

Among Friends

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Post

CONVERSATIONS WITH KENNEDY. By Benjamin C. Bradlee. Norton. 251 pp. \$7.95

By **GEORGE V. HIGGINS**

BEN BRADLEE called me a son of a bitch, and meant it. That was last year, when The Washington Post was on strike, and I telephoned him specially, at long-distance rates, to compliment him on his writing. For a liberal editor, and scab, he was writing surprisingly well.

SOB was the appropriate response to that praise, as were the other adjectives and nouns that he employed. It is the confidence of an appropriate response that makes you call to heckle Mr. Bradlee, when he is most harassed and least in need of it, and also when he is not harassed at all, and most in need of it.

This book is Bradlee's response to the experience of having had a President for a friend, and it too is appropriate, recording (with a kindness sometimes quizzical and occasionally exasperated) what was plainly an experience that he cherished.

That plainness, and the candor that it demanded, demonstrate that Bradlee is a man who will take a chance, a predilection which, two years ago, afforded a certain amount of professional uneasiness to the libel lawyers for The Post. It served him, and us, well, then, and it serves us well, now, although William Safire has had some disagreeable fun as a result.

Put shortly, Bradlee with his book has

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emerged from a very large closet, wherein cower altogether too many newspaper people disrespectful of the intelligence of their readership. That disrespect is implied by the convention that reporters and politicians ought to be natural enemies (a notion lavishly imbibed by participants of the Nixon Administrations), usually are, and that, when they're not, the reporter's a whore and the politician Fagin.

Uncritically received, as conventions commonly are, that leads to a great deal of persiflage, and to an inconvenient amount of incivility and outright rudeness. Walter Trohan, former Washington bureau chief for the Chicago Tribune, recently published an appalling book (*Political Animals*), the evident purpose of which was to prove that he'd been consummately impolite to any number of politicians, presidential and otherwise, who endured his bad manners with superior grace because they feared him and The Power Of The Press. Which, in turn, I guess, was supposed to reestablish the power of the press, and to excuse the fact that Trohan's not housebroken. But did neither.

What Bradlee has done is make the gift outright, and begin with fair admonition that he found JFK to be a "remarkable man who lit the skies of this land bright with hope and promise as no other political man has done in this century." Bradlee was with Newsweek, then, and his unconcealed affection for the President did him no substantial professional disadvantage. When he was on good terms with the President, he (and this paper, when the muttered leak was given too late for Newsweek) got stuff nobody else had, and he rather liked that. When he was in banishment, for quotes (Continued on page 6)

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deemed lese majeste by himself, Bradlee did not get the choice tidbits, and that confessedly displeased him. "If I was had," he writes, "so be it."

Well, as a matter of fact, he probably was had, and Kennedy was also, and so are we all, all honorable men, because candor disarms, and courtesy ingratiates, and thoughtfulness and wit attract where surliness and pompousness repel. Pretty obvious, but, it seems, not to Ron Ziegler, or the men who programmed him.

The truth is that reporters and politicians, initially for mutual reasons of enlightened self-interest, rather like each other, and, insofar as possible, exert themselves in modest imitation of the Hippocratic oath: first do no harm. Unless it's unavoidable. If the guy is dumb enough to say it, on the record, then you print it, but you don't mousetrap him, and he doesn't lie to you.

That symbiotic relationship, at its best, is synergistic also. In its bad-graft disguise, it is a Trohan surreptitiously marketing a damaging photograph of a congressman to a primary opponent. In its

good-graft configuration, it is a reporter wafting a trial balloon, without detectable attribution, to determine the sense of the country.

For some reason, almost everybody but Arthur Krock (who takes a good many lumps in this book) and Joseph Alsop and James Reston and some other people, seems most assiduously bent upon denial of that fact. When I was with the Associated Press, I could have understood it, because everyone knew that the press was objective, but I am older now, and do not understand it anymore. There is an iterative effect obtained by reportage upon policy, and another one by policy upon reportage, and in most instances, those effects are useful. And desirable.

Now that time enough, in Bradlee's view, has passed, to permit report of some of his private conversations with JFK (there are tantalizing suggestions that there is more to come, later), we have this relaxed and thoughtful book. It is not always pretty. Bradlee's as gimlet-eyed with the late President as he is with himself, and you get the man raw, hair, hide and all. But out of it comes the serene and justified assurance, as one man understood it, that it is all right to be fallible, okay to be profane, and rather winning to be self-deprecating.

The manner was out of fashion for too long. It's nice to remember. For an editor, Ben Bradlee doesn't write badly at all. □