

B O O K S

ROBERT KENNEDY AND HIS TIMES, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.
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Court historian of Camelot

ROBERT SHERRILL

ONE DOES NOT EXPECT AN excessive amount of objectivity when a Kennedy writes about a Kennedy, which is what has happened here. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., is a part of that extended Kennedyesque family welded together by the same kind of bonds Luigi Barzini detected in the Italian mafia—"a state of mind, a philosophy of life, a conception of society, a moral code . . . that they must aid each other, side with their friends and fight common enemies even when the friends are wrong and the enemies are right."

In this book, Schlesinger gets his clan ticket punched again. He is not devious about it. He tells you at the outset what to expect: "I was a great admirer and devoted friend of Robert Kennedy. . . . I thought him the most creative man in American public life when he was killed. It is not too much to say . . . that I loved him."

One need not be on guard when reading a Festschrift or sonnet inspired by love. But when love is applied so heavily as Schlesinger has done to biography and history, the fascinating results—and the results are indeed fascinating all the way—are something like a minotaur, half bull and half man; and it is not always easy to tell which end is which.

Some of the bull, however, is quite obvious. When Schlesinger discusses Robert Kennedy's successful effort to

unseat Senator Kenneth Keating, he says that "Keating, striking hard for the Jewish vote, accused Kennedy of having made a deal with a 'huge Nazi cartel . . . the chemical arsenal for Nazi Germany' when the Justice Department [which Kennedy then headed as attorney general] settled the case of the General Aniline and Film Corporation in 1963." Schlesinger treats the Keating accusation as no more than slung mud,

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and wraps it up in three paragraphs.

Unfortunately for him and for the memory of Robert Kennedy, another book, *The Crime and Punishment of I. G. Farben*, by Joseph Borkin, is moving onto the market at this moment and it sheds such a light on this episode as to leave Kennedy's record badly blemished.

Borkin's account: I. G. Farben, which pioneered in the use of prison labor during World War II and can be reasonably held responsible for the death of at least 25,000 Jews, maneuvered through a number of dummy corporations and stock shufflings to avoid having its property seized in retribution by the U.S. government. General Aniline and Film (GAF) was

one of the I. G. Farben companies that was laundered through Swiss banks. But to no avail. It was seized. To make a very long story short, let it just be said that things worked out okay in the end for those mysterious stockholders when they hired Prince Radziwill as their negotiator. Radziwill, brother-in-law to President Kennedy, got the dispute settled in a very profitable fashion despite what Borkin tells us was the "unanimous opposition of [Robert Kennedy's] staff."

Not a whiff, not an inkling, of any of this emerges from Schlesinger's book. He does not mention the name I. G. Farben. He does not mention the name Radziwill or allude to his role in the settlement. In fact, if one had only Schlesinger to rely on, one might even draw the conclusion that there never was a settlement to benefit the ex-Nazis.

ROBERT KENNEDY AND HIS *Times* is not a cover-up or whitewash in the ugly sense; it is just a backward look at the mirage of Camelot through the rheumy eyes of an old Cold War liberal. That's why the book is so valuable. You may never again get to share the view with such a master as Schlesinger, a genius at assimilating and juggling details, who can make Camelot bob and waver forever just above an unreachable pastel horizon, under an almost cloudless sky. But that is also what makes the book so quaint, like a Hallmark card. His Camelot has no outhouse. His heroes are too perfect. To be sure, some of Robert Kennedy's classmates at Harvard remember him, as John Knowles recalls, "as kind of a nasty, brutal, humorless little fellow." But Robert, Schlesinger assures us, not only grew out of that phase but became sweetness itself. Thanks to daddy's string-pulling, Robert got a deferment and sat out World War II in a Harvard classroom, but Schlesinger tells us that Bobby "chafed" to see action. (After the war was over, he canceled his deferment and went to sea with the navy—a trip to Cuba—for four months.)

And of course there was the McCar-

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thy period, which Schlesinger tries to soften. But he fails. There is no evidence here that Kennedy ever came to realize the real evil of Senator Joseph McCarthy. In later years when Kennedy discussed the fallen goblin, he admitted that McCarthy had sometimes been "cruel" to individuals but he never acknowledged that McCarthy critically damaged the government and the nation. Robert allegedly said in a 1966 taped interview (quoted by Schlesinger) that "in 1952 I had been crazy about [Adlai Stevenson]. I was excited [about his candidacy] in 1956." Somebody is trying to kid somebody here. In 1952 Robert was working for McCarthy, and when McCarthy died in 1957, the year after Robert's alleged excitement over Stevenson's candidacy, Kennedy was so saddened that he dismissed his office staff for the day and confided in his diary, "I feel that I have lost an important part of my life."

Schlesinger tries so hard he hurts his own cause. Robert Kennedy wasn't a lousy attorney general and indeed there were moments when he was really first rate. But he wasn't nearly so perfect as Schlesinger, with great difficulty, tries to make him out. As attorney general, Robert Kennedy

authorized more than 500 wiretaps. But Schlesinger rushes up to assure us, like an undertaker explaining the price of the casket, that Robert "did not promote wiretapping," no indeed, and to prove the point Schlesinger tells us that "he authorized no wiretaps against racketeers." Wonderful! There's just the kind of restraint we need. So who did he wiretap? The very ones you would expect from a McCarthy alumnus—"national security" cases, of course, including such threatening persons as Lloyd Norman of *Newsweek*, Hanson Baldwin of the *New York Times*, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Schlesinger has to admit that "in the main, Kennedy consented to Hoover's wiretap requests," but he offers us the bizarre excuse that "the electronic world was a mystery to the Attorney General," as though that had something to do with understanding the Bill of Rights.

While Schlesinger concedes that under Robert Kennedy the Justice Department made virtually no effort to enforce the antitrust laws and that in this field Robert's record was "nondescript," Schlesinger tries to compensate by portraying Robert as a valiantly incorruptible attorney general in

that he prosecuted and sent to jail three political cronies. Kennedy does deserve plenty of credit for having done that, but, again, he does not deserve nearly so much credit as Schlesinger heaps upon him. One of the miscreants was George Chacharis, mayor of Gary, Indiana. Chacharis was a savvy campaigner, and had helped John Kennedy in Indiana. But he was even better at taking payoffs—more than \$200,000 worth. He was dragged into court by Edwyn Silberling, section chief of the Justice Department's Organized Crime Section, and by Jay Goldberg, Silberling's special prosecutor for this case. Despite constant interference and obstruction from other officials in the Justice Department—encouraged by Kennedy?—Goldberg and Silberling put Chacharis behind bars. Shortly thereafter Goldberg resigned. He had been advised that he was "dead" at Justice. Silberling soon followed. They were the heroes in the case, not Kennedy, and yet Schlesinger dismisses Goldberg as "theatrical and, in view of some in Justice, a grabber of headlines." If you want to read a balanced account of this episode, read Victor S. Navasky's *Kennedy Justice*.



EDWARD CARRAVAL

AT NO OTHER TIME IN OUR history, I imagine, have the nation's problems been treated by a President and an attorney general the way college kids might study for a pop quiz. "On an August morning in 1960," writes Schlesinger, "John Kennedy picked up Harris Wofford, his campaign man on civil rights, in his red convertible and said, as they drove downtown, 'Now, in five minutes, tick off the ten things that a President ought to do to clean up this goddamn civil rights mess.' Kennedy needed the black vote." And if John Kennedy knew nothing about the question of civil rights, it seems that Robert Kennedy was "considerably less" learned. Bearing that in mind, it is not surprising that they appointed some of the worst segregationists to the federal bench—for which Schlesinger can offer the not very comforting excuse: "... the final Kennedy record of southern judicial appointments was, despite public impression to the contrary, comparable to that of the Eisenhower administration."

The attitude of the New Frontier was shockingly careless. The Kennedys treated government as something to play around with; if you make

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a bad mistake today, don't worry, you'll get the hang of it eventually. Schlesinger keeps referring to "the education of Robert"; every time he or his brother bungled something crucial, Schlesinger will say "Bobby was learning." No doubt if he had lived long enough, and the nation been able to survive his mistakes, Robert might have turned into a fine fellow. He was changing, it seemed, and very much for the better. But oh my, he and his brother certainly did start from scratch. For all the thought they put into selecting the cabinet, they might as well have flipped a coin. You know how we got the great stone face, Dean Rusk, as secretary of state? President Kennedy didn't know anything about Rusk, but on the recommendation of Bobby, he telephoned Robert Lovett, the Wall Street lawyer, who in that one conversation persuaded Kennedy to take Rusk. The reason for appointing that great Republican moneybags Douglas Dillon to treasury secretary was even worse. According to Robert Kennedy: "Joe Alsop was a tremendous booster of Douglas Dillon. In view of all the favors that Alsop had done [Kennedy] I don't think there's any question that this was a factor." The President of the United States selecting a cabinet member to please a columnist?

One of the most important messages that sneaks out of these pages (Schlesinger of course never specifically makes the point) is that the Kennedys seemed to go out of their way to surround themselves with incompetents and were willing to tolerate the most awful bungling. Why did they put up with such people as Richard Bissell? Bissell had been commander of the CIA policy team that directed the Bay of Pigs defeat—something that the Kennedys never recovered from. And yet the very next year after the Bay of Pigs, Bissell was heading a group that thought up the counterinsurgency

bullshit, which in turn led to the formation of the Green Berets. And that was our entry into the Vietnam fighting. Robert Kennedy was an "ardent" supporter of counterinsurgency, which Schlesinger tells us with a straight face was not conceived in military terms. The Green Berets, he insists, were originally "instructed in harvesting crops, digging wells, curing jungle diseases," etc. Of course counterinsurgency turned into a monstrous bully-boy foreign policy operation, but Schlesinger tosses off this development as just "another phase in the education of Robert Kennedy."

During the confrontation with Russia over the placement of missiles in Cuba, Dean Rusk, according to Robert Kennedy, "had a virtually complete breakdown mentally and physically" as a result of the crises. Robert also claimed that half a dozen of the President's advisers would have been willing to see the United States plunged into a "catastrophic war." And yet the Kennedys did not get rid of any of these advisers. They were still there to give President Johnson the same kind of advice in moments of crisis.

ROBERT KENNEDY SAID HE thought J. Edgar Hoover was "dangerous . . . a psycho . . . and I think he's . . . become senile and rather . . . frightening." But the Kennedys never for a moment contemplated firing Hoover, at least not in JFK's first term, because, as Robert also pointed out with a dazzling confession of expediency, "it was important . . . that Hoover remained happy and that he remain in his position because he was a symbol and the President had won by such a narrow margin . . ." (JFK's willingness to fight the war in Vietnam simply to win reelection is also made clear. Schlesinger's defense of this as a moral decision is that it was better to get bogged down in Vietnam than to lose in 1964 to Goldwater. Ask not what your country can do for you . . .)

Bobby's pal, General Maxwell Taylor, was such a kook-a-boo as to make General Curtis ("Bomb them back to the Stone Age") LeMay seem almost a softie. Taylor wanted Kennedy to declare a national emergency and to put the United States on a war footing because "we are in a life and death struggle" with Russia. If he wasn't a madman, at least he was certainly brimming over with what Schlesinger

calls "organizational fantasies"—and yet Robert Kennedy actually endorsed the fantasies. He thought Taylor was a socko thinker. He agreed with Taylor that "there can be no long-term living with Castro as a neighbor."

Robert Kennedy became consumed with the Cuban problem, exerting extreme pressure on the CIA to "do something" about Castro. Schlesinger gives over several pages, futilely, to arguing that the Kennedys didn't know about the CIA's efforts to assassinate Castro, but President Kennedy admitted to Tad Szulc that he was under "tremendous pressure" to okay a Castro murder, so he obviously knew what the CIA had in mind and there is absolutely no evidence that he specifically forbade the CIA's assassination attempts. It's curious that Robert Kennedy should feel such a frantic need to retake Cuba. For whom? The big losers from the Castro takeover had been the underworld. Gambling, whorehouses, and drugs had provided the mob with a \$100 million annual income—all swept away by Castro. When one recalls that Robert Kennedy as attorney general went out of his way to avoid using wiretaps on the mob, one can't help wondering if the mob inspired his hysterical advocacy to "do something" to dump Castro. Okay, so that's a dirty thought. But Bobby had some strange connections, some strange impulses, and they were not always high-minded. With Bobby, things were not always as they seemed. Willam Hundley, who worked with him at Justice, believed, on the basis of many conversations, that "If he had ever become President, the first person he would have let out [of prison] was Hoffa."

Bobby's brief career as senator from New York was marked mainly by one other rather late development in his education—the discovery that many Americans are hungry. But, being a prudent person who did not want to make the home state power structure unhappy, he took his hunger-in-America investigating team to Mississippi, not to the South Bronx. Needless to say, Schlesinger sees it all as compassion, free of politics.

As for Bobby's truncated presidential campaign, wherein Kennedy first let Eugene McCarthy test the waters before trying to drown him, Schlesinger shucks the last polyester item of his historian's apparel and comes out the naked hero worshiper. His hatred of McCarthy for not surrendering

finally gets to be kind of funny. But the messiah forgives and carries on. Again and again along the campaign trail, Schlesinger depicts people reaching out to touch Kennedy to be spiritually cured. Not content to make him Jesus, in one scene he also makes Kennedy out to be Moses crossing the Red Sea. A black leader is quoted: "I walked in front of the car and raised my hand, and they [a once unruly crowd] parted so we could get through . . ." and "Willie Brown looked on with amazement." Very Biblical.

Cunning cult books like this are basically insulting. In many black homes, pictures of the Kennedys still hang, reminding the occupants of something that never existed. This book (which the Literary Guild has bought for \$750,000 and Time-Life will use to make a TV series) tries to be such a picture for all of us. □