

At Justice, An Unusual Balancing Act

Left and Right Converge To Honor Robert F. Kennedy

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Robert F. Kennedy may have dreamed things that never were and asked, "Why not?" But it's doubtful even Kennedy could have imagined the scene yesterday at the Justice Department.

There was a Republican president and his arch-conservative attorney general naming the Justice building after the brother of the nation's top arch-heral, and leading a standing ovation for Ethel Kennedy on her late husband's 76th birthday. Bush and Schroft grinned and applauded when a speaker said to Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, a frequent administration nemesis, "Teddy, we love you and we thank you."

And there was the Kennedy clan—more than 50 of them—leading a standing ovation for President Bush while former Democratic congressman Joe Kennedy, RFK's son, hailed Bush, scion to scion. "Mr. President, your strength since September 11th has been a profile in leadership," he said. "You deserve the thanks of all who are committed to freedom from fear."

Bush, when his turn came to speak, was equally complimentary.

"In the memory of our country, we hold a special place for Robert Francis Kennedy," he said, drawing attention to Maryland Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend as RFK's "baby girl." Robert Kennedy—his brother John's attorney general and a New York senator who was assassinated during his 1968 presidential campaign—"was not our longest-serving at-

See KENNEDYS, C4, Col. 1



PHOTOS BY RICH LIPSKI—THE WASHINGTON POST

Sen. Edward Kennedy listens as his nephew Joe (below, with the president) speaks at the Justice Department dedication honoring Robert F. Kennedy.

A Day for Justice and the Kennedys

KENNEDYS, From C1

torney general, yet none is more fondly remembered," Bush said.

Their families may be political Montagues and Capulets, but yesterday, Bush, the son of a president, grandson of a senator and brother of a governor, had nothing but praise for Bobby Kennedy, brother of a president, brother of a senator and father of other pols.

Joe Kennedy introduced himself "as one of many here trading on my last name." He recalled his father's joke about how he rose to power: "I worked hard, I was ambitious, I studied, I applied myself, and then my brother was elected president of the United States."

"We both know what that's like, Mr. President," Kennedy said, as Bush chuckled.

Bush rejoined: "There's nothing quite like the eloquence of a loyal son."

Hard-bitten politicians were awed.

"It was very different," marveled Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) as he left the event.

"It certainly was interesting," acknowledged RFK's nephew Mark Shriver, who is hoping to unseat Rep. Connie Morella, the Montgomery County Republican.

Not everybody got the be-nice memo. One RFK daughter, Kerry Kennedy Cuomo, let loose on Bush's policies at another event before yesterday's ceremony, publicly warning her young daughter: "If anyone tries to tell you this is the type of justice your grandpa would embrace, don't you believe it."

Actually, that's not so clear. For all the liberalism the family is associated with today, the Kennedys were known for being tough figures on law and order and national security. Robert Kennedy, after all, authorized FBI wiretaps on Martin Luther King Jr. and led a major crackdown on organized crime among union bosses. For all their political differences, Bushes and Kennedys both



have often sided with the power of the state over the freedom of the individual.

Indeed, Bush and his administration invoked Robert Kennedy as a backer of their current efforts against Osama bin Laden and the other Evildoers. Kennedy's example "inspires us still today in the war against terrorism," Ashcroft said. "He was unafraid to call his enemy evil and unapologetic about devoting all his resources, his energy and his passion to that evil's defeat."

Joe Kennedy said his father would endorse that view. "Like you, Mr. President, he believed that there was a fundamental difference between good and evil—and that evil had to be opposed." And Bush, completing the triple play, noted that in these trying

times, "we admire even more the spirit of Robert Kennedy, a spirit that tolerates no injustice and fears no evil."

Lawmakers such as Rep. Tim Roemer (D-Ind.) had been calling for more than four years for the Justice Department building, a 67-year-old neoclassical and art deco structure on Pennsylvania Avenue NW, to be named for RFK—but the proposal ran into resistance from Republican leaders.

Even before Sept. 11, Bush and his political strategist, Karl Rove, made sympathetic noises to Roemer about the idea. Since Sept. 11, a time when the administration has been increasing the government's police powers, the idea of a bipartisan gesture tying Bush to a law-and-order Democrat like Robert F. Kennedy became increasingly attractive. The administration last week announced it would make the change without congressional action.

Though praising RFK, Bush used words that his aides often use to describe the president: loyal, valiant, "a strong man who understood weakness . . . a man who knew privilege but also suffering."

"Robert Kennedy was not a hard man, but he was a tough man," Bush said. "He valued bluntness and precision and truth. Those under investigation learned those qualities firsthand."

Whatever the impetus, the Kennedys were grateful. "Isn't this exciting?" marveled Kathleen Kennedy Townsend as she entered the Justice Department's Great Hall with Sargent Shriver and other Kennedy icons.

And—who knows?—the gesture might pay unexpected dividends. Bush is hoping Congress can strike a deal on education legislation, and Ted Kennedy is a pivotal figure on the subject. Might yesterday's gesture earn the White House some extra help?

"Well," Bush said, "I'm not quite that devious."