

Post-11/5/68

RFK's Memoir

By all odds the most compelling political memoir to come along in years is the late Robert F. Kennedy's account of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, whose concluding excerpt appears in today's paper. It is a fascinating document. Even-handed in tone, revealing in substance, it goes much further than the journalism of the time, and seems more subtle than the published recollections of White House officials. For the first time, we learn authoritatively of Soviet duplicity and the reaction of American officials; the Joint Chiefs of Staff favored immediate military action to take out the missile sites, Congressional leaders concurred, and Adlai Stevenson supported a trade, U.S. missiles in Turkey for Russian missiles in Cuba. "Adlai wanted a Munich," was the way the story was told at the time. Robert Kennedy dictating his manuscript in the fall of 1967,

is decidedly more generous: "Although I disagreed strongly with his (Stevenson's) recommendations, I thought he was courageous to make them and I might add that they made as much sense as some others considered at that period of time."

The memoir is not normally an American art form, probably because it is essentially reflective. After Harold Ickes's diaries, Robert E. Sherwood's account of Roosevelt and Hopkins, George Kennan's remembrance of the State Department and Eastern Europe, and Richard M. Nixon's *Six Crises* (all for very different reasons), the twentieth century list grows very thin. While it might be stretching a point, on the basis of one article, to put Robert F. Kennedy in company as fast as that, it is reasonable enough to say that he has set a very high standard, certainly the highest of any official of the Kennedy-Johnson era.