Kennedy, without tears

By Henry Fairlie

WITH KENNEDY. By Pierre Salinger. Doubleday. 391 pp. $5.95.

"They were both monarchs," it has been said of Ferdinand and Isabella, "who knew how to be served": it can be said as well of President Kennedy. From the various volumes of reminiscence which have so far been delivered to the best-seller lists, the fact that he "knew how to be served" stands out as one of his most positive political gifts, and one which any successor—even a brother—may reasonably envy.

Ferdinand and Isabella, as they traveled round Spain, used to carry little notebooks, in which they jotted down the names of men who might, one day, prove useful in their service. From the moment he mounted the operation to become President, Kennedy was as alert; and he seized Pierre Salinger to be his press secretary much as Ferdinand and Isabella might have seized a tubby, career-hungry monk in Seville.

Salinger's recollections of his years with Kennedy make interesting chit-chat—fun summer reading—but they are not necessarily to be despised for that. He has written a jolly roly-poly of a book, and this is at least a relief from the solemn consecration of Kennedy to which other gatherers of memorabilia have strangely bent their talents and their energies since his assassination. Salinger is not overwhelmed by his subject. In fact, there are long stretches of the book in which one wonders whether Kennedy or Salinger is the hero. (Salinger, I think, wins in the end.) But even this is an advantage.

Kennedy is not imposed on us. The anecdotes are told as anecdotes, and not as Awful Peeps at a Man of Destiny. His humor is allowed to be his humor, without painful reassurances that this was another example of his "special grace." There is nothing strikingly new in Salinger's observation of this exceptionally equipped human being, but he achieves a kind of perspective, almost by default.

The description of Kennedy during the Bay of Pigs is an example. Previous accounts have drawn—overdrawn—a picture of the anguish of a politician at such a fiasco. The anguish is there in Salinger's account, but so is a far more convincing and far more reassuring picture of Kennedy as a man who was simply hopping mad. He was hopping mad with the press—"Castro doesn't need agents here. All he has to do is read our papers." He was hopping mad at the CIA and the Pentagon—"How can that crowd be this wrong?" He was hopping mad with himself—"We really blew this one."

This seems to me a far more persuasive picture of Kennedy at a moment of sore trial than the others we have been given. It reminds me of St. Theresa of Avila, when God told her that some particularly nasty torment had been sent to try her. "Have care, O Lord," she replied sharply, "that you do not try your servant too far." The anguish of saints and Presidents is usually exaggerated. (They have often, anyhow, sought sainthood or the Presidency.) Salinger's unexaggerated account, however slight, is therefore worth having.

But Salinger has two stories of his own to tell. The first—and more diverting—is of his strange exploits as a secret diplomatic courier between Khrushchev and Kennedy, and of the personal visit which he paid to Khrushchev in 1962. He recounts these in a rollicking manner and, although they were perhaps less important than he would have us believe, they prompt one or two reflections.

They are a surprising illustration of the euphoria which was encouraged during Khrushchev's tenure of power. I have suggested before that Kennedy and Khrushchev, to say nothing of John XXIII, were all men of a season, and fortunate to be so; and that the season, in spite of Laos and Berlin and Cuba, was one of limited but hopeful detente, for which the world had been pining, and which they came to personify.

Salinger's account of his uproarious diplomatic activities leaves one with a grim sense of this euphoria: of the contrast between the warmth of the personal relations and the relentless facts which, in spite of them, still guided each country's conduct. The fantasy of it all is summarized in two remarks which Khrushchev addressed to Salinger. "I thank your President," he said more than once, "for having my daughter to lunch in the White House. No other American President has had the courage." But, then, a few moments later: "I personally ordered the construction of the [Berlin] wall. A state is a state, and must control its boundaries."

Khrushchev's daughter is—where? But the Berlin wall is still there. On three vital issues, Kennedy checked the Russians, at the same time asserting Amer-

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Henry Fairlie, an English journalist, writes frequently on American politics.

Khrushchev's dacha

ica's national interest in three continents. It is, however, the euphoria of the period which clings. People yearn to be warmed again by the public faces of a Kennedy and a Khrushchev. They forget how tough the going was, and how each of them steeled himself against the other. Salinger's exuberant account of his extramural diplomatic activities, of his meetings with Soviet agents at street corners and in the bar of the Hay-Adams, leaves one with little alternative but to conclude that the world is governed by madmen. If messages from the two most powerful men in the world were in fact passed as Salinger says, I am the more confirmed in my belief that power is not available to rational examination.

Salinger's second story, which runs through most of his book, is one which he should be able to tell better than most: his account of his own and the President's relations with the press. There were three crises in these relations: during the Bay of Pigs, during the missile crisis, and intermittently in everything that concerned Viet Nam. Salinger properly concludes that the conflict between government and a free press was, and is, inevitable. The struggle between government and a free press is an old one, but it is worth noticing some of Kennedy's own remarks when he found himself in conflict with newspapermen. The Cold War, he said, is a continuing national emergency, implying that the press therefore has a continuing responsibility for national security. Newspapers, he said, have to understand that "we're never more than a miscalculation from war."

"This town is a sieve," he exclaimed during the missile crisis, when it became clear that vital information had been leaked. America's involvement in Cold War and undeclared war has only just begun: she is likely to be in a state of "continuing national emergency" for most of the next 100 years. If the freedom of the press is not to be one of the first casualties, thought will be needed on both sides.

Kennedy clashed with the press at moments of extreme crisis, but there was not a running battle between him and the newspapers (except, significantly, as the situation in Viet Nam began to deteriorate). To the day-by-day relations between the White House and the press, Kennedy made two personal contributions: accessibility and credibility. He never withdrew the first, he never dissipated the second. Moreover, of course, his example informed the behavior of his Administration. There are persons in the highest stations today who might profit from it. Salinger's book may be light reading. It is not without its lessons.

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