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## The Kennedy Promise

The Politics of Expectation.

By Henry Fairlie.

376 pp. New York:

Doubleday & Co. \$7.95.

## Book Review

By TOM WICKER

"And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country," said John F. Kennedy in his Inaugural Address, as everyone knows.

As everyone does not know, he had written more than 20 years earlier that England before World War II had "failed to realize that if it hoped to compete successfully with a dictatorship on an equal plane, it would have to renounce temporarily its democratic privileges . . . . It meant *voluntary totalitarianism* because, after all, the essence of a totalitarian state is that the national purpose will not permit group interests to interfere with its fulfillment."

Henry Fairlie contends in this brilliant, curmudgeonly book that the seeds of the President's Inaugural Address were in the student's thesis—not, Fairlie writes, "that there was in John Kennedy anything which deserved to be called a totalitarian spirit" but that on Jan. 20, 1961, as in the Presidential campaign of 1960, Kennedy "was already pulling the country onto tiptoe; summoning it to confront great dangers, on the one hand, and to expect great deeds, on the other; teaching it to

prepare for a strenuous adventure in which a single ruler would lead it with a united purpose. . . . His real concern [was] the exaltation of the power of the state."

This view of Camelot will disgruntle true believers, of whom not a few are thirsting already for 1976 and another try at Restoration; those less committed to the cause will find Fairlie's book rewarding, if flawed and fully as sweeping as those of Kennedy idolators.

Fairlie does not appear to have interviewed a long list of former officials, friends, hangers-on, etc., but to have pored over the documents and the publications of the era, together with its known history, and to have subjected all these to his own judgments—about events, that is, not about personalities. "We must clear the man away," he writes (of Rob-

Tom Wicker, author of "Kennedy Without Tears," writes a column for The Times. His new novel, "Facing the Lions," is to be published in May.

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ert Kennedy), "if we are going to consider him sensibly as a politician"; and that kind of clearing away is one of the great values of "The Kennedy Promise."

Several personal statements suggest that Fairlie, who is British (he has written for a number of British and American newspapers and periodicals and since 1965 has lived in Washington), was not even in the United States during the Kennedy Administration — at least not consistently. This may contribute to some minor factual difficulties; Fairlie thinks, for example, that "a statesman who can travel to West Berlin and cry on its walls, 'Ich bin ein Berliner,'" was surely emotional, and no doubt Kennedy was. Nevertheless, when I wrote something similar at the time, McGeorge Bundy told me with considerable amusement that Kennedy had practised pronouncing the phrase throughout his flight from Frankfurt to West Berlin.

But Fairlie is not wrong that it was a theatrical gesture, and his method, on the whole, enables him to withstand even in retrospect the fabled Kennedy charm. Since that is the first requirement for a study of the man's work, it therefore serves him well and enables him to challenge vigorously such common notions as that Kennedy's 1960 campaign was more uplifting than most; that his Administration was a great ministry of talents; that he sought and got real diversity of opinion in policy-making; that his emphasis on the arts and the intellect was either genuine or useful; that his attempt at linkage of "power and excellence" marked a kind of high point in American sophistication; that his pragmatism was much more than frantic response to misunderstood problems; and that his thousand days in office were marked by an unending series of crises.

Instead, he writes, studying those thousand days is like "watching a film in which the narrative has been cut to a succession of barely related events. As the frames jump, [the viewer] is jolted from episode to episode in the same spectacular displays of the same uninhibited personal leadership. There was no time to question the behaviour in one

episode before the action had jumped to another, the audience left too breathless in anticipation to do anything but applaud. In becoming a series of episodes, politics had also become theater."

Fairlie also argues that Kennedy seemed to regard the United States as basically a finished society, having no real problems with which he need concern himself, certainly none comparable to those he saw abroad. Therefore, his most costly "exaltation of the power of the state" resulted from his consequent projection of the nation into conflict and confrontation and involvement on a global scale, and into chest-thumping trials of national strength with Moscow. Together with his publicized "personal leadership," Fairlie believes, this high-keyed approach clad the man in the Presidency all too nearly in robes appropriate to an imperial concept of the office.

As Fairlie argues it in his irascible but incisive manner, much of this will seem compelling to all but hardcore aficionados. All of it will challenge accepted views, which is useful. But a minor flaw of "The Kennedy Promise" is that Fairlie exempts the current Nixon-Kissinger management of affairs from similar indictment—and that minor flaw suggests by contradiction a primary flaw.

Not content with painting a revisionist picture of the Kennedy Administration, Fairlie also suggests that John Kennedy more or less invented the imperial Presidency, converted cold war into crusade, and conditioned the American people to view all problems as dramatic crises

subject to political solutions through Presidential leadership. Therefore, he lays at Kennedy's door virtually the entire history of the subsequent decade, and contends that its strife at home and confrontations abroad sprang essentially from the "politics of expectation" that the young President made into such vivid theater.

If all that were the case, surely it would have to be pointed out that 10 years later Richard Nixon conducts a more imperial foreign policy than Kennedy ever dreamed of, as did Lyndon Johnson; and that while Mr. Nixon is by no means so spectacular a personal performer, he does, for instance, subvert television to his pur- (Continued on Page 10)



### Clearing away the man to get at the politician

s reserved.

## Kennedy Promise



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poses far more than Kennedy did; and that he has taken the romantic notion of the solitary President beset by crisis and awful burdens, wrestling with the fate of mankind, much closer to what must be hoped are its outer limits.

But aside from absolving the Nixon-Kissinger Administration from the aberrations Fairlie says Kennedy fastened on the nation, the thesis itself seems overblown; it is as if Fairlie himself is a trifle lacking in that "sense of history" of which he finds so little evidence in the Kennedy Administration.

John Kennedy certainly made the Presidency a more personal and glamorous office than he found it; but what he did find was already a powerful instrument for the projection of a personality. Those who remember Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower — each in different ways an intensely personal President — will question whether Kennedy changed the office so profoundly as Fairlie believes.

It was the dominant "father figure" of Eisenhower (much admired by Henry Fairlie), for example, that was caught in a flat misstatement of fact on the U-2 incident — and found himself only the more revered by a people who believed that

whatever he had done must have been for the best. Put another way, are we to conclude that it was the example of Kennedy, rather than his own personality and circumstances, that made it possible for Lyndon Johnson to be at one time perhaps the most "personal" and "powerful" President in history?

As for the "politics of expectation," while no one should discount its consequences, only a limited understanding of

American society could sustain the idea that the explosion of the nation's cities in the mid-sixties and the revolt of American youth were merely the products of disappointed hopes aroused by John Kennedy. He did arouse hope that was disappointed, and that disappointment did have its effect; but to stop there is to ignore, among other more important factors, one of the great migrations of human history (of American

blacks out of the rural South into the cities during and after World War II) and the total political neglect of this phenomenon during the Eisenhower years. Fairlie's thesis ignores also, in the case of the "counterculture," the astonishing spread in the same years of an affluence and a technology that radically altered, and in one generation, the experience of American life. Can it seriously be asserted that we would have had neither the Detroit riots nor Kent State had Kennedy never been elected?

Fairlie himself concedes that it was in the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 that cold-war policies first turned aggressively toward "the diffuse need to preserve the general stability of a nation or a region" through American intervention. But he goes on to accuse Kennedy of giving this new departure its "dynamism," and this too cannot be wholly refuted—not by anyone who heard the Inaugural Address.

On the other hand, John Kennedy's voice, in his American University speech of 1963, first called for the "era of negotiation" Mr. Nixon has been pursuing in Moscow. And Fairlie's picture of a young President spoiling to knock over Castro, for another example, is too sharp around the edges. Allen Dulles, who was there, said later that Kennedy had had to be persuaded into the Bay of Pigs adventure, not least by pointed inquiries whether he wanted to appear less anti-Communist than his predecessor — whose Administration already had gone adventuring in Iran and Guatemala and Lebanon. If anything, Kennedy in this episode seems to have been more nearly weak-willed than imperial.

The point here is not to defend him nor to accuse Eisenhower or Johnson or Nixon; it is to suggest that what has happened in American society, politics and diplomacy in recent decades is far more complex than the effect — however electric — of one man's personality and brief tenure in the White House. The Kennedy faithful, in his life as after his death, have consistently claimed too much for him; and it is ironic to find a bold dissenter also giving him undeserved credit, if only for troubles and despairs. ■