

Kennedy's World Full of Action and Turbulence

By NICK THIMMESCH

(Nick Thimmesch is co-author of two books on Robert F. Kennedy, "Robert F. Kennedy at 40," and "The Bobby Kennedy Nobody Knows.")

WASHINGTON — Robert F. Kennedy was a sacramental but not holy man, somehow driven to live life so intensely it bordered on recklessness.

His father fought, conquered and enjoyed the world and Kennedy tried the same. Robert Kennedy would never stay put. He was aware of his own complex nature, but never wholly understood it. "I'm not

one you can stretch out on a psychiatrist's couch," he once said.

The world of Robert F. Kennedy was so full of action and turbulence that he was often found clinging to its very institutions, the sacraments, if you will, in order to keep himself going.

He would divert himself from just about anything to be with children; his own, or those who happened across his path. He was gay at weddings; serious about godfathers; sad when marital discord visited his family (his sister, Pat, divorced actor Peter Lawford); and even as an adult, volunteered to serve Mass when a priest was without an altar boy.

Death and funerals moved him deeply. He went to the funeral of Senator Joseph McCarthy because he understood the man's own torment. He knelt for two hours, in vigil, at the coffin of one of his dearest friends, Dean Markham, and then laid his head on the coffin and sobbed.

He roamed the rolling lawns alone at Hickory Hill for nearly one hour on Nov. 22, 1963, after the news from Dallas. He tried manfully to cheer up mourners by saying, "there are no long faces here." He tended his brother's widow so protectively as to cause malicious gossip. He became so distracted and depressed in early 1964, that President Lyndon Johnson sent him on a round-the-world trip to snap him out of it.

When a small boy in a hospital ward recognized him and cried out, "Hey Mister, your brother got shot," Kennedy paused, went to the child and said gently, "It's all right. I have another brother."

Weeks later, Teddy Kennedy was critically injured in an airplane crash. Bobby rushed to the hospital, afterwards took a long walk, and finally lay down in a field. He looked at the sky and said to a friend: "Somebody up there

doesn't like us. It's been a great year for the giggles, hasn't it." At the 1964 Democratic convention, his face was a study of passion and grief when a film on his brother's life caused an outburst of great feeling to roll through the hall.

There were times in his loneliness of 1964 that his closest friends thought he might quit. John R. Reilly, who worked with him since 1959, recalled one day in January, 1964, when Kennedy called his top aides at the Justice Department to his office to give them cuff links and then sol-

emnly told how his late brother felt about them. "It sounded like the end," Reilly said. "It was a going away speech."

But it wasn't, because Kennedy fought back, first to the Senate, and then to a stature which rivaled President Johnson's. Whether he was relentless or ruthless or dedicated isn't as important as the fact he was thoroughly in the game. Like his hero, Hemingway, he took on mountains, swirling rapids, sport and even confronted a rhinoceros in Kenya in 1966. At home, there was no end to water polo and touch football, and he required his son, Joe, to play too, though his leg was in a cast.

In his presidential campaign, there were perilous airplane landings, 80-mile-an-hour motorcades and Kennedy's constant fatalism. When he talked of threats on his life it was more in terms of expectancy than fear.

Now it is over. Young John Reilly got the news, had a heart seizure and is now in the intensive care ward at Georgetown Hospital. Walter Sheridan and the other loyalists dutifully perform their last chore for him. Their present numbness will dissolve into deep sorrow later.

Kennedy, in wry thoughtfulness, used to remark of his own Irish that "there's only a few of us left." Somehow the blend of his life led him once to say: "How can you make plans when you don't know you're going to be around? Fate is so unreliable. I have no plans."

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