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The Enemy Within

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, Oct. 29—There is a strain of perfectionist absolutism in American political thought, longing for total solutions to problems and impatient with the compromises of politicians. It exists on both left and right. Each side, curiously, may resent the failures or ideological impurity of its own people more keenly than the opposition's wrong-headedness.

An exceptional insight into this habit of mind is provided by a recent book on Robert Kennedy's years as Attorney General. It is "Kennedy Justice," by Victor S. Navasky.

Mr. Navasky has done a superb job of acquiring the facts on those years of intense activity at the Justice Department, 1961 to 1964. He describes far better than anyone ever has how the department worked in general and the Kennedy people in particular. But his judgments are distorted again and again by a yearning for absolute solutions.

On civil rights, for example, Mr. Navasky greatly regrets Robert Kennedy's reluctance to use force against the South. He believes that Kennedy should more freely have used troops or other massive Federal force to prevent terrorization of Negroes trying to attend a school or exercise other rights.

Instead, Kennedy tried to make Southern Governors and other leaders

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take responsibility for enforcing constitutional rights. This policy of negotiation and persuasion outrages Mr. Navasky, who says Kennedy and his aides assumed, "like good Ivy League gentlemen, that white Southern law enforcers, like themselves, were decent human beings, men who didn't break their word. . . ."

Robert Kennedy and his assistant

for civil rights, Burke Marshall, knew more about the cruelty and duplicity of Southern officials than Mr. Navasky ever will. They chose the course of persuasion not because it made life easier for them—God knows it did not—or because they had any illusions. They chose it because they thought it would be better for the country in the long run.

Were they wrong? History suggests not. The United States tried force in the South once, after the Civil War, and the resulting wounds lasted a century. By contrast, the policy of persuasion over the last decade has brought most of the official structure of the South to accept the rule of non-

discrimination. That is one of the few great successes of contemporary American society.

Going beyond the racial issue, is it really progressive doctrine today to want the Federal Government to do everything? Hardly. Radicals have learned by painful experience the importance of local initiative and responsibility. They may even see dangers in centralized power. Would it have been a wise precedent to impose Federal forces upon the process of law enforcement in a quarter of the country? Would that make people feel safer today, under the Justice Department regime of John Mitchell?

The book discloses that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had only three agents in Mississippi in 1961—and 153 in 1964. But that change does not really please Mr. Navasky, because it resulted not from a confrontation with Edgar Hoover and the F.B.I. but from "the adroitness of Kennedy pragmatists . . . at the business of F.B.I.-managing." Was it bad thus to enlist the bureau's resources for the first time in the racial area?

Mr. Navasky, an intelligent and sensitive man, must reflect some general mood or fashion when he prefers "confrontation" to "pragmatism" and repeatedly scourges "the Ivy League mentality." (He went to Swarthmore and Yale Law School himself.)

Perhaps the saddest passage is one in which Mr. Navasky brings himself to say that Burke Marshall, for all his long effort on behalf of Negro rights, "by breeding, by class, by education, by life-style thought like a corporation lawyer."

If even ten per cent of the corporation lawyers in the United States thought like Mr. Marshall, it would be a different country. Everyone who has ever dealt with him knows that he is a man of extraordinary public concern. Fortunately, and fairly, Mr. Navasky's book provides the facts that contradict the misjudgment. It describes Burke Marshall's successful mediation of the Birmingham crisis in 1963 and quotes one observer there as saying:

"I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for Burke . . . we would have had either a civil war or hundreds of thousands of troops down here."

Those were the terrible realities facing the Justice Department between 1961 and 1964. It is dangerous nonsense to suggest that some radical stroke could have made them go away. There were no perfect solutions: there were only determination and patience and courage. Knowing that was the burden of Robert Kennedy and the men he brought to Government—and their strength.