

Marya Mannes on
New York in crisis

Leon Edel on
genteel Boston

Michael Harrington
on Lindsay's future

OCTOBER 3, 1963

The
Washington
Post

BOOK WEEK

ON CHRONICLES AND PARTISANS

"Here we write well when we expose frauds and hypocrites. We are great at counting warts and blemishes... In expressing love we belong among the underdeveloped countries."

By Saul Bellow

Public interest in politics has greatly increased. To what is this due? In the Mencken era no politician was worth a damn. Washington was monumental, gloomy and cavernous. I recall that Mencken, describing the President's dull day, ends one of his chilling paragraphs by noting two events—the Presidential car hits a dog in the street, and the rain begins to fall. It delighted Mencken peculiarly to exaggerate the futility of Presidents, but his point of view was also that of an enlightened, illusionless newspaperman of the Twenties.

We see matters differently now. We have had the Depression to enlighten us a bit more, and after that the War, the Bomb and the responsibilities of world power to sober us even further. Today, instead of The Literary Digest and Mencken in the Baltimore Sun, there are the mass media offering more and more detailed information to the public about a government of vastly increased powers. And we now have a large and increasing group or comfortable and privileged (Continued on page 3)

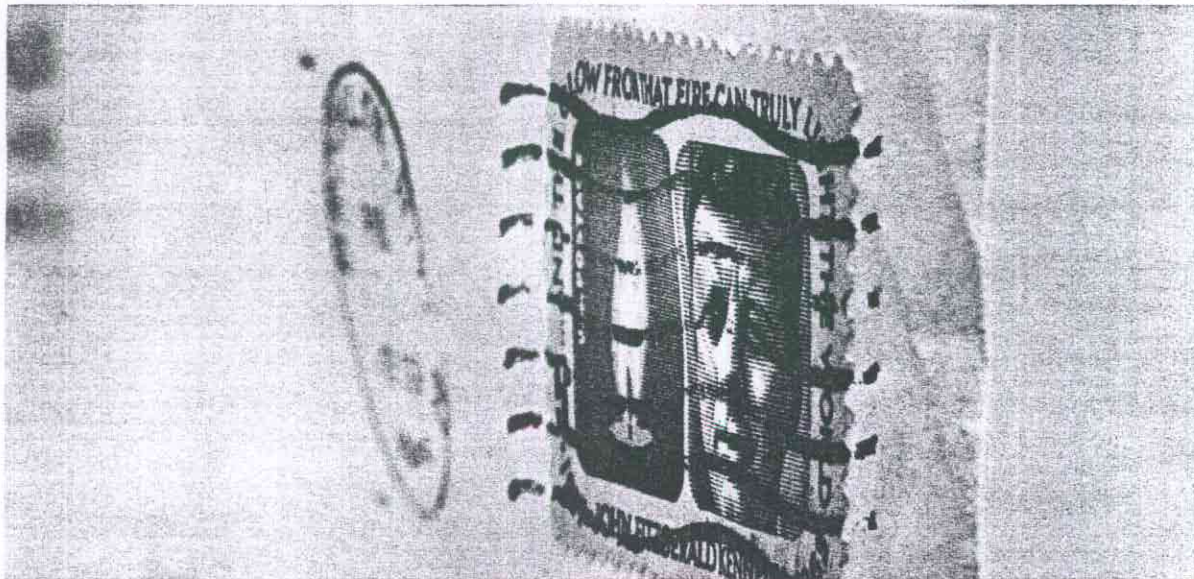
"... Mr. Sorensen's meticulous journal plots with aching credibility... the pathos of Kennedy's leadership, which has nothing to do with the obscenity of his end in Dallas..."

By Alistair Cooke

KENNEDY. By Theodore Sorensen. Harper & Row. 783 pp. \$10.

"Lincoln was a sad man because he couldn't get it all at once. And nobody can." This sounds more like Kennedy than anybody but was, in fact, his favorite quotation (from Franklin Roosevelt) about the central frustration of the Presidency.

His upbringing must have made it all the more taunting to him. For Kennedy and his brothers and sisters had been taught by their father that to come in second was not good enough for a Kennedy, and if Richard Whalen's *The Founding Father* is anything to go on, the separate ambitions of the children were recruited early in life into a community drive to prove to the world, almost as an American axiom, that Kennedys come in first. To anyone who is unsympathetic to the Norman Vincent Peale-Hold 'Em Yale view of America, this is a pretty awful way to bring up a family, or even to pass the time. But it was one of the most attractive and odd things about John Kennedy that he preserved, through (Continued on page 2)



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Cooke on Kennedy

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all the beating tom-toms of his father's success campaign, a fundamentally ironic view of life and a skeptical view of success. (I like his snorting comment on Ambassador Alphand's suggestion that if De Gaulle came to the United States, Palm Beach might be the proper place to receive him: "I'll be damned if I'll show De Gaulle the worse side of American life. Cape Cod is where I'm really from.")

It is possible that stoicism was forced on him by his chronic poor health. He was four times on what his family assumed was his death bed. Back pain, among other kinds, was more or less constant from his teens on, but the only time he ever mentioned it was to say that its intensity "depends on the weather—political and otherwise." As for coming in first in a race with Khrushchev, it was Kennedy who always reminded his audience that it might be done at the price of "150 million fatalities in the first 18 hours . . . or 500 World War II's in less than a day."

Not the least appealing of his off-hand bits of philosophy, and one that produced an untypically thoughtful silence in his audience, was an ad lib meditation at a press conference in answer to a question implying that Reservists had a specially cruel life: "There is always inequity in life. Some men are killed in a war, and some men are wounded, and some men never leave the country . . . it's very hard in military or in personal life to assure complete equality. Life is unfair. Some people are sick and others are well."

This is a difficult trait to pin down, and it may not be a single quality at all but a balance of opposing attitudes, held always in suspension, which produces a special kind of wariness. It struck me early on as the most mature thing about him. He would never, like Roosevelt, have been sold on silver by one professor in one evening, and then have had to be practically locked in his bedroom by the Brain Trust to keep him from going off the gold standard next morning.

Idea interested Kennedy more than they excited him. It is a fine form of restraint for a leader on our planet. At any rate, it was a blessing to the country in the most pressing and historic test of Kennedy's Presidency: the Cuban missile crisis. From Mr. Sorensen's account, which in clarity and disinterestedness is superior to any we have had, and which maintains the quiet sort of terror that comes from an unfussy mastery of detail, it now appears that there were not two or three alternatives but at least seven to the action Kennedy finally took. They all had something plausible or tempting about them. And to steer through their powerful appeals and choose a course that challenged the Russian bluff to the limit and yet left the bluffer with a dignified retreat, this was an ordeal that required courage and patience—the peculiar form of stamina or wariness I have been trying to define—of the highest order. It also revealed a mind resolved to act by intelligence purely, and not by a surrender to such passing moods as audacity, patriotism, the stiff upper lip, or to the more dangerous itch to lick 'em while the going's good.

The going has not been good since Sputnik. And Mr. Sorensen's meticulous journal plots with aching credibility (though he may not have thought this was what he was doing) the pathos of Kennedy's leadership, which has nothing to do with the obscurity of his end in Dallas but with the historical fact that he was a brave and cagey man whose instinct was to be the bold leader of the West but whose intelligence told him that in a nuclear world the cost of bold leadership

comes too high. Loving politics and, as he once said, "being where the action is," he discovered before most of his colleagues, and practically all the opposition, that leadership in the modern world is far more com-



plicated than our Hollywood view of politics concedes, that prudence today is the better part of valor, even though we go on conducting our Presidential campaigns on the traditional promise that right after Election Day we shall restore full employment at home and abroad, restage the Charge of the Light Brigade—in Russia, Indonesia, Viet Nam, any place you say. The missile record should puncture the cocksureness of people who "knew all along" that nothing would come of the Soviet's brazenness. Kennedy did not know, nor the United States and Allied commanders, at every base and station around the world, who could gauge the full apocalyptic meaning of the sentence: "Everything was in combat readiness on both sides."

His failure with Congress, which—in spite of the latter-day theory that all L. B. J.'s legislation was planned by Kennedy—was profound, was due, I think, to a temperament that was more judicial than creative. This book teems with wonderfully dry and civilized comments on the complexity of the international scene and its actors. His remarks to Sorensen on Macmillan, De Gaulle, Adenauer, Nehru and the rest are witty and often just; but they don't push forward an alliance, or establish the Common Market or anticipate a mid-century role for Britain.

Mr. Sorensen's two chapters on the Cuban missile crisis are, partly through their publicity in magazine excerpts and partly through their innate fascination, already the most celebrated, and will be the most cherished, part of his book. So much so that it may be hard to get people to read the other 700-odd pages of the text, which contain among scores of other goodies a moving account of the Berlin visit, a frank confession of the really complete failure of the multi-lateral force, the most thorough and persuasive report on the fight with U. S. Steel (though it may not persuade Mr. Roger Blough), and a blow-by-blow description of the Kennedy-Macmillan exchange on the Skybolt fiasco which, if it proves nothing else, proves how inevitably uninformed is the perambulating press.

The missile chapters, too, expose by contrast the slop that has been written about the "splendid misery" and the loneliness of the White House. It usually calls up a poignant picture of Jefferson brooding in his carpet slippers or a comic one of Coolidge looking forlorn in a row boat, all alone except for an AP photographer. But the nights of the last week in October, 1962, must have been an appalling vigil of self-questioning. Hardly less harrowing, I imagine, was the night of the 27th of August, 1963, the eve of the Negro March on Washington. We now know by hindsight that it was bound to be a peaceful demonstration and, in effect, a ceremonial pacifier of whites with a troubled conscience. But during the days that preceded it, the warnings that came in to the President must have made him wonder about the chances of a race riot at best, a Reichstag fire at worst.

A big thing has been made of Mr. Sorensen's having deleted from the later galley the names of the members of the so-called Excom who proposed different

solutions in the Bay of Pigs and the missile crises. Mr. Sorensen has been accused of sacrificing to discretion his "duty" to tell all. If this is a fault, it is a very welcome one. There is no need to go to the other extreme, of the British Foreign Office, and preserve in amber for 50 years or so the names of culprits whose courage or crimes threw them out of office decades ago. But Mr. Sorensen has had the good second thought that what matters, in a crucial debate over policy, *inside the circle of the men who must carry it out*, is the range of suggested cures—not the identity of the doctors. The names of the antagonists in a Cabinet row are none of the public's business. Publishing them only provides a stockpile of recriminations which, come



election time if not sooner, political enemies are going to draw on without scruple; not to mention the positive damage to the morale of any society which is invited to feel the warts and sniff the belches of its leaders while they are still governing the country. "Open agreements secretly arrived at," Harold Nicolson's excellent emendation of the Rev. Dr. Woodrow Wilson's pious and infinitely mischievous prescription, is a pledge that might well be added to the customary oath of public office.

It will be said that by this self-denial Mr. Sorensen has only reinforced a gray, careful, pedestrian style. But when you look back over the "colorful" and unbuttoned memoirs that rumbled and spat through the 1920s, say—the egomaniacal battle of Foch and Clemenceau, Lloyd George burning a reputation a day on the pyre of his consuming ambition—and the self-justifying testaments of most of the leaders of the Second World War, you can appreciate that Sorensen's *Kennedy* is a quite new, and precious, kind of record. Of course, it is done by a sworn disciple, and where so much of Kennedy's quality is depicted hour by careful hour, the retrospective fondling of his virtues in interlarded chapters adds nothing but embarrassment to the outsider, i.e., the reader. But it is an immensely valuable, a unique, record of the daily train of a President's thoughts, and his continuous conduct of the government. Kennedy was very lucky in Sorensen, for he had in him a confidant as intimate as Colonel House, a reporter as accurate as Boswell but no sycophant, and a political intelligence as tough as his own.

Mr. Sorensen's prose is peppered with words like excellence, style, dialogue, confrontation, escalation, option—the New Frontier jargon that, like all jargon, muffles important distinctions with handy blanket phrases. And there are more flagrant signs of haste and fatigue. Somewhere he writes about "the bulk of his ingenuity." Ingenuity has no more bulk than a snake has paunch. This may seem niggling, but these sagging sentences weigh down the taut line of the exposition. Without them, I suppose about 200 or 300 pages could have been blotted. I don't know why Mr. Sorensen should have been in such a hurry to get out his book. The crop of gossip memoirs now about to be harvested promise to be of vastly inferior grade. Sorensen's book is plainly going to stand like a giant among a threatened invasion of pigny memoirs. It is, and is likely to remain, the one essential text on the Kennedy administration. But edited and rewritten with fiendish watchfulness, it might have been a classic. **★**

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Bellow on Kennedy



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citizens who discuss political questions. It is indeed a mark of privilege to sit talking about the highways, De Gaulle, Kashmir. An assured income makes people moderately responsible and even idealistic. Then, too, the pursuit of pure happiness in the personal sphere during the Eisenhower period ended in high frustration. With Kennedy's election came renewed interest in public affairs.

We are sometimes told that the unimportance of the individual citizen increases as bureaucracy spreads over us and manipulative techniques become subtler. Contemplating the problems of nuclear power, world communism, urban ugliness and traffic, water shortages and pollution, racial violence and the safety of the streets, one may feel inclined to agree that the threat of political ineffectiveness is very real. But it is true also that the public is more political. Its politics may be relatively shallow, but it is more concerned with government and aware that government is concerned with it.

Two things in recent years have caused an extraordinary expansion of political consciousness: the Civil Rights movement and the career and death of John Kennedy. The connection between Civil Rights and the militancy of students or the increased concern of privileged classes of people with moral ideas is obvious. Harder to gauge are the effects of Kennedy's rise, his assassination and the ritual of his burial, but I think the emotions generated by these events have had a lasting effect on the public and probably also on the Presidency. Kennedy made the office more conspicuous. The public is hungry for information about the President, and also for gossip, analysis, impressions, memoirs. I can't remember that Eisenhower, Truman or FDR had to endure such scrutiny. President Johnson does not always bear this patiently, it seems. No king ever had so many cats looking at him. If he is vexed, if he fumes, if he is cold and hostile, the public hears of it, and if he withdraws behind a mask, it hears of that, too. He is surrounded by journalists and by a literate staff, and he will escape neither history nor historians.

But how do we write about Presidents?

Arthur Schlesinger, Theodore H. White, Mrs. Lincoln and Theodore Sorensen found millions of readers this past summer, and were discussed, complimented, rebuked, pulverized and sifted in Washington and in editorial and correspondence columns across the country. Schlesinger came under heavy attack in government circles. He was said to have abused his privileges as a Presidential assistant, talked out of turn and damaged the prestige of the Secretary of State. If even half of what Schlesinger says about the State Department is true, he should be thanked for saying it. But that is a political question, and I am not concerned here with political questions. What interests me is the way in which these histories and memoirs are written. It would not be fair to say much about



Schlesinger's writing. Three large extracts from his book appeared in *Life*. Presumably they were heavily edited. Still, they do tell us something. Schlesinger is a sophisticated, experienced, cultivated man who writes particularly well when he is angry and mordant, less well when he is generous, and very badly when he is tender. Perhaps these had passages belong to an earlier version and will not appear in the book.

Mr. Sorensen in his account omits no detail of the President's career. Factual, documented, cumbersome, *Kennedy* is redeemed from dryness by its fascinating subject and by a feeling one seldom finds in books about American politicians. This feeling is shared also by Schlesinger and White. They all loved Kennedy—that is very clear. He was greatly loved. Not many successful public men inspire such an emotion. Grief has deepened it, no doubt, but it was strong to begin with. Even skeptical and guarded observers testified that it was stirring to meet Kennedy.

Suspicion often follows such reactions. We fear that respect, admiration and love will suck us in. We throw doubt on our own untutored feelings, which can be either basely resentful or uncritically loving. We worry about being taken in by a very skillful exploiter of emotions. And we feel much surer of ourselves when we are debunking a man. We then think debunking is more realistic. And we have a better vocabulary for it. It is when we want to describe a man's virtues and say that we admire and love him that we learn how desperately poor our language has become. Critical sophistication finds the debased rhetoric reserved for such feelings repulsive. So it can't speak at all.

What does Mr. Sorensen do with these feelings of his? Not much, unfortunately. He falls into officialese repeatedly. "Having," he writes, "formed a strong attachment for John Kennedy, I cannot now pretend an attitude of complete detachment. Having devoted nearly eleven years to advancing his interests and explaining his views, I cannot now cloak my partisanship as disinterested scholarship. This book, let it be clear at the outset, praises John Kennedy for what he has done, not merely out of loyalty and affection, but out of deep pride and conviction."

"Nevertheless he both deserves and would have desired something better than a portrait painted of him as more heroic than human. In life he did not want his counsel to be a courtier, and in death he would not want his biography confined to eulogies." And he goes on to quote the President's own words to certain Voice of America employees: "You are obliged to tell our story in a truthful way, to tell it as Oliver Cromwell said about his portrait, with all our blemishes and warts, all those things about us which may not be so immediately attractive."

There are few warts and blemishes in Mr. Sorensen's loyal portrait. The Leveller, John Lilburne, spoke of Cromwell as "the most absolute single-hearted great man in England." Sorensen has no such language at his command. He has Churchillian echoes and Stevensonian flourishes. When he speaks of Kennedy's attitude towards the Negro revolution he says that "... in 1963 he befriended and articulated its high aspirations, and helped guide its torrential currents." It is a great pity that Sorensen has to put his undoubtedly genuine feelings into banalities. The style may be the man in France, where language matters more, but not in the United States. We have to make allowances. Here we write well when we expose frauds and hypocrites. We are great at counting warts and blemishes and weighing feet of clay. In expressing love we belong among the underdeveloped countries.

Theodore H. White may have deserved the harsh review *The Making of the President 1964* received from I. F. Stone in *The New York Times*. (Continued on page 3)

Bellow on Kennedy

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York Review of Books, but that harshness is also revealing. Stone acknowledges that White is a genuinely friendly fellow and that "the eye of kindness may often see what the critical, by its very relentlessness, misses," but, he goes on to say, White has a practical stake in friendliness. To get information in Washington and to be able to serialize his books in Life magazine, White must be circumspect. He butters up the famous. He is in with the Establishment. "The truth with which a Mark Twain or a Will Rogers would have begun," says Stone, "is barely touched on in White's voluminous pages."

Well, perhaps White does "scatter certificates of genius wholesale." But it isn't easy to praise famous men in America. What do we say about virtue? The whole subject seems alien to us. And our populist tradition teaches us to be wary of the powerful. Behind the scenes, under their masks, they are up to no good. Trust them with your soul and they'll hock it for a dime. These suspicions of course contain a substantial amount of truth. Skepticism is essential. But sometimes it hides the truth from us. Yes, we say, the fellow is friendly, but he also has a little racket. Doesn't everybody?

The worst thing that can happen to the alert and skeptical American is to be *had*, snowed, taken-in, duped. We have a literature in which trustfulness is painfully punished and of which a persistent theme is the exposure of evil under good appearances. We can be sure that a Gatsby, pure in heart and romantically trusting, is going to be found dead in the swimming pool, and that foul dust always floats in the wake of dreams and ideals. The stress is generally less on the shallowness of the ideals than on the wickedness of society.

Like his ancestor the rube, the modern American is still matching the eye against the hand in the old shell

game. The slicker may be called "the military-industrial complex," "the cold-war operators," "the Establishment" and even "the Chief Executive." Well, the powers are certainly there, and they are certainly dangerous, but shallow skepticism can't tell us much about them. Who *are* the mighty, and what are they made of? Would a Will Rogers know? I doubt it greatly. He was an agile, graceful and witty debunker, a leveller but of a different sort from Lilburne, and he had nothing much to say about the most absolute single-hearted great man. Debunking works on a fairly simple Calvinistic principle. Sinners abound; they are masked, we unmask them. But political personalities are often too complex for simple exposure. A politician may be cunning, arrogant, devious, boorish, cold-blooded, but nevertheless a public benefactor. To deal with such rich personalities, complex mixtures of monstrosity and morality, we need a new vocabulary, a deeper base, greater subtlety. The truth of a Will Rogers, indeed! Will Rogers is about as useful to us now as Elsie Dinsmore.

Mr. Sorensen speaks of the first days of the new administration as "a time of intellectual hope," of Kennedy's urbanity, of his reversal of the McCarthy prejudices against intellectuals, of the presence of 15 Rhodes Scholars among his appointees. "The qualities he sought largely mirrored his own; 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." And the men Kennedy chose, "All spoke with the same low-keyed restraint that marked their chief, yet all shared his deep conviction that they could change America's drift. . . . Their own feelings of pride—*our* feelings, for I was proud to be one of them—could be summed up in a favorite Kennedy passage from Shakespeare's *King Henry V* in his speech on

the St. Crispin's Day battle: . . . *we shall be remembered—We few, we happy few, we band of brothers . . .*"

Conscious at last that it had changed greatly, America saw a new sort of President in Kennedy. He was indeed a modern city type, succeeding the smooth, grandfatherly general, the small-town Missouri politician, the Hudson Valley patrician—none of them contemporary. Kennedy had the modern impatience with the unnecessary, made the modern demand for a quick outline, had the modern feeling for essences. Most extraordinary of all, he seemed to have a modern inner life. Suddenly Washington promised to become real to everyone, genuinely, personally relevant. There were several months when it was believed that Kennedy might make the White House a sanctuary, a national base for art, for poetry, for learning, even for Hip-Hop. He was bound to disappoint these hopes, though he partly inspired them by his style. He wanted the best of everything for America, including a high culture. That a President should even be aware of such a thing was in itself astonishing. But to demand that he should transform the Presidency and American life by embodying all these good things in his own person was not reasonable. He was willing to encourage them, he sheltered the happy few, certain liberal intellectuals. He soon blundered at the Bay of Pigs. He was, however, also responsible for the test ban. He was, in short, the President of the United States. He was a politician and meant to be re-elected. I assume he would have been glad to improve the quality of American culture and to raise the level of mental life. Why not? The intention was praiseworthy. It was all very much like Mark Twain on the subject of the weather: everybody talked about it but nobody did anything about it. American Presidents and other politicians, and their experts, advisers, assistants, are far too busy for culture. There is very little time to re-

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Bellow on Kennedy

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flect on the art of government. Nothing can be considered amply except in its immediate political bearing. There are few opportunities for reading—an important man has too much legislative homework to do; he can't be expected to read books. Immense demands are made on his intelligence and energy. True, the enormous excitement of public business replenishes his strength, but nothing can be more alien to him than mere contemplation: it may be not only alien but weakening. And around the important man are others, intellectuals some of them, who are carried away by the same excitement and are soon scolding their former colleagues from their new eminence, giving them low marks and denouncing them as dreamers. Hyperactive, often needlessly agitated,

I suspect, they lose their reflectiveness and their culture often deteriorates. A little more dreaminess might be good for them.

NOTE:

In saying such things about the liberal intellectuals of the New Frontier I hope I will not be thought to be in agreement with critics like Christopher Lasch, whose recent book, *The New Radicalism in America*, has been praised by intransigent intellectuals. Mr. Lasch has this to say about journalists and scholars who were close to Kennedy: "As a reflection of the intellectuals' own self-image, the portrait of Kennedy as an intellectual provides a full measure of the degree to which the idea of the intellectual life had become bound up with the images of worldly success and prestige. What the intellectuals admired in Kennedy was his

youth, his good looks, his cultivation, his cosmopolitanism, his savoir faire, his taste, his respect for 'excellence,' his wealth itself—what all of his admirers, in short, presumably admired; but the intellectuals not only admired these things, they associated them with *intellect*."

This is not only false, it is politically hopeless and culturally bankrupt. It implies that the intellectual cannot be associated with power and that by his desire to know it or to serve it he must become impure and must always betray his intellectual standards. It means that to an intellectual the government must always be "their government," institutions "their institutions, not mine." What this "radical purity" reveals is an attitude not too different from that of the debunker who can be appeased only by "exposures." ❧