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BOOKS

COACHED BY CAMELOT

Why do we still want to defend J.F.K.?

BY GORE VIDAL

EARLY spring, 1959. Dutchess County, New York. My telephone rang. "Senator Kennedy is calling." It was Evelyn Lincoln, Jack's secretary. (Her employer hadn't yet metamorphosed into the imperial acronym J.F.K.) Years later, Mrs. Lincoln wrote a fairly unrevealing memoir of her years with Kennedy—a pity, since she knew a great deal about him, including the subject of his call to me. Jack came on the line. No hello. No how are you. "That friend of yours up there, Dick Rovere. He's writing a piece for *Esquire* about 'Kennedy's last chance to be President' or something. Well, it's not true. Get to him. Tell him I don't have Addison's disease. If I did, how could I keep up the schedule I do?" Many more staccato sentences. No time to lose. Primaries were coming up; then the Convention. Before I went down the road to see Rovere, I looked up Addison's disease: a deterioration of the adrenal function that can lead to early death. No wonder Jack was panicky. Even a hint that he was mortally ill . . .

Background: In 1953, Jack married Jacqueline Bouvier, whose stepfather, H. D. Auchincloss, had been my stepfather until, in a fit of generosity, my mother passed him, like a well-stuffed safety-deposit box, on to Jackie's needy mother. Through Jackie, I got to know Jack; delighted in his darkly sardonic humor, not unlike my own—or Jackie's, for that matter. In due course, I shifted from the noble—that is, Adlai Stevensonian—side of the Democratic Party to the raffish gang of new kids from Massachusetts, by way of Riverdale, N.Y. Then I, too, went into active politics; by 1960 I would be the Democratic-Liberal candidate for Congress from New York's highly conservative Twenty-ninth District, and our party's Presidential candidate was a matter of poignant interest to

me. When Jack rang me—the first and last time—I was eager for him to be nominated, even though I had already seen a poll that indicated that his Roman Catholicism could cost our district the election. In the end, I was to get 43.3 per cent of the vote to his 38 per cent; this was very satisfying to me. Unfortunately, the Republican incumbent congressman got 56.7 per cent. This was less satisfying. "Your loss," Jack grinned afterward, "was a real tragedy for our nation." Whatever else, he was funny.

Richard H. Rovere wrote the much read and admired Letter from Washington for *The New Yorker*. "The Washington Letter as mailed from vital Rhinebeck, New York," Jack used to chuckle. "That shows real dedication. Endless tracking down of sources. In-depth analyses on the spot . . ." But Dick was now on to something that could cost Jack the nomination.

Rovere lived in a gingerbread frame house on a tree-lined street in Rhinebeck. He had a large, nearly bald head with patchy red skin and a scarred neck. Jack had asked me if he was a drinker. I said no, I thought it was eczema. Thick glasses so magnified his eyes that he seemed like some rare aquatic specimen peering back at you through aquarium glass. In youth, Rovere had been a Communist. Later, when he saw that the Marxist god had failed, he left the Party; he also must have made some sort of inner vow that never again would he be taken in by anyone or anything that required mindless loyalty. As of spring, 1959, Rovere was inclined to support Stevenson, who had not yet made up his mind about running for a third time.

I began, to the point, "Kennedy does not have Addison's disease."

Rovere insisted that he did. He had ac-

The Kennedys were an eighteenth-century "amoral" couple who would have fitted with ease into "Les Liaisons Dangereuses."

EDWARD SORIEL



quired the journalist's habit of always being, no matter what the subject, more knowledgeable than anyone else in the room. I asked him how *he* knew. "A friend's wife has Addison's, and they took her to the Lahey Clinic in Boston where they have all the latest procedures, including one that was cooked up for Kennedy. They put a pellet under your skin and it's supposed to drip adrenaline into you for a week or so and then you get another pellet."

I used Jack's arguments. How explain his tremendous energy? How could he have been campaigning so furiously ever since 1956 if he was ill, etc.? Dick was unimpressed. He had the doctor's name; he had a lot of clinical data. He was already writing the piece. *Esquire* had been advertising it. No turning back.

Question for today: Did I suspect that the story was true? I suppose, in court, I'd say I'm not a pathologist and so how could I know? Jack had had, all his life, numerous mysterious illnesses. Four times, he had been given the last rites. The yellow-gold complexion (typical of Addison's) was explained as the result of wartime malaria. I suppose now, with hindsight, I had already made up my mind that if he thought he could survive four years of the Presidency "vigorously"—his key word that season—as well as he had survived four years of campaigning, then whatever was wrong with him was under control. Thus one embraces, so painlessly, falsity.

Dick's piece duly appeared with no mention of Addison's disease. I did bet him a hundred dollars, even money, that Jack would be nominated and elected. Dick was cheerfully condescending. "At those odds, I can get you a lot more bets." In November, he paid off. Oddly—well, not so oddly—Dick and I never again alluded to our business.

Point to story: How easily so many people—best and brightest as well as worst and dullest—got caught up in the Kennedy bandwagon. The amount of lying that went on in that era was, the ineffable Nixon to one side, unique in our homely history.

Three years later, Rovere and I had a row that pretty much put an end to our friendship. Again the subject was Kennedy lying. The Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962, was resolved between Kennedy and Khrushchev with a secret deal: we would remove our missiles from

Turkey if the Soviets withdrew theirs from Cuba. Neither side would give the game away. No gloating. No publicity. But, as always, there was a leak. To plug it, Jack got his old friend the journalist Charles Bartlett to write a *Saturday Evening Post* article declaring that the bold macho leader of the free world could never have backed down on anything. J.F.K. had simply ordered the Russians off the premises, and they had slunk away. In a fit of thoughtful malice, Jack decided that this would be a good moment to knife his ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, and he added that "that old woman Adlai" had wanted the President to make a deal. Bartlett wrote that the resolute Jack never made deals with darkness.

I learned what had happened from Bartlett's assistant: my half sister, Jackie's stepsister, who had heard Bartlett discussing details of the article with Kennedy over the telephone. I repeated the matter to Rovere. "No!" he said, which was his response to whatever anyone said. Dick got very red. A heavy smoker, he almost vanished in a blue-white cloud. To my amazement, he was, by now, so much a Kennedy loyalist that not only could he not believe so vicious a tale but if it was by any chance even remotely true he was done with Kennedy forever, presumably like that other god that failed him.

Now I read in "One Hell of a Gamble," a fascinatingly detailed narrative of the Cuban missile crisis (by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali; Norton; \$27.50), that an aide to McGeorge Bundy was sent round to Bartlett to tell him that Stevenson "had angered the President by suggesting that the United States pull out its missiles in Turkey in an exchange for the Soviet missiles in Cuba. . . . Poor Adlai Stevenson, the two-time failed Democratic Presidential nominee . . . was being hung out to dry." Later, "Bartlett had a private dinner with the President. He handed over the draft of the article. . . . As Bartlett recalls today, the President 'marked it up.'"

"I told you so," I muttered to myself, in lieu of the now dead Rovere, when I read the confirmation of Jack's lively malice.

THIS is a deliberately roundabout way of getting to Seymour Hersh ("The Dark Side of Camelot," Little, Brown; \$26.95) and his current collision with what I have just been describing: the great

disinformation apparatus put in place forty years ago, a monster that even now continues to metastasize within academe and the media to such a degree that myth threatens to overthrow history. Spin is all. Spin of past as well as present.

For some reason, Hersh's "revelations" are offensive to many journalists, most of whom are quick to assure us that although there is absolutely nothing new in the book (what a lot they've kept to themselves!), Hersh has "proved" nothing. Of course, there is really no way for anyone ever to prove much of anything, short of having confessions from participants, like the four Secret Service men who told Hersh about getting girls in and out of Jack's bed. But when confronted with these smoking guns the monkeys clap their hands over their eyes and ears and chatter, "Foul allegations by soreheads." The responses to Hersh's book made me feel as if I were in a deranged time warp. Since there is not, in any foreseeable future, a Kennedy candidate for President, why is there so much fury and fuss at Hersh's attempt to let daylight in on old, old black magic? Sufficient, surely, to the day is the blessed martyr Paula Jones, small potatoes, perhaps, but our very own tuber rose.

Incidentally, how our masters the synergists must be tied in knots. Remember, back in the eighties: wouldn't it be wonderful if you could own a network *and* a studio that made films to show on it as well as magazines and newspapers to praise them in *and* a publishing house for source material *and* . . . ? Well, now we have the marvellous comedy of Hersh's book being published by Little, Brown, which is owned by Time Warner, and reviewed negatively-nervously, nervously-negatively by *Time* (same ownership), while *Newsweek* (owned by the Washington Post Company and still, perhaps, influenced by Kennedy's old friend Ben Bradlee) denounces Hersh, while ABC (owned by Disney) prepares a TV documentary that is tied in with . . . Many years ago, there used to be something called "conflict of interest." No longer, I'm afraid. Today, we all bathe in the same river. It will be a relief when Bill Gates finally owns everything and there will be just the one story.

Now let me declare my interest. I got a second telephone call thirty-six years after the one from Jack. This was from Seymour Hersh, whom I'd never met. He told me about the book he was writ-



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ing and why he was ringing me. He had just read my memoirs, "Palimpsest." "You have some new stuff on Kennedy in your book," he said, "and I wondered why I hadn't heard about it before. I got curious. I got a researcher to check your American reviews, and I found that not one mentioned all the new things you'd come up with. Why did nobody write about you spending a couple days with Kennedy at Hyannis Port during the Berlin crisis and keeping notes?" I gave him my theory. Few American reviewers actually read an entire book, particularly if the author is known to hold opinions that are not those of the conglomerate for which the reviewer is writing. Also, since I'm a novelist, my books are given to English teachers to review, rather than to history teachers, say—which is possibly no great improvement if they serve the empire too well or, worse, grow misty-eyed when they hear "If Ever I Would Leave You."

"Well," said Hersh, "I'm glad I got to you." Hersh is brisk and bumptious. "I got some questions for you. That detail in your book about how he was having sex in the tub with this girl on top of him and then, as he's about to come, he pushes her head underwater. Why?"

Now, I think that I am one of the few Americans who honestly don't want to know about the sex lives of real people as opposed to fictional ones, as in pornography. Like Kennedy, I came out of the Second World War, where a great promiscuous time was had by just about all who could hack it sexually. Most of us were not into warm, mature, meaningful relationships. We were cool, "immature," meaningless. Getting laid as often as possible was the name of our game, and I don't regret a moment so spent. Neither, I am sure, does Jack's ghost. But this is hardly the right attitude at century's end, when the dull heirs and heiresses of Cotton Mather are like Seventh-Day Adventists with St. Vitus' dance, darting about with scarlet "A"s in one hand and, in the other, emblematic rosy curved cocks as big around as a—quarter?

I explained to Sy that the shock of the head being shoved underwater would cause vaginal contractions, thus increasing the pleasure of a man's own orgasm. "Crazy," he said. "So how do you know this?" I said I'd been told the story years ago by an actress Jack and I both knew. Sy was exuberant. "Well, I got four retired Secret Service men—serious guys—and one of them told me how he would bring



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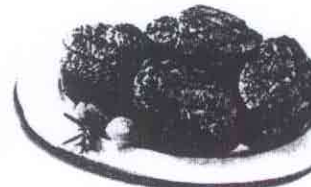
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the President a hooker when he was lying on his back in the tub and then she'd get on top of him and then when he was ready the Secret Service guy standing behind her would shove her head underwater. Well, I couldn't really believe this. But now you tell the same story. You both can't be making it up." A bit irritated, I said not only did I have no reason to make the story up, I could never have thought it up.

PREDICTABLY, the press frenzy over Hersh's book has centered on J.F.K.'s promiscuity. This is believed to sell newspapers. But then no other country, save our edgy adjunct the U.K., bothers with the sexual lives of its public men, on the ground that their official lives are sufficiently dispiriting, when not downright dangerous, to occupy what small attention the average citizen of the average country can force himself to give to political figures.

This was the case in the United States before mid-century. Private lives were dealt with by gossip columnists, often in what were called "blind" items (principals unnamed), while public matters were kept to the news columns. The blurring of the two began when vast amounts of money were suddenly required to fight the Second World War and then, immediately after, to pay for our ever-expanding and still ongoing empire, set in place in 1950. The empire requires huge expenditures for more and more bombers that do not fly in the rain, as well as the maintenance, with secret bribes and threats, of our NATO-ASEAN axis, which girdles the thick rotundity of the globe itself. With that much money being wrung from the taxpayer, the last thing that those who govern us want is any serious discussion of what is actually happening to all "our" money.

Put bluntly, who collects what money from whom in order to spend on what is all there is to politics, and in a serious country should be the central preoccupation of the media. It is also a very interesting subject, at least to those who pay taxes, which in this country means the folks at home, not the conglomerates that own everything. (Taxes on corporate profits once provided the government with more than forty per cent of its revenues—almost as much as the personal income tax provided—but taxes on corporate profits today contribute a little over twelve per cent.) During Kennedy's three-year Administration, he increased the de-

fense budget of the Eisenhower years by seventeen billion dollars. This was one of the biggest, quickest increases in our history. That was—is—the story that ought to have been covered. Unfortunately, politics is the last thing a government like ours wants us to know about. So how do they divert us from the delicate subject?

Until recently, anyone who questioned the Pentagon budget, say, was apt to be labelled a Communist, and that would be that: he could lose his job; become unemployed. This is diversionary politics at its crudest. When Communism went away, sex came into its lurid own as the diversionary smear of choice—a peculiarly American specialty, by the way. Once the imaginary teams, straight and fag, had been established at the start of our century, the fag smear was an irresistible means of destruction. It was used, unsuccessfully, against Adlai Stevenson, while Jack and Bobby would giggle as they argued over which of them first thought to call James Baldwin "Martin Luther Queen."

Basically, misuse of tax money is the interesting scandal. Much of the expensive imperial changeover started by Truman was institutionalized by Kennedy's policy of constant overt and covert foreign confrontation. But Hersh, aware that this is pretty much a non-subject for mass media and most academics, must first get the folks into his sideshow tent. Hence the highlighting of Jack's sexual shenanigans. Later, Hersh does get around to politics—Cuba, Vietnam—and though he has new insights and information, his critics generally fail to respond coherently. They rehash such weighty matters as whether or not J.F.K. briefly married a Palm Beach girl and did his friend Chuck Spalding remove the records from the Palm Beach courthouse. A Camelot court joke circa 1961: Anyone married in Palm Beach in the year 1947 is now no longer married, since Joe Kennedy, while destroying Jack's records, tore out a whole year's worth of marriage registrations.

TYPICAL of the critics is Evan Thomas, in *Newsweek*, who notes skeptically that Hersh's sources include a "mob lawyer" who allegedly brokered a meeting in Chicago between Sam Giancana and Joe Kennedy at which Joe is supposed to have enlisted organized-crime support within Chicago's labor unions, providing much of the hundred-and-nineteen-thousand-vote margin by

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which Jack won the 1960 election. Another Hersh source is "Tina Sinatra, who says her father Frank acted as a go-between for the Kennedys and Giancana." Although daughters are not taken too seriously, by and large, in the still sexist shady cellars of public life, let me attest that Tina Sinatra is a most intelligent woman who knows a great deal about what went on in those days. The writer does concede that: "All [this is] possible—but Hersh never stops to ask why the Kennedys needed Giancana to fix the Chicago election when they had Mayor Richard Daley's machine to stuff the ballot box." "What's still missing," he writes more in anger than in sorrow, "is the kind of solid proof that would rewrite history." Well, it would be nice, but where would you find such proof? Truman's National Security State, still in place as of this morning, has seen to it that miles of our history, archives, and "secrets" have been shredded, deep-sixed, made over into frog princes, for the delectation of the dummies we are, collectively, taken to be.

In the tangled weave of human events, there is no *solid* proof. Particularly when governments, with everything to hide or distort, can do so with electronic ease, scattering their misinformation like confetti all over, as well as under, the Internet. At best, what we get are self-serving tales from survivors, not to mention the odd forger of genius. And spin.

Predictably, one of Hersh's chief attackers is Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (sic—the Jr., that is). Ever eager for distinction like that of his father, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, young Arthur bestowed on himself his father's middle name so that he could call himself "Junior," thus identifying himself with an already famous brand name in academe. Later, his infatuation with the Kennedys earned him the sobriquet "the tenth Kennedy," the brilliant if pudgy child that Joe and Rose Kennedy had never had.

"I worked at the White House," Junior told the *New York Times*. "No doubt, some things happened, but Hersh's capacity to exaggerate is unparalleled." This is curiously and carefully phrased. In a sense, as the weight of the evidence mounts, it is already quite plain to all but the most enthralled that Hersh's case, slapdash as it often is, is essentially true, if not Truth. Although "I worked at the White House" sounds as if Schlesinger were in on everything, he was not; he was neither a policymaker nor an intimate. Kennedy

made a cold division between the help and his friends—"his white-trash friends," as Schlesinger observed bitterly and, I fear, accurately to me. Schlesinger amused Jack, who liked to call him "the film critic from *Show* magazine," his other job. But should Arthur ever say that he had no idea about the Kennedy brothers' dalliance, let us say, with Marilyn Monroe, one has only to look at the photograph from the night of the birthday gala for the President. The two Kennedy lads are leaving Monroe, while off to one side stands swinger Arthur, glass in hand, beaming like Emil Jannings in "The Blue Angel," only he has two male Marlene Dietrichs, the Kennedy brothers, to be demoralized by.

NOT all of the press has been trash. In *Slate*, a mysterious apparition of a paper edited by "On the left, I'm Michael Kinsley," as he used to say on the wondrously silly program "Crossfire," Jacob Weisberg zeroes in on one of the most interesting bits of news Hersh has brought us, demonstrating the power—and corruption—of the fabled military-industrial complex that Kennedy did so well by.

In August, 1962, the Los Angeles apartment of a beautiful young woman, Judith Campbell Exner, was broken into. She had been having the usual off-and-on couplings with J.F.K., as well as with Sam Giancana, and there was an F.B.I. stakeout on her apartment. The break-in was observed by the agents on watch, and they identified the perpetrators as the two sons of the head of security for General Dynamics, which a few months later received an "otherwise inexplicable" six-and-a-half-billion-dollar defense contract. Hersh concludes that General Dynamics used the information about Exner to blackmail Kennedy into giving it the contract. Hersh admits that he can't *prove* this: despite five years' effort, the two intruders into Exner's apartment would not talk to him. Hugh Sidey, once *Time's* White House correspondent, said on Larry King's television program that Hersh, in effect, is making it all up for his "evil book." But then the good Sidey never met a President he couldn't worship. On the other hand, I tend to believe this story. First, it is the way our world works. Second, it is the way the Kennedys operated. Third, defense contractors will do anything when billions of dollars are at stake, and, finally, in a well-run world the Presi-

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dent involved should have been found out, impeached, and tried.

Weisberg is confused by "minor inconsistencies": "Hersh relates one anecdote about a Secret Service agent having to prevent the first lady from finding out for herself what she suspected was going on in the White House swimming pool. Later in the book, Hersh describes Jackie Kennedy's strenuous efforts to *avoid* catching J.F.K. in action" (my italics). But this is not a contradiction, only sloppy writing. Jackie knew all about Jack's sex life in the White House and before. What she did not want was any sort of confrontation with his playmates. The Kennedys were an eighteenth-century "amoral" couple, together for convenience. They would have fitted, with ease, into "Les Liaisons Dangereuses." I mean this very much as praise, though others affect shock. Paradoxically, toward the end of their marriage they actually established something very like a friendship. She said to me, as early as their first year in the White House, "We never actually got to know each other before the election. He was always off somewhere campaigning. Then, when we did get to this awful place, there we were, finally, just the two of us." His sexual partners were to her simply anonymous physical therapists. I suspect that's what they were to him, too.

In December, 1959, Jackie asked me to a charity costume ball at the Plaza. "I'll put you at Jack's table, so he'll have someone to talk to. Just ignore what I'm placing between you. She's very beautiful. Very stupid. She's also just arrived from

England, so Jack will have first crack at it." "It," not "her."

We sat at a round table with eight or so other guests. Jack's costume was a holster with two six-shooters and a bandanna around his neck. He puffed a cigar and gazed intently at the blond girl between us. She was very beautiful. "You're in politics, aren't you?" Thus she broke the ice. I was curious to see Jack in action. "Uh . . . well, yes, I am. I'm . . . uh, running for President."

"That's so fascinating!" she exclaimed. "And will you win?"

"Well, it won't be easy . . ."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, I'm . . . uh, Catholic . . ."

"But what's that got to do with anything?"

"Oh, Gore, *you* tell her." I did, and then he and I talked politics across her: not a woman's court, Camelot.

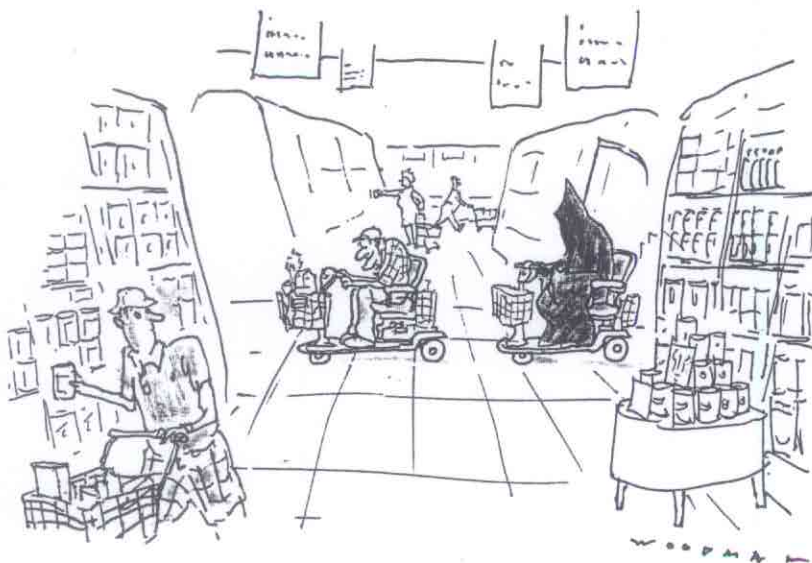
To this day, Kennedy loyalists point to the missile crisis as a sign of J.F.K.'s superb statesmanship, when it is obvious that even to have got oneself into such a situation was hardly something you'd want to write mother, much less Rose, about. Certainly you don't prepare invasions of Cuba and repeatedly try to kill Castro without encouraging Castro to egg on the Soviets to what proved to be a mad adventure.

Incidentally, those Kennedy apologists who deny that J.F.K. knew anything about the various C.I.A.-Mafia plots to murder Castro are nicely taken care of by Robert Scheer in the *Los Angeles Times*. "The

entire nefarious business is documented in excruciating detail," he writes, "in 'Report on Plots to Assassinate Fidel Castro,' a 133 page memorandum prepared in 1967 by C.I.A. Inspector General J. S. Earman for Director Richard Helms." The report was so hot that all copies were destroyed except one "ribbon copy," which was declassified in 1993. Scheer also notes "that Giancana was a key player in the effort to overthrow Castro and that the President's brother, the country's top law-enforcement official, knew all about it."

The Kennedy brothers put a lot of pressure on the C.I.A. to take care of Castro. When—and how—these callow young men got it into their heads that to them belonged the power of life and death over others is more of a metaphysical than a political question. We all know by heart their story: crook pro-Nazi father makes fortune; drives boys to a political peak unavailable to him. But there was always something curiously brittle about the two murdered sons. They were physically fragile. Hence, the effort of will to drive themselves hard, politically and sexually. As their non-admirer Eugene McCarthy, former senator and forever poet, observed, "Isn't it curious that they always played touch football and never football."

Currently, the heirs to Camelot are pointing to the just released tapes that J.F.K. made of himself during October of 1962. When he was ready to address his council, he would secretly switch on a recording machine. The others did not know they were being immortalized, and the nuke-'em-all military men are chilling. J.F.K. is cautious: on the record. Robert Manning, in the international edition of *Newsweek*, gently made fun of the way the whole situation is now being depicted. "As one who sat in on some of those White House deliberations in the President's cabinet room, I believe that the case can be made that the dangers of that 13-day interlude in October 1962 have been greatly exaggerated." Manning was an assistant secretary of state; later the *Atlantic Monthly* editor. His case is simple. Whatever Khrushchev might want to do in extremis, we had five thousand nuclear warheads ready to erase the Soviet Union; and they had only between seventy-five and three hundred. "All those factors dictated a peaceful settlement." The Russian general who recently said that Moscow had given the commanders in Cuba permission to use



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nuclear weapons *at will* "was a pompous windbag, and his claim proved to be patently untrue." So much for the iron nerve, cool wisdom of Sidey's hero.

To further undo J.F.K.'s delicate physical balance, along with the cortisone that he took regularly, there was his reliance on—addiction to, in fact—the amphetamines that the shady drug dispenser Dr. Max Jacobson regularly injected him with. It was through Chuck Spalding that Max entered J.F.K.'s life. Max made more than thirty recorded visits to the White House; travelled with the President; provided him with shots that he could give himself. So, in addition to cortisone, which can have dangerous side effects—a sense of misplaced, as it were, euphoria—the President was now hooked on speed. According to Jacobson's memoirs, Bobby was sufficiently concerned to want the medicine analyzed. "I don't care if it's horse piss," Jacobson quoted Kennedy as saying. "It's the only thing that works." In 1975, Max's license to practice medicine was revoked.

In Hersh's interviews with the Secret Service men, sex and drugs to one side, one is struck by how little actual work Jack got done. There were many days when Kennedy "didn't work at all. He'd come down late, go to his office. There were meetings—the usual things—and then he had pool time before his nap and lunch. . . . We didn't know what to think." My own impression, reading this, was how lucky we were that he wasn't busy all the time, because when he did set his hand to the plow Cuba got invaded and Castro was set up for assassination, while American troops were sent to fight in Vietnam, and the Diem brothers, our unsatisfactory viceroys in that unhappy country, were put to death in a coup, with White House blessing if not direct connivance.

In a way, the voices of the Secret Service men are the most damning of all, and I was prepared for what I call the Historians' Herndon Maneuver. William Herndon was for seventeen years Lincoln's law partner and shared an office with him. Herndon is the principal historical source for those years, except when Lincoln told Herndon that he had contracted syphilis in youth and had a hard time getting rid of it. Herndon wrote this after the President's death. The Lincoln priesthood's response to the syphilis charge is Pavlovian: Herndon was a disreputable

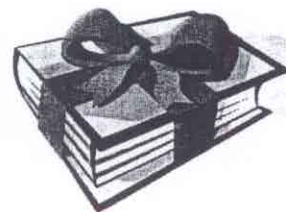
drunk and not to be relied on—except when he is. As I read Hersh, I knew that the Kennedy zealots would say the same about the Secret Service man who mentions Jack's nongonorrheal urethritis and all the rest of it. On Larry King, a professor appeared along with Hugh Sidey. He conceded that J.F.K. had a "squalid covert life." Then, when one of the Secret Service men was named, it was Sidey who executed the Herndon Maneuver: the agent later had a problem with "alcohol."

I think Hersh comes to some wrong conclusions, inevitable considering his task. Incidentally, it is ridiculous to accuse him of not being a serious, sober historian, careful to footnote his way through a past that very few American academics could even begin to deal with. After all, if they were competent to do the job, what effect would it have on those powerful entities and personages who endow universities? Hersh is an old-style muckraker. The fact that he's found more muck in this particular Augean stable than most people want to acknowledge is hardly his fault.

I don't believe, however, that Lyndon Johnson blackmailed Jack into taking him as Vice-President, which is what Hersh suspects. Although I certainly was not in the allegedly uncrowded room when the decision was made, I was a member of the New York State delegation, and I was present in Los Angeles as the candidates came around, one by one, to work us over. (Tammany Hall had already committed us to Kennedy—the highest form of democracy.) Johnson entered the room in a blaze of TV lights. He was no more manic than usual. Very tall, with a huge head, and a gift for colorful invective, he had taken to calling Kennedy, more or less in private, "that spavined hunchback." He discussed his own recent heart attack—before any of us could. He was good as new now. But in the hospital he *had* wondered if he should go ahead and buy this blue suit he had ordered just before the attack. "Finally, I told Lady Bird, O.K., go buy it. Either way, I'll be using it." As he was leaving, he stopped to speak to several delegates. I was too far away to hear him. Later, I was told that he had mentioned something about Jack's "illness." He had been vague, but by evening Addison's disease was being talked about. If Johnson had gone there to take second place, he would certainly not have mentioned Jack's health. In any case, none of us could imagine why the omnipotent majority leader of the Senate would want

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to be a powerless Vice-President. Certainly, in the normal actuarial course of things, Jack was bound to outlive him. In those matters, it is wise to strop Occam's razor. Jack had to carry Texas to win and with Johnson on the ticket he did, barely.

Finally, a correction for Hersh and his readers: He writes, "There was some talk from inside the family of having a Kennedy-Kennedy ticket in 1964"—Robert to replace Lyndon as Vice-President—"most of it, Gore Vidal told me in an interview, coming from Ethel Kennedy, Bobby's wife." Actually, it was Hersh who told me this story last year. As for Ethel Kennedy, I've only met her once. She wanted to know if I was writing a new dirty play, like Edward Albee.

HERSH does not take his book where it is logically headed from the beginning, the murder in Dallas, and what looks to be a Mob killing. Too many lunatics have already checked in on that subject, and Hersh is wise to leave it alone. But it is also frustrating, since the inventors of our official history are forever fetched by that lone mad killer, eaten up with resentment and envy, the two principal American emotions, if our chroniclers are to be believed. Yet the gunning down in public view with wife to one side and all the panoply of state fore and aft is purest Palermo sendoff. Some years ago, the head of the Italian national police, General dalla Chiesa, was similarly killed—at the center of a cortège of police as he drove triumphantly down the main street of Palermo shortly after taking command of the "war" against the Sicilian Mafia.

What, then, as movie producers like to say, is the "take-away" of Hersh's book? This means, what is the audience supposed to think at the end? First, for me, the dangerous inadequacy of the American press. We are seldom, if ever, told what we need to know about how Presidents get elected and then, once in office, what they do of a secret and often unconstitutional nature, particularly abroad. That the political system doesn't work is no news. Whoever can raise the most corporate money by providing services once in office will be elected, or at least get to be on offer. Clinton and Dole spent, it is said, more than half a billion dollars on the last Presidential election. The press accepts all this as just the way things are. On the rare occasions when a journalist does have a specific smoking-

gun complaint, he will find few outlets available to him. Soreheads need not apply for space in the mainline press, much less hope for a moment on the Koppel hour of charm.

In retrospect, it has always been incredible that someone as thoroughly disreputable as Joe Kennedy should have been allowed to buy his sons major political careers. So—could that happen today? Yes. It is even worse now, as anyone can attest who has so much as gazed disbelievingly upon Steve Forbes or Michael Huffington, empty suits with full wallets. We all agree, monotonously, that a change in the campaign-financing laws would be helpful, but no Congress or President elected under the present corrupt system could bear to kick over the ladder that got him and his tools to the second floor.

Quite as serious is the danger of electing someone totally dependent on all sorts of mind-altering drugs to enhance mood, not to mention simply stay alive. Curiously, on April 9, 1961, I published a piece about Jack in the London Sunday *Telegraph*. Rereading it, I can see that, subliminally at least, my knowledge of his Addison's disease was bothering me then, just as not having gone public with it in 1959 bothers me now. I wrote that because of the "killing" job of the Presidency, "despite his youth, Kennedy may very well not survive." This is a pretty peculiar thing to write of a "vigorous" man of forty-three. I go on: "Like himself, the men Kennedy has chosen to advise him have not reached any great height until now. They must prove themselves now. Government service will be the high point of their lives." Alas, this turned out to be true. Between the second-rate cronies who made up the Irish Mafia—only Larry O'Brien was outstanding—and the "efficient" managers, like McNamara, with no conception of the world they had been set loose in, one wishes that he had taken on a few more aides and advisers who had made their mark elsewhere. But, as he said, plaintively, at the time, "I don't know anybody except politicians. Who the hell is Dean Rusk?" So it came to pass, and even now the photogenic charm of the couple at the center of so much corruption and incompetence still casts its spell, and no harsh Hersh? light let in upon them can ever quite dissolve their magic until time itself places Jack in history's oubliette, alongside another handsome assassinated President, James Abram Garfield. ♦