

Book World

VOL. VIII, 1

The Washington Post

JANUARY 7, 1973

THE KENNEDY PROMISE

By NICK THIMMESCH

AS WE SLIP further into the seventies, we look back on those violent sixties and wonder what made them that way. Were they not destined to be resplendent with accomplishment, when John F. Kennedy was inaugurated 12 years ago, magnificent in phrase with "... ask not what your country can do for you . . ."? Was this not to be the Leadership for the Sixties, provided by a new generation of Americans which Kennedy advertised in edging out Richard Nixon? How did it come to pass that our cities burned, our military might was squandered in the bloody mud of Vietnam for a decade, and the charismatic figures who were to lead us were murdered? Did the wrong people get ahold of the Republic in 1961?

The decade and Kennedy's influence on it are being harshly reassessed. First, it was David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, a huge, dour indictment of the men of reputed excellence whom Kennedy brought to Washington and who planned and executed the Vietnam war. *The Kennedy Neurosis*, by Nancy Clinch is forthcoming. Now we have *The Kennedy Promise*, a severe examination of the Kennedy method by

Henry Fairlie, one of those British journalists who delights in picking Yankees apart. This highly readable polemic, laced with quotes by JFK and his gabrier New Frontiersmen, is damning and unforgiving. Should be red meat for Republicans.

Fairlie's Kennedy is politically conventional, more conservative, and far less idealistic than previously advertised. JFK was unquestionably more charismatic than Nixon in 1960, but just as cornball and centrist. (In Bloomer, Wisconsin, JFK informed farmers that "the American cow is the 'foster mother' of the human race and a great asset to the nation.") He queried Billy Graham for biblical quotations for the inaugural address. He appointed hardliners to top jobs, including General

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The Politics of Expectation

By Henry Fairlie

Doubleday. 376 pp. \$7.95

Curtis LeMay as Chief of Air Staff, because he liked decisive toughness. Kennedy's thinking, as Fairlie analyzes it, was more simplistic than subtle, hence, his mission as commander-in-chief of the Grand Alliance in the cold war.

Domestic policies, including civil rights, were second to his global thoughts (Nixon, too?). Kennedy dallied on his promise to order desegregation of public housing. He had to be pushed into calling for civil rights legislation. Martin Luther King accused his administration of tokenism. When the now-historic March on Washington was planned in 1963, Kennedy first asked Negro leaders to call it off, then seeing it was a reality, welcomed its leaders with an ingratiating, "I have a dream." Familiarity breeds votes.

Meanwhile, back on the media front, the Kennedy rhetoric, the entertaining press conferences, the gay renditions of his Camelot in photo and on TV screen, lifted the populace into fantastic expectancy, the way Fairlie writes and documents it. Kennedy's constant cries for a sense of purpose and destiny (Fairlie quotes Harold Macmillan's "If the people want a sense of purpose they should get it from archbishops") particularly annoys the author. It sounded like wartime. "I think to be an American in the next decade," Kennedy had declared, "will be a hazardous experience. We will live on the edge of danger." Kennedy urged the American giant to show his muscle. Presidential meetings became football "huddles." Vigorous games, 50-mile hikes, speed-reading, jet trip after jet trip. It started terribly fast. Very early, McGeorge Bundy observed: "... we are like the Harlem Globetrotters, passing forward, behind, sidewise and underneath. But nobody has made a basket yet."

Now it's almost incredible for me to recall how President Eisenhower and his defense secretary, Thomas Gates, futilely pleaded that the United States had adequate defense and security, that there was no "missile gap," that no international crisis existed. The disbelieving Washington Post sarcastically editorialized, (Continued on page 3)

The Kennedy Promise

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"No longer, presumably, need we worry about the lethal power of the big bruiser next door with the club, once we are told that his heart is pure." Walter Lippmann similarly chided Eisenhower, and Kennedy bounded across the Republic, crying "missile gap." As the new President, he did a dumb thing in subsequently telling Khrushchev that the United States enjoyed a clear superiority in the arms race. The Soviet leader interpreted this disclosure as a threat, and stormed home to return the threat in kind.

Indeed, as Fairlie tells it, John F. Kennedy was a President in search of a war. Guerrilla warfare and the Green Berets fascinated him. Thus, there was to be counterrevolution to the Soviets and Chinese—which amounts to getting into the same subversive bed with the Communists. James Bond, the CIA, it's "one-minute-to-midnight" in Latin America, Cuban missile crisis, rushing troops to the East German border, exhortations for fallout shelters (New Frontiersman prescribed but never installed them), the military situation-room mentality, warnings about nuclear attack, constant crisis and alarm—all gave strong men, fearful women and obedient schoolchildren the willies in those Kennedy days.

Foreign policy went askew. The slim-

plistic lumping of Latin America's diverse nations into one region, and the hope that their acquiescent leaders would meet, say, in Puerto Rico, to discuss democratic ways were reflected in the failure of the Alliance for Pro-

gress. Relations with the nations of Europe floundered. Kennedy wanted us to be "the watchmen on the walls of world freedom" but seemed unqualified to lead us atop the wall. It was catching up with him when he was tragically



killed in Dallas, on a day when he boasted record boosts in defense spending, told how his administration had doubled strategic air forces and ready nuclear weapons and "increased our special counter-insurgency forces which are now engaged in South Vietnam by 600 per cent." Kennedy jammed his thumb in the air as he cried, "This requires sacrifice by the people of the United States, but this is a very dangerous and uncertain world."

Fairlie also treats of Robert Kennedy who came to reverse his brother's course, but not his urgent rhetoric. Likewise, Teddy is hardly the model of rhetorical restraint and seems ready to stir those old expectations. Fairlie doesn't blame it all on the Kennedys. He sees a positivist, puritanical flaw in America which falls prey to anxiety and seductive royalty.

Fairlie set out to kick the stuffings out of Kennedy, but overdid it. Balance and fairness weren't his intent. This clever, highly thematic book should rouse aging New Frontiersmen to valiant defense. But I suspect that much of the fight is drained, and what remains has fermented to deep resentment and hostility for Richard Nixon who is as uncomfortable in their Washington as they are to have him here. Kennedy fair and vigor in this Nixonian time? Charisma and 15 cents will get you a cup of coffee these days.