

Psychohistorians Rush In .

THE KENNEDY NEUROSIS

By Nancy Gager Clinch

Foreword by Bruce Mazlish

Grosset & Dunlap. 433 pp. \$10

By RICHARD J. WHALEN

A DECADE AGO, as I did the research for *The Founding Father*, the first (and thus far only) biography of Joseph P. Kennedy, I was not surprised to encounter hostility from the subject's family. The Kennedys were accustomed to having their way in all things. One afternoon in Boston, son-in-law Steve Smith, then managing Teddy's first campaign for the family's Senate seat, simply commanded me to abandon the unauthorized project, saying, "You can't do it without us." But Smith did not know where the barn was, much less which horses to lock up.

What did surprise me, as I made my rounds, was the open conspiracy of silence within the tight little sub-republic of American letters. Many liberal writers and intellectuals were reluctant to see the Kennedys portrayed objectively, as human beings, warts and all. The reason was obvious. They felt themselves part of the power and glory of the Kennedy era, and they had a vested interest in preserving the make-believe on the Potomac. For them, truth-telling would be personally inconvenient.

RICHARD J. WHALEN's most recent book is *Catch the Falling Flag: A Republican's Challenge to His Party*.

(Continued from page 4)

tingly made her condition worsen to the point where she had to be removed. On an unrecognized level, the family had resolved the problem of a burdensome handicap.

I turned to the chapter notes seeking some documentation for the passage but found nothing, not even a reference to a secondary source. I did not find quoted Joe Kennedy's earlier, fiercely loyal rejection of the idea that Rosemary had to be sent away, a remark reported in my book (from which Clinch borrows freely in other areas). "What can they do for her that her family can't do better?" demanded the elder Kennedy when Rosemary was a small child. "We will keep her at home." And so they did. But the author, described on the book jacket as the mother of two daughters, shows not the faintest trace of empathy and com-

We are now in the post-Chappaquiddick era, and the hope of a Kennedy restoration has faded among all but the most loyal adherents. Many liberals, including those who have promoted themselves to "radical" status, are now fairly panting to tell us the awful truth about the Kennedys. As inconstant as old-time Boston ward-healers after a losing election, these belated truth-tellers of the political and cultural left find it personally convenient to put as much daylight as possible between themselves and the Vietnam disaster some of them helped bring about. Much of their "revisionist" outpouring has a funny smell, though, like incense gone stale. And we must wonder whether we would be reading it if Lee Harvey Oswald and Sirhan Sirhan had not ventured from their dark corners.

Nancy Clinch's strange work belongs to the revisionist genre, but it has a special twist. Although she takes her stand with the disappointed liberals and radicals who claim the Kennedys betrayed them by failing to fulfill their soaring promises, she goes beyond the Vietnam-centered anti-Kennedy literature whose chief motive is self-exculpation. She is intent not only on destroying what remains of the Kennedy myths, which is a healthy impulse sanctioned by our tradition of debunking the puffed-up. More disturbingly, she also seems intent on destroying the humanity of her subjects, making them into pathological specimens to be picked apart under the tweezers of her cruel amateur psychologizing.

In his equivocal but approving foreword, a fellow practitioner of "psychohistory," Bruce Mazlish (*In Search of Nixon*), notes the "irony" that Nancy Clinch's professed "psychological humanism" seems to lead her to a sort of inhuman treatment of the Kennedys that

passion for what keeping Rosemary at home actually meant over the years; and without these qualities, I submit, no would-be historian can convey true understanding of the characters described.

The bulk of the book is devoted to proving that John, Robert and Edward Kennedy, throughout their personal lives and in their public careers, were—and in Teddy's case, continue to be—victims of neurotic obsessions and compulsions. The account of their derelictions, broken promises and reckless gambles, drawn from other sources, is more depressing than enlightening, for over it all hangs the cloud of inevitable doom conjured up by the author's thesis: "... the factual failures were largely the result of psychohistorical circumstances that existed for the Kennedy sons even before they were born..." These circumstances, we are told, restricted their choices and

would distress, I am sure, someone such as Erik Erikson, whom she accuses of being mechanistic." Striking the jejune note characteristic of the psychohistorians, Mazlish closes with what he surely considers a grabber: "We can no longer be innocents in Camelot." To which the rest of us may reasonably reply: Where were *you* then, Mazlish?

On the basis of her reading of the Kennedy canon, Clinch has constructed a thesis: the Kennedys as a family suffered in varying degrees from "the form of emotional illness that psychologists call a 'neurosis,'" which she defines as "a self-defeating defense pattern of feeling and behaving." The Kennedy parents, Joe and Rose, helped produce neuroses in their children through "their excessive demands for perfection and social success," with the result that

the Kennedy drive to power was largely neurotic in origin and thus largely neurotic in goal; and that when power was obtained, the Kennedys were severely limited in the use of their authority for positive aims because of emotional conflicts and ambivalences.

We know what's coming next, and Clinch does not disappoint us: we are all sick.

... the Kennedys are analyzed not only for their individual characteristics, but also, and more importantly, for their significance as factual and symbolic exemplars of emotional and social maladies that afflict an entire nation. We are all, in this sense, victims in differing ways of the 'Kennedy neurosis.'

Clinch's fundamental complaint is with nothing less than "the irrationali-

influenced their behavior at every turn in their careers as leaders. Indeed, in President Kennedy's case, other influences—the narrowness of his 1960 victory, his unsure command of the Congress, the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, Khrushchev's crude bullying and blackmail, the inherited commitment in Indochina—are filtered away and assigned lesser importance than the supposed prenatal warping.

It is an eccentric view of the way things happen and why, sprung from a misconception so basic as to overthrow the whole thesis built upon it. In one of the many definitions of the book's title scattered through its pages, Clinch writes: "Put most simply, the universally recurring human sickness that I have called the 'Kennedy neurosis' is a drive to power and dominance of others rather than a drive for equality, love and sharing." By this standard, almost every

ties of Western civilization as a whole," which she helpfully catalogues in the closing pages of her book. She gives expectedly, high priority to her particular grievances: machismo and "sexism." In an age when anything can happen, this book affords us one more bizarre spectacle: The Kennedys are collectively mugged by a militant feminist bearing the credentials of Co-Director of the Center for Women Policy Studies in Washington—whatever that is.

What offends me about this book is its ruthless simplification of the complex mysteries of human motivation and its implacable, arrogant certainty about things inherently unknowable. While the responsible journalist and scholarly historian hesitate at the threshold between provable fact and speculation, this psychohistorian rushes in. Consider, for one small example, her account of how Rosemary, the Kennedy's retarded daughter, came to be sent to an institution when she was in her early twenties.

Rosemary, having finally become unmanageable, had to be sent away to a home for retarded children. Contrary to popular belief, retarded children do not become unmanageable if accepted. . . . But a neurotic and hard-driving family would unconsciously signal rejection to a child such as Rosemary. She would sense the undercurrent of conflict in the family and that her existence was a problem. It seems impossible that this power-obsessed family of highly intelligent people could have integrated any retarded person. . . . Thus, although the Kennedys' conscious intentions for Rosemary were good, their neurotic drives unwittingly

(Continued on page 10)

political figure in almost every society might be judged a neurotic—a judgment to which Clinch presumably subscribes. But what do we understand of men, politics, power and social processes when we "know" that? Where are the exemplary models of non-neurotic behavior, the leaders who somehow attained power and dominance and subsequently dedicated themselves to "equality, love and sharing?" Who are these well-adjusted earthly saints?

Clinch has leveled what's left of Camelot—and good riddance—but has replaced it with another imaginary land inhabited by case-histories rather than human beings. No one has ever accused me of being soft on the Kennedys or what they have done to America. As I closed this book, however, I felt a twinge of shame at what one author has done to them.