

Harold Weisberg

# 'Balanced' Indeed!

F. Paul  
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We are blessed to have among us in recent years, we yokels, a man so all-wise, so all-understanding that he sits in judgment for us, telling us what to think and how to understand and what is appropriate for occasions of special sorrow and remembrance.

He feels his "obligation" acutely, does Roy Meachum. So acutely that for this day of special national sorrow, when he was offended by what he refers to as "further sanctifications," he "felt obligated to throw in a balancing word."

"Word"? It is many words, more than a full newspaper column of them. And most of those "balancing" words were about himself. For that he finds almost any occasion appropriate.

Where was that day, what he was doing and at what great personal cost and sacrifice, how essential he was in it - he alone.

Not why or what was so special about that occasion. Not that it turned the world around, not that we have not been the same since then. Not why so many Americans still feel it so painfully and with such sorrow. Not, of course, what it has meant. Personalization is not as easy with mature consideration.

After all, it was only the most subversive of possible crimes in a country like ours. Nothing like that is worthy of his thought or mention. What is important and gets his attention, after almost half a column on what he did that day "30 years" ago, are his great thoughts and indispensable, "balanced" and wise opinions and judgments. Like: "I have never been caught up in the Kennedy myth."

"I was not smitten" just because "I had come to know his wife," which means he saw her a few times.

"Mr. Kennedy smelled," or as Doctor Johnson would have told him, bad usage. He did not mean "smelled."

"The Kennedys talked the game without really knowing how to score."

This means to score with him. Not with any accomplishments, of which he makes no mention of a single one. Preventing World War III in October 1962 was not "score." Nor was the first halting, dangerous steps toward detente in the world that could blow itself up at any minute. After all, all he did at the risk of his political future was end the poisoning of the air we all breathe (words he used in his American University speech of June 1963) by all those atomic and nuclear tests in that air. No "score" in the value and judgment of this great man who is careful that we not have a chance to forget how he is and all the great he knew by never failing to find an occasion, like November 22, to remind us.

Returning culture to our White House and removing the curse from the word, at least temporarily, that was no real "score."

Certainly earning the love and respect of the people wasn't, and he did that.

"Stories of his sleeping around ... had diminished the man in my mind," Meachum says.

He voted for Nixon instead, he says, "because President Eisenhower was not running again." He does

not say what is the fact, that he could not run again.

"Balancing," Meachum's word, consists in not having the same opinion of Eisenhower, whose sleeping with other than his wife to the knowledge of the troops he led in battle when they could do no such thing, was so very well known, so unhidden, so open.

So Meachum preferred Nixon, the man whose anti-American activities when he ran the misnamed "Un-American Activities Committee" of the House were an international scandal and a national disgrace.

This was of no meaning at all and thus, "I was never a candidate for the Kennedy bandwagon."

Equating those affairs with it, he tells us he "had no patience with smutty humor."

Putting those like "The Hollywood Ten" in jail and denying them their livelihood and careers, that famous Nixon accomplishment that got his vote, that was hardly "smutty."

"It should be remembered that Lyndon B. Johnson brought the nation's social laws into the 20th century," he tells us. Not that reaction to the assassination had anything to do with that. Nor when it could have cost him the election that he stood with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and called for his release from jail. Not that he compelled the admission of blacks to state universities, like in Alabama. Not that he began the effort to change the nation's social laws, Meachum's words, they are "social" with such great political risks and certainly not when as the influential majority leader Lyndon Johnson did nothing to get those laws, introduced in the Kennedy administration, enacted.

Kennedy's brother's "manners" toward Johnson were "snotty." And Johnson's toward that brother were not? Calling him "that little son-of-a-bitch" was better than being "snotty?"

One way only that "struck me as unnecessarily cruel," he says.

While others think of all that terrible crime cost us; all that has changed since then, and not for the better; all the endless failures of government that crime made possible; he marks the sorrowful occasion by using it for all those words, mostly to puff himself up, without finding a decent or kind one to say about the man whose assassination the day marks. While saying so much that is the exact opposite.

That is his concept of "a balancing word."

His wise, mature, thinking and caring way of remembering one of the greatest national tragedies in our history.

How fortunate we yokels are that he deigned to live among us and to teach us what is right and what is wrong, what real "manners" are, what is good and what is bad and who is and who is not. ...

For giving us the blessing of Watergate? A quadrupled national debt? All those goodies like the export of so many of the best jobs and industries? All those empty factories? All the people for whom there are no jobs?

"Balancing" is hardly the word for it! But it is his word.

Harold Weisberg writes from Frederick.





# Roy Meachum



11/21/93

## 30 years

The next day I probably couldn't have recalled, 30 years later it is totally impossible to say why Jack Jurey and I wound up in the nearly empty Broadcast House cafeteria, eating together that November afternoon.

Readers with long memories will remember Jack was on-air editorialist for WTOP-TV, now called WUSA. He was also managing editor for the news operations, including the radio station, which was transmitted throughout the building on speakers.

The first CBS special report out of Dallas, delivered in modulated tones, had special dimensions of surrealism among the tile, formica and linoleum, which provided backdrop to the recently installed vending machines, the first I had ever seen that served hot soups and stews, sandwiches and desserts.

The Hot Shoppes contract had not been renewed, removing the workers whose human presence might have mitigated the overwhelming sense of unreality created by the grim announcement. Maybe.

As with all life's great occasions, personal or universal, the story of someone shooting President John F. Kennedy stunned everyone. At least Jack and I were not left with the completely helpless feeling that afflicted most folks. Before Walter Cronkite's strangely unfamiliar voice, as much as the gruesome truths he stammered out, could register despair, the editor and I were running for the elevator, headed for our respective offices.

The next several days were spent at my typewriter and in production facilities. I returned home to shower in the middle of the night; the children slept through the visit. I was preparing a radio special for Sunday evening, which meant events in the outside world those first hours escaped me.

By the time the new work week dawned, Mr. Kennedy's secular sainthood had been established. Not until midnight, early Monday morning really, could I pay attention to what became, because of television's impact, the most profound public trauma in human experience.

The banging of the requiem kettles and dunning dirges could not be escaped entirely, thanks to those wired-in speakers. But the immeasurable proportions of my fellow Americans' grief were intrusions that had to be shut out, in order to get my project done. It probably didn't matter.

For whatever cause, I have never been caught up in the Kennedy myth. Long before his death, stories of his sleeping about, while parading his "perfect" marriage, had diminished the man in my mind, particularly since I had come to know his wife.

Don't misunderstand: There is no claim here to have been Jackie Kennedy's friend. We had seen each other half-a-dozen times and talked maybe twice. I was not smitten, but believed her someone who worked hard at being a mother and a wife. At any rate, hypocrisy rates in the

depths of human failings, for my money.

Mr. Kennedy smelled like an offensively cocksure politician, even before details and specific names of his various affairs, like dirty jokes, filtered through to me. Even as a young man, I had no patience with smutty humor. Nevertheless, the president's reputation simply could not be avoided.

However, to be fair, I had never fallen for the Massachusetts man's charm. In 1960 my vote had gone for Richard Nixon, but only because President Eisenhower was not running again. That election may have been the first that brought the realization ballots rarely advance the fabled Best Man. We are generally given the choice of lesser evils. (To keep the record straight, I never voted for Nixon again.)

The only way the Irish mafia would have received my support would have come from my perception bigots might turn out its chief for his Catholic faith. Once Mr. Kennedy bounded over that hurdle he no longer needed me.

In those several years when the White House was transformed into their Camelot, I came to admire the Kennedys' style, granting his grace and her cultural understanding. But I was exposed enough, in that much smaller Washington, to the presidential presence that an immunity was generated to his undoubted charm.

Of course, long-time readers know I performed odd jobs for the Johnson White House. It is possible to speculate I was caught up in the lingering hard feelings between the Massachusetts and Texas crews. Certainly Bobby Kennedy's snotty manners toward his brother's successor struck me as unnecessarily cruel, considering the protective patina enjoyed by the holdover attorney general.

But as my 1960 vote demonstrated, I was never a candidate for the Kennedy bandwagon, before or after his death. The assassination filled me with disgust at the violence, sorrow for the family and dread for my country's future.

The brutal murder of a president touched me to the core, but life demanded carrying on, especially with the opportunity presented to ram civil rights reform through a cowardly Congress and a reluctant public. The Kennedys talked the game, without really knowing how to score.

Before his administration became overwhelmed with Vietnam, it should be remembered Lyndon B. Johnson brought the nation's social laws into the 20th century. I never really liked the man, but couldn't help admiring his strengths.

In any event, since this 30th anniversary of his death has brought forth a torrent of observations, generally aimed at John Fitzgerald Kennedy's further sanctification, I felt obliged to throw in a balancing word.