Balanced Ledger

A THOUSAND DAYS: JOHN F. KENNEDY IN THE WHITE HOUSE *by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.* 1,087 pages. *Houghton Mifflin.* $9.

Of all the Kennedy books that have cascaded from the presses in the past two years, this is the first from a professional historian. By no coincidence, it is also the best. As an ex-presidential assistant, Harvard Historian (*The Age of Jackson*) Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. is not an altogether dispassionate chronicler; he makes the fatuous claim, for example, that Kennedy's legislative record was "unmatched in some respects since the days of Roosevelt." But if he frequently hymns the Kennedy Administration, he also limns it with objectivity and perception.

Bowl of Jelly. Schlesinger was nowhere near as close to Kennedy as Speechwriter Ted Sorensen, whose own memoir soared to the top of the best-seller lists. No matter. Acutely aware of his peripheral vantage point, Schlesinger has managed—by using state papers, letters and personal interviews—to reconstruct the period so skillfully that the result is not so much a personal memoir as a penetrating, balanced ledger of the Kennedy Administration.

Portions of the book have already appeared in LIFE and ten other publications, and consequently his opinions of the State Department as "a bowl of jelly" and of Secretary of State Dean Rusk as a man who "seemed actually to prefer stale to fresh ways of saying things" are already well known. On page after page, he betrays his view of Rusk as a man who is almost always silent because he almost never has anything to say—and he suggests that Kennedy felt the same way. What did Rusk think of Italy's impending *apertura a*

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SCHLESINGER & J.F.K.
A view from close by.

sinistra (opening to the left)? "He did not have, as far as I could find out, any views," writes Schlesinger. Of Berlin? "No one quite knew where he stood." Of the Congo? "Rusk, it seemed, thought about it as little as possible."

If his opinion of Rusk was low, Schlesinger is ungrudgingly admiring of some other members of the Kennedy cast. He found Lyndon Johnson "a good deal more attractive, more subtle and more formidable than I had expected." Defense Secretary Robert McNamara is a "tough, courteous and humane technocrat, for whom scientific management was not an end in itself but a means to the rationality of democratic government." White House Aide McGeorge Bundy, "in spite of the certified propriety of his background, had an audacious mind and was quite capable of contempt for orthodoxy." No one rates more admiration than veteran Diplomat Averell Harriman, "who said what he believed and cared not a damn for anything but getting the policy right." He was known among Foggy Bottom types as "the Crocodile," reports Schlesinger, "for his habit of abruptly biting off proposals which seemed to him stupid or irrelevant."

Whirled Asunder. Schlesinger excels at providing the illuminating stray quote or the odd fact that firmly fixes a character in the reader's mind. Here is Kennedy about to appoint Harriman to an ambassadorial post but first sending a trusted friend over to make sure that the old pro promised to get himself a hearing aid. Here is Britain's Prime Minister Harold Macmillan turning from a discussion of Red China as the real menace to the West to the question of a new NATO commander, and saying breezily to Kennedy: "I suppose it should be a Russian." Here, again, is Kennedy telling a friend how difficult it was, short of a showdown, to convince Russia's Nikita Khrushchev that the U.S. would not let anybody push it around. "That son-of-a-bitch won't pay any attention to words," said Kennedy. "He has to see you move."

In the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Khrushchev saw Kennedy move—and that brink-of-war episode sobered both men. Kennedy felt that he had "peered into the abyss and knew the potentiality of chaos," says Schlesinger, and from then on his overriding aim was to minimize "the ethos of violence" and "to prevent unreason from rending the skin of civility." Shortly before Dallas, he read aloud a passage from *King John:*

Which is the side that I must go withal?
I am with both: each army hath a hand;
And in their rage, I having hold of both,
They whirl asunder and dismember me.

Kennedy indeed saw himself and his office in princely Shakespearean verse. The prose of attendant-lord Schlesinger does him no disservice.