

of Yeatsian magic. Only once have I ever had a—what's the word?—presentiment. In 1961 I dreamed, in full color, that I was in the White House with Jackie. Dress soaked with blood, she was sobbing, "What will become of me now?" Yet I don't "believe in" dreams, and I certainly would not believe in this dream if someone else told it to me.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you believe that the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy were the work of lone lunatics—or of a well-organized conspiracy?

**VIDAL:** I tend to the lone-lunatic theory. Oswald. Sirhan. They are so typical, as anyone who ever served in the Army knows. We are a violent country with a high rate of mental illness, much of it the result of overcrowding in the cities, where—like rats under similar conditions in a laboratory experiment—we go insane. To allow any nut to buy a gun is a folly no other country in the world permits. During last year's French revolution, involving millions of people, there were fewer casualties in two weeks than there were in the first hour of New-ark's ghetto riot.

**PLAYBOY:** To return to the Kennedy assassinations, don't you feel there may be some evidence to support the conspiracy theory, particularly in the Oswald case?

**VIDAL:** Like everyone else, I believe the last book I read: "Zapruder Frame 313, J. F. K. pitches backward, not forward." It does seem as if Oswald might have had help; and if he did, then there was, indeed, a conspiracy. I realize that a generation brought up on horror comics and *Gunsmoke* is convinced that the MacBirds did in our Prince, just so they could make the White House their aviary; but I think it not very likely. The villains, if they exist, are probably Texas oilmen, fearing a Kennedy repeal of the oil-depletion allowance: in other words, a conspiracy as unserious politically as the John Wilkes Booth caper. Nevertheless, just as a phenomenon, it is curious that a nation that has never experienced a *coup d'état* should be so obsessed by conspiracy—but then, a fear of "them" is a symptom of paranoia. Look at Joe McCarthy's great success. Look at Mr. Garrison in New Orleans. Incidentally, I used to know Clay Shaw; and if there is anyone less likely to have been involved in a political murder, it is that charming apolitical man. As I predicted, Mr. Garrison's case against Shaw was nonsense.

**PLAYBOY:** Whoever assassinated John Kennedy, and for whatever reasons, do you believe that if Kennedy had lived, he could have reversed, or at least arrested, the social decay you decry?

**VIDAL:** No. But then, no one could—or can. These things are cyclic. By and large, Kennedy drifted. When he did act, the results were disastrous. Consider the Bay of Pigs, which took for granted that the United States has the right to inter-

vene militarily in the affairs of other nations; and Vietnam, where he—not Eisenhower—committed us to active military support of a corrupt regime. There are those who believe that had he lived, he would have got us out of Asia. But I doubt it. The week before his assassination, he told an associate, "I have to go all the way with this one"—meaning that after Cuba, he did not dare look "soft" on communism, particularly with an election coming up.

**PLAYBOY:** Apart from foreign affairs, how would you assess the Kennedy Administration?

**VIDAL:** Mediocre. Presidents are supposed to be made in their first 18 months. That's when they're able to push through their programs. Kennedy's first 18 months were a blank. Nothing happened. And by his third summer, it was plain even to him that he was botching the job. In private, he was full of complaints and excuses. He felt that he could do nothing with the Congress, and so he did nothing with the Congress. Re-elected in 1964 with a proper majority, however, he thought he would do great things. But, again, I doubt it. For one thing, he would have been holding the franchise for his brother and that would have meant a second Administration as cautious as the first. More to the point, the quality that gave him his great charm was not of much use to him as Chief Executive: an ironic detachment about himself and others. I remember once he was complaining about how the "Pentagon just throws money around, and there's no way of stopping them." It didn't seem to occur to him that even at this late date in the reign of the military-industrial complex, the Administration was *his*, not theirs.

**PLAYBOY:** Don't you think Kennedy laid the groundwork for genuine social progress by giving the nation a new momentum in peace and civil rights that could have come to fruition in his second term?

**VIDAL:** On almost every subject, he made at least one splendid speech, and left it at that. Domestically, he was simply carrying forward the program of the New Deal. It was left to Johnson to complete the New Deal. He rounded out not only Kennedy's interrupted first term but Roosevelt's fourth.

**PLAYBOY:** In the foreign-policy area, many political historians cite Kennedy's handling of the Cuban missile crisis as an undeniable and major accomplishment—perhaps the greatest of his career. They point out that it set the stage for a subsequent thaw in the U.S.-Soviet relations and thus substantially reduced the danger of nuclear war. Do you agree?

**VIDAL:** In 1963, when asked whether or not Soviet missiles in Cuba really jeopardized the security of the United States, Kennedy said, "Not really. But it would have changed the balance of political power. Or it would have appeared to,

and appearances contribute to reality." Kennedy's handling of the crisis was a public-relations masterpiece, which changed nothing at all except his own image; he had made himself seem forceful. Yet when the matter ended, the Soviets were still in Cuba, 90 miles away, and we were neither stronger nor weaker, despite all the theater.

**PLAYBOY:** Is your hostility to the Kennedy family prompted exclusively by political considerations, or is there an element of personal animus in your opposition?

**VIDAL:** Personally, I didn't like Bobby but I did like Jack. The others don't interest me. As for my opposition—is it likely that, with my view of what needs doing in the country, I would ever be much pleased with the works of such conservative and conventional politicians?

**PLAYBOY:** What was it you liked personally about President Kennedy?

**VIDAL:** He had a fine dry kind of humor, not very American, coupled with a sort of preppish toughness that was engaging. I remember once giving to a particularly bright magazine writer a very guarded report about my childhood, which was much the same as Jackie's. We were both brought up in Hugh Auchincloss—our stepfather's—house in Virginia. I lived there from 10 to 16. Then Jackie's mother married Mr. Auchincloss and Jackie moved into my room, inheriting several shirts of mine, which she used to wear riding. I don't remember her in those days—I enlisted in the Army at 17—but our lives overlapped: We have a half brother and a half sister in common. I was unaware of her, however, until the Forties, when I began to get reports from friends visiting Washington that she had introduced herself to them as my sister; I was, pre-Kennedy, the family notable. In 1949, we finally met and I allowed her claim to be my sister to stand. Anyway, I certainly know what her childhood was like, since it was pretty much the one I had endured. So I told the interviewer something about life in that world, described how sequestered it was, how remote from any reality: Great money is the most opaque of screens.

During the Depression, which was unknown to us, the Roosevelts seemed Lucifer's own family loose among us; the American gentry liked to call them the Rosenfelds, on the fragile ground that they were really Dutch Jews and, therefore, Communist, since all Jews were Communists except the Rothschilds, who didn't look Jewish. You have no idea what a muddled view of things the American aristocracy had in those days, with their ferocious anti-Semitism, hatred of the lower orders and fierce will to protect their property from any encroachment. Liberal hagiographers will always have a difficult time recording the *actual* background of our Republic's Graechian princes.

Anyway, not wanting to give the game

away, I made a vague reference in that interview to what I thought was an unreal "golden season" and let it go at that. One night while playing backgammon at Hyannis Port, Jack Kennedy said, "Gore, what's all this golden season shit you've been peddling about life at Merrywood?" I thought him ungrateful. "You hardly expect me to tell the truth, do you?" He ignored that and chose instead to mount, as Jackie listened, a fine tirade against our family, how each of us was a disaster, ending with, "Merrywood wasn't golden at all. It was . . . it was . . ." he searched for a simile, found one and said triumphantly, "It was the little foxes!" But, of course, he was a cheerful snob who took a delight in having married into what he regarded as the American old guard—another badge for the Kennedys, those very big foxes who have done their share of spoiling in the vineyard. But the Kennedy story is finished. The age of Nixon has begun.

**PLAYBOY:** Edward Kennedy might not agree that the Kennedy era is over.

**VIDAL:** When Teddy Kennedy first ran for the Senate, there was a great cackling from even the most devoted of the Kennedy capons: He was too young, too dumb—in fact, they were so upset that a number of them openly supported his opponent in the primary, Speaker McCormack's nephew. At about that time, I asked a member of the Holy Family why the President had allowed his brother to run. The member of the H. F. admitted that it was embarrassing for the President, even admitted that Teddy was not exactly brilliant, but added, "He'll have wonderful advisors and that's all that matters."

Politics today is big money. X can be stupid or a drunk or a religious maniac, but if he has the money for a major political career and enough political flair to make a good public impression, he will automatically attract to himself quite a number of political adventurers, some talented. With luck, he will become the nucleus of a political team that then creates his speeches, his positions, his deeds, if any—Presidential hopefuls seldom *do* anything—until, finally, X is entirely the team's creation, manipulated rather than manipulating, in much the same way that the queen bee is powerless in relation to the drones and workers.

At the moment, the Teddy Kennedy hive is buzzing happily. There's honey in the comb and perhaps one day the swarm will move down Pennsylvania Avenue to occupy the White House. But, once again, I doubt it. For one thing, there are too many other swarms at work—Humphrey, Muskie, McCarthy, not to mention the possibility of a Nixon second term, followed by a good bee like Lindsay, or a bad bee like Agnew. The future is obscure. But one thing is certain: The magic of the Kennedy name

will have faded in four years, be gone in eight years. By 1972, E. M. K., as he's now being touted, will no longer be a Kennedy as we have come to think of that splendid band of brothers. Rather, he will be just another politician whom we have seen too much of, no doubt useful in the Senate but nothing more—and so, familiar, stodgy, cautious, trying to evoke memories that have faded, he will have to yield to new stars, to a politically minded astronaut or to some bright television personality like Trudeau. By 1976, Camelot will be not only forgot but unrestorable, if for no other reason than that Arthur's heir will by then be—cruellest fate of all—unmistakably fat.

**PLAYBOY:** How do you feel about the Age of Johnson?

**VIDAL:** Sad. He did so much in his first 18 months. He was able to force through the Congress all sorts of constructive legislation, ranging from public health to civil rights. He was something of a wonder, in marked contrast to his predecessor, who treated him with contempt; the Kennedy courtiers, in fact, fled at his approach. He had every reason to dislike them. It's been argued that Johnson's programs were inadequate, but then, what is adequate in times like these? At least he did what he could do, given the kind of Government we have, and that is the most any conventional party politician can be expected to do.

**PLAYBOY:** What might a radical politician accomplish?

**VIDAL:** The word "radical" comes from the Latin word meaning "root." A radical politician could go to the root of things—something no conventional politician dares do, for fear of what he'll find. But, of course, there *are* no radical politicians close to the top of our system, nor are there apt to be until—a paradox—it's changed. Our politicians—like our people—are about equally divided between conservatives and reactionaries, with very few radicals of any kind.

**PLAYBOY:** Would the leadership of your Party for Human Survival be radical?

**VIDAL:** By definition, yes. After all, they would be creating a new social order to save our old race.

**PLAYBOY:** Since the idea for such a party is yours, do you see yourself as a radical?

**VIDAL:** In thought, certainly. I'm not so sure in deed. Given the power, would I also have the faith in my own rightness to pull down the house and then the energy, as well as the wisdom, to build another? Tall order. But then, Voltaire, safe among his Swiss lakes, made possible the French Revolution—and Bonaparte—just as Bernard Shaw prepared the way for Harold Wilson. Analogies are pointless, thank God. Each case is different. Each life is different. All that can be said of this time is that radical action is necessary if we are to survive.

**PLAYBOY:** In your opinion, did L. B. J.—though by your definition a conventional

politician—have any sense of what the times required? Or was he merely shoring up what you consider the old, outmoded social and political institutions?

**VIDAL:** Like Kennedy, he simply continued the New Deal—which, in his youth, had all the glamor of radicalism, without its substance. Roosevelt saved capitalism by accepting a degree of welfarism. Johnson applied the same formulas, with less dramatic results. When Roosevelt's experiments began to go sour, the Second World War disguised their inadequacy. I've often wondered if Johnson instinctively hoped to repeat the Roosevelt career: domestic reform, followed by the triumphant prosecution of a war. Poor man! He was doomed from the beginning. After Kennedy, he was the wrong age, the wrong class, from the wrong region. I always thought the fact that he wasn't a bogus Whig nobleman was a point in his favor—but his public manner gave offense, and I could never understand why, since his sort of folksy hypocrisy is the national style. But perhaps that *was* why: The people recognized themselves in him and recoiled. He was the snake-oil salesman, just as Nixon is the Midwestern realtor, gravely intent upon selling us that nice acre of development land called Shady Elms that turns out to be a swamp. We're used to these types and prefer something grander as our chief of state, a superior con man, preferably of patrician origin, who can disguise with noble phrases who and what we are; to euphemize, that is the Presidential task. God knows they all do it. Take Latin America. In that sad continent, we support a wide range of military dictatorships that our Presidents, invariably, refer to as necessary links in the bright chain of freedom with which we are manacled the world. In our way, we are as predatory as the Russians, and every bit as maniacal in our confusing—and debasing—of language: Free means slave, democratic means oligarchic, liberated means slaughtered. A fine pair of superpowers, suitable for history's wastebasket!

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think the various superpower confrontations in Asia or the Middle East might lead to a nuclear showdown that would end just that way?

**VIDAL:** It certainly would seem so, though I personally see the last struggle for men's minds, the ultimate blow for freedom, struck in Latin America, with us confronting the Soviet in the harbor of Rio de Janeiro, while the Chinese hover in nearby Montevideo. Brazil is much too important to lose, the way we "lost" China. Finders keepers, as they say. But since I'd like to see the world's people survive the destruction of these two political systems, I don't look with much pleasure on what will probably be a war only a few survive, their genes significantly altered by radiation. It could very well be that intense atomic radiation