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Adlai Stevenson: A Sense of Loss

By Marquis Childs

A YEAR has passed since Adlai Stevenson died while walking in Grosvenor Square in London. He had been through trial and tribulation in his post as Ambassador to the United Nations. His influence on the foreign policy of the Johnson Administration was negligible. Yet millions in this country and around the world felt his passing as a personal loss. And, if one may venture a guess, that sense of loss is still strong not only among his friends but among the unnumbered multitude that looked to him for something more than the exercise of power.

The reason is not hard to find. His generosity of spirit, his magnanimity, his lack of malice, his humor, the free flow of ideas—all this came through in almost everything he wrote and spoke. Above all, a generosity of spirit is missing today and, while this made him vulnerable to petty snipers practicing a dubious power politics, it was the essential element of his greatness.

Much was written after his death about his dismay and disillusion at the course of American policy and the chores he was called on to perform at the U.N. He was in on the crash landings, as in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, but seldom on the take-offs.

THIS reporter was in South America at the time of his death and the memory of that call from the Embassy giving the news is still sharp. I had spent several days with him in New York at the height of the Dominican crisis in May and he was deeply troubled by the assigned task of justifying the massive American intervention. As a thinking man he knew well that far more was involved than either a Communist threat or the safety of Americans on the island.

But he was loyal to those from whom he took his orders and if at that time of great strain he contemplated resigning his post he never spoke of it. Nor did his humor fail him. The recollection of a small relaxed dinner party at which he told story after story, some new and some old, as the table rocked with laughter is unforgettable.

Increasingly evident in the year since his death is the fact that he was trapped. He was caught between the aspirations of a world organization seeking a common way to peace and the demands of an Administration in Washington resorting to nationalist solutions for situations in which force appeared the only recourse.

This is the dilemma in which Stevenson's successor, Arthur Goldberg, finds himself. By the Lyndon Johnson persuasiveness—a brand seldom equalled in public life—Goldberg was moved to leave the Supreme Court and take a post held out as one in which the potential for achieving peace could mean salvation for the world and a crown of glory for the architect. Ambassador Goldberg finds himself limited to gestures far short of the heroic future unfolded before him in the President's study.

The U.N. is, in fact, in danger, under the one-nation, one-vote rule, of falling under the control of the countries of color. With African nations joined to the Asian bloc they could outvote the West. If and when Red China is admitted such a powerful bloc becomes an even greater threat. A rebellion in this country against paying more than one third the cost of the U.N. is not hard under those circumstances to foresee.

STEVENSON understood this danger. He had from time to time talked about resigning and following a quieter life, including the writing he wanted to do. But public office and its perquisites had become a habit. His friends were concerned that in the dizzy round of the U.N. it was an unfortunate habit—a drug of sorts easing the pain of so much disillusion and disappointment.

He was unlucky in his public career. Twice he ran for President against a great military hero and twice he was disastrously defeated. Nothing he might have done in those two campaigns, and particularly in the second one in 1956, was in any way likely to alter the outcome, and with his intuitive knowledge of political trends he surely knew it.

The abiding ambition he carried with him to the grave was to be Secretary of State. His own mistake in judgment when at the 1960 Democratic convention he declined to deal himself out of the Presidential game is widely considered to have denied him that ambition.

Given the imprint he left on his time, the mark of that generous, questing spirit, Stevenson is likely to live longer in history than many of the power-grabbers and power-seekers. His heritage is written in the character of a citizen-patriot who denied the savagery and brutality of his own time of troubles.

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