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LIFE BOOK REVIEWS

How R.F.K. got trapped

KENNEDY JUSTICE
by VICTOR NAVASKY
(Atheneum) \$10.00

Through a long give-and-take of phone calls, Robert Kennedy tried to arrange with Mississippi's governor, Ross Barnett, for the registration of James Meredith at "Ole Miss." Barnett had worked out the scenario: he would disarm his own state police, then a federal marshal must force him (Barnett) from the school's doorway at gunpoint. *Wait*, no, the governor has an even better idea—"We got a big crowd here and if one pulls his gun and we all turn it would be very embarrassing. Isn't it possible to have them all [the marshals] pull their guns?" Kennedy objected that this "could create harsh feelings," and tried to work toward compromise: "Isn't it sufficient if I have one man draw his gun and the others keep their hands on their holsters?" Nope, not good enough, said the governor: "They must all draw their guns." Reluctantly Kennedy agreed.

How did the Attorney General of the United States get himself mired in this craziness? (He was saved from the pistol charade only because Barnett called it off—letting a riot develop would be even better for the governor's purposes.) To get one man into college, Kennedy was prepared to reenact the Civil War on poor unarmed southerners, to cast himself as villain and Barnett as suffering hero on TV. Any short-term gain won by Meredith's registration would be paid for in long-term enmities revived or deepened. It was a cruel trap that Kennedy was caught in.

Victor Navasky weaves a credible, detailed and labyrinthine story of that entrapment. He does not resort to the Good-Bobby-Bad-Bobby thesis of other writers. R.F.K. was not only good and bad at the same time, but often for the same reason. The very things that gave him power (e.g., the thrust of his brother in the White House) set limits to that power (he must not embarrass his brother, endanger his reelection). Because he lacked credentials (other than his name) for running the Justice Department, he had to set a record at the outset—most readily by playing on his *The Enemy Within* days with the McClellan crime committee. And because this implied a criticism of the FBI, which had snoozily dismissed



Kennedy watcher Victor Navasky

talk of the Mafia, Kennedy soon incurred large debts of placation and deference to J. Edgar Hoover.

Thus Kennedy's priorities were already set (bust gangs, get Hoffa, play up the Mafia through Valachi), his forces deployed, his credit with the FBI used up, before he had to grapple with Barnett and Wallace. His is the tragedy of electoral power—you do what you can do (gangbust), or want to do (get Hoffa), or said you would do, not what needs doing. Even charisma is self-limiting—it must be spent on things that refurbish rather than tarnish one's image.

Navasky feels that three things clogged Bobby's freedom of maneuver—the Justice Department bureaucracy as typified by J. Edgar Hoover (what Navasky calls “the code of the

FBI”), the negotiatory timidity trained into Justice Department lawyers (“the code of Ivy League gentlemen”), and a constant need to make the Clan look good (“the code of the Kennedys”). These three points are mere narrative conveniences, symbols of a much larger thing—the self-limiting nature of political ambition in our system. The same forces are operative even when no Kennedy is involved—*e.g.*, when the priority is not to get Hoffa but to get the Berrigans.

This book is not merely about the Kennedys, or Hoover, or our troubled courts. More disheartening, it shows how little politicians (even the best ones) can accomplish, at what cost they purchase power to do good, how the evil they do lives after them. Bobby, in Navasky's book, seems the best the system can give us. By comparison with that stunning fact, one hardly cares that Mitchell may be the worst. The book shows why disillusionment came under the Kennedys, and why Bobby-criticism has moved from the Right to the Left, from the crude to the subtle, from Victor Lasky to Victor Navasky. Only good men disappoint. Only Camelot could cure us of that sweet disease, man's hope.

by Garry Wills

Mr. Wills is a columnist whose most recent book is Nixon Agonistes.