

Through Freud-colored glasses

The Kennedy Neurosis

By Nancy Gager Clinch.
Forword by Bruce Mazlish.
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By **ROBERT CLAIBORNE**

If psychoanalysis were anything approaching an exact science, this book might have been worth reading. In fact, as even some analysts are aware, it is an esoteric art, whose successful practice requires a blend of empathy, imagination, humor, humility and common sense not often encountered either inside or outside the profession. I speak here of "direct" analysis (from which I have myself benefited), where the analyst is personally and intimately known to his therapist. When it comes to indirect analysis, in which the "patient" (usually a historic figure) is inaccessible and generally dead, the practitioner must add to the virtues listed above a degree of omniscience not often encountered in mortals—definitely not in the author of this book.

"The Kennedy Neurosis" is what Nancy Clinch calls "psychohistory," a term she believes was coined by Erik Erikson. In fact, its more likely inventor is Isaac Asimov, in one of his science-fiction sagas—an appropriate origin in view of the science-fiction character of most works in the genre. (See, for instance, the Freud-Bullitt posthumous study of Woodrow Wilson, or the recently published wartime "analysis" of Hitler.) The psychohistorian's premise is that "persons who are trained and experienced in both psychological and socio-political fields may be able to make more relevant analyses of political persons and issues than specialists in either field." This may or may not be true, but in any case Mrs. Clinch gives little evidence of expertise in either area. An A.B. in political science led her to work as an intelligence analyst for the Army and for a Defense Department think-tank called Historical Evaluation and Research Organization (HERO). She has written or contributed to gov-

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ernment studies of housing in South Korea and of the Mongolian People's Republic, as well as an unpublished Directory of World Combat Aircraft. None of this seems particularly relevant to American politics and history. Her psychological expertise rests on two years of personal therapy plus "wide reading and many conversations with psychologists." The book she has produced is about what you would expect: interminably long on facts, short on substance.

To give the author her due, she has done her homework; she has apparently read every book ever written about the Kennedys—father, mother and sons. Given this mountain of material and sufficient elastic standards of evidence, one can prove almost anything; including, I suspect, that Bobby Kennedy wrote Shakespeare's plays. Mrs. Clinch doesn't go that far, but she goes far enough, mostly by resolutely regarding every feature of the Kennedy world through Freud-colored glasses.

Thus Joe and Rose Kennedy's large family "may well have been an unconscious defense against [social] rejection." Or, just possibly, the result of their own religious rejection of birth control. Rose's statement that she "occasionally" paddled her children is quickly transmuted into "spare-the-rod, spoil-the-child discipline," which "destroys the respect of a child for his parent and plants the seeds of future unconscious hostility." The not infrequent arrogance of her three elder sons reflects neurotic hostility, while Teddy's contrasting easy-goingness reflects neurotic compliance. Jack Kennedy's toughness with Khrushchev and tenderness with Southern racist politicians did not stem from political calculations but from "his deep inner contradiction between a sense of power and of powerlessness." And when the Kennedy boys took up cigar smoking, it was as "the Freudian symbol of potency and power." (The author missed a bet here. The symbolism clearly explains what she calls the Kennedys' "unusual resentment" at Fidel Castro: he cut off their cigars. The resulting castration complex could also account for J.F.K.'s need to be hard on communism.)

As a feminist, Mrs. Clinch is especially alert to the implications of the Kennedys' "hyperactive" and even "obsessive" sexuality. Joe Sr.'s alleged "promiscuity" is seen as perhaps "a means of relieving anxieties, channeling hostilities, expressing unacceptable longings, keeping safe distance

while seeking human relationships, and even punishing the despised self." Jack and Bobby's reputed "womanizing" showed repressed hostility to women, but Teddy's reflected a neurotic taste for mothering, acquired as the baby of the family.

As a sometime womanizer myself, I must tell the author that men adopt this life style (which I do not recommend) for all sorts of reasons. Some enjoy making women for much the same reasons they enjoy making money, and not, believe me, because of hostility to either. Most male Americans, I suspect, womanize—in reality or (much more often) in fantasy—for reasons no more recondite than that their culture expects it. The Kennedys, father and sons, were doubtless sexists, in this and other respects, but I hardly think the author would contend that this differentiates them from other American men. The most one can say is that they seem, even with due allowance for the many ego-tripping young women anxious to testify that J.F.K. or R.F.K. slept here, to have been somewhat more successful sexists than most.

Indeed if one strips away the author's analytic speculations (commonly prefaced by such standard academic hedges as "could mean," "might be interpreted as" and "suggests") and examines her account of the facts, the Kennedys emerge, not as idiosyncratic neurotics but as remarkably typical products of the culture and class that begot them. If they were "raised with a childhood pattern centering on . . . patriarchy, competition and sexism," it was a pattern, as the author herself notes elsewhere, "not so very different from that of many ordinary families in America." If Joe Sr.'s financial manipulations showed "no evidence of regard for the effect of his actions on others," of how many tycoons and conglomerators could this not be said?

If his sons' pursuit of power was frequently characterized by manipulation and fakery, as it certainly was, and their exercise of it by wide gaps between promise and performance, as it certainly was, this hardly distinguishes them among American politicians. If J.F.K. fouled up enormously with the Bay of Pigs, the basic reasons, as the author herself concedes after much talk of "psychic dynamics" and "unconscious motivations," were "a typically American overconfidence and a typically American indifference toward the responses of the enemy." And if that is neurosis, it is a neurosis, vis-à-vis both Cuba and Vietnam, shared for some 20 years by the brightest and

best in American public life.

Incredibly, the author says just about this in her own final summary: "The only significant difference between the Kennedys and most of their contemporaries has been the Kennedys' wealth and their single-mindedness of purpose." The Kennedy "neurosis," in short, had far less to do with their childhood upbringing, or with the inner conflicts they may or may not have had, than with the fact that, like their countrymen, they lived at a particular time and place. The author's laborious reconstruction of their personal history even unto the third generation, her intricate and unprovable hypotheses concerning their neurotic conflicts, really tell us nothing that could not have been easier learned from an astute examination of their public acts and the historic and cultural context in which they acted.

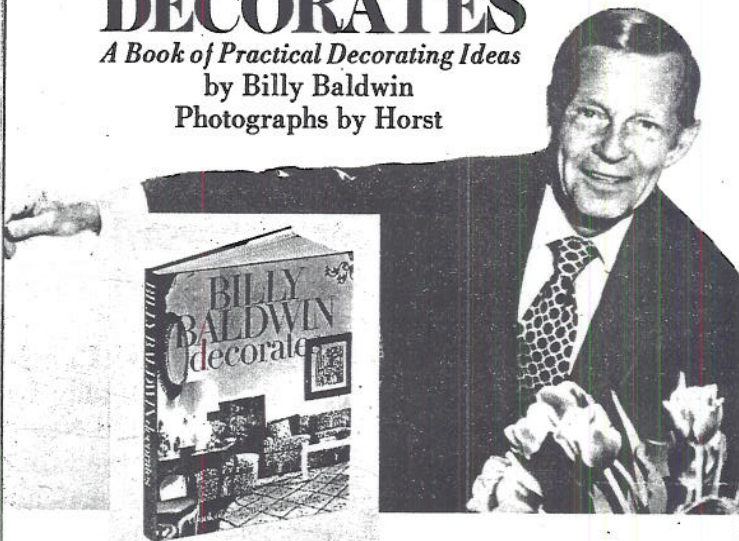
Politicians, like the rest of us, may at times be driven by their personal demons but, also like the rest of us, their actions are in the first place

defined and delimited by their culture. One can, to be sure, label the entire culture "neurotic," as Nancy Clinch seems tempted to do, but this is question-begging; if one cannot, as Edmund Burke declared, indict a whole people, even less, I think, can one psychoanalyze it.

All cultures without exception possess arbitrary and irrational traits which, matched against some imaginary ideal, can be called neurotic. When a Masai youth feels moved to establish his manhood by killing a lion single-handed, he could, by these standards, be diagnosed as suffering from tendencies, when what he really "suffers" from is being a Masai. What the Kennedys suffered from was being rich, ambitious Americans. The riches are hardly evidence of neurosis, and as for the ambition one may quote the harassed Air Corps doctor in William Wister Haines's "Command Decision": "Sir, if we diagnosed ambition for an aberration, we'd be busier than we are." ■

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