

The questioner for two Presidents

When the hurt of Robert Kennedy's death begins to subside, the void it leaves in our national life will become visible. For almost eight years he was something like the conscience of the Presidency.

For three of those years he shared in the power from within at John Kennedy's side. Historians will have a hard time delineating his exact contributions, because the relationship of these brothers had a certain mystical quality. "We're cryptic," said John Kennedy one day in the Oval Office after he had just finished a conversation with his brother which consisted of grunts and uh-huhs and monosyllabic words and yet conveyed total understanding.

Once with certain mischief and that subdued delight which was his specialty, Jack Kennedy cradled his phone on his shoulder and told a visitor sitting across the desk, "This is Bobby . . . the second most powerful man in the country." Bob later crinkled up and countered, "Who's first, Joseph P. Kennedy?" The President's remark was a joke and also a truth. Back when he was shaping the New Frontier, John Kennedy seemed intrigued with the idea of making Arkansas Senator William Fulbright his Secretary of State. Bob had his say on that one. "This Administration is not going to have what amounts to a Southern segregationist as its Secretary of State."

Just after sunrise one morning in the early days, he walked across the dewy lawn of Hickory Hill listening to the grim report on Vietnam just brought back by Walt Rostow, who had been sent with General Maxwell Taylor to survey the trouble. Rostow had come out to brief Bobby after reporting to the President. Bob Kennedy's own voice could be heard later in the President's worried comment: "That's the worst one we've got."

The full dimensions of Bob's contributions in the Cuban missile crisis have never been described because he carried so much within him. Some who watched that drama closely believe that he, more than anyone, hammered out the final solution. He worked in the boiler room of government, which was his familiar place, forcing his colleagues to go back into more meetings and think and rethink those first easy solutions of using great force or of doing nothing. He was horrified at the thought of a bombing strike on Cuba. Wasn't there some other weapon in the vast U.S. arsenal? he asked. Bob was the one who asked the crucial question that opened the way to negotiation: Why couldn't they ignore Khrushchev's belligerent messages and respond only to his more conciliatory tone?

Bob was the supervisor of drudgery, the man who rooted out the facts and stared them down. He never denied them, and that way he infused a rare candor into the heart of government. "It's simple," said the President. "Bobby works harder, knows more and has the best judgment of anyone I know."

In the final days of the New Frontier, when John Kennedy was immersed in foreign matters, Bob was almost Assistant President for domestic affairs. He was in charge during the racially tense days at the University of Mississippi and Tuscaloosa. He began then to sense the dimensions of related problems of the Negro and poverty—and his concern became part of the national concern. Just before John Kennedy died, there were discussions between the brothers about launching a war on poverty in the second Kennedy term.

The death of his brother changed Bob Kennedy's approach. But, in many ways, it did not alter his role. One did still not have to like him or agree with him or even credit him with being right. But, even now, one could not overlook his presence. He remained a questioner of presidential policy. He still looked for facts and raised doubts. His real power was far greater than his Senate office brought. Sometimes it did not fall far short of the

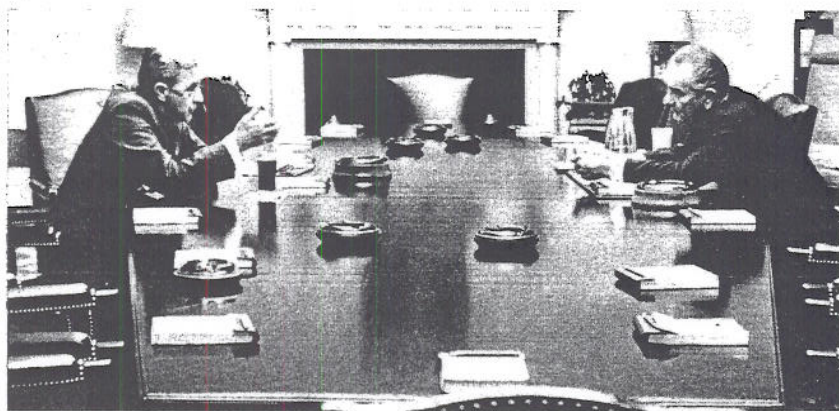
influence of President Johnson himself.

Lyndon Johnson, on one of his melancholy nights in the midst of trouble, paced the White House backyard drive and grumbled that "the Kennedy family really runs this country." During the bitter Vietnam debate, Larry O'Brien, who had served as the chief political strategist for both John Kennedy and Johnson, sat in his immense Postmaster's office and said that the only effective voice raised against the Administration was that of Robert Kennedy. The Fulbrights and the McGovern and the Churches could make speeches in the Senate, but beyond the Potomac there was hardly a ripple. When Bob Kennedy spoke up, however, there was an immediate effect, which O'Brien could detect in the precincts all across the country.

On many nights there were more of the key people of Johnson's government dining at Hickory Hill than there were in the White House. And from this grew resentments and antagonisms, both personal and political, between the forces of Johnson and Kennedy. Bob Kennedy's court became almost a quasi-public institution. Some called it a government in exile. But it was far from being in exile.

Bob Kennedy often sat in his shirt sleeves behind his Senate office desk and talked about the military and diplomatic plans of Johnson in Vietnam with such thoroughness of detail and concept that it seemed he had never been isolated from the Oval Office. His continuing connections with the government gave him instant and total information. More than anyone in the city beyond Johnson's own team, he knew the workings of the Presidency. He, more than anyone outside the Administration, cared.

From the stirrings at Hickory Hill, which became a watering place for the disenchanting and the disenfranchised, came the doubts about the war, about the direction of the massive federal housing programs, about the handout concept of welfare, about expanding further the immense, clumsy federal machine which was proving more inept every year at solving the myriad local concerns. These were doubts that many in the country had begun to feel. But when they were articulated by Robert Kennedy, they began directly to influence and change the national course.



As the business of the Presidency and the campaign resumed, President Johnson talked with Senator McCarthy in the White House, briefing him on Vietnam and the Paris negotiations.