

Mrs Schlesinger Robert Kennedy

"There's danger, of course," Kennedy had told me, "just using people from 1960. Politics has changed a lot in the last eight years." Nevertheless, he seemed at the start the old politics of motorcades, rally speeches and political organizations. McCarthy's strength, as Goodwin said a day or two after he rejoined us, lay in his understanding of the new politics of television and the kids: Goodwin thought that the Kennedy people greatly underrated McCarthy's seriousness and his political acuity.⁵⁴ Dutton and I shared the fear that we were getting mixed in the past. In early April I circulated a memorandum to that effect called "The Old Politics and the New." The post-1960 class felt this even more strongly. "The classical political wisdom which is shaping this campaign," Thomas Johnson soon wrote Kennedy, "is similar in all important essentials to the advice which said you should not run this year." Your decision to run "was made by you, on your own, acting against this advice. . . . You are at your strongest when you are most yourself. . . . The ultimate source of your political strength is your capacity to fire and shape the moral imagination of this country."⁵⁵

Actually, the generational clash was overplayed by the press. Dutton later thought that the prevailing disorganization caused no serious troubles in the primaries.⁵⁶ I am sure he was right. Kennedy himself arrived at a unique blend of the old and the new politics—and both, in fact, were necessary in 1968. After California he intended to reorganize the campaign and place Stephen Smith in full charge. For the time being there was too much else to do.

VII

With Johnson's withdrawal, Kennedy and McCarthy had lost their most conspicuous issues: the unpopular President and, to some degree, the increasingly unpopular war. For Johnson had also on March 31 abandoned major escalation and gestured toward negotiation. McCarthy affected to take it calmly and, for all I know, did. "Bobby has to show straight pool now," he told reporters, thereby deflecting attention to his rival. "When he was banking his shots at Lyndon it was a different game,"⁵⁷ McCarthy's jabs often hit home. One felt a certain liddown in Kennedy's thought course he was tired after his transcontinental foraging. I told him he should begin to pace his campaign. He bridled a little and said, "I know I look tired, but I'm all right. I know the limits of my strength very well. There is no more

to worry about that."⁵⁸ He had enjoyed the quest. Now, in two weeks, the dragon was slain. There was, for a moment, a loss of steam and of theme.

Yet a theme remained—the theme that, along with the war, had absorbed him most in the Senate. For, more than anyone else in American politics, he had become the tribune of the underclass, the leader determined "to show," as he said, "that the individual does count in a society where he actually appears to count less and less,"⁵⁹ determined to overcome the alienations of American society, to bind the wounds of American life. As soon as he became a candidate he had reaffirmed this theme. "We are more divided now than perhaps we have been in a hundred years," he said on March 17. The great need was "to heal the deep divisions that exist between races, between age groups and on the war."⁶⁰ Now that he and McCarthy together had moderated the Vietnam policy and driven Johnson into retirement, he was free to move ahead where McCarthy could not easily follow—toward a coalition of the poor and the national community. "I've got every establishment in America against me," he said on April 2. "I want to work for all who are not represented," he told Charles Evers. "I want to be their President."⁶¹

A crucial component of any coalition would be the United Auto Workers. When Roy Reuther died in January 1968, Kennedy was the only one outside the family to sit with the Reuthers at the funeral. Victor Reuther (whose wife was on the Kennedy delegation in the District of Columbia), Leonard Woodcock, Douglas Fraser, Jack Conway, Paul Schrade and other UAW leaders worked for Kennedy in Indiana, Michigan and California. Walter Reuther delayed his decision because of an old friendship with Humphrey, but Victor was sure he would have supported Kennedy in the end.⁶²

Another crucial figure in any coalition of the disestablished was Martin Luther King. Though Kennedy and King had kept their distance, events were bringing them closer together. In the spring of 1967 King had decided to oppose the war. In the summer the two men began collaboration, through intermediaries, on a new drive for economic and racial justice. Chatting with Marian Wright and Peter Edelmann beside the pool at Hickory Hill, Kennedy had remarked, "The only way there's going to be change is if it's more uncomfortable for the Congress not to act than it is

for them to act. . . . You've got to get a whole lot of poor people who just come to Washington and they have to act. . . . Congress gets really embarrassed and they have to act." The next week Marian Wright presented the idea to King at a Southern Christian Leadership Conference retreat. This was the origin of the Poor People's Campaign of 1968. The Kennedy office was now working closely with Marian Wright and the organizers.*

When Johnson pulled out, King said to Walter Fauntroy, head of the SCLC's Washington office, "He's just doing like a Baptist preacher . . . you know, trying to get a vote of confidence. He'll pull back in later. But this country's through with him." King, Fauntroy recalled, was "very hopeful" that Kennedy would make it. He said, "We've got to get behind Bobby now that he's in."⁷⁴ Peter Edelman, citing Marian Wright: "King was prepared to endorse him."⁷⁵ Stanley Levison, the target of the wiretaps: "He said that while he hadn't publicly decided to take any stands yet, his mind was made up. He had decided that he would support Bobby Kennedy. . . . He felt that if he'd come this far, with the greater responsibility he could become one of the outstanding presidents. . . . No question: if he had lived, he would have supported Bobby Kennedy."⁷⁶

On April 4 Kennedy began the Indiana campaign. It was scheduled in the evening to speak in the heart of the Indianapolis ghetto. Walter Sheridan and John Lewis had set up the meeting—John Lewis, the Freedom Rider, the SNCC chairman who had asked at the March on Washington which side the federal government was on but who had "started identifying" with Kennedy in later years as "the only political leader" addressing the "real issues of the United States" and who had offered his services as soon as Kennedy announced.⁷⁷ They had decided Sheridan called, to put Kennedy "not only into the black community but into the worst section of the black community."⁷⁸

* Peter Edelman, in recorded interview by L. J. Hackman, August 5, 1977, 331-333. RFPK Oral History Program; Nick Kotz, *Let Them Eat Power* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor reprint, 1971), 147, 161-165. Ten years later Andrew Young said, "I think now that Dr. King's assassination was directly related to the fear that officialdom had of his bringing large numbers of poor people to the nation's capital, demanding some response from them. . . . [at the time] I didn't see the Poor People's Campaign as the threat to Washington and the Establishment that I now see it was" (as interviewed in *Life*, Oct., *The Strides* [New York, 1977], 252, 256).

Indianapolis mayor thought it dangerous; but, said Sheridan, "we had no real fears that there was going to be any problem."⁷⁹ In the afternoon Kennedy spoke at Muncie, where one of the last questions had come from a young black wondering whether Kennedy's apparent belief in the good faith of white people toward minorities was justified. Kennedy had said he thought it was. A few moments later, as they boarded the plane for Indianapolis, Pierre Salinger telephoned that Martin Luther King had been shot in Memphis. Perhaps they had better cancel the Indianapolis rally.⁸⁰

Kennedy, on the plane, said to John J. Lindsay of *Newsweek*, "You know, it grieves me . . . that I just told that kid this and then walk out and find that some white man has just shot their spiritual leader." Soon they arrived in Indianapolis. Worse news: King was dead. Kennedy "seemed to drink back," Lindsay thought, "as though struck physically." He put his hands to his face: "Oh, God. When is this violence going to stop?"⁸¹ The chief of police warned the party not to go into the ghetto; he would not be responsible for anything that might happen.⁸² Kennedy sent Ethel on to the hotel but was determined to keep his rendezvous. In the automobile he sat wrapped in thought. As his car entered the ghetto, the police escort left him.⁸³

It was a cold, windy evening. People had been waiting at the street for an hour but were in a festive, political-rally mood. They had not heard about King. Kennedy climbed onto a fatbed truck in a parking lot under a stand of oak trees. The wind blew smoke and dust through the gleam of the spotlights.* "He was up there," said Charles Quinn, a television correspondent, "hunched in his black overcoat, his face gaunt and distressed and full of anguish" as he said, "I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight." There was a terrible gasp from the crowd.

Robert Kennedy, speaking out of the somber silence of the ride from the airport, speaking out of aching memory, speaking out of the depth of heart and hope:

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice and recently by chance driven past the scene. "The winds still stirred the same trees but the hopes both Kennedy and King stirred in those days are surely gone from the national consciousness."⁸⁴

for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort.

In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black—considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible—you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization—black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another.

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.

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: "In our sleep pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice towards those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black. . . . We've had difficult times in the past. We will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; it is not the end of disorder.

But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land.

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and to make gentle the life of this world.

Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.¹⁴

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THE LONG DAY WANES

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BACK IN THE HOTEL Kennedy called Coretta King. "I'll help in any way I can," he said. She said, "I'm planning to go to Memphis in the morning to bring back Martin's body." He said, "Let me fly you there. I'll get a plane down."¹ Southern Christian Leadership Conference officials told her this was a mistake; Robert Kennedy was running for President. Coretta King was not bothered. She remembered 1960, when Martin was in prison and John Kennedy was running for President. "Although they were political figures," she said later, ". . . they were human beings first, and their humanness reached out to the needs of other people."²

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John Lewis had scheduled a meeting between Kennedy and a group of black militants after the Indianapolis rally. They waited for him now, filled, Lewis recalled, with "hostility and bitterness." When Kennedy finally arrived, one said angrily that "establishment people" were all the same: "Our leader is dead tonight, and when we need you we can't find you." Kennedy responded: "Yes, you lost a friend, I lost a brother, I know how you feel. . . . You talk about the Establishment, I have to laugh. Big business is trying to defeat me because they think I am a friend of the Negro." They talked on. Departing, the black leaders pledged their support.³

After the meeting, Kennedy seemed overwhelmed, depressed, fatalistic. Thinking of Dallas, perhaps also of Sophocles ("Death at last, the deliverer"), he said to Jeff Greenfield that King's death was not the worst thing that ever happened. Then he said, "You know that fellow Harvey Lee Oswald, whatever his name is, set something loose in this country." The first stories after Dallas, Greenfield remembered, had so misnamed Oswald. "That's the way he remembered [the name] because obviously he

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never took another look at it again." Early in the morning restlessly roaning the hotel, he found Greenfield asleep on top of his bed and threw a blanket over him. Awakening, Greenfield said, "You aren't so ruthless after all." Kennedy said, "Don't tell anybody."⁴

That night fury raged in the ghettos of America. The next morning Kennedy kept an engagement to speak at the City Club in Cleveland. The Indianapolis remarks had been entirely his own. The Cleveland speech had contributions from Sorensen, from Walinsky, from Greenfield, all writing through the dreadful night.

Violence, Kennedy said in Cleveland, "goes on and on. . . . Why? What has violence ever accomplished? What has it ever created? No martyr's cause has ever been stilled by his assassin's bullet." Yet calmly accept newspaper reports of civilian slaughter in far off lands. We glorify killing on movie and television screens and call it entertainment. We make it easy for men of all shades of sanity to acquire whatever weapons and ammunition they desire. . . . We honor swagger and bluster and the wielders of force." And there was not only the violence of the shot in the night. Slower but just as deadly, he said, was "the violence of institutions. . . . This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men because their skin has different colors. This is a slow destruction of a child by hunger. . . . the breaking of a man's spirit by denying him the chance to stand as a father and as a man among men." So much at least was clear: "Violence breeds violence, repression brings retaliation, and only a cleaning of our whole society can remove this sickness from our soul."⁵

There were riots in 110 cities; 39 people were killed, mostly black, more than 2500 injured; more than 75,000 National Guardsmen and federal troops in the streets. He flew back to Washington, a city of smoke and flame, under curfew, patrolled by troops. He walked through the black districts, "Burning wood and broken glass were all over the place," said Walter Fauntroy. ". . . The troops were on duty. A crowd gathered behind us, following Bobby Kennedy. The troops saw us coming at a distance, and they put on gas masks and got the guns at ready, waiting for this horde of blacks coming up the street. When they saw it was Bobby Kennedy, they took off their masks and let us through. They looked awfully relieved."⁶

On April 7 Martin Luther King was buried in Atlanta.

Dignitaries crowded the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Humphrey, Nixon, Rockefeller, McCarthy—all were there, all save the President himself. Afterward there was a straggling march, five miles under the fierce sun, from the church to Morehouse College. Kennedy hung his jacket over his shoulder and walked with shirtsleeves rolled up. "It struck me," noted John Maguire, the civil rights fighter, "that of all the celebrities there, the only two people that were constantly cheered wherever they walked. . . . were Sammy Davis, junior, and Robert Kennedy."⁷ Roy Jenkins, a friend from England, noted that the Kennedy party got most of the offers of water and Coca-Cola from the black crowd along the streets. Jenkins asked where Lyndon Johnson was. Kennedy observed, without bravado, that lack of physical courage kept him away.⁸

Kennedy watched the crowds with disbelief: so few white faces among them. Jimmy Breslin said, "You'd think even a few of them would come out and just look, even for curiosity." "You'd think so," Kennedy said. "Then maybe this thing won't change anything at all?" "Oh, I don't think this will mean anything," said Kennedy. He turned to Charles Evers, walking beside him. "Do you think this will change anything?" "Nothing," Charles Evers said. "I didn't mean nothing when my brother was killed." "I know," Robert Kennedy said. "I saw Jacqueline Kennedy after she returned from the funeral. "Of course people feel guilty for a moment," she said. "But they hate feeling guilty." They can't stand it for very long. Then they turn."⁹

II

Before leaving Atlanta, hoping to restore contact at a bitter time, Kennedy held two meetings with black notables. One was with entertainers on the principle, verified in the reception accorded Sammy Davis, Jr., that they exerted great influence on the black community. The meeting was a mess. Julian Bond, a young Georgia political leader observed it with disgust. "It became a matter of each of these entertainers," he recalled later, "saying in what I thought was a very egotistical way, how much they were doing for the movement." Bill Cosby finally said, "This is a lot of shit! I'm going to leave"—and left. Kennedy said little. When they broke up, he said to Bond, "Julian, I bet you've been to a lot of meetings like this before, haven't you?"