KENNEDY BY SORENSEN: PART FIVE

IF KENNEDY HAD LIVED

BY THEODORE C. SORENSEN

JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY had no fear or premonition of dying. Having narrowly survived death in the war and in the hospital, he did not need to be reminded that the life he loved was a precious, impermanent gift. But neither could he ever again be worried or frightened by the presence of death amidst life. "I know nothing can happen to him," his father once said. "I've stood by his deathbed four times. Each time, I said good-bye to him, and he always came back."

John Kennedy regarded the possibility of his own assassination as simply one more way in which his plans for the future might be thwarted. Yet he rarely mentioned death in a personal way and, to my knowledge, never spoke seriously about his own, once he recovered his health. He looked forward to a long life, never talking, for example, about arrangements for his burial or memorial. He had a will drawn up, to be sure, but that was an act of prudence, not premonition. Asking Ted Reardon and me to witness it on June 18, 1954, he had made it the occasion for a joke: "It's legal for you to do this—because I can assure you there's nothing in here for either of you." In 1956, driving me home one evening at high speed, he humorously speculated on how the headlines in my home state of Nebraska would read if we were killed together in a crash.

When his wife and daughter stopped by his White House desk with a dead bird Caroline wanted to bury, he preferred not to look at it. (Dead animals, in fact, appalled him. He did not like to hunt, was upset about the deer he had shot at the LBJ Ranch and often dangerously swerved his car to avoid running over a rabbit or dog, alive or dead, in the middle of the road.) Writing letters to the next-of-kin of those killed in Vietnam constituted one of his most difficult tasks. And during the Berlin and Cuban-missile crises, he expressed concern, not over the possibility of his death, but over the terrible tragedy that

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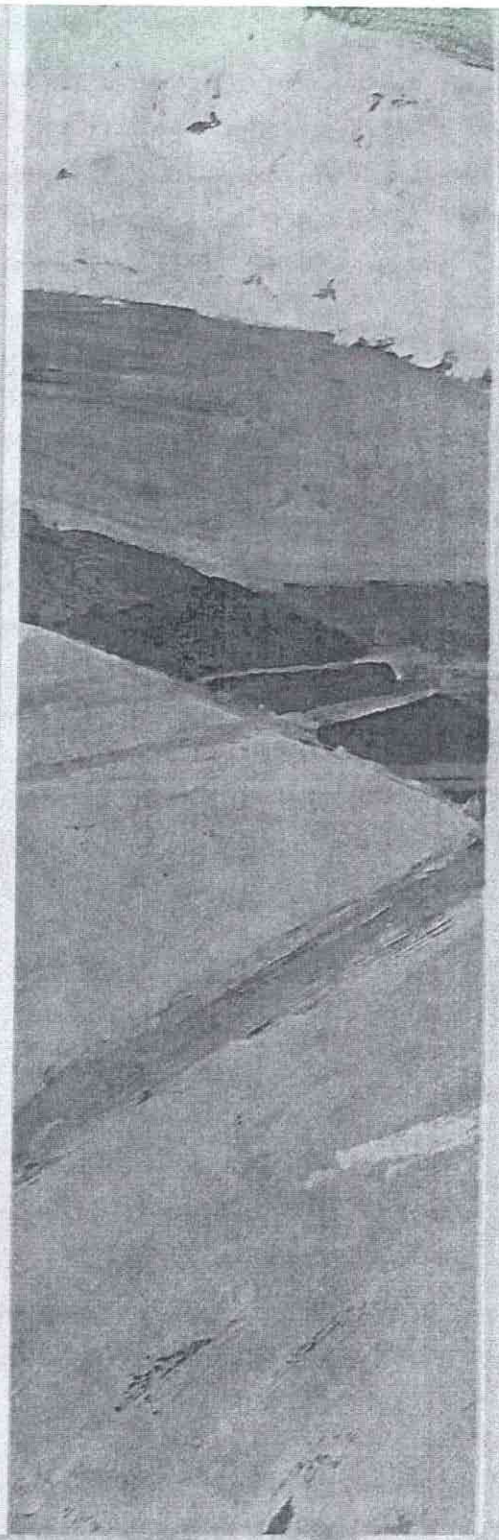

PAINTING FOR LOOK BY BERNARD FUCHS

might befall his children and all the children of the world. Even then, he was not moody or melancholy about the subject. Perhaps he came closest to revealing his inner thoughts when the Irish ambassador presented a Wexford cup in honor of little John's christening, with a poem by the Irish poet D. L. Kelleher:

"... *When the storms break for him*
May the trees shake for him
Their blossoms down;
And in the night that he is troubled
May a friend wake for him
So that his sons be doubled;
And at the end of all living and love
May the man above
Give him a crown."

The President, moving toward the microphone for his remarks of acceptance, whispered to the ambassador: "I wish that was for me."

He was moved by Buchan's words on the death of young Raymond Asquith: "He will stand to those of us who are left as an incarnation of the spirit of the land he loved. . . . He loved his youth, and his youth has become eternal."

"It is," he said at a War memorial, "against the law of nature for parents to bury their children . . . a son . . . with all of his life before him."

"The poignancy of men dying young always moved my husband," said Jacqueline, "possibly because of his brother Joe." And possibly he lived each day of his own life to the utmost because he did not know when his own rendezvous with death might be due. He refused to worry about his personal safety—not with any bravado, but with an almost fatalistic unconcern for danger. He had preferred the risks of a dangerous back operation to the frustrations of life on crutches. He had preferred the risks of flying in poor planes and poor weather to the frustrations of holding back his campaign. And he preferred the risks of less protection in the Presidency to the frustrations of cutting off public contact.

He mentioned more than once—but almost in passing—that no absolute protection was possible, that a determined assassin could always find a way, and that a sniper from a high window or rooftop seemed to him the least preventable. Occasionally, he would read one of the dozens of written threats on his life that he received each month in the White House. But he regarded assassination as the Secret Service's worry, not his. "Jim Rowley," he quipped, "is most efficient. He has never lost a President."

He paid little attention to warnings from racist and Rightist groups that his safety could not be guaranteed in their areas—but it made little difference to him anyway. He went to Caracas, Venezuela, where Nixon had been endangered—he stood overlooking the Berlin Wall, within Communist gunshot—he traveled more than 300,000 miles in a dozen foreign countries, where anti-American fanatics or publicity-seeking terrorists could always be found—he waded into uncontrolled crowds of handshakers at home and abroad—he advocated policies he knew would provoke venom and violence from their opponents—and he traveled in an open car in Dallas, Texas, where the Lyndon Johnsons and Adlai Stevenson had been manhandled by extremists—not to prove his courage or to show defiance, but because it was his job. "A man does what he must," he had written in *Profiles in Courage*, "in spite of personal consequences, in spite of . . . dangers—and that is the basis of all human morality."

His trip to Texas was a journey of reconciliation—to harmonize the warring factions of Texas Democrats—to dispel the myths of the right wing in one of its strongest citadels—to broaden the base for his own reelection in 1964. Just before he boarded his helicopter on the South Lawn—November 21, 1963, 10:45 a.m.—I ran out with some suggestions he had requested for "Texas Humor." I never saw him again.

He died as he would have wanted to die—at the center of action, being applauded by his friends and assaulted by his foes, carrying his message of reason and progress to the enemy, and fulfilling his duty as party leader and public educator.

He regarded Dallas's reputation for extremism as a good reason to include it in his schedule, not a good reason to avoid it. For with all his deep commitments, Kennedy was fanatical on only one subject: his opposition to fanatics, foreign as well as domestic, Negro as well as white, on the Left as well as the Right. He asked his countrymen to live peacefully with each other and with the world.

On the morning of November 22, as he glanced at a full-page, black-bordered advertisement in the Dallas *News* accusing him of a series of pro-Communist attitudes and actions, he said to his wife, shaking his head: "We're really in nut country now." He spoke contemptuously of oil millionaires who paid little taxes, sounding as angry, she thought, as he had been one night in Newport when a wealthy Republican had complained about the minimum wage. But John Kennedy never stayed angry long. He had traveled to Dallas to tell its citizens that "ignorance . . . can handicap . . . this country's security," and that "the righteousness of our cause must always underlie our strength. For as was written long ago: 'Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.'" On November 22, 1963, in the city of Dallas, the watchman woke but in vain.

"The only two dates that most people remember where they were," Kennedy once said, "were Pearl Harbor and the death of President Franklin Roosevelt." No one will forget where he was when he first learned of the death of President John Kennedy. The intellectual who had written in 1960 that Kennedy, like his opponent, was not "a man at whose funeral strangers would cry" was proven wrong. An era had suddenly ended; the world had suddenly changed, and the brightest light of our time had suddenly been snuffed out by mindless, senseless evil.

"There is . . . a time to be born and a time to die," according to the passage he liked to quote from Ecclesiastes; but this was not John Kennedy's time to die. He had so much more to do and to give that no religion or philosophy can rationalize his premature death as though it served some purpose, and no biographer can assess his truncated life as though it were complete. If one of his extraordinary qualities stood out among the many, it was the quality of continuing growth. By November, 1963, he had learned more about the uses and limitations of power, about the men on whom he could depend, about the adversaries and evils he faced, and about the tools and techniques of policy. He had undertaken large tasks still to be completed and foreseen future plans still to be initiated. He had, in the words of his favorite Frost poem, "promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep." With all of his accomplishments in the past, he seemed destined to accomplish still more in the future.

"What made it so unfortunate about Kathleen and Joe," he once said, referring to the deaths of his sister and his older brother, was that "everything was moving in their direction . . . For someone who is living at his peak, then to get cut off—that's the shock." That was the shock of November, 1963. Jack Kennedy was living at his peak. Everything was moving in his direction—abroad, after the Cuban missile crisis and test-ban treaty, at home, with the tax and civil-rights bills and a more complete mastery of the Executive branch. He was healthier and happier than he had ever been, neither wearied nor disillusioned by his burdens, more respected and beloved than before, still growing, still striving, confidently looking forward to five more years of progress in the Presidency—and then suddenly to get cut off. The world's loss is the loss of what might have been.

On the night of November 21, he had quoted the Scriptures: "Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions," and "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Jack Kennedy was old enough to dream dreams and still young enough to see visions. Of what could he have been dreaming as he smiled and waved to the people of Dallas on November 22?

On this most successful trip, he might well have been thinking of future trips. He was planning, for early 1964, a tour of Asia and a state visit to Italy later that year. He had pledged at Limerick to "come back to Erin in the spring-time." Most intriguing of all was the prospect of touring the Soviet Union at the invitation of Nikita Khrushchev, an invitation often repeated. The test ban and other signs of accommodation had now made that trip possible, and a Berlin solution, or even a continuation of relaxed tensions, would have made that trip definite.

More immediate problems were on his mind as well. He was to have lunch back home on Sunday with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to discuss Vietnam. On his last full day in Washington, November 20, at breakfast with the legislative leaders, he had reviewed progress on the tax, civil-rights and education bills, and spoken out strongly against attempts to curb foreign-aid funds and wheat sales to the Soviet Union. A host of other

Kennedy bills—on conservation, mass transit, youth employment and other priorities—clogged the legislative calendars and committees. The leaders were optimistic that all would pass that Congress, if not that session. Earlier, the President had said, "By the time this Congress goes home . . . next summer—in the fields of education, mental health, taxes, civil rights—this is going to be a record . . . However dark it looks now, I think that 'westward, look, the land is bright.'"

He was probably thinking about 1964 campaign strategy in Dallas. There was no doubt in his own mind that he would win, despite defections over the issue of civil rights. He had already flatly committed himself to a restaging of the televised debates with his opponent and was looking forward to them. He cautioned us not to talk to the press regarding prospective Republican nominees, fearful that our indication of a favorite might encourage the Republicans to turn elsewhere. But within the confines of the White House he predicted—and fervently hoped—that Barry Goldwater would be nominated. For Nelson Rockefeller to be named, he said, "would be too good to be true—but he doesn't have a chance." George Romney or some dark horse, he felt, had a chance and would be tougher to beat than Goldwater, whom he liked personally, but who stood diametrically opposed to him on every major issue. "This campaign," said the President with relish, "may be among the most interesting as well as pleasurable campaigns that have taken place in a long time." Defeating Goldwater, he thought, would end the radical right and provide him with a renewed and more powerful mandate.

He expected his second term to be more productive of domestic legislation than the first, with a more responsive, responsible Congress and a less distracting, distressing foreign scene. His long-range goals in foreign affairs included a decade of development to put the poorer nations on their feet, a United Nations made stronger as national sovereignty became weaker, and, most importantly, an evolving détente with the Soviet Union and the eventual reunification of Europe. He expected, before the end of that second term, to be dealing with new leaders in England, France, Russia and China, and to be dealing with a world in which no nation or bloc of nations could maintain a meaningful nuclear superiority or retain a camera-free secrecy. New arms limitations, new science and space cooperation, new approaches on Berlin and increased trade and contacts with Eastern Europe were all on the future agenda, and the major foreign-policy issue deliberately postponed to the second term was Red China.

After the second term . . . well, I do not believe he was thinking about that in Dallas that day. Certainly he would not have permitted any constitutional movement to enable him to seek a third term. As a congressman, he had supported the two-term limitation—the only specific restriction on the Presidency, to my knowledge, for which he ever voted. He had supported it, he once told me, out of a conviction he retained in the White House, that no President should be expected to extend his political and physical reserves beyond an eight-year period.

After the second term, what? I think he would have groomed his own successor as Democratic standard-bearer; but I have no idea whom he would have picked, and I don't think he did either. He would have remained active and influential in the party—ex-Presidents, he said, in some ways have more influence than they did when they were Presidents. He would have written his memoirs. He would have spent time at his library.

But none of these outlets would have been sufficient for a man of his exceptional energies at the age of 51. Occasionally, he speculated about what it would be like. He jokingly asked a former president of the UN General Assembly how it felt to be an ex-president, discussed with Truman his altered role, and remarked on Inauguration night what an adjustment it must have been for Dwight Eisenhower to wake that morning as President and leave that afternoon a private citizen. But he did not worry about it, and he told his wife not to worry about it. "Those things have a way of taking care of themselves when the time comes," he said.

He might have purchased, published or edited a newspaper, as he once contemplated, or become a syndicated columnist. He might have been Secretary of State in some later Democratic administration. He might have been president of a university. When I told him that McGeorge Bundy had been mentioned as a possible new president of Yale, Kennedy deadpanned: "I wish somebody would offer me the presidency of Yale!"

THE LIST of possibilities included a return to the United States Senate. His wife, remembering his contentment in that body, once asked Ted Kennedy at dinner whether he would give back Jack's seat when the time came, and Teddy loyally said that of course he would. But the President, upset, sternly told Jacqueline later never to do that to Teddy and not to worry about his future.

On November 22, his future merged with his past, and we will never know what might have been. His own inner drive as well as the swift pace of our times had enabled him to do more in three years than most Presidents do in eight—to live a fuller life in 46 years than most men do in 80. History will surely record that his achievements exceeded his years. In an eloquent letter to President Kennedy on nuclear testing, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan once wrote, "It is not the things one did in one's life that one regrets, but rather the opportunities missed." It can be said of the thousand days of John Kennedy that he missed very few opportunities. "He believed," said his wife, "that one man can make a difference and that every man should try."

He left the nation a whole new set of basic premises—on freedom now instead of someday for the American Negro—on dampening down instead of "winning" the cold war—on the unthinkability instead of the inevitability of nuclear war. For the most part, on November 22, these problems had not been solved, and these projects had not been completed. But I suspect that history will remember him for what he started as well as for what he completed. The forces he released in this world will be felt for generations to come.

People will remember not only what he did, but what he stood for. He stood for excellence in an era of indifference—for hope in an era of doubt—for placing public service ahead of private interests—for reconciliation between East and West, black and white, labor and management. He had confidence in man and gave men confidence in the future. I believe that John Kennedy believed that his role as President was to initiate an era of hope.

It will not be easy for historians to compare Kennedy with his predecessors and successors, for he was unique in his imprint upon the office: the first to be elected at so young an age, the first from the Roman Catholic faith, the first to reach literally for the moon and beyond, the first to prevent a new recession or inflation in modern peacetime, the first to pronounce that all racial segregation and discrimination must be abolished as a matter of right, the first to meet our adversaries in a potentially nuclear confrontation, the first to take a solid step toward nuclear arms control—and the first to die at so young an age.

History and posterity must decide. Customarily, they reserve the mantle of greatness for those who win great wars, not those who prevent them. But I find it difficult to measure John Kennedy by any ordinary historical yardstick—for he was an extraordinary man, an extraordinary politician and an extraordinary President. A mind so free of fear and myth and prejudice, so opposed to cant and clichés, so unwilling to feign or be fooled, to bore or be bored, to accept or reflect mediocrity is rare in our world—and even rarer in American politics. Without demeaning any of the great men who have held the Presidency in this century, I do not see how John Kennedy could be ranked below any one of them.

His untimely and violent death will affect the judgment of historians—and the danger is that it will relegate his greatness to legend. Even though he was himself almost a legendary figure in life, Kennedy was a constant critic of the myth, and it would be an ironic twist of fate if his martyrdom should now make a myth of the mortal man. His life, not his death, created his greatness. In November, 1963, some saw it for the first time. Others realized that they had too casually accepted it. Others mourned that they had not previously admitted it to themselves. But the greatness was there, and it may well loom even larger as the passage of years lends perspective.

One of the doctors at the Parkland Hospital in Dallas, observing John Kennedy's six-foot frame on the futile operating table, was later heard to remark: "I had never seen the President before. He was a big man, bigger than I thought."

He was a big man—much bigger than anyone thought—and all of us are better for having lived in the days of Kennedy.

END