J. K. Galbraith on John O'Hara

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Marshall McLuhan on 'Propaganda'

BOOK WEEK

NOVEMBER 28, 1965

The Washington Post

STILL SPELLBOUND

A sophisticated account of the Kennedy years that does not feign dispassion

By Michael Harrington

A THOUSAND DAYS: John F. Kennedy in the White House. By Arthur M. Schlesinger jr. Houghton Mifflin. 1,087 pp. $9.

For Americans, November 22, 1963, is not yet history. It still hurts too much.

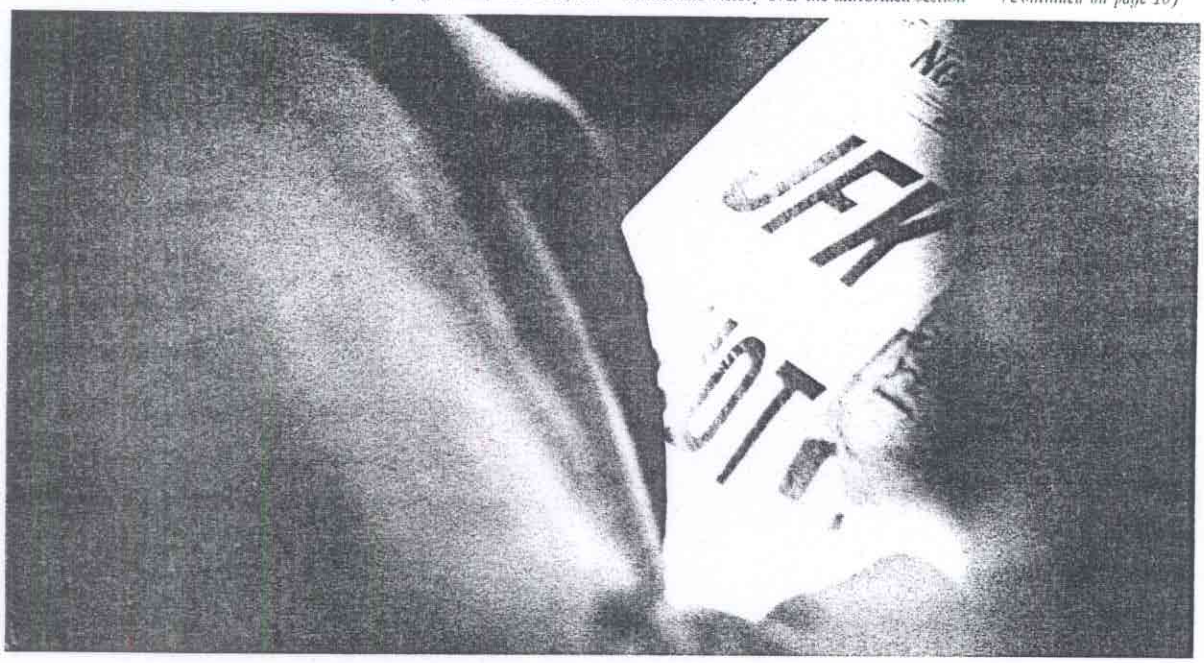
Thus, as Arthur M. Schlesinger jr., well understands in *A Thousand Days*, it is not yet possible even to pretend to dispassion. Some young historian of the future, he says, will attempt to regain the "Presidential perspective," that view of the whole which John F. Kennedy had intended to record in his own memoirs. But this generation of chroniclers still lives within the political and emotional spell of the fallen leader. The past they analyze is still very much the present and thus in fragments (for example, Schlesinger's own White House experiences weight his book toward the foreign policy issues in which he was personally involved).

And still, *A Thousand Days* is a permanent and indispensable contribution to the understanding of the Kennedy Administration. It is rare that a brilliant scholar is himself an original historical source or that he has an eye for personality as well as massive trends. Schlesinger is certainly a Kennedy partisan, but he is not an apologist, and, above all, he writes politically about politics, a virtue which eludes many in his profession.

In *A Thousand Days*, John F. Kennedy emerges as a man who restored the youth, excitement and rationality of the young Republic to the mature nation, and who provided the world with the vision of a leader who "understood the terror and the hope, the diversity and the possibility, of life on this planet." I share much of this conclusion. If I state it with the qualifications and criticisms of the outsider, I have the same feeling that, with John F. Kennedy, this country changed for the better. While living in Europe in 1963, I had decided to break with my radical orthodoxy and vote for Kennedy in 1964. I heard the terrible news in a Milan restaurant. And even now, while trying to be an objective reviewer, it is that sense of loss which is my true point of departure.

But to attempt the return to history, turn first to John F. Kennedy as Commander-in-Chief.

Unquestionably, the late President's flexible military policy represented a gain over the apocalyptic and dangerous posturing of the "massive retaliation" doctrine. And certainly Secretary of Defense McNamara won a memorable victory over the uniformed section *(Continued on page 10)*



Still spellbound

(Continued from page 1)
of the "permanent government" (the President's battle for control of the Executive is a major theme of this book). But three events are clearly decisive in coming to an assessment of Kennedy as a world strategist: the disaster he inherited at the Bay of Pigs, the tragedy that he left behind in Viet Nam, and the ambiguity of the Cuban missile crisis.

As a political leader, Kennedy took full responsibility for the Bay of Pigs: as a historian, Schlesinger is right to absolve him of much of the blame. The late President was systematically mis-advised by the CIA (which did not even tell its Intelligence Branch that it was mounting an invasion), the Joint Chiefs, and all those with "special competence" in military matters. In addition, Kennedy did not know how to demobilize the secret exile army which Eisenhower left him. And so he suffered the worst defeat of his Administration by following the specialized, sophisticated advice of brass and spooks to act like a gunboat diplomat. He was too new to his post to have learned how to reject such documented and imposing madness.

Viet Nam represented an analogous case. At the outset, General MacArthur told President Kennedy "that anyone wanting to commit ground forces to the mainland of Asia should have his head examined." Yet the American military painted glowing stories of imminent victory; Washington believed in the false-front villages of Diem and Nhu and basically ignored the social and political needs of the peasantry; and by the time the unpopular government was overthrown, the United States was already deeply and tragically involved in an impossible, immoral action. Schlesinger considers Viet Nam to be Kennedy's "great failure." I agree.

The Cuban missile crisis is a much more ambiguous moment to assess than Viet Nam. Kennedy did indeed show "toughness and restraint. . . . will, nerve and wisdom so brilliantly controlled." From *within the premises of American nuclear deterrent policy*, he acted magnificently. But Schlesinger's data point to another line of thought, one he does not pursue: that this confrontation contradicted many of the assumptions of that deterrent policy. According to American calculations, Khrushchev broke the rules of military gamesmanship by acting as he did; the President later felt that, had we had only 24 hours to decide, we would "not have chosen as prudently as we did"; and the confusion over two contradictory Khrushchev messages at the end of the crisis was probably a result of goofing off in the Kremlin bureaucracy.

But if the missile crisis challenged the fail-safe rationales of the military theorists, it also freed Kennedy and the world for the nuclear test-ban treaty. Coolness, luck and skill achieved a happy ending, yes, but they showed how insecure we still are, how precarious is the balance of terror.

It was Kennedy's great merit that his approach to international affairs was not simply military. The late President was for the "democratic revolution" in the developing lands. But, as Schlesinger's account of the Alliance for Progress suggests, such a determination is easier stated than carried out. Without making a *Fidelista* oversimplification, the Latin ruling classes are not anxious to give up their privileges, and American business has shown a much livelier interest in guaranteeing their investments abroad than in economic reform. Schlesinger freely admits that these complications distorted many of the original hopes of the Alliance, but he remains optimistic in the long run. I am not so sanguine. The disparity between the rich and poor lands, as Myrdal and others have documented, is still growing and this impoverishment of the "external proletariat" is a source of wealth—and political power—in the advanced countries. Much more radical means than have yet been proposed are required, I suspect, to fulfill Kennedy's excellent end of the democratic revolution.

On the domestic front, *the* issue of this generation is, of course, Civil Rights.

The President responded with forthrightness and even passion in 1963, particularly after Birmingham. Before that, he felt that his own slender mandate and the weakness of the Presidential party in the Congress held him back. Schlesinger approves this judgment; I do not. When Schlesinger says that Kennedy delayed signing the order against discrimination in housing because it might imperil setting up a Department of Urban Affairs with a Negro Secretary to head it, hold back the Trade Expansion Bill and discourage business from housing investments, the practical, political priorities were wrong. And until 1963, it was not the bully pulpit in the White House, but the Negro in the streets, that educated the people in the fundamentals of brotherhood. But here, as in so many other areas, history denied John Kennedy his rightful chance, and I think that the Negro masses who still idolize him rightly intuited the direction in which he would have moved after his tardy but bold beginning.

On economic matters, Kennedy moved brilliantly to establish a new consensus—and privately held, according to Schlesinger, a most fascinating and advanced position. After the mismanagement of the economy during the late Eisenhower Fifties, Kennedy established a series of important new principles: unbalanced budgets even in times of business prosperity if unemployment persisted at high rates; special training and retraining programs for left-outs and automation victims; the recognition of the problem of poverty in America. In each case, the basis of the Johnsonian economic performance was laid in the Kennedy years.

But, Mr. Schlesinger tells us, the late President went well beyond tax-cut Keynesianism in his economic thinking. He believed *(Continued on page 12)*

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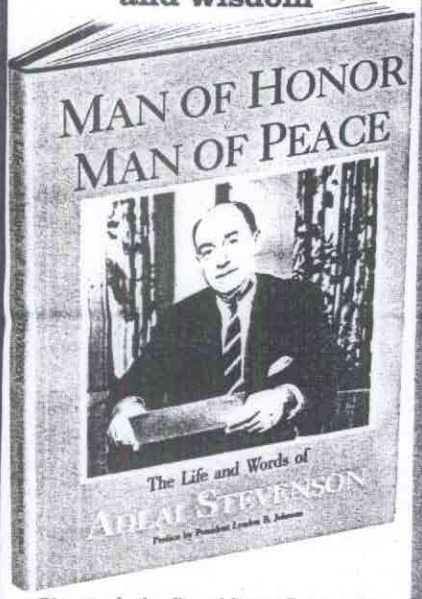

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(Continued from page 10)

in John Kenneth Galbraith's thesis that government intervention should take the form of direct social investment in the public sector—housing, schools, hospitals, etc.—and not confine itself to tax relief. But he did not think he could persuade Congress to so much good sense, and he held back. Now that Mr. Johnson has corporation executives committed to Kennedy's initial programs, one hopes that he will move on to implement his predecessor's more profound insights in this area.

Finally, it is in two areas that Mr. Schlesinger stakes out the strongest claim for the greatness of John F. Kennedy: world peace and the late President's impact upon American thinking. These two points are, I would suggest, quite related.

To an extraordinary degree, Kennedy broke with the dangerous banalities of the Cold War. Peace, he said at American University in 1963, "does not require that each man love his neighbor—it requires only that they live together in mutual tolerance." In the Moscow Treaty banning atomic tests, the late President actually led the American people and the world a tiny step back from the brink —a giant stride in the right direction.

But then, the Cold War rigidities were not simply a fact of international life. They were the basis of patriotic celebration, of suspicion and McCarthyite conspiracy theories within America. And, in part because he was seeking a *detente*, John F. Kennedy was able to make criticism and candor about the national failings a part of the national life once more. (And one wonders, if the present escalation in Viet Nam continues, if that reawakening of conscience and consciousness John Kennedy helped to initiate will not come to an end.)

Virginia Woolf once said that those who die young are always remembered. That is true—and not true—about the late President. Youth was indeed murdered in Dallas and there is, as Schlesinger evokes it, an almost unbearable poignance in thinking of what might have been had he completed what he began. But there were deeds as well as promises in the short political space of a thousand days. If I cannot agree with some of Schlesinger's interpretations of them, I can share his main conclusion that this was a man who changed his nation. He has written a truly political history—sophisticated, partisan, provocative even when one disagrees with it—and one of the most important books about the Kennedy years that will come from a contemporary of the late President.

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