

Dissecting the Body Politic

By ROBERT SHERRILL

WHEN ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER JR. came out last year with *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, Midge Decter wrote in *Commentary* magazine: "Never may so formidable a mind and so accomplished a pen have produced so unsubtle an electioneering pamphlet." Her thesis was that while Teddy barely figures in the book, "Schlesinger gives us clearly to understand that. . . the Kennedys are interchangeable." But a hardback selling for \$19.95 can hardly qualify as an electioneering pamphlet. Ballantine's \$3.95 paperback that came out a couple of months ago may reach the voting rabble, so it's time for a re-review.

Schlesinger's efforts as a pro-Kennedy propagandist are more than cancelled out by his instincts as a historian. Whatever partisan intentions he may have had, he has produced a book that is luxuriant with stuff that could sink the Kennedy legend.

The picture we get of President Kennedy during his buildup of U.S. troops in Vietnam (from 600 when he went in to 18,000 at the time of his assassination) is of a leader completely befuddled, sometimes almost incoherent in his inability to choose between conscience and political expediency.

And wait till you read how Kennedy chose his Cabinet. Would you believe he appointed Douglas Dillon, a Wall Street Republican, to be treasury secretary partly as a favor to columnist Joe Alsop? No kidding. Would you believe that one conversation with another Wall Street big-

snor, Robert Lovett, was enough to convince him to hire Dean Rusk as secretary of state, though Kennedy knew absolutely nothing about Rusk? And then he kept Rusk in the job even after it became clear that he couldn't take pressure. According to Robert Kennedy, Rusk just fell apart during the Cuban missile crisis—"Rusk had a virtually complete breakdown mentally and physically."

As for Attorney General Kennedy—once the vigorous admirer of Herbert Hoover and Joe McCarthy—we find him falling under the spell of General Maxwell Taylor's kookaboo Cold War plots—"organizational fantasies," Schlesinger calls them, a grandiose marshalling of the whole government for a global assault on communism, an assault that would emphasize counterinsurgency. Green Berets, here we come!

Kennedy courage in political matters does not seem exactly overwhelming. President Kennedy reportedly hated General Curtis LeMay so much that after every conversation with him Kennedy had "a sort of fit." Fits or no fits, Kennedy not only kept LeMay around but promoted him to please Congressional right-wingers.

Attorney General Kennedy admitted privately that J. Edgar Hoover was "a psycho" and "senile" and that the FBI under Hoover was "a very dangerous organization." But, he explained, he and his brother didn't want to fire Hoover because "the president had won by such a narrow margin" and they didn't want to give the right wing something to hit them with.

Excuses based on expediency are bad enough. But another explanation might be that Bobby had his own dark side. After all, Schlesinger points out, as attorney general Bobby authorized wiretaps on newspapermen, on lawyers, on bureaucrats and on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and associates—but not once did he authorize a wiretap on racketeers.

As for the president's attitude toward big business, Kennedy did buck Big Steel momentarily, but he was so shocked by his own show of spunk and so fearful of the corporate passions such action might arouse that "his policy toward business thereafter," writes Schlesinger, "was one of mild appeasement."

So much for Camelot.