

Poster

# JFK and Ike: Anagrams

*A Commentary*

*By Nicholas von Hoffman*

Washington's Mr. Pecksniff, the impeccable diplomat and clubman, Dean Acheson, turned up in Life Magazine with some rather sharp judgments about the real John F. Kennedy.

"He did not seem to be in any sense a great man," said the one-time Secretary of State, who apparently thinks his former boss, Harry Truman, was. "I did not think he knew a great deal about any of the matters which it's desirable that a chief of state or a President of the United States should know about. He was not decisive . . . he did not have incisiveness and he was really out of his depth where he was. I hate to say this because I know it's going to be misunderstood, but his reputation is greater because of the tragedy of his death than it would have been if he had lived out two terms."

It's not so certain that Acheson will be misunderstood. There is a growing body of opinion that holds that Camelot and all that razzamatuzz in dinner coats and long dresses was a fraud; it holds that only the murderer's gun saved JFK from the massive obloquy that fell on Lyndon Johnson.

The July 22d number of The New York Review of Books carries a long and persuasive article by Ralph L. Stavins which contradicts those who say that if he had lived Vietnam would never have happened. "Kennedy's policy toward Vietnam was to accelerate the war while denying that he was doing it. His policy was to prosecute a private war," writes Stavins who bases his conclusions not only on the Pentagon Papers, but on White House and State Department documents, as well as on interviews with many of the officials involved.

"One hundred days after he was elected President, he ordered agents to be sent into North Vietnam . . . teams trained by the Special Forces were to be used for sabotage and light harassment inside North Vietnam . . . Kennedy adopted a CIA-sponsored program to recruit South Vietnamese personnel for the purpose of forming an underwater demolition team to operate in strategic maritime areas of North Vietnam."

It was Kennedy, Stavins tells us, who created the 303

Committee, so named after the room in the Executive Office Building where a group of the highest level war jocks met and approved such things as Operation Farmhand. Under Operation Farmhand South Vietnamese were airlifted into the North to commit sabotage.

Kennedy had another bunch also meeting in Room 303, Special Group Counter-Insurgency. To match Operation Farmhand, these guys came up with Operation Ranchhand, which obviously, was the code name for the first big American defoliation effort. All of this, and much, much more, brings Stavins to write that, "had John F. Kennedy lived, he would not have pulled out of Southeast Asia. He would more likely have taken any steps necessary to avoid an ignominious defeat at the hands of the Vietcong."

Well, JFK's reputation has been coming apart for several years now. What's more surprising is the salvaging of Dwight Eisenhower's. The rescue job may have been started by Garry Wills in his book "Nixon Agonistes" (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1970.) Here the proposition is that Eisenhower was a lot wiser and shrewder than people took him to be during the days he was living in the White House. The Wills view of the much loved President has now been taken up by historian William L. O'Neil in his new book "Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960's," Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1971.)

As O'Neil sees it, in a Republic where the people are king, it behooves a wise President to play the fool and the jester in the court of the populace:

"Eisenhower was very different from what he seemed. He was a man of drive, intelligence, ambition, and ruthlessness . . . These remarkable qualities of mind and will were disguised by a boyish grin and homely face, still more by what can only have been deliberate stratagems.

"Arthur Larson, one of his speechwriters, says that though Eisenhower was famous for having said he never read the papers, he, in fact, did so carefully. He rarely picked up Westerns but let everyone think them his favorite reading matter. Though capable of composing a good speech himself—those he wrote for Gen. MacArthur before the war were much admired—he insisted that his own writers do bad ones. He scrupulously edited out the phrases they liked best . . . His press

See COMMENT, B4, Col. 3

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COMMENT

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COMMENT, From B1

conferences, notorious for obtusation and mangled syntax, were not so artless as they seemed. He admitted as much once when his press secretary, James Hagerly, asked what he would say about the sticky Formosa Straits issue. Eisenhower replied, "Don't worry, Jim. If that question comes up, I'll just confuse them."

O'Neill does not go so far as to maintain that Ike really despised golf, but you do get the feeling that the old man was, within limits, doublecrossing the electorate and secretly nudging the world closer to disarmament and peace. A reverse Johnson/Kennedy so to speak. What's unarguable is that it was Kennedy, not Eisenhower, who opened the gates of hog heaven to the aerospace-armorament people.

Whether these new appraisals will stand up better than the old ones is problematic. Certainly, by any standards, Kennedy will never again be as well thought of as he was in the years immediately after his murder. He truly was a frozen-dessert politician, one whose pic-

ture on the box looked much better than he tasted.

But if the actual historical Kennedy was more of a warring marauder it is still hard to believe that Ike couldn't have brought us much closer to a peaceful epoch than he did. Yet there must be something in what Willis and O'Neill say. If the man had been the idiot that some people still take him for, he wouldn't have been able to feed himself.

Yet you wonder about historical judgments, even those of nearest history. To what extent are they arrived at to serve the needs of the living rather than to reveal the truth of the dead? It may be we just have to be able to say a good word about some recent president.

It's getting harder and harder to do that as the president gets worse and worse. It will take some ingenuity with Nixon, but how will they ever manage with Agnew? What mental contortions that's going to take. Imagine trying to put a good face on this Agnew gem, uttered as he toured Baltimore after the '68 riots. "I can't understand it. I can't understand it. I never did think that Martin Luther King was a good American, anyhow."