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POLITICS

A THOUSAND DAYS by ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR.

Kennedy in the round

A THOUSAND DAYS by Arthur J Schlesinger, Jr/Andre Deutsch
By Sir Alec Douglas-Home

THE SHOCK and horror of President Kennedy's assassination inevitably overlaid any calm appreciation of his life and works, and even now the title of this book, *A Thousand Days*, reminds us that this young man but flashed across the human scene like some flaming meteor and was gone.

In his presentation of the man and the events Mr Schlesinger tells the tale in a way which is scholarly, compelling and authentic. He has chosen to do so in chronological order from the complex political manoeuvrings which accompany the choice of a presidential candidate to the climax and drama of the final day of violence and death. That no doubt is right; it reveals, in the account of the incidents of the "Bay of Pigs," and the meeting with Mr Khrushchev in Vienna, how Kennedy was tested and his Presidential mettle proved.

But it is in the later chapters — "In the White House," "The Tully Pulpit" and "Down Pennsylvania Avenue" — that the reader begins to feel the magic of the man and to understand the secret of his appeal to millions. As page after page unfolds his character, his sympathy with ordinary people and their preoccupation with the problems of living decent dignified lives becomes apparent.

He not only expressed their problems in vivid and often stark language, but he was able to make people feel that he would bring the prestige and authority of the Presidency and the power of the United States to their aid. The unemployed, the underprivileged, the Negro, the hungry and all those who lived under the shadow of fear, saw in Kennedy one who meant to do something about their troubles.

Mr Schlesinger certainly goes to the root of the matter when he says that "personality" was the most potent instrument of his Presidential authority. On one occasion Kennedy said: "I suppose that if you had to choose one quality to have, it would be 'vitality.'" And that is the quality which permeates these pages.

The description of his Presidential term as "instinct with action" is fully justified. But if he was impatient, he was also, as Mr Schlesinger records, a "superb" listener. I noticed on many occasions his quite unusual ability to stand back from a problem to get it in focus. The opinion of everyone round a table would be extracted by a series of staccato questions. The positions of his own advisers would be mercilessly probed. Then, equipped with all the facts and arguments, he took time to make his decision, and when it came

it was his own. It was a process which gave confidence to friends and allies.

Being of Irish extraction, he had politics in his blood; but he was not by nature partisan. His instinct told him that nearly all the decisions of a President had to be made on behalf of the nation or by reason of America's power on behalf of mankind. He treated them so, and as a result he acquired, much earlier than most, the stature of a statesman.

Mr Schlesinger selects, as Kennedy's most powerful weapon on the home front, the "vision of the truly civilised community America might become." His appeal was for "quality" in American life, and here he touched a chord.

His technique in getting his way was unusual if not unique. He sensed an underlying discontent and sense of frustration in society. So he set out to make "ideas" fashionable and in so doing to release the critical faculty of the nation. Self-criticism, as Mr Schlesinger puts it, became not only legitimate but patriotic. "Modernity" became popular. The intellectuals and the young were inspired to crusade.

Early in the story we see the combination of the realist and the radical reformer at work: in the appointment, against the advice of his closest political associates, of Lyndon Johnson, the most competent and successful of practitioners in Congress, as Vice-President.

In the controversial selection of his brother, Robert, as Attorney-General, and after the humiliating confusion of the Bay of Pigs, as his trouble-shooter, right-hand man, and candid friend.

In his personal selection of the ablest young men he could find from the universities for the White House staff—a move which was not popular with the Departments of State but which produced a situation in which Kennedy took delight, for he was not averse to stimulation by friction if that brought results. He simply would not accept from the usual official channels the traditional postures and answers.

Foreign and defence policy offer typical examples:

"Each believes that we have only two choices, appeasement or war, suicide or surrender, humiliation or holocaust, to be either red or dead."
"Against the Left he urged the indispensability of strength, against the Right the indispensability of negotiation."

He was not afraid to enlist the advocate of trial by strength, Dean Acheson, and to sit him down at the table with the patient seekers for the middle way, Adlai Stevenson and Averell Harriman; and from that clash of temperaments and views to distil a policy which was new but American.

I well remember how, convinced by Mr Harriman, he reversed "traditional" American policy in Laos, and how after months of sterile argument he cut through the official block on the road to a nuclear test ban in the atmosphere. In this he listened to Mr Harold Macmillan, was convinced, and acted. Kennedy sensed that the pure doctrine of the Soviet Communist revolution was on the decline and insisted that a modus vivendi with Russia was a prime American interest. He placed America's sympathy firmly on the side of those nations who were urgently seeking independence—although it must be confessed that when it came to British Guiana his enthusiasm was contrived. And on these policies he stamped his own mark and changed the image of his country in the eyes of the world.

The Bay of Pigs was baptism by fire. The tale of muddle and inefficiency caused by the separate Empire building of the CIA, the General Staff, and the State Department makes almost incredible reading.

It hit the young President like a hammer. The conclusion is inescapable that given more experience Kennedy would have vetoed the expedition, doomed to failure from the start.

Much interest in Mr Schlesinger's tale lies in the manner of its handling of this episode, particularly in the light of subsequent events. At one stage in the endless discussions, Mr Schlesinger records the President as asking: "What is prestige?" "Is it the shadow or the substance of power? We are going to work on the substance of power." Soon he was to face the test. He had not yet quite found his touch, or he would not have exposed himself to a meeting with Mr Khrushchev so early in his career.

I doubt if historians will deal so kindly with this episode as Mr Schlesinger does. He holds that it educated Kennedy; but if, as I suspect, it led some of the Russian leaders to underestimate the President of the United States, a heavy price

was still to be paid. Nevertheless the lessons stood him in good stead when the crunch with the Soviet Union came.

It seemed that this had arrived over Berlin. Mr Macmillan was very close to the President's thoughts throughout those anxious months. Kennedy was in a dilemma. He felt that Mr Khrushchev might interpret a reluctance by the United States to wage nuclear war as a loss of nerve. But he knew too how easy it would be to "drive the crisis beyond the point of no return." With great skill he blended a judicious and sufficient show of force and a publicly stated willingness to negotiate. Nothing he said was unnegotiable except "the dignity of free men." Khrushchev understood this language; he built the wall and that crisis turned the corner.

But for the United States the real test was yet to come, in grim and urgent form. Mr Khrushchev's decision to put nuclear missiles into Cuba represented the "supreme probe of American intentions." Kennedy immediately recognised it for what it was. He said at once: "The United States must bring this to an end," and not once thereafter did he waver. Deliberately he chose blockade rather than intervention. True to his character he had given himself and his antagonist time in which sanity could prevail. At the moment of supreme trial he understood the strength and discretions of power.

Every page of the narrative reveals Kennedy as a man of acute perception and big ideas. Neither Castro in Cuba nor the Communists in Russia were to him the fundamental problems, but the conditions which brought them into being. The result was the launching of such campaigns as "Food for Peace" and the "Peace Mission" which did so much to change the traditional picture of America in Asia and in Africa. His theme was the "dignity" of man and the "liberty" of man, and that is why he threw the Federal power on the side of Civil Rights for American Negroes and made this the first of his domestic tasks. That is why he gave the moral and economic support in full scale to those countries who had gained their independence. His sympathy was universal.

This book is "instant history," and inevitably subject to the charge that the critical faculty is clouded by emotion. Mr Schlesinger is only human and would doubtless plead guilty. But from all I knew of Kennedy the portrait is true of the President, the public servant, the husband supported at all times by his talented wife, the friend—serious and grave, witty and gay. Inevitably the reader will be haunted by the might-have-beens, but on any reckoning, Kennedy's was a life of rare quality and achievement.

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