

Kennedy's Stature More Than Legacy

By Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

NO ONE EVER forgot, of course, that Robert Kennedy was the brother of a President of the United States, and some accused him of running for the Presidency on his brother's coattails. Yet Robert Kennedy had not only an identity but a record of his own — an identity and a record which would have entitled him to consideration for the Presidency had none of his relatives even been elected to anything higher than city assemblymen.

This record began in a serious sense when, amid almost total skepticism on Capitol Hill and among the press, John Kennedy appointed Robert Kennedy his Attorney General. Skepticism was understandable. Robert Kennedy was hardly 35. His legal experience had been limited to service as counsel for senatorial committees, and there his role had been one of a zealous — many thought overzealous — prosecutor.

His chief fame then was as the manager of his brother's campaign. His designation as the Nation's chief law-enforcement officer seemed an act of dynastic indulgence. Why not, someone

said, make him Postmaster General, like Jim Farley?

But Robert Kennedy was a good deal more than a party manager. His brother valued his intelligence and judgment and wanted him by his side. They had thought for a moment of a deputy or assistant secretaryship — perhaps in Defense or in Latin American affairs at State — but their father had pointed out this would put the official who stood between the brother and the President in an impossible position.

So the President-elect decided to go ahead with the Attorney Generalship. He later told Ben Bradlee how he planned to announce the appointment: "I think I'll open the front door of the Georgetown house some morning about 2 a.m., look up and down the street and, if there's no one there, I'll whisper, 'It's Bobby.'"

When the moment finally came, and the brothers started out the door to face the press, he said, "Damn it, Bobby, comb your hair." We were still saying that 7½ years later.

The Racial Crisis

AS ATTORNEY General, Kennedy was plunged into the heart of the racial crisis. He came to this crisis with strong general sympathies but without

much specific background, and he learned very quickly. He learned above all of the determination of his black fellow citizens to achieve their rights. He believed in the justice of their cause and respected their courage, and his own exceptional feeling for the excluded groups, his curious sense of identification with the casualties and victims of American society, gave him the power to command the confidence of those who had no one to trust.

He called out the troops to put James Meredith into the University of Mississippi. He managed the passage of sweeping civil rights legislation. And his concern extended to the poor in general, especially through his Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, which originated many of the ideas and programs later carried forward in the war against poverty.

His relationship to his brother, moreover, meant his involvement in a far wider range of public questions than any other Attorney General in our history. He did not take part in the meetings which preceded the Bay of Pigs, but thereafter President Kennedy took no crucial decision in foreign policy without making sure that Robert Kennedy was there.

Next to the President, Robert Ken-

nedy played the most important role in the peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis. At the start, he led the opposition to the proposal that we take out the missile bases by surprise air attack and, at the end, when two messages of different import arrived from Khrushchev, he conceived the idea of ignoring the second and harsher message and responding to the more reasonable negotiating terms set forth in the first.

Nerve Center of New Frontier

BYOND ALL this, Robert Kennedy was, in effect, the nerve center of the New Frontier. Every New Frontiersman, chopping his way through the thickets of Government, tended to turn to Robert Kennedy when he encountered obstacles and frustrations. The

Attorney General had a sort of roving mandate through the Government, and he used it with discretion and imagination to reinforce liberal ideas and initiatives on matters from the release of Junius Scales to our policy in Africa, Latin America and Indonesia.

There was a tendency to feel that Robert Kennedy as a Senator was more liberal than he had been as Attorney General and to attribute this to his New York constituency. This was not so. The effect of Dallas was not to transform his convictions but to give them a new dimension and quality. His brother's murder intensified his own sense of the awful fortuity of life.

He now inclined more than ever toward that fatalism which saw human existence in terms of a tragic destiny but did not relieve man from his obligation to strive as best he could for the right. He found comfort in Aeschylus and also in Camus, and he evolved for himself a personal faith, a kind of Catholic stoicism and existentialism.

Elective politics also developed latent qualities in what had been a somewhat abstracted and diffident man. He became, for example, an excellent speaker, and he was at his best when he went among the poor and the helpless, whether in hospitals or Indian reservations, in hovels along the Mississippi delta or in the teeming ghettos of New York or Los Angeles. These years strengthened his sense of identification with the untouchables of American society. He made himself in the Senate the particular champion of those who in the past had been the constituents of no one. He was the representative of the unrepresented.

Most Promising Leader

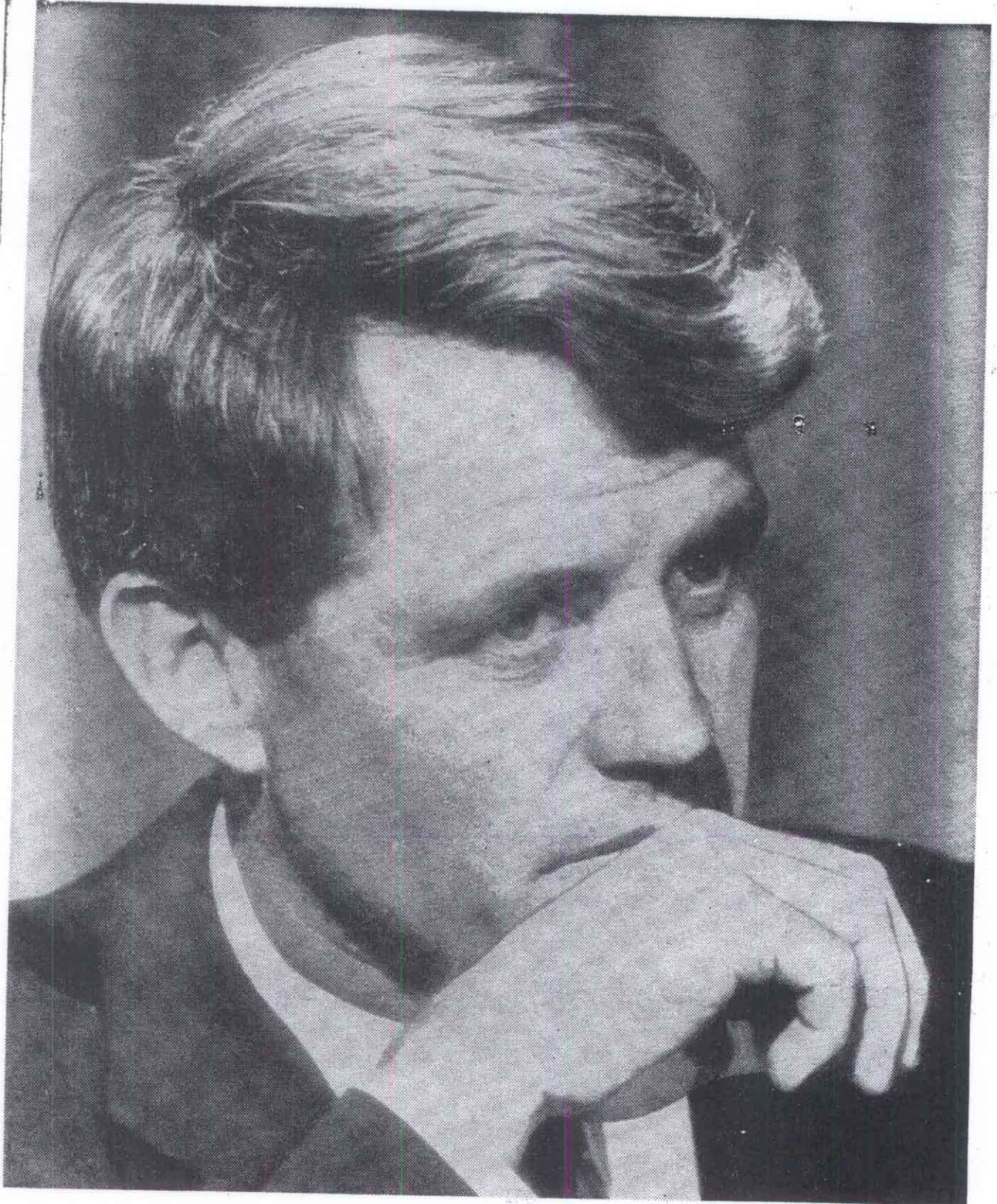
THIS MADE the fashionable complaint of 1968 that he was a divisive figure so irrelevant. No doubt he was divisive in the country clubs and the manufacturers' associations. But in the context of the great and terrible divisions of American society—affluent America vs. destitute America, white America vs. black America—he was the most unifying figure in our politics. No one else offered such a possibility of a bridge between the alienated groups and the official American community.

He continued his fight, of course, for restraint and rationality in foreign affairs, and he spoke out against military escalation in Vietnam as early as the spring of 1965—long before any other of the current presidential aspirants.

It was an intense sorrow for him that his hesitation in entering the presidential competition of 1968 lost him the support of so many among the young and in the intellectual community; these he regarded as his natural constituency. But I have no doubt that after California and South Dakota he could have been well on his way to regaining their confidence and backing.

He was a brilliant and devoted man, superbly equipped by intelligence, judgment and passion for the great tasks of national leadership. He was, indeed, better prepared for the Presidency than his brother had been in 1960. His experience had been wider, and he had been exposed to more of the terrible problems of his own coun-

See KENNEDY, B2, Col. 3



By Wally McNamee—The Washington Post

KENNEDY, From B1

try and the world. He was, I deeply believe, our Nation's most promising leader.

In his private relations, he was a man of exceptional gentleness and generosity—the best of husbands and fathers, the dearest of friends. He was, in addition, a man of the most irresistible and rueful wit. I spent Thursday, May 30, with him as he whistle-stopped through the Central Valley of California. What lingers in memory are the faces of the crowd, worn and tired faces, weathered in the sun, lighting into a kind of happy hope as he appeared on the back platform of the train and launched into that characteristic combination of banter and intensity with which he beguiled and exhorted his audiences.

He went through this all with his sense of fatality. Perhaps no one would have been less surprised than Robert Kennedy himself by the tragic conclusion of his life. He was vividly aware of the interior tensions of American society; that is why he mingled his attack on social and racial injustice with insistence on the defense of the peaceful processes of change. He loved his fellow citizens and was prepared to trust himself to them, and the quality of his love was such that it would surely have survived the depraved and terrifying act that destroyed him.

Just two months earlier, he had stood at dusk on a street corner in Indianapolis, his voice breaking with emotion, telling a black audience that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been murdered. He said, "In this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are." Black people, he said, might understandably be "filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge." We can move in that direction as a country, he said. "Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love."

That stain of bloodshed is now deeper than ever. With the murder of Robert Kennedy, following on the murder of John Kennedy and the murder of Martin Luther King, we have killed the three great embodiments of our national idealism in this generation. Each murder has brought us one stage further in the downward spiral of moral degradation and social disintegration. "What we need in the United States," Robert Kennedy said that sad spring evening in Indianapolis, "is not violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country."