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The Tragedy of Robert Kennedy

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

ROBERT KENNEDY: A Memoir. By Jack Newfield. 318 pages. Dutton. \$6.95.

THERE was a time when people were puzzled and a little annoyed by Jack Newfield. There he was, a charter member of S.D.S. and a spokesman for radical causes, palling around with Sen. Robert F. Kennedy of the Establishment. Worse, early in 1968, after all the liberals and activists had swarmed to Senator Eugene J. McCarthy, Jack Newfield was still sticking with Bobby.

And worst of all, he had begun to use his column in *The Village Voice* to put McCarthy down and to cheer Bobby's belated run for the Democratic Presidential nomination. After all, it was thought, if Kennedy succeeded, Newfield would go to work for him. Perhaps he was already working for him? Wasn't Newfield compromising himself? No, he said. He was not working for Robert Kennedy, nor would he ever work for him. And he was not compromising himself because he was a journalist and he was covering Kennedy. And being a "new journalist" he was covering him in depth. He was, as a matter of fact, writing a book.

Now, one year after the death of his subject, we have the book, "Robert Kennedy: A Memoir." As it turns out, it is not only a deeply moving and affectionate tribute to Newfield's fallen hero, and probably the best of several dozen books on R.F.K. to appear to date. It also justifies Mr. Newfield's stubborn loyalty to what seemed at times a base position.

Based on Experience

For one thing, unlike several products of the so-called new journalism I've encountered recently, Mr. Newfield's depth of coverage does not violate the boundaries of his experience. His book is based on "more than 150 conversations with Kennedy. . . . 10 notebooks filled "with quotations, observations, ideas, and anecdotes" compiled between September, 1966, when he began it, and June, 1968. He covered most of R.F.K.'s last campaign and interviewed over 100 of his friends, associates, and rivals. Everything he writes about Kennedy was experienced first hand and is recounted from a fixed vantage point, with the observer always clearly in focus.

For another thing, Mr. Newfield offers a portrait of Robert Kennedy (and of himself, too) that makes his position as a radical devotee entirely plausible. It is not that he was mesmerized by Kennedy, although his lower-class ghetto origins provided the chemistry for attraction. (It was reciprocated: Kennedy once said to him, "I'm jealous of the fact you grew up in a ghetto.") He was critical and told Kennedy so. He resented the "McCarthyite" phase, the performance on the McClellan Committee. He was contemptuous of Kennedy's record as Attorney General. He

saw a persisting "conservative," "Puritanical" strain. He thought Kennedy an "insure politician" to the end.

'He Wasn't Plastic'

But he had detected something unusual the first time he met the Senator in 1966 ("He wasn't plastic. He wasn't programmed.") In time he came to see Kennedy as a man with "an existentialist dimension" who "defined and created himself in action, and learned almost everything from experience." And his final judgment was that at the point of death, Kennedy had completed a terrible journey across the void between the old politics and the new. He had left behind the politics of "C.I.A.-tainted liberalism," of bosses, patronage, and union leaders—the politics of his older brother and Lyndon Johnson. He had begun to understand the new media and the new issues—television, alienation, civil rights, and the loathing for American involvement in Vietnam.

This judgment provides Mr. Newfield with the key to the last phases of Robert Kennedy's career. His brother's death had robbed him of his identity as younger brother, henchman, technician, no-man, and left him in a big sleep. He did not wake to take charge of the New York political scene because New York was and is a museum of the old politics. It took the agonizing development of his opposition to the Vietnam War to begin to rouse him.

More agonizing still was the prospect of breaking with his own past—the decision to oppose President Johnson. When it came (and it came, according to this account, before McCarthy's victory in New Hampshire) it was totally disorganized. And when L.B.J. withdrew, Kennedy "lost his cause and he lost his enemy," and he floated in limbo.

It was only gradually, in the industrial centers of Indiana and the slums of Nebraska, in the Indian territories of Arizona and the ghettos and grape fields of California, with the shock of Martin Luther King's assassination and the relief of losing in Oregon (it was possible to lose and still exist, he discovered) that he found what to stand for instead of what to stand against. And having found himself, and a constituency—the young, the poor, the lost, the dispossessed—he was cut down.

It is an interpretation that gives Robert Kennedy's life tragic dimension. (Indeed it increases one's belief that at this point in history any political leader who dares to reach out and touch the American people is daring tragedy, because to reach the people is now to touch their madness.) In Jack Newfield's handling, the tragedy is all the more poignant because he makes us believe with him, in the time and space of his story, that if Robert Kennedy had lived. . . .