The two-Bobbys theory

ROBERT KENNEDY: A Memoir. By Jack Newfield. Dutton. 318 pp. $6.95.

By David S. Broder

Robert Kennedy and Jack Newfield

Even more than most politicians, Robert F. Kennedy enjoyed traveling with an entourage of admirers, a diverse band of socialites, astronauts, athletes and aesthetes, united only by their fondness for their leader. One of the journalists in the group, Jack Newfield, the young assistant editor of *The Village Voice*, has published this affectionate memoir of the late Senator, or, as he calls it, "a chronicle and analysis of Robert Kennedy's politics and character between the gunshots of Dallas and Los Angeles."

As a chronicle, it is not half bad, but it is not in a class with Jules Witcover's *85 Days* as a history of the last Kennedy campaign. Newfield, who can be stridently self-indulgent in some of his journalism, has brought a degree of discipline to his writing in this book, indulging himself in only a few reckless sentences.

Nonetheless, as an analysis of Kennedy's politics and character, the book is less than satisfactory. Newfield is right, I think, in saying that in the last years of his life, "Kennedy's thinking was pushing beyond liberalism," but he makes an inadequate effort to define the origins and principles of Kennedy's philosophy or to explore its relationship to the constituency Kennedy was seeking.

Instead, by his deadpan treatment of speech-text generalities, Newfield leads the unwary to think that rhetoric is equivalent to a genuine political program — an error that is compounded by his failure to assess Kennedy's standing among his political peers. Except for a footnote comment that neither Eugene McCarthy nor John Lindsay "combined a total vision . . . as avant-garde as Kennedy's," whatever that may mean, there is little measurement of the Senator's accomplishments and failures in the world of politics.

But the more serious fault arises from Newfield's view of the relationship between personality and politics. He says some things about Kennedy that are astoundingly naive: "Kennedy always hated Evil [Newfield's capital E] with a certain and principled passion." And he says some things that will make even Kennedy's close friends choke: "Kennedy preferred the small town to the big city, the factory worker to the agency undersecretary."

More serious, he distorts his portrait of the Senator to fit the "Good Bobby and Bad Bobby" image so popular in the New Left. The distortion starts from the observation, which I think most of us who covered Kennedy would share, that the Senator was a late-bloomer, a man who, throughout his Washington career, was, as Newfield says, "always in a state of becoming." Beyond that, Newfield argues, with insight but some exaggeration, that Kennedy "was constantly at war with himself . . . his pragmatic, goal-oriented intellect . . . in opposition to his emotional, romantic instincts."

The clash between instinct and prudence is not so rare among politicians as Newfield seems to think, but it provides a reasonable way of viewing Kennedy's waverings on the war and his 1968 candidacy. Indeed, the best part of the book, I think, is Newfield's description of Kennedy in the anguish of indecision over running for the presidency. But Newfield is unwilling to accept that prudence and passion can coexist in a man of talent and sensitivity such as Kennedy. In the existentialist vogue, he is all-out for passion.

"Kennedy," he says, "was at his best whenever he suspended his reason" — a fine recommendation for a presidential candidate, one might say — "and trusted his instincts. . . . He was better — more authentic — when he followed his own passions." In fact, Kennedy's passions often got him into political hot water, as Newfield admits now and then. One reason he was able to do so little as a party leader in New York, Newfield concedes, was that "Kennedy's violent emotions were sometimes too much for him to handle. . . . His reputation for ruthlessness made him gun shy, and he frequently tried to overcompensate for it . . ."

Again, he notes that Kennedy's instincts "exploded abruptly" in his announcement the day after McCarthy's New Hampshire victory that he was "reassessing" his own possible candidacy, and Newfield admits that "his impulsive airport comment was a classic political blooper."

No matter; Newfield likes in-

David S. Broder is national political correspondent for The Washington Post.

stincts. He revels in the recollection of the last two weeks of March, when Kennedy, newly announced, poured out "his private hate" of President Johnson, to the delight of screaming college crowds. He grinds his teeth at the memory of Kennedy's subsequent "gross lapse of behavior," i.e., his 90-minute formal "harmony" meeting with the President after Johnson's withdrawal from the race.

All the fun went out of it, Newfield says, when Johnson quit. "It drained Kennedy of much of his driving desire; it made the campaign a campaign, rather than an emotional crusade. . . . Kennedy had felt natural and right running against Johnson and the war. But in Indiana he was running against McCarthy . . . and indirectly against Vice President Humphrey, whom he genuinely liked." "Good Bobby" disappeared except for scattered moments when he was "becoming engaged, at new and deeper levels, with the cause of the black and white poor." "Bad Bobby" went on driving for the nomination.

What can we learn from this nonsense? Newfield, I guess, speaks for those who want to reduce the complexities of personality and politics to the level of Good Guys and Bad Guys. That Kennedy could compete with a man "he genuinely liked" just because they had basic policy differences and conflicting ambitions is more than Newfield can accept. Without hate, it is not Authentic. Without Evil, the campaign is just a campaign, not an emotional crusade.

Robert Kennedy understood that politics involves the interaction of personality, policy and power. Newfield tries to boil it all down to a form of psychological therapy. It won't do.