimate withdrawal of the missiles was a major triumph in the cold war, which contributed to the fading of the Soviet Empire. Watching Kennedy at that time, I am confident that even had Khrushchev held firm and not withdrawn the missiles, the President would not have ordered an attack on Cuba. That he was quite unwilling to precipitate a war was shown by the recently disclosed plans for United Nations intervention which he secretly worked out with Dean Rusk.

It was Kennedy's misfortune that he will be remembered as the president who at an early point moved the country farther into the morass of Vietnam. Reeves describes a number of steps in that process, including the dispatch of advisers and the killing of President Diem, but fails to address a question I have been asked on numerous occasions: "Had Kennedy lived would America have continued to drift into the Vietnam quagmire or would he have pulled it out before such embroilment became irreversible?"

I can give that question no categorical answer. I could, on the evidence, argue it either way. Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has put forward cogent evidence for the thesis that Kennedy would have extricated America before the country got hopelessly caught up in the momentum toward catastrophe. On the other hand, Kennedy was surrounded, in the top echelons of his administration, by the same strong-willed advisers—including General Maxwell Taylor, on whom he strongly relied—who later joined in a common front to dissuade Lyndon Johnson from an American withdrawal. Yet it can also be said that Kennedy was not in awe of these colleagues as was Johnson, who was constrained from disagreeing with his close advisers by a sense of inferiority, due to his belief that they had superior educations.

I have no special insight to provide on this issue—only a brooding question that continues to bemuse me. During the early stages, when the President sent General Taylor together with Walt Rostow to examine the Vietnam prospects on the spot, they made a report urging that, among other things, we should ignore the limitation of 685 advisers called for by the 1954 Geneva Accords and introduce a military force of 10,000 into Vietnam to conduct combat operations required for self-defense and by the need to "back up the Vietnamese armed forces, 'in the case of a heightened military crisis.'"

Secretary McNamara and the Pentagon reached conclusions essentially supporting the Taylor-Rostow report, but, as frequently happened, its recommendations were watered down by agreement between Rusk and McNamara. These two advisers did, however, insert language that would have categorically committed the United States "to the objective of preventing the fall of South Viet-Nam to Communism," and included the statement that "in doing so, we recognize that the introduction of United States and other SEATO forces may be necessary to achieve this objective."

Presumably, that was farther than the President was prepared to go at that time, and he personally struck out the inserted language. Reeves accurately writes that when the report was first delivered to him, I told Kennedy in a private conversation that to commit American forces to South Vietnam would, in my view, be a tragic error:

> Within five years we'll have three hundred thousand men in the paddies and jungles and never find them again. That was the French experience. Vietnam is the worst possible terrain both from a physical and political point of view.

To my surprise, the President dismissed my comment with a gesture of impatience, saying, "George, I always thought you were one of the brightest guys around there, but you're just crazier than hell. That just isn't going to happen."

I do not know to this day what the President meant by that statement—whether he was convinced that events would so evolve as not to require escalation, or that he was determined to halt the escalation before it got out of control. Another interpretation is that he felt it impossible for Americans to be defeated as the French had been. There is no doubt that Kennedy was fully aware of both the pressures for escalation and their dangers. Later in the year, he commented on a request from Diem for further American troops that if he gave the military a go-ahead on combat troops,

> [Vietnam] will be just like Berlin. The troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowds will cheer; and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off, and you have

to take another.

Still, when Kennedy was assassinated there were 16,000 Americans in Vietnam.

But if he avoided any long-range commitments, as his colleagues were strongly advising, he was also, as Reeves notes, reluctant to accept a recommendation for withdrawal. "There are limits to the number of defeats I can defend in one twelve-month period," Kennedy told Galbraith. "I've had the Bay of Pigs, pulling out of Laos, and I can't accept a third."

He reinforced that view when he told Walt Rostow, who was urging a deeper United States involvement, that American withdrawal and Communist triumph would destroy him and the Democratic Party in a replay of the "Who Lost China?" debate that had plagued President Truman in the early 1950s. Conscious as he apparently was of the political dangers of withdrawal and presumably carried forward by the forces of escalation, Kennedy responded to a request from Diem for further assistance on December 15, 1962: "We are prepared to help the Republic of Viet-Nam to protect its people and independence. We shall promptly increase our assistance to your defense effort."

Kennedy's instinctive interest in foreign policy included its economic as well as its political aspects. Almost from the time of his inauguration he was determined to reverse the deficit in the United States balance of payments, though the annual deficit which caused so much alarm did not much exceed two or three billion dollars a year—a tiny fraction of our Gross National Product. Yet because that deficit seemed to him unacceptable, Kennedy appointed a "Balance of Payments Committee" under the chairmanship of Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon, on which I served as the representative from the State Department.

During committee meetings, Secretary McNamara took early command. In his anxiety to prove that the Defense Department could by itself quickly ease the President's anxieties, he even went so far as to appoint an official named Henry Cuss to wander the world, seeking to gratify the ambitions of second-rate dictators by selling them surplus US equipment.

I found this practice distasteful, and not only because I had been exposed to prewar propaganda about "merchants of death." It was certainly not in America's interest to load up small third world countries with substantial armaments; to do so would only strengthen military dictators and promote the resumption of civil disturbances within countries as well as local wars with their neighbors.

I felt so keenly that we were getting our policies badly out of shape in a short-sighted urge to gratify conservative passions for balance in our international accounts that I protested to the President. We were, I said, blowing the issue of the trade deficit out of all proportions. But he replied, "I take your point fully, but you still have to show me how to cut the deficit. Otherwise, how can I explain it to my father?"

In overseeing the American economy, Kennedy was torn between his intellectual convictions and the politically palatable. Generally liberal in his tendencies on political matters, he well understood the teachings of John Maynard Keynes as interpreted to him by Walter Heller, James Tobin, and Paul Samuelson. Keynes thought that a president should use fiscal policy to try to maintain a robust economy approaching full employment. If that required deficits in the balance of payments or the budget, no matter.

Although Reeves attributes Kennedy's conservative restraint to the influence of Douglas Dillon, I strongly suspect that, so long as old Joseph Kennedy was alive and sentient, he more than Douglas Dillon exercised the most conventional restraints on the President. For domestic political reasons, the President was determined not merely to eliminate the balance of payments deficit but to keep the budget deficit below the highest level reached under Eisenhower. That remained his firm resolve in spite of the fact that the Keynesians in the administration favored a more relaxed attitude at the cost of increasing the deficit.

After his father's failing health had eliminated his active influence, the President became more flexible. Thus, when in January 1963 Heller presented Kennedy with draft language for a special president's message to Congress on tax reduction and reform, Heller pointed out to him that he had worded his draft to have the President "saying something no other President has ever said—that a deficit under certain circumstances can be a good thing; that there are constructive deficits and destructive deficits and it depends on the circumstances." After weighing these cautionary words, the President approved the draft language and sent Congress his special message.

The picture of Kennedy Reeves puts together from bits and pieces of writings and interviews is far from admiring, and his *American Heritage* piece does not describe a man for whom Reeves had much admiration either as a human being or as a leader of America and hence of the world.

I was, therefore, greatly surprised to read in *Time* Magazine of November 22, 1993, an appraisal by Reeves that contained a glowing description of Kennedy's inspiring effect on his American contemporaries and the generation that followed. Reeves writes that "Kennedy passed the great test of democratic leadership: he brought out the best in most of his people most of the time." And later he observes that:

> Whatever one thinks of the political record or the political man, John Kennedy was a surpassing cultural figure—an artist, like Picasso, who changed the way people looked at things. Kennedy painted with words and images and other people's lives, squeezing people and perceptions like tubes of paint, gently or brutally, changing millions of lives. He focused Americans in the directions that truly mattered—toward active citizenship, toward the joy of life itself.

Can this be the same man to whom Reeves's book devoted 660 largely denigratory pages? Kennedy's contemporaries, Reeves continues, saw

> the young and restless rich, well educated and well mannered, gaily presiding over the White House, the world really. Watching the Kennedys was educational, teaching that most American of endeavors: self-improvement.

Nor has Kennedy's influence been limited to his contemporaries. That it still survives thirty years after his death is shown by a passage Reeves quotes from a young Harvard undergraduate, who said of Kennedy and his administration that "it doesn't seem fair that there was optimism then. He symbolizes idealism and service, an era when people could do things. When things got done."

Such views in Reeves's own writings lead one to ask: What are the defining qualities of a leader? At the top of the list, in my view, is the ability to inspire his own generation, and generations to follow, with a zest for living and a sense of high possibilities for his country and mankind in the future. Kennedy's ability to inspire people undoubtedly met that test, for his influence was not limited in any way to domestic politics. The Kennedy image helped to shape the world's opinion of America favorably at a time when a positive view was essential if America was to carry out its responsibilities as the leading world power. The vision of Kennedy—rich, handsome, stylish, and wise beyond his years, with a glamorous wife and a coolly confident manner—appealed to a large part of the world's population. Indeed, the Kennedy legend became so much a part of the global mythology that throughout the world millions wept when Kennedy was shot.

Thus I find it hard to share Reeves's darkly skeptical view of Kennedy and the events and achievements of his administration, particularly his derisive observation that Kennedy learned nothing from his experience in office. The record emphatically belies that observation. Consider, for example, his thoughtful but incisive handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, his instinctive comprehension of the potential of an Atlantic partnership, and his speech at American University on June 10, 1963, when, in evoking the horror and irrationality of nuclear war with the USSR he said that "we must reexamine our own attitude—as individuals and as a Nation—for our attitude is as essential as theirs." He went on to say that the US would not be the first to resume atmospheric testing and he soon worked out an agreement with Khrushchev banning it altogether.

In domestic policy, it is true, he responded cautiously at first to the growing civil rights movement and was excessively concerned by J. Edgar Hoover's attacks on Martin Luther King. But he changed direction and was willing to use the National Guard to directly challenge George Wallace in order to open up segregated universities to blacks. Saying in a national broadcast that the country faced a "moral crisis," he called on Congress to enact civil rights legislation of the kind that became a reality after his death. These accomplishments alone —and there were many others—suggest the wisdom he was gaining from his experience in the White House and the qualities he might have brilliantly applied to the improvement of mankind's lot, had Oswald's bullet not reached its mark. □