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Kennedy among the people

By now everybody has said all the inevitable things about violence in America, and about the fates that hammered at a proud family. What remains, different for each of us, is some personal memory of Robert Kennedy, of how we saw him and of what he was.

As national-affairs editor of the *Post*, I'd had a number of encounters with Kennedy—beginning with a long and fascinating lunch two years ago—but I had never observed him among the people. And so, last April 22, I boarded the Kennedy press plane in Washington, bound for the Indiana primary campaign.

The 50 or 60 reporters and photographers sat in the plane and waited, and then the senator and his wife and three of their children came aboard—blue eyes and freckles. The senator sat across the aisle from me and smiled and said, "We're using only the best briefing material," pulling out a 1953 copy of the *Post* containing an article on Indiana.

We were headed for the southern part of the state, "Nixon country." The weather was beautiful—"It's a nice day in America," said one reporter from New York, stepping onto the heartland soil—but the day went sour almost immediately. Kennedy was taken to the Ramada Inn, a motel in Vincennes, where perhaps 100 members of a Rotary-like group called Civitan were assembled. Kennedy was late, and the Civitans had started their meal, and they continued it as he spoke, their eyes on the shrimp salad instead of the candidate. He gave a version of his standard speech, but he was strained and formal. Then, turning a vague question to his own purpose, he tried to stir the audience with the matters that most concerned him. To the Civitans—big, heavy men, most of them, well-fleshed and still occupied in shoveling down their lunch—he spoke of children starving, of "*American* children, starving in *America*." It was reverse demagoguery—he was telling them precisely the opposite of what they wanted to hear. "Do you know," he asked, voice rising, "there are more rats than people in New York City?"

Now this struck the Civitans as an apt metaphor for what they had always believed about New York City, and a number of them guffawed. Kennedy went grim, and with terrible deliberateness said, "Don't . . . laugh . . ." The room hushed. There were a few more questions, and finally he escaped.

But in the days that followed, the crowds grew and were enthusiastic. BOBBY HAS SOUL, said a sign. BOBBY YOUR [sic] GREAT, said another. Said a third: SO WHAT IF HIS HAIR IS A SILLY MILLIMETER LONGER! The enthusiasm made Kennedy blossom. In Huntington someone presented him with a pot of petunias. "I am very happy to be in Petunia," he said. "I have always wanted to come to Petunia." The crowd loved it. It was a nice moment.

There was a bad moment in Logansport. High above Kennedy, on the roof of The National Bank of Logansport, a man with a rifle stood silhouetted against the sun. The man was a policeman; even so, the involuntary emotional response to the scene—a man with a rifle looking down on a Kennedy—caused a rush of anguish among the Kennedy people.

Others have observed about Kennedy that he brought with him always an air of death. "Do you notice there are no really hostile questions from the crowds?" asked David Halberstam, a writer for *Harper's* magazine. "The assassination aura protects him."

Late one night I sat with several press people and Frank Mankiewicz, Kennedy's press secretary. It was Mankiewicz, a warm and gallant person, who two months later would announce Kennedy's death. "The senator never read the Manchester book," he said. "He never read any of those assassination books. Once he said something to me that just barely suggested that one of us ought to be up on those books, just in case he'd ever need to be briefed. And so I've read them all.

"For him," he went on, "his brother is dead. It wouldn't make any difference if it were disclosed that a conspiracy of twelve homosexuals and seven tattooed Cuban refugees had killed him."

Another of us, a photographer, told about a man in a Kennedy crowd some weeks before. "He had a popper," he said, "and he was popping streamers. One streamer popped right at Kennedy, and he raised his arm in terror."

"There was another occasion like that," said Mankiewicz. "Very sad. I said to the senator, 'Guess what happened to Joe Jones?' And the senator instantly said, 'What happened, he die?'

"Jones—that's not his real name—he was very young, there was no reason to think he might be dead. It was the time that all his friends seemed to be dying—Dean Markham, Lady Harlech."

A number of Kennedy relatives and close friends, including Markham, had died in plane crashes, so no airplane ride was a casual thing for him. We were flying from Indianapolis to Bloomington the morning after a day in which tornadoes had ripped through the area. The turbulence was fierce. Some people were vomiting, and everyone was anxious. The senator was sitting directly in front of me, and next to him was Colonel John Glenn, the former astronaut. "I have an announcement to make," Kennedy said, half rising from his seat. "Colonel Glenn is frightened."

We were all beguiled, and we knew it. There was plenty of press wisecrackery about Kennedy, however—for example, the jokes about his maddening habit of ending every speech with the words, "As George Bernard Shaw once said . . ." followed by a Shaw quote that always bewildered his audience.

One day's schedule called for Kennedy to retrace the route of the famous old Wabash Cannonball, the train celebrated in the ballad of the same name. His staff had hired a train with a rear observation platform, and stops were to be made in the grimy little towns along the tracks. In the press car, some of the best journalistic talents of the nation occupied themselves between stops by composing a parody of the Wabash ballad, entitled "The Ruthless Cannonball." Finally, the senator was summoned to hear the finished version; Frank Mankiewicz brought him back to the press car, not really wanting to, but not wanting to have Kennedy appear a bad sport either. A young reporter had brought along his guitar and struck a chord.

I was sitting in a camp chair in the aisle, and Kennedy came up behind me and stopped, and rested his hands on my shoulders. The song began. I couldn't see his face, but I could feel his fingers pressing me as he listened, the pressure never relaxing.

Oh, listen to the speeches
that baffle, beef and bore
As he waffles through woodlands
and slides along the shore.
He's the politician
who's touched by one and all.
He's the demon driver
of The Ruthless Cannonball.

It ended, after seven stanzas, and everyone turned to Kennedy for his reaction. His hands still on my shoulders, his voice coming from just above me, he said at last, "As George Bernard Shaw once said . . ." Wild laughter, partly in relief that he had taken it lightly. "As George Bernard Shaw once said . . ." he repeated, ". . . the same to you, buddy." More laughter, and applause. And suddenly the hands were gone, and so was he.

Seven weeks later I again saw Kennedy among the people, the thousands upon thousands of mourners who streamed past his bier in St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was 3 A.M., and a new honor guard was due to relieve the previous guard, but one member was absent; and so a Kennedy staff man I knew nodded to me, and I went and stood at the foot of the coffin. My hands were clasped in front of me, and because the space was cramped, my fingers touched the flag-covered bier. I felt the coffin move, and my heart jumped. And then I realized that the coffin was unsteady, and that each mourner who bent to pat or kiss it made it stir just a little, rocking it softly, as if to aid his rest.

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