

Good Bobby vs. Bad Bobby in a fight to the finish

TO SEEK A NEWER WORLD. By Robert F. Kennedy.
Doubleday. 224 pp. \$4.95.

By Ronald Steel

How can the confused voter reconcile the two Robert F. Kennedys, otherwise known, in Jules Feiffer's words as the Good Bobby and the Bad Bobby? The Good Bobby sympathizes with hippies, draft-card burners and peace demonstrators, speaks movingly of the poor, gets indignant over the shame of the ghettos, condemns the Vietnam war and keeps his alienation card in good order. He is the Great White Hope of all those liberals who have discovered that they didn't really intend to go all the way with LBJ.

But having inspired the crowd to mutinous thoughts, the Good Bobby shows no sign of trying to overthrow the wicked Chief. The eloquent speeches are unmatched by subversive action, and an unlikely challenger from Minnesota is monopolizing the opposition. When pressed by faithful minions to enter the fight, the junior Senator from New York declared recently: "I have told friends and supporters who are urging me to run that I would not oppose Lyndon Johnson under any foreseeable circumstances."

How can such a statement be squared with the burdened heart and the radical beliefs of the Good Bobby? How can a man so opposed to the Vietnam war and the Administration's neglect of the domestic crisis refuse to challenge the President for the Democratic party nomination? Particularly when he is the only challenger who has a chance of capturing the nomination from the man whose policies he so criticizes?

The answer, of course, is that this cautious politician who counts delegates and keeps his eye firmly fixed on the 1972 elections is really the Bad Bobby: a politi-

Ronald Steel, a former foreign service officer, is the author of The End of Alliance: America and the Future of Europe and Pax Americana.



cian bearing only a coincidental resemblance to the Good Bobby and bent upon undermining him in the eyes of his followers. The fact that they both occupy the same seat in the United States Senate, look strikingly alike and bear the same glamorous family name is a regrettable coincidence that has caused much unnecessary confusion.

Partisans of the Good Bobby will find much to admire in the Senator's latest book, *To Seek a Newer World*. A collection of essays dealing with foreign affairs and

the crisis in domestic relations, it reveals the Senator at his thoughtful best: wise, compassionately concerned, occasionally outraged and even marginally radical in his analysis of the ills afflicting our society. America, to a degree which few of us are fully willing to admit, is a nation suffering a terrible political and moral crisis. In the pages of this book, and in some of his major speeches, Robert Kennedy has confronted this crisis with rare candor and understanding. It is for this very reason that his refusal to challenge President Johnson for the nomination, understandable and practical though it may be, has distressed many of his admirers.

Tuned in to the vocabulary of alienated youth, he understands why old-fashioned liberalism has become a dirty word for young radicals. He recognizes the violence of the slum-dweller as an attempt "to assert his worth and dignity as a human being" and explains why Black Power can help instill "a sense of Negro self-reliance and solidarity . . . which has been the base on which earlier minorities achieved full integration into American life." His prescriptions for these ills tend to be less radical than his diagnoses, when he argues, for example, that "the lack of private enterprise participation is the principal cause of our failure to solve the problem of unemployment in urban poverty areas." Whether private capital can handle the gargantuan problems of rebuilding the slums and providing jobs for their inhabitants is questionable. But the Senator has made a heroic attempt in the Bedford-Stuyvesant experiment in Brooklyn, and the results achieved there will be a test of his theories.

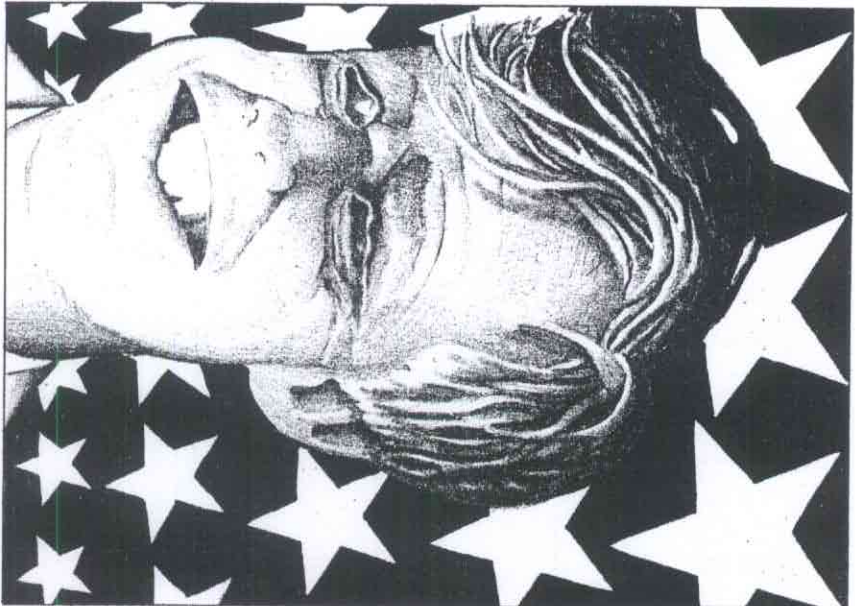
He is eloquent on the need to "eliminate the oppression and exploitation of man by man" in Latin America and reminds us that "a revolution is coming whether we will it or not." Like all good liberals, the Senator hopes that the revolution will be a peaceful one. But he is realistic enough to recognize that the Alliance for Progress—designed to prevent future Castros—has been mostly a failure. This is partly because the Latin oligarchies were never interested in any serious re-

forms, and partly because the United States, over the past few years, has shown a marked preference for stability over reform — as illustrated in Santo Domingo. He opposed the Dominican intervention at the time, on the grounds that there was no evidence of Communist control, and he urges the United States to favor reform-minded liberals over reactionary generals.

All this is very well. But what if the Latin liberals, whose record so far is not inspiring, prove incapable of achieving the modest ambitions of the Alliance for Progress — even with our support? What if the peaceful revolution should turn out to be an illusion, and we are faced with the choice between repression and revolt? What if Latin America should not be Bedford-Stuyvesant, but another Vietnam?

The one we have is already bad enough, and Senator Kennedy minces no words in declaring that “we became allied with a regime and a class that, given repeated chances to change its ways, has shown neither the will nor the capacity to meet the needs of its own people.” The recent elections, he maintains, are a pious fraud, and the “other war” for the allegiance of the people can hardly be won by a Saigon regime marked by “corruption and weakness.” Why should we continue to expend American lives defending a government that refuses reform and that “without our support would not survive a month”? Not because the other nations of Asia would fall to Communism, since he discounts the domino theory as a “vast oversimplification.” And not even because a unified Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh would represent any threat to American interests.

Having refuted all our reasons for remaining in Vietnam, he nonetheless maintains that “withdrawal is now impossible” since it would “damage our position in the world.” Last September, when this book went to press, this seemed more reasonable than it does today. “Now we have seen,” Senator Kennedy observed last month after the Vietcong attack on the cities, “that none of the population is secure and no area is under sure con-



“It now appears that “a total military victory . . . is probably beyond our grasp,” and the continual reassurances of our political and military leaders little more than “a policy founded on illusion.”

If this is the case, what does an honorable man do? Senator Kennedy warns that “we can no longer harden our terms every time Hanoi indicates it may be prepared to negotiate; and we must be willing to foresee a settlement which will give the Vietcong a chance to participate in the political life of the country.” This is

fine as far as it goes, and it is probably the only basis on which the war can be ended. But will it be achieved by this Administration, by a President that this impassioned critic says he will support for re-election?

We can sympathize with Senator Kennedy's predicament, for he probably cannot win the nomination and may succeed only in splitting the party. Yet because he is the only Democrat who has a chance of unseating the President and thereby changing the Vietnam policy he so deplors, does he not have a moral obligation to act, as well as to speak, boldly? Maybe this is a romantic argument, but it was Jesse Unruh, California party boss of the Democrats and an old friend of the Kennedys, who recently declared: “I used to dismiss the ideological liberals with the pat phrase that they thought victory at the polls meant defeat for principle . . . but now I say our actions and words must be judged by the human consequences, and the political consequences be damned.”

A political “realist,” Robert F. Kennedy is shooting for 1972. But what is “realism” in this case? Can Kennedy, whose appeal is pitched largely on moral and intellectual grounds, separate the practical from the idealistic and still retain his following? To whom will he speak four years from now? What kind of country will we be living in? If the war continues will *any* Democrat stand a chance of election? If a Republican unseats Johnson this year, who will still be around waiting for Bobby Kennedy in 1976? Will those who look to him today for leadership remember his realism, or only his refusal to act when his action might have made a difference?

The answer, alas, is not to be found in the eloquent, incisive and perceptive pages of this book. In fact, it won't be found at all until the Good Bobby and the Bad Bobby fight it out to determine whether the impassioned idealist or the cautious politician is to win the upper hand. Senator Kennedy has laid out an impressive plank for himself in these Presidential papers. The question now is whether he will dare walk on it.