

Loyal Robert grew into a nobler role

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**Robert Kennedy:
Brother Protector**

By James W. Hilty

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By Philip Seib

John Kennedy's presidency remains wrapped in mythology rooted in his martyrdom. The career of his brother Robert is likewise enveloped by a mist that distorts fact while it nourishes legend.

Historians have much to contend with when appraising the Kennedys. Diligent promoters of their carefully crafted images, members of this family often saw truth as an inconvenience. Reality about the Kennedys is like buried treasure — it must be located and excavated.

Temple University history professor James W. Hilty has done an admirable job of searching, digging and then assembling what he has found. Drawing on an array of sources, he has succeeded, for the most part, in cutting through myth and mist. *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector* is best when it is toughest, as in its lawyer-like presentations of evidence about its subject's often cavalier attitude toward civil liberties and his hesitant embrace of the civil rights movement.

Mr. Hilty's thesis is that Robert Kennedy was always ready to rationalize his actions — whatever they were — "as necessary to defeat the forces of evil or to protect his brother." The record is unsettling. Robert admired and worked for Sen. Joseph McCarthy. He tolerated J. Edgar Hoover's illegal surveillance techniques. He usurped the authority of others in government whenever he thought doing so would advance his brother's interests.

For his part, John Kennedy

learned early that he needed the help of his fiercely loyal brother. They were very different: John cool and calculating, Robert passionate and never subtle. The two would use "good-cop, bad-cop" ploys effectively, with John letting Robert be the heavy while he, himself, stayed above the fray.

One of Robert's Harvard classmates called him "a nasty, brutal, humorless little fellow." That description has some truth to it, but perhaps more accurate is historian Richard Goodwin's judgment that Robert was "a constellation of contradictions."

This became particularly apparent after John's death, when Robert developed his own political identity. The image of Joe McCarthy's buddy began to fade, replaced by that of the champion of the poor, the hungry and others desperate for mere hope. Compared to his brother, writes Mr. Hilty, Robert "conveyed a greater, more genuine sense of indignation and moral outrage over America's social problems."

Brother Protector does not carry Robert Kennedy's story beyond the days immediately after John's assassination. Mr. Hilty promises another volume that will cover his final years. That book — if done as well as this one — should provide a fascinating portrayal of a politician's evolution. Robert Kennedy was no saint, but at the time of his death he was no demon.

Philip Seib is a frequent contributor to the Books pages.