

Richard Goodwin: Washington Reflections And Other Illusions

By Michael Kernan

Richard N. Goodwin, the Voltaire of the Kennedy era, has quit politics.

"At least two reasons," rapped out the 42-year-old former speech writer for both Kennedys, Eugene McCarthy, McGovern and all sorts of Democrats: "For one thing, my book is very radical about the economic structure. The difference between a radical and dangerous radical is that the dangerous radical is radical about money. . . . If my book gets any attention, then it will be attacked violently. . . ."

"For another thing, I have come to the rejection of politics as a vehicle for social change in America."

That's for starters.

Goodwin, roaring through Washington yesterday to promote his new book, "The American Condition," said he rarely comes to town anymore.

Even as he sat in the Staler Hilton's Steak House, old Kennedy hands came by, waved or nodded, and George Murphy steamed past with an entourage, but the old light didn't go on. Goodwin sat patiently in his booth, wearing the slightly rascible look of the person who has always been more intelligent than his peers, answering the traditional questions.

Why hasn't some Democratic leader moved into the power vacuum created by Watergate?

"It's the natural caution of politicians. They're not about to touch something that might damage them with their constituents. The mavericks like Morse have been filtered out. Today there's a bureaucracy of political leadership: the idea is to avoid controversy and not get hurt. Who's talking about Big Business these days the way Roosevelt and Truman used to? Not even Wallace."

What about Teddy Kennedy?

A quick shrug. "If he decided to run, he'd win the nomination and the election, considering the state of the opposition. But if he asked my advice about running? That's an existential decision, one of those things nobody else can decide for you. Whether you want to risk your life."

And Nixon? What can his administration do? Don't you feel it's stuck?

"Not stuck. Caught." A flash: not really a smile. "What should Nixon do? Go to Brazil. With all his money, I suppose, after the terrific beating his psyche has been taking, the quicker he gets out, the better for his health. Myself, I'd like to see him impeached and tried. Stuff would come out that would make everything up to now look pale."

The idea of Brazil came naturally to the man who was John Kennedy's special counsel on Latin American affairs. When he was finishing his book in Cambridge, Mass., before the publisher's advance came through, creditors nipped at him so hard that he fled to Brazil with his 7-year-old son Richard. "But our real home is in Kingfield, Maine," he added. "After the '68 campaign I went up there to write the book, finally bought a farm. Twenty miles from the nearest New York Times."

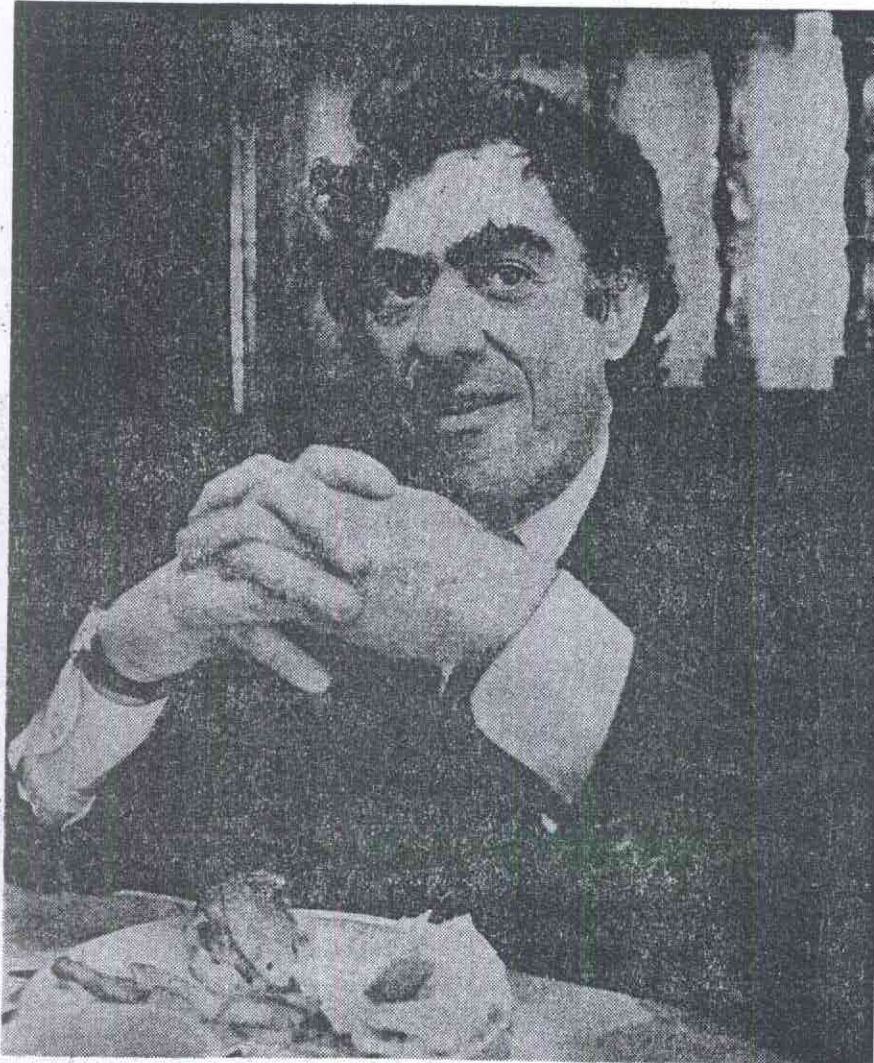
His wife of 14 years, Sandra, died nearly two years ago.

At the moment Goodwin seems totally absorbed by the book and has no particular plans that don't include its promotion. He looks forward to getting back to Maine, away from "the capital of illusion," as he calls Washington.

(Early yesterday he took Richard to see a colonel at the Pentagon about a weapons system the 7-year-old has invented. What was the invention? "I'm not talking to the press," said Richard.)

A man who can call Washington "an extravagant parody of social existence without community. . . . a caricature of society, a fabricated city inhabited by strangers whose simulated camaraderie is both facade and necessary lubricant for unceasing competition," has come a long, long way from the days as JFK's coach in the Nixon debates, as the best Kennedy speechwriter this side of Ted Sorensen, as originator of the phrase "Alliance for Progress" and author of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" and "War on Poverty" speeches, as a close aide to Robert Kennedy who fin-

See GOODWIN, B3, Col. 1



By Ken Felt—The Washington Post

Author and former speechwriter Richard Goodwin: "People really come to Washington believing it's the center of power. I came here with that belief. But it's a steering wheel that's not connected to the engine."



By Ken Felt—The Washington Post

Richard Goodwin: "When the highest office in the land becomes an attractive goal for psychotics, we're in real trouble."

Washington Reflections And Other Illusions

GOODWIN, From B1

ished that nightmare campaign as a writer first for McCarthy and finally for Muskie.

Still, if seen as a gradual stripping of illusion, Goodwin's present position is all that one would expect of a double summa cum laude (Tufts '53, Harvard Law '58) who jumped from law clerk in Felix Frankfurter's office to House investigator to campaign worker to a whole brace of White House posts.

His point in "The American Condition" is that our connections with each other—the bonds of community, moral authority, "shared social purpose"—are breaking down, depriving us of the freedom to exert influence:

"One can expect the ideology of individualism to be drained of its active principle; finally, to define freedom as being unhindered in one's private life without the obligation to choose, commit or act. Let us not be molested within our cells."

Meanwhile, bureaucracy overtakes the society, even regimenting via the franchise system our traditionally independent small businessmen. And as the normal sources of popular authority disappear, the individual finds himself alone against coercive power.

Richard Goodwin in conversation:

- "When the highest office in the land become an attractive goal for psychotics, we're in real trouble."

- "All these liberation revolution—feminism, gay power and so on—are still just a part of our consumption ideology, where personal gratification is the

purpose of life."

- "We buy the products that the companies tell us to buy at the price they set, and we call that freedom? It's not freedom if you have to wait four hours in a gas line."

- "Bureaucracies don't innovate. They've had no progress in 20 years. The only new thing the telephone company's come up with is the Princess phone."

- "Real income has stag-

nated since 1967. The stock market will never come back. You know, if the big institutions would give \$2,000 to the poor; they'd buy a car with it; that's the first thing people buy. It would help the economy. Give \$2,000 to someone who's already got a car, and it doesn't do any good. But institutions don't act in their own interests."

- "Change the bureaucracies? That's like asking a whale to fly. Like asking a politician to take a risk."

- "Sure, you could have a consumer revolution, Naderism, boycotts, but you lack

direction and focus. Any American revolution will have to come from the middle class, but the middle class powers are fragmented. Maybe if you had some sort of Middle Western populist, like a Huey Long out of Wisconsin, you could really shake the system."

- "We tend to think in terms of personalities. The right person could change things, right? But it's the structure that prevails. The very process of promotion in a major corporation insures that these people will be weeded out."

- "People really come to

Washington believing it's the center of power. I came here with that belief. But it's a steering wheel that's not connected to the engine."

- "All the important social movements of the '60s—like civil rights and peace—came from underneath. They didn't begin in Washington."

- "Politics is what religion used to be, the opiate of the people. It neutralizes those people who want social change. It absorbs the energies of the discontented. It's not just an illusion but a dangerous illusion."