

Mr. Jonathan Yardley, Style section  
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Dear Mr. Yardley,

To say what you said about Robert Kennedy (Missing Bobby, 5/31/93), with which I agree completely, it was not necessary for you to say of John F. Kennedy, "What we now know about John F. Kennedy's private life has cast everything else about him into question."

Perhaps you have been unduly influenced by the persuasive and not always fair book by those who hated him and what he came to stand for and was trying to do.

What was there - what could there have been - in his private life that could cast into question his magnificently-stated exposition of the need of the future in his June 1963 speech at the American university?

What was there - or could there have been - in his private life that could cast into doubt his daring, politically-dangerous negotiating of the limited test-ban agreement? Or in his efforts to reduce military spending? Or his breaking of the agreement to make Blue Streak missiles for Great Britain?

Or in his solution to the Cuba missile crisis? Or all those letters with Khrushchev as they groped their way toward peace?

Or in so much <sup>more</sup> so often forgotten <sup>in</sup> the hate campaign of those who detested what he came to stand for and long for after that crisis? When he was a much <sup>h</sup> changed man with quite different policies and aspirations for us and for the world?

Those who undertook to change what we think of him, which also means of his changed presidency after that 1962 crisis, have launched no such campaigns against FDR or Eisenhower or so many other very important people in our political lives. But then, as you have <sup>not</sup> stopped to think, he had undergone a radical transformation. You regard this as good and normal in Bobby but you do not think and write about JFK with the same understanding.

You have, I think, misled and misinformed many and have made yourself in it part of the campaign to diminish him and what he did come to stand for. Whatever your intent.

Now about his personal life, I spent most of a week as the guest of one of his lady friends more than four years after his assassination. Had it been possible for me to return to that part of the country ~~we~~ were going to record an oral history she would then put away until she believed its disclosure would not be hurtful. My health and then her death prevented that. In her account, and she wept as she told me, was of a completely honest man about whose treatment of her she had no complaint at all, no matter how minor.

I have never spoken of this before and I say no more now but <sup>we</sup> he did spend very much time and she recalled very much, with great pain and obvious sincerity.

On a much simpler basis, do you really think that what is said about his private life, not all of which is true, can cast aside how people felt-how he made them feel - in his press conferences and in his many statements to them? It is not his private life but the misuse of it that can cast aside anything else about him. Sincerely, Harold Weisberg

*Harold Weisberg*

JONATHAN YARDLEY

## Missing Bobby

If you are an American of a certain age and a certain bent—I confess to being both—then it is difficult to let Memorial Day 1993 pass without note or sober reflection. Though intended, properly, as a holiday to honor those who died in their country's service, this year it acquires added meaning and intensity, for it falls within only a few days of the quarter-century anniversary of the death, in combat of another sort, of Robert Francis Kennedy.

That day seems so remote as to have been in another century, or another life. The shots fired at Kennedy in Los Angeles after the California Democratic primary, followed by the brief death watch, were in equal measures appallingly predictable and incalculably shocking. Since his elder brother's murder 4½ years earlier, Kennedy had conducted what his biographer Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. has called "a dance with death" born of "an almost insolent fatalism about life," so when death at last arrived, it came as no surprise. Yet at the same time it was utterly stunning; not merely did it seem to confirm the nation's descent into madness—Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed barely two months before—but it left us poised at the edge of an unknown future into which Kennedy's death forever denied us admission.

It is no longer fashionable to mourn Kennedys, or to praise them. What we now know about John F. Kennedy's private life has cast everything else about him into question. We long ago wearied of Edward M. Kennedy's disgrace-defying high-wire act, reeling between honorable public service and egregious self-abasement. We have wearied as well of too many Kennedys of the next generation, paying lip service to noblesse oblige while wallowing in self-indulgence and unaccountability. The magic of the family name is still there, but it has been compromised and diminished and soiled.

Robert Kennedy is another matter altogether. It is true that certain old grievances are still nursed in certain quarters—that he was a handmaiden of Joe McCarthy, that he was "ruthless," that his commitment to civil liberties was at best halfhearted, that he betrayed Gene McCarthy—and from time to time new ones are unearthed: most sensationally, if dubiously, that he was somehow involved in a coverup attendant to the death of Marilyn Monroe. But though none of these can be discounted, by the same token none of them seems even remotely as important now as once it did; what is most interesting and revealing about Bobby Kennedy is not what we know but what we do

not.

There may well be in the entire history of these United States no single individual whose death has left a more lasting and mysterious sense of unexplored promise. We will always wonder how Reconstruction might have

proceeded under Abraham Lincoln's forgiving guidance, but we also know a great deal about what he had already done. George Gershwin, dead at 38, took untold compositions with him to his grave, but he left us "Porgy and Bess" and "Someone to Watch Over Me." Martin Luther King Jr. had scarcely begun his campaign in the cities of the North before he was killed, but he left behind several lifetimes' worth of accomplishment in the cities and towns of the South.

Robert Kennedy, by contrast, was all hope and expectation at the hour of his death. Two writers considerably less sympathetic to the Kennedy family than Schlesinger—Peter Collier and David Horowitz—have written that "Bobby, more than any other figure in American politics, conveyed a sense of latency and potential, a 'capacity for growth.'" He was going somewhere, but no one knew quite where, this most surely including Kennedy himself. "Moving away from that monochromatic and monomaniacal Bobby of the Kennedy Administration and before," Collier and Horowitz write, "he began to elaborate a new persona out of the old psychological materials: passionate, filled with tough-minded concern, impatient with a political minuet that required the music of injustice."

This last is most telling of all. If it is unfashionable now to sing the glories of Kennedys, so too is it unfashionable to speak of, much less to lament, the injustice of American society and politics. Our attention is focused on the grievances of a middle class that certainly has been exploited and neglected but that is also relatively if imperfectly prosperous. Our political system is engineered now, after a dozen years of reactionary rule so callous as to give new meaning to the word, to accommodate the interests of the well-connected, pay lip service to those in the middle, and dismiss with contempt those on the bottom; the new Democratic regime is more intimate with lobbyists and special interests than with the underprivileged Americans whom Bobby Kennedy cultivated in his strange, quixotic, exhilarating, heartbreaking campaign.

It was the last time that a prominent

compassionate savior, some as ruthless opportunist, some as irresponsible demagogue plucking at the exposed nerves of the American polity—race, poverty, the [Vietnam] war. Few were neutral, very few indifferent.”

It is precisely because of all these conflicting forces and viewpoints that it is utterly impossible to say with anything remotely approximating authority what might have happened had Kennedy lived. Quite apart from the practical politics of the matter, which involved everyone from Gene McCarthy to Lyndon Johnson to Hubert Humphrey to Richard Nixon to Richard Daley, there is the vastly more incalculable matter of the emotions Kennedy aroused. Had he won the Democratic nomination, a problematical possibility at best, his campaign against Nixon could well have been plunged against his will into divisiveness; had he achieved the presidency, it might well have been to preside over a nation so bitterly torn between the prosperous and the poor as to make the effective operation of government impossible.

Yet however uncertain and dangerous the prospects that lay before Kennedy in the hour of his death, what will remain forever most poignant is that we never had the opportunity to find out what in fact they were. In the last months of his life Kennedy radiated a sense that he was prepared to take the nation places where it had never before been, to address problems and injustices so deeply ingrained in the national character that to ask questions about them was to ask questions about ourselves; at the very least it would have been interesting to see what results such an undertaking might have produced.

Like innumerable other Americans, I have come in the quarter-century since Bobby Kennedy's death to doubt the capacity of government—or, perhaps more accurately, this government—to identify problems, much less to solve them. Yet even in this climate of skepticism and cynicism, it is still possible to recall Kennedy's combination of ardent conviction and persistent innocence and to believe that his death deprived us of more than just an uncommonly complex, driven, passionate man: to believe, that is, that some of our own capacity for conviction died with him.

Near the end of his life Bobby Kennedy, child of privilege, was moving toward not merely an understanding that no one owes more to the country than those who have most enjoyed its blessings but also a determination to act upon that knowledge. It is not exactly true that this, too, died with him, but in order to believe that it survived him one must have a pronounced inclination for grasping at straws. The one certainty is that no one in public life has had the vision, courage and audacity to pick up his standard, and that our loss is quite literally immeasurable.

American politician who had a legitimate prospect of achieving the presidency spoke to, and for, these people. Small wonder that if they were heartened, others were horrified. As Schlesinger writes:

“By November 1967 when Robert Kennedy had his 42nd birthday, he was the most original, enigmatic and provocative figure in midcentury American politics. A man of intense emotion, he aroused intense emotion in others. . . . Kennedy incarnated the idea of struggle and change. This moved many. It disturbed many. He gave hope to some groups in the country, generally the weak; threatened others, generally the strong. Some saw him as