

## BOOKS AND THE ARTS

### *Kennedy: The Blurred Photograph*

by Emmet John Hughes

The way of the political memoirist, as Mr. Theodore C. Sorensen and Prof. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., are currently learning, can be a thorny path. For any responsible now-it-can-be-told exercise must begin with responsive answers to the snarled questions: *When* is "now"? *What* is "it"? *How* is it "told"? The memoirist must shape his responses from many values and tests: taste and

*Kennedy*  
by Theodore C. Sorensen  
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timing, fairness and compassion, pertinence and precision, sober scholarship and simple humanity. Even the most faithful weighing of all such concerns, as this season's memoirists now know, promises no saving shield against all critics: A small but strident chorus can be counted upon to excoriate decisions they have never examined. These voices do not matter. All that matters is the inner voice of the memoirist, declaring his dedication to the two purposes that alone dignify his labor: to enrich a little the pure sources of history, and to enlarge a little the intellectual resources of a democracy.

I speak with some conviction on the problem, for I am not unfamiliar with it. Three years ago, the publication of my memories and opinions of an earlier Presidency (*The Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years*) excited the kind of discussion that all publishers' press agents hail as a controversy. I found the term inflated for so unequal a debate: a large number of historical scholars generous and unanimous in appreciation, disputed merely by a small number of journalistic critics who could hardly applaud a contradiction of their own published appraisals of Eisenhower through the years. From Washington, too, there came a few reactions of interest. On

Capitol Hill, Sen. Hubert Humphrey could voice, publicly and privately, his unqualified pleasure. At the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, I learned, without surprise, the more complex response of President John Kennedy: He had read the book with relish — only to reflect with a frown upon the number of aides around him so certain, one day, to take up *their* pens.

I found less interesting, however, the cries of some critics — some serious, some splenetic — challenging all such political memoirs as defiant of principle and propriety. I confess to feeling that even the most conscientious objectors were a bit confused in their logic. I found the facile analogy between the confidential relationship of lawyer-to-client and the official relationship of President-to-aide essentially ridiculous: A lawyer's revelations about a client could claim no relevance whatsoever to *either* the historical or the democratic imperatives that *alone* summon a serious memoirist to write. I found the critic piously discovering only senseless gossip in *any* memoir, written at *any* date, hopelessly snared by his own unreason: In the past, he would have had to purge all archives of the reminiscences of a Hopkins or an Ickes or a Perkins, not to mention an aide to Washington or an advisor to Jefferson; and for the future, he would thus condemn the historian to work *only* with the most despised materials — cheap gossip and remote rumor. I felt that the critic enjoining all memoirs until the death of all principals offered an argument at once decently meant and slackly reasoned: Since dead men are notoriously incapable of denying anything said about them, such delay by the memoirist would be more safe but surely not more just. And out of the swirl of all such axioms and assertions, I remained — and remain — convinced of a few essential propositions. One: A po-

litical memoir must be deferred until all men concerned have left office, lest their private words be cruelly used to trouble their public roles. Two: Quite properly, such a memoir thereafter should be published with all reasonable speed — for the sake of the public — since a democratic people, particularly in this revolutionary time, should not be asked to wait for 10,000 tomorrows to learn more exactly where they were yesterday. Three: Along with constant concern for taste and fairness and accuracy, such a memoir must deal only with matters clearly and properly of public concern and national meaning.

I summon these thoughts from the past only for their obvious pertinence to the present. An ugly chorus of sneers about all memoirs on JFK already has grown loud. It would be a pity — and a discredit to public intelligence — if this din were allowed to hurt the authors, demean their works, or deny them a fair reading. It requires an immeasurably vicious kind of vulgarity, moreover, to insinuate — as a few have done — that men like Sorensen and Schlesinger are selling their confidences for a pot of dollars. They are serious and gifted and responsible men, officials, and authors — quite regardless of whether one disagrees with many of their printed words (as, alas, I do). And I think it fair to ask that any impassioned decrier of their works pause long enough to ask himself: While it is the right of the critic to judge by any pertinent standards the quality of what he reads, does this literary franchise include the moral authority to proclaim, one way or another, whether what he is reading should ever have been written?

All this said, I should add, for clarity's sake, that I have exhausted any similarities between Mr. Sorensen's and my White House experience and consequent memoirs. Mr. Sorensen was hired by Senator Kennedy in January of 1953, as the Eisenhower Years began; he probably remained the Senator's closest counsellor for ten years; he was an ardent member of the same political

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party; and he was a central figure in a Democratic Administration exciting his full enthusiasm. My role in the Eisenhower Administration had been wholly different, far less full, and far more independent: a volunteer in the 1952 campaign, a White House Administrative Assistant for less than one year working to help a President whose political party was not mine, and – again – a volunteer to serve in the 1956 campaign and on special *ad hoc* assignments. On many issues, the differences between this President's views and mine were always present, and our final dissent probably inevitable. As a result, any truthful memoir of mine about this Republican regime and its officials inevitably entailed (as Mr. Sorensen notes) a measure of "quoting their private conversations against them." Candidly, he states from the outset that his recital, far from being critical, is "not even a neutral account": It is written by "an impassioned participant," in a spirit of "deep pride and conviction." His sovereign conviction – charting the whole thrust of his book – is the falsity of the "most regrettable" popular notion that the Presidency of John Kennedy may be memorable more for "style" than "substance." And to prove this substance – "the strength of his ideas and ideals, his courage and judgment" – Mr. Sorensen submits his voluminous testimony.

It is a work of sustained dignity, honest devotion and prodigious research. It is also, however, a work of baffling paradoxes. The most eloquent Presidential speech-writer of our time, with his massive testimonial to one of the most articulate leaders of our time, has fashioned one of the less eloquent political eulogies of our time. A student of US national politics who had never been outside the US when he joined the Kennedy staff in 1953, he has written accounts of American political campaigning that are mostly quite tedious – and analyses of international crises that are mostly quite brilliant. And oddest of all: a man self-described as "more closely associated with Mr. Kennedy than anyone outside the immediate family" has written his Presidential portrait with the insight and the verve of a casual acquaintance.

The record contains some striking and

exciting passages of real worth. The 50-page account of the Cuban missile crisis is a crisp and skillful tale of anxious probing for Soviet intents, and agonized weighing of American alternatives, worth the patient study of any student of foreign affairs. There are almost equally sharp, brief accounts of both the test-ban negotiations and the Berlin crisis, a little marred by a tone so tense and urgent as to imply that Berlin had never before known such menace. There is an acute and illuminating analysis of the make-up of JFK's Cabinet. And the epilogue that takes us, quickly and gracefully, past the ghastly tragedy in Dallas is written with admirably restrained eloquence. It would be hard to surpass both the dignity and the irony, for example, of the two simple statements: "Just before he boarded his helicopter on the South Lawn – November 21, 1963, 10:45 a.m. – I ran out with some suggestions he had requested for 'Texas humor'. I never saw him again."

There are scattered glints through the pages, too, of bright reflections of JFK's manner and mood and wit. Shrewdly shying from military involvement in Laos, the President cites his own rude education: "Thank God the Bay of Pigs happened when it did. Otherwise we'd be in Laos now – and that would be a hundred times worse." Exultant and fresh from his personal triumph in Berlin, he says that he plans leaving a note to his successor "to be opened at a time of some discouragement," with a mere three-word suggestion for solace: "Go to Germany." And always the humor must bubble forth. . . . To an aide insisting that an immediate decision was the biggest JFK would ever face: "We get one of those every week." . . . As he viewed the wreckage after the Bay of Pigs: "Why couldn't this have happened to James Bond?" . . . After *L'Osservatore Romano* jarred his 1960 campaign with an editorial proclaiming the Church's right to tell the faithful how to vote: "Now I understand why Henry VIII set up his own Church."

All this is good and welcome. I wish there were a great deal more in this vein to report, but there is not. Instead, there arise problems and disappointments of many kinds. And these involve the quality of writing, the weight

of the substance, the soundness of the history, the clarity of judgments, and—above all—the portrait of JFK.

Perhaps least serious but surely most surprising, is the fact that Mr. Sorensen's first book is written in an undistinguished style—never exuberant and often banal. It would be hard to sketch, for example, a less vivid picture of a man just elected President of the United States than this vignette of JFK: "He was jubilant about his victory. At the same time he was deeply touched by it. Above all, he was tired, terribly tired." Or at the almost breathless moment of triumph in the Cuban missile crisis, we join the NSC's Executive Committee merely to learn: "The Soviet ships nearest Cuba had apparently stopped or altered their course. A feeling of relief went around the table." In the corridors of the State Department, we meet Chester Bowles, and we wish some editor could have spared our introduction to him as a man rather too fond of "expediting short-gap expedients." In the recesses of the White House, we are assured of the President's calm and fair view of civil rights: "To him, Negroes were no different from anyone else." And after we have followed JFK through more than 300 pages of congressional, senatorial and Presidential campaigns, nominations, primaries and elections, we hear: "John Kennedy liked politics. He liked talking about it, participating in it, speculating about it." The report is so stunningly superfluous as to be downright arresting.

And such difficulties of style inevitably are related to problems of both substance and structure. The report of Kennedy's 1961 dialogue with Khrushchev in Vienna, for example, finally makes the reader blink. A serene judgment concludes that "neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev emerged victorious or defeated, cheerful or shaken." Yet only four pages later an alarming lament warns that "the harsh atmosphere of Vienna" had been such that "both men had felt that all appeals had been exhausted and that a showdown was next." One would think and hope that so great a despair might have "shaken" at least one of the two men—just a bit.

This but suggests a larger trouble. In pursuit of the proof of the "substance" of the Kennedy Presidency, Mr. Sorensen's

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sen is a tireless researcher of a remarkable range of subjects. But as encyclopedic detail piles ever higher, the people—their motives and qualities—get buried beyond sight. Somewhere along the way, we are briskly introduced to Sargent Shriver: He is an “energetic, idealistic brother-in-law.” An important and intelligent pollster, Louis Harris, also rates two adjectives: “ambitious but idealistic.” An Adam Clayton Powell appears and vanishes with the same speed: “flamboyant but effective.” As for Mrs. John Kennedy, she commands a description much more tender but no more enlightening. We meet her as a woman who is “exquisitely beautiful, highly intelligent, and irresistibly charming.” Glad to concur, we become a little confused when told that her search for “quieter ways” than campaigning to “assist” her husband inspired her to the enterprise of “translating French works on Indochina.” And the most respectful reader may be forgiven a quizzical look when he learns that, on her journey with JFK to Latin America, she let herself be kissed

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on a visit to an orphan home—thereby exciting the “astonishment” of nothing less than “the entire continent.”

A little careless hyperbole may not be too remarkable, but a carelessness toward history—and the standards of historians—seems harder to explain. Throughout the book, Mr. Sorensen indulges almost a passion for hiding the source, concealing the occasion, and obscuring the context of the quoted remark—including the words of JFK. Again and again, we see the sudden signal of quotation marks, or marginal indentations, to herald the words of the President; but again and again we cannot tell whether the quotation is written or oral, whispered to an aide or shouted to a rally. And the undated comments with unknown intents to unidentified audiences fill these pages. In one instance, we see quotation marks bracketing what we are told JFK said—“in effect.” In another instance we hear a rather pretentious remark from a leading Democratic governor—simply because he “was quoted as saying” it.

If all the veiled sources tantalize the historian, the oddly fragmented allusions to many events will torment him. Cryptically, we are told that the President met secretly in Mr. Sorensen’s office with “anti-Catholic pamphleteer Paul Blanshard”; but the news is less than stimulating when we are denied any clue to the meeting’s tenor, content, or result. Parenthetically, we learn that JFK went to his brilliant rendezvous with Baptist ministers in Houston, early in the 1960 campaign, “with considerable reluctance”; but we are granted no hint to suggest either the reason for his reluctance or the circumstances of his acquiescence. Inexplicably, the Bay of Pigs tragedy is unfolded with no mention whatsoever of any role played in US councils by Adlai Stevenson; but we are assured, a few pages later, that published accounts of his role, soon after the fiasco, were “erroneous.”

Along with this want of precision, the weight of partisanship conspires to becloud a number of meaningful issues. Three examples suffice. First: The amiable rapport between the Kennedy family and Sen. Joseph McCarthy is suggested with pain but appraised without candor. While Mr. Sorensen insists on

the “solid significance” of Representative Kennedy’s thin victory over Henry Cabot Lodge in the 1952 Senate race, the remarkable and decisive refusal of Senator McCarthy even to enter Massachusetts, where his zealous following meant so much to Lodge, passes without notice. There is assurance from Mr. Sorensen that, in succeeding years, the young Senator would have been “more outspoken” about the Wisconsin Senator if he had not “felt inhibited by his family’s friendship.” But this idly mentioned “friendship” is never fully defined or judged. Second: The relationship of both John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy to the civil rights movement is set forth with more ardor than accuracy. There may have been a “whirlwind of activity” on this front, blowing through the corridors of the Department of Justice in 1961; but the year nonetheless left both civil rights leaders and members of the Civil Rights Commission privately charging both President and Attorney General with icy indifference. Third: The summary of the personal rapport between JFK and LBJ could hardly be more emphatic or more perplexing. In Mr. Sorensen’s words: “The President and the Vice President, to the astonishment of many and somewhat to the surprise of them both, got along famously.” And this verdict invites the astonishment of all citizens, famous or not, who knew either man.

All this provokes the most unwanted and unexpected question: How perceptively and profoundly did Mr. Sorensen know Mr. Kennedy? Such speculation would be impudent and audacious—were it not for fragments of Mr. Sorensen’s own testimony. We read: “Not once in eleven years—despite all our discussions of church-state affairs—did he ever disclose his personal views on man’s relation to God.” We read: After six years of political intimacy and arduous campaigning, when JFK confessed (in October of 1959) that “I think now I can make it,” the admission jarred the author as “a surprising statement to me, since I had never thought he thought otherwise.” We read: On the tense eve of the Los Angeles convention, Mr. Sorensen drafted the adroit retort to former President Truman’s challenge on JFK’s youth, cit-

ing the immaturity of a Washington or a Columbus in past centuries—only to require JFK to delete the name of Jesus Christ as an unfortunately incomparable example. Finally, we read this honest sentence about the two men's White House years together: "He and I continued to be close in a peculiarly impersonal way."

There is no reason to glance so perplexedly at so serious a personal relationship except to seek a true answer to the final riddle of this book. There are a couple of other considerations, at least partially pertinent. The author has had no experience as a journalist. He has had no training as a historian. And perhaps (I do not know) all these facts suggest an answer to the question: Why does this portrait of so strong and vivid a President emerge so thin and frail?

For the final result is painted not in bold oils but in baffling water colors. We read repeatedly about John Kennedy's "growth" over the 1953-63 decade—only to find it attested by such trivial evidence as his quickened respect for traffic laws. We learn that the diligent young Senator "became less absent-minded"—only to wonder when he was *more* absent-minded. We hear that "Jack Kennedy loved Boston and Boston loved Jack Kennedy"—only to be advised promptly that he rarely lived in the city, never owned a house there, and scarcely visited but for campaigns. We are assured of his preoccupation with family concerns even as President—only to be shown as proof his "even taking time out in the White House, for example, to talk with . . . Peter Lawford about his acting career."

And the sweeping judgments of him—both at the start and the end of his Presidency—confound no less. As he sought and chose a Cabinet of men with qualities that "largely mirrored his own," we note carefully these virtues: "an outlook more practical than theoretical and more logical than ideological; an ability to be precise and concise; a willingness to learn, to do, to dare, to change; and an ability to work hard and long, creatively, imaginatively, successfully." I sadly confess that I can find no word in this description that would not naturally fit an advertisement from a Madison Avenue agen-

cy urgently seeking a new account executive . . . And when the life of this lusty, laughing leader has come to its savage end, the final tribute reads: "His Inaugural, his wife, his children, his policies, his conduct of crises all reflected his pursuit of excellence." I must believe that John Kennedy could read such a tribute—mingling his oratory and his progeny, his relation to his wife and his relation to Moscow—only with a resigned sigh.

I truly wish that a book of such good and grave intent could be warmly acclaimed rather than coldly dissected. I remain unsure about the essential flaw. But I suspect an important clue may lie in a curious photograph.

The profile of John Kennedy facing the title page is described by the publisher as the author's "favorite picture" of the late President. It is a photograph taken from a live television transmission during his visit to Dublin in June of 1963. Like most such pictures, its grainy texture gives it a rugged quality. The result is strong and striking, not precise and alive. It suggests more the idea of a man than the face of a man. It seems more a thing of granite than flesh. It is imposing. But it is blurred.

And so seems the written portrait. The unhappy cause of this, oddly, might well be the lofty purpose: to prove, as a lawyer or an archivist might strive, that the abiding story of John Kennedy was not a tale of "style" but of "substance." For the scrutiny of this portrait makes one wonder whether such a premise is true or such a distinction important.

The man—simply as a man—may have towered above the heap of practical achievements or legislative victories amassed in a meager two years. This would not mark him as less a man, more a midget, or a bit of a charlatan. A Senator is not measured by the number of bills he proposes, a jurist by the number of cases he decides, or a diplomat by the number of treaties he signs. And a President who lives and strives long enough surely can turn the course of history as much by what he *is* as what he *does*. There were no moments in the Kennedy Presidency more shining or stirring than his triumphal visit to Western Europe. There was, how-

ever, no "substance" to it: no compacts sealed, no foes routed. But there shone through it all the most splendid *style*: the force and presence and voice of a man blessed with a gift to command new trust, provoke new thought, and inspire new venture on the part of many men—including himself.

*Merely* a man of such rousing *style*? I doubt that he would have found such an appreciation either insufficient or diminishing. He was not a man to care any more about computers than about conformism. He had a joy in being a Senator—without believing it need be proven by his attendance at roll-calls. He admired the Spanish sense of courage as "grace under pressure"—without imagining that any instrument could measure either. And he rejoiced in being President—without conceiving that this required his being anything but himself.

It could be a baseless fancy, but I have a favorite passage from Thoreau that I have always thought slightly caught his spirit and told of his temper. He may not have lived much in Boston, but I think he would have nodded assent to the sage of nearby Concord, and the instruction: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

This is the way that I think of his stride through history.

And this may be why it seems so hard to snap his picture, pace off his steps, or record the song he heard.

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