

# Schlesinger at the White House

## *An Historian's Inside View of Kennedy at Work*

### A Conversation with Henry Brandon

**A**rmed with his favorite long cigar, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. settled down to this tape-recorded conversation in my house in Washington, D. C., after he had resigned as Special Assistant to President Johnson. It gives one a foretaste of the book that he is now engaged in writing about his experiences in the White House and in the Kennedy Administration.

BRANDON: When President Kennedy suggested that you should join him in the White House, how did he define your job?

SCHLESINGER: Actually, the first suggestion came from the Attorney-General-to-be, in the middle of December in 1960 . . . he asked me what I would think of his proposing to the President-elect that I come down as Special Assistant. I said I had no objection. Subsequently, the President-elect came to Cambridge (you may remember early in 1961—to attend a meeting of the Harvard Board of Overseers) and made his headquarters in my house, and he said he was expecting me to come down as Special Assistant. I said it sounded very exciting to me but rather unclear, and I wondered what my duties might be, to which he replied: "Well, I don't know what the duties of a Special Assistant will be. . . . I don't know what the duties of a President will be, but I think there will be enough down there in the White House to keep both of us busy." So it was on this basis that I came to Washington.

BRANDON: And once you, so to say, entered your office, did he then define it more clearly?

SCHLESINGER: Only in practice. I think that his original conception of the White House staff was a very free-wheeling group which would serve him in a variety of ways. He disliked the notion of staff assistants with fixed assignments and rigid jurisdictions and sharp demarcations of authority. He wanted to keep things flexible. In

this respect he was obviously in the school of Franklin Roosevelt as a Presidential administrator rather than in the school of Dwight Eisenhower.

Inevitably, various continuities built up in the staff and various people had increasingly well-defined spheres of authority, but some of us remained utility men, though we had certain continuing assignments. In my own case I became more continuously involved in Latin America, in Europe, in the United Nations, in civil rights, and in the arts . . . but I did a lot of other things.

BRANDON: I remember at the time I said teasingly to you that you had joined the White House in order to be able to write the history of the Kennedy Administration . . . and then you said I was wrong because there was an historian in the President and that he would write his own history. Now circumstances have changed.

SCHLESINGER: It had never been my intention to write a history of the Kennedy Administration. I had always supposed that the President would. Among other aspects of the tragedy, history has been denied what I think would be a fascinating book, because few heads of state have had such an interest in writing history, and I think such capacity for it, as President Kennedy.

This whole experience has been chastening for a professional historian. I think the professional historian understands very much better—after an exposure of this sort—the perils and artifices of his own profession.

BRANDON: If you had to write your Roosevelt Era again, how would your experience in government have influenced you?

SCHLESINGER: I don't think the experience would influence one very much on the broad outlines or the broad analyses or the broad interpretations. Where it does have a great impact, I

think, is on the reconstruction of the processes of decision. I think the historian tends in retrospect to make the processes of decision far more tidy and rational than they are: to assume that people have fixed positions and represent fixed interests and to impose a pattern on what is actually a swirl if not a chaos. I think the historian doesn't realize the opaqueness of the process.

BRANDON: There are, I presume, Presidents who simply take decisions on the basis of different alternatives offered to them. And then there are Presidents who on the basis of the alternatives forge their own decision, their own ideas. Was this Kennedy's technique?

SCHLESINGER: Very much so. As you know, ~~Kennedy was a man of extraordinary and insatiable intellectual curiosity who had a great instinct for the crucial realities in a situation.~~ It was a common experience to see proposals brought to him on which experts had been working for months and then have him ask one or two questions which were obviously extremely relevant if not decisive questions, questions which came out of a larger context and which the experts themselves had not thought of.

He had the effect on people, in short, of forcing them to fresh approaches—exciting them because of his great interest and his own brilliance, and forcing them to a higher, more imaginative performance than the bureaucracy would ordinarily produce or tolerate.

How Presidential decisions are made in particular remains a mystery to me, and the process is ultimately impenetrable.

The question of timing, of course, is very important. It was, I think, the critical thing in his decision on the question of civil rights. Since the beginning of the Administration, the President had been sending messages to the Hill and giving occasional speeches in which he sounded the call for civil rights and described equal opportunity as a national obligation. But Congress seemed determined not to move ahead in regard to civil-rights legislation, and the only area left for aggressive action was within the Executive branch itself. As you may know, a great deal was done

there, not only in the appointment of more Negroes to public office than ever before, but also on the defense of voting rights and equal educational opportunity, including in a couple of cases the sending in of troops.

But all this proceeded without great new impetus being given to the civil-rights struggle itself until the events in Birmingham. I can remember a meeting which the President had with a number of Negro leaders—Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins and Philip Randolph and the others—in which he said the man to whom the civil-rights movement owes most in this country is, of course, Bull Connor. This occasioned a mild surprise. He explained that Bull Connor's police dogs finally awakened the American conscience and made it possible for us all to move ahead.

And that's quite true. Compare the message that President Kennedy sent to Congress in February 1963—before Birmingham—and the speech he gave in June—after Birmingham. The sense of urgency and the moral exhortation don't differ very much one from the other. What differs is the context. When he gave his second speech he had the nation's ear, and therefore the message was charged with excitement and had a penetrative effect. This could only happen after the events of Birmingham had finally shocked the nation into some awareness of what was going on.

#### No Fireside Chats

BRANDON: At the same time some people criticized him for not having moved sooner.

SCHLESINGER: Some people always suppose that the Presidency has a unilateral power and that by his own fiat the President can create the kind of opinion he needs. This to me, of course, seems historically untrue. Our Presidents who were most effective in the process of public education had to have some leverage in the country to begin with.

In the case of Theodore Roosevelt, a whole generation of progressive political action, beginning in the cities and spreading to the states and then to the newspapers and the magazines, made the country listen to him. In the case of Franklin Roosevelt, the Depression made the country listen.

Now Kennedy had the advantage of neither grass-roots progressive political activity, nor of a great economic calamity, to make the country hang upon his words. And it was always naïve to suppose that by giving a few television speeches he could make the country heed something it didn't want to heed. That's why he was always skeptical of people who used to suggest that if he gave a Fireside Chat every week, this would change everything. He had a very acute and deli-

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cate sense of timing. The fact is he was far more effective in public education than many American newspapermen and editorial writers supposed at the time, as was shown by the quite astonishing terrible sense of vacancy and loss when he was murdered.

BRANDON: The curious thing is that while he was alive he was criticized for not trying to educate the nation enough, and now one often hears the complaint that he moved too fast, that he was somewhat ahead of public opinion, and that this is one of the reasons why serious splits have occurred in the nation. Do you agree with this?

SCHLESINGER: Yes. I think the retrospective judgment is the correct one. I think he was ahead of public opinion and that he did quite an extraordinary job in public education within the limits of a situation in which people didn't want very much to be educated.

As to the question of splits, obviously no strong President can carry out affirmative policies without producing a split. It's a great illusion that national unity and progress in public policy are compatible. Every great President, because he's wanted to change things, has violated the sensibilities of not the interest of some strong and contented group in the population; consequently they've hated him. And the fact that Kennedy was hated as Roosevelt was hated, and Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt and Lincoln and Jackson and Jefferson, was one sign of the fact he was doing an effective job.

### The Bay of Pigs

BRANDON: To come back to the decision-making process . . . it is often said that what is important for a President is to know how to use power. Now the first important decision that the President took was the Bay of Pigs decision, which went wrong. Did it go wrong because he did not yet know how to use power?

SCHLESINGER: I think it went wrong because he was so new to the Presidency that he did not yet know the quality of the men who were offering him advice. I do not mean to say that some of the men who offered him the advice to go ahead in the first Cuban case were not of great intelligence and ability. But all men of intelligence and ability have to be weighed in one sense or another, and the way a President learns to use advice is not to accept anybody's unconditionally, but to work out various forms of discount and triangulation so that when advice comes he can accept it—not perhaps in the terms that it's offered, but in the terms which make it usable for him.

He inherited an apparatus of government, the

Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Central Intelligence Agency, a State Department, which were all more or less committed to this project. For various reasons the problems of disengagement from the project seemed at the time more difficult than the problems of permitting it to go ahead, so to speak, on its own and without any form of American military support.

One consequence of the Bay of Pigs was to reinforce and vindicate his basic skepticism about the kind of advice he would get from some of the most distinguished and eminent men of the time.

BRANDON: Did he say anything much later about it to you? In the historic perspective?

SCHLESINGER: Yes, I think he felt that this was a most basic element in his Presidential education. I think it made him quite skeptical of a military establishment and of the diplomatic establishment and of the intelligence establishment, and I think it caused him to rely more on himself and on the White House staff. It also imbued the White House staff with a great sense of having served him ill. The members of the White House staff who were involved were themselves new to Washington and somewhat intimidated by the weight of authority which appeared to support this expedition. I think the White House staff was galvanized into new and more aggressive activity in the months thereafter.

BRANDON: By that you mean more active . . .

SCHLESINGER: More active in defending the interests of the President and therefore more aggressive in invading what the machinery of government regarded as its own domain. This led to a certain amount of resentment of the White House staff for meddling, but the staff felt it had not meddled enough in the early months of the Administration and consequently helped expose the President and the nation to a grievous error.

BRANDON: What does the "meddling" really consist of?

SCHLESINGER: The hardest thing in government is to change anything. You have a great laborious, opaque mechanism which is in many respects committed to the process of doing everything the way it was done before—with great vested interests, administrative, fiscal, and intellectual, and certain accustomed processes—and with very little capacity for innovation.

What meddling consists of really is seeking out those people in this machinery who *are* capable of innovation—and there are a great many of them, as you know—and helping them, strengthening their hands, both by bringing their ideas to the attention of the President and also by sup-

porting them in their own internal conflicts.

The White House staff would be nothing without allies throughout the machinery of government, and one of the things that the Kennedy Administration tried to do was to bring forward the freer spirits in the Foreign Service and in the Civil Service and strengthen their hands. This obviously was resented by the people who for the most virtuous reasons were wedded to the status quo.

#### A Call from the President

BRANDON: Very often the President himself acted as a sort of gadfly by calling Desk Officers and so on—

SCHLESINGER: The President was in this respect very much like Roosevelt or Churchill. If he was interested in a problem like the Congo and wanted to control what was going on, he would not follow the chain of command as President Eisenhower, I gather, did. In other words, say, tell something to the Secretary of State, who would tell it to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, who would tell it to the Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, who would tell it to the Congo Desk Officer, and similarly the Congo Desk Officer would reply through the same chain of command. This would often dilute the message both ways, divesting it of any pungency or character. President Kennedy's instinct would be to call the man and ask him or tell him, and this had the effect of not only giving the President much fresher information and sharper opinion, but it also would imbue the machinery of government itself with the sense of his own purposes. It's a very exciting thing to get a call from the President and an exciting thing to have some direct sense of what he wanted, and this had I think a tonic effect throughout government.

BRANDON: Do you remember any case where this happened to you?

SCHLESINGER: Yes, in quite a number of cases. One which comes to mind particularly was in the midst of the Second Cuban Crisis when I was in New York working with Governor Stevenson on the UN presentation. I had a talk with a man whom I would consider as wise a man in our country as any on Soviet affairs, Averell Harriman. He was at that time Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, and despite his rich experience and, I believe, deep understanding of Soviet policy, he had not been consulted on this crisis. Averell, of course, was filled with ideas and had no one to talk to about them, so he called me up in New York and said he was

absolutely convinced that Khrushchev was going to pull back. He mentioned a few pieces of evidence—the things Soviet broadcasts were saying and not saying—the fact that Khrushchev had attended a concert of an American singer and called in an American businessman. There was an accumulation of details which convinced Harriman that Khrushchev's policy was going to be one of withdrawal. This seemed very convincing to me, and it was still at a stage when the predominant opinion was that he would not. So I sent a telegram from New York to the President and within forty minutes I got a call from him demanding to know more. Then he immediately called Harriman. That was quite characteristic.

BRANDON: Why did Harriman at that point not contact the President directly?

SCHLESINGER: Because I think he felt a reluctance in the midst of this terrible crisis to give unsolicited opinions. But this is something that the White House Special Assistant can do. Since the Special Assistants roam the whole domain of government and since their job is to serve the President, they should have no hesitation about barging in on anything. It's very odd because this is rather a new system, as you know. It was all based on an Act passed in 1939; before that, the President of the United States had as little staff assistance as the Prime Minister of England has today. Informally, Roosevelt perceived very strongly the need for staff assistants. He had them, but he had them, so to speak, by subterfuge, because his Special Assistants were all on someone else's payroll. Thus Raymond Moley was nominally in the State Department, Tom Corcoran nominally in the RFC, Ben Cohen nominally at the National Power Policy Commission.

Roosevelt thus found it necessary, as government expanded under the New Deal, to have people who would be in effect on his staff, who could tell him what was going on, make sure the decisions were followed, protect him, and, above all, enable him to control the machinery of government. Without a staff, the problems of Presidential control would be insuperable; the President would be at the mercy of the heads of his Departments and Agencies.

BRANDON: What was surprising about Kennedy, since he was after all a Senator, was his enormous concentration on foreign policy and the relative difficulties he had in maintaining good relations with Congress.

SCHLESINGER: I don't think either is really surprising. I think every President in this modern age begins his Presidency with a greater interest in domestic affairs. Roosevelt did,

Truman did. Eisenhower was the exception, but Eisenhower's whole experience had been military or foreign. In every case after a time they begin to be more interested in foreign affairs. That's partly because foreign affairs are more urgent and more interesting, and partly because the President has more power to act.

BRANDON: You don't think that President Johnson is essentially really more fascinated by domestic affairs and Congressional relations?

SCHLESINGER: I think he is now, but unless he deviates from what has been the typical course in his office, I believe in due time he will find himself more and more absorbed in foreign policy.

BRANDON: To what extent was President Kennedy influenced by historic precedent? To what extent was his thinking influenced by history?

### No Binding Precedents

SCHLESINGER: His thinking was influenced very much by history, but not in the sense of precedent. A precedent was something which the first Catholic to be elected President of the United States could hardly regard as binding. That something had not been done before didn't interest him particularly, if it was a sensible thing to do.

I can remember the discussions before his Presidency when he was thinking of making Douglas Dillon Secretary of the Treasury. I said to him that it would be unprecedented to take a Junior Cabinet Minister from a previous Administration and of the opposite political complexion and put him in one of the most important posts in the government. President Kennedy was rightly unimpressed by this. On the other hand, he was deeply influenced by history in the sense of having a notion of the direction, the movement of events. He saw things in certain historic sweep and flow. Also he was deeply influenced by the great figures of history and their qualities of heroism, magnanimity, generosity, chivalry.

He derived from history certain useful generalizations, such as that you should never get into a fight and deny your opponent a means of exit. That, for example, was something which he had had as a maxim privately for years, and which he acted upon with such brilliance during the Second Cuban Crisis.

BRANDON: What do you think now in retrospect are historically his most important speeches?

SCHLESINGER: His Inauguration speech will go down in history as one of the great Inaugural addresses. His civil-rights speech of June 1963 is, I think, his great speech in domestic policy. And the American University speech. I suggest those might be the three great speeches.

BRANDON: Did you take part in any of them?

SCHLESINGER: In the American University speech, in a minor way, but the main lines of these speeches were the President's own. He was assisted in them by Ted Sorensen, who was his brilliant and selfless collaborator in these things. The American University speech [delivered June 10, 1963] suggests how he went about them.

President Kennedy began to feel in the spring of 1963 that there was a possibility of some kind of new movement in our relations with the Soviet Union, and he began to look for an opportunity to make a "peace speech." That was the way it was described, and this was a project which was kept extremely confidential in the White House. McGeorge Bundy began in a quiet way to get from two or three members of the White House staff ideas which might go into such a speech. Ted Sorensen worked on it. The President thought a great deal about it, talked with Sorensen and Bundy, made clear the point of view and the ideas he wanted. Part of this draft presently emerged. It was shown to a small group in the White House. As I recall, the draft was not shown to the State Department or to the Defense Department until the Saturday before it was given. It was given on a Monday. You may remember the President went to Hawaii, and I think it was perhaps on Friday afternoon that the draft was circulated through State and Defense for their comments. Ted Sorensen then flew with the draft to Honolulu and the President worked on the final draft on his way back and gave the speech Monday morning.

I think that was the kind of speech which only the President could make. It shows the importance of a President who will not be passive in the sense of accepting only proposals submitted to him from the machinery of government, but will have the courage to have his own conception of what ought to be done, and when it ought to be done, and to impose it on the government.

BRANDON: What were the reasons for showing it so late to the State Department and to the Defense Department?

SCHLESINGER: The President knew what he wanted to say and didn't want to set in motion a process of dilution.

BRANDON: It seems to me that Kennedy in his speeches tried to be the reformer, the man who makes history, but in his actions he was much more cautious.

SCHLESINGER: I think the problem there was that in order to prepare the ground for action in a democracy you must have consent and support, and the process of education had to come first. In



↓ a fairly prosperous country like America in the 1960s, he had to begin an immense job of public education in order to prepare the way for action. He himself, of course, was looking forward to a second term. He supposed that his reelection would be by a much wider margin, that he would have a much freer hand in Congress, that there would be many more Democrats committed to the principles of the Democratic platform, and that he would be able to do something to minimize the role of the anti-Administration Democrats. For all these reasons, I believe, he thought that in his case—as in the case of Theodore Roosevelt—it would be the second term rather than the first that would be the term of major accomplishment.

BRANDON: Did he talk to you about any specific new ideas—both in domestic and foreign affairs?

SCHLESINGER: No. After all, the election was still a year away at the time of his death and at that time, during the summer and fall, the major new idea which was in his mind was the poverty program. He pondered the question of unemployment and talked it over with Walter Heller of the Council of Economic Advisers and others. He became more and more convinced that the hard core of unemployment could not be ended by a simple increase in the general levels of economic activity, and that the unemployed were those more and more in handicapped or disqualified categories—either ethnic minorities or the under-educated or undertrained or old people. When you subtract those various categories from the general unemployed, those who were left, who would be reemployed by an increase in general levels of business activity, were not too great. Under Walter Heller's direction, the studies were made which prepared the way for the poverty program which President Johnson has loyally continued and carried forward.

#### Why So Sensitive?

BRANDON: Do you think the President's indefatigable interest in the press was an advantage or a disadvantage to him?

SCHLESINGER: Oh, I think it was overall an advantage. One of the important things the President has to do is to know what's going on. But why Presidents are so sensitive to press criticism is hard to understand. Presumably men who have been in public life ought to be inured to a certain amount of misunderstanding and malice. But Presidents are terribly sensitive. Some, like Coolidge and Eisenhower, just didn't read papers which criticized them; others, like Roosevelt, Kennedy, Johnson, and Truman, read them with apparently inexhaustible capacity for indignation.

Kennedy, as you know, regarded this as one of the occupational hazards of the Presidency. Even though he often got briefly irritated, on the whole these were cause more for jokes than for genuine rage.

BRANDON: Many historians have now accepted the theory that history is mainly a personal vision. A minority of historians, especially those whose preoccupation is economic history, have argued that the study of history should mean more than a personal reconstruction of the past, that it should be more concerned as to how one epoch relates to another. What is the point of view from which you approach history?

SCHLESINGER: I think history is partly a personal vision. But it is more than a personal vision because the raw material of history is what the historians optimistically call "facts." These are elements on which all historians can agree—namely, that certain people have lived, that certain battles and elections have taken place, and so on, no matter how much they differ about the interpretation. I think this substratum will continue. The questions of the interpretation are going to vary from historian to historian and from generation to generation.

BRANDON: Do you think the fact that you participated—that you were inside of government—will enable you to interpret more accurately?

SCHLESINGER: It will enable me perhaps to describe the process of public decision more accurately than people who have never been in government, though the experience is really less important than the instinct—the intuition—about these things. Undoubtedly a great historian in a library—if his intuitions are subtle enough—can do better than a mediocre historian who spent years in the public service. Public experience by itself is no substitute for the insight which distinguishes a great historian from an average one.

BRANDON: But will your perspective be better or worse?

SCHLESINGER: My perspective on the Roosevelt Administration will be better as a result of this experience. But participation in the Kennedy Administration does not ensure that my perspective on it will be better. And what I write about the Kennedy Administration therefore will not be (as my work on the Roosevelt Administration attempts to be) a comprehensive and systematic account. It will rather be a contribution to the work that some future historian will undertake about the Kennedy Administration, because what is important about the Kennedy years twenty years from now may not be what you and I and Ted Sorensen think is important about it today.