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Recollections of Robert Kennedy

Only five years have passed since Robert Kennedy was murdered in Los Angeles, but I barely recognize the figure history has made of the man I knew at least a little.

Not that history is necessarily wrong. The point germane to the moment is that Robert Kennedy had the inner qualities which made it possible for him to shift ground without causing the heavens to fall.

The Robert Kennedy who has emerged after five years is an existential figure. He is idolized by the celebrities of the with-it world, and condemned by traditionalists.

The religious services said in his memory are ecumenical to the point of making John XXIII look square. He is widely hailed as a foe of poverty and war, and a special friend to blacks, young people, chicanos, and the dispossessed victims of imperialism abroad.

A foundation that bears his name is specially dedicated to minority groups. Younger journalists close to him have set up prizes for reporters who work to undo social injustice.

The lapidary phrases chiseled upon the stones of his memory bear the mark of misty prophets echoing the un-Cartesian principle that I don't think, therefore I am. Jack Newfield has him deep into Albert Camus. Pat Moynihan wrote of his death in Yeatsian numbers: "A terrible beauty was born."

Perhaps so. But the Robert Kennedy I knew was a different kind of person. He was much cooler, and much more disposed to calculate odds. He was also much less self-righteous. Indeed, during the period I knew him best—from 1963 through 1968—he was essentially a man in transition, picking his way carefully from one position to another.

On Vietnam, for example, he had been a piano-wire hawk. He had believed Indochina was important to America's destiny, and that the war there could be won if this country and its allies only adopted the guerrilla tactics of the other side. So he was all for counter-insurgency, and the teaching of ways to deal death silently in the night—by the knife thrust, and the loop of wire drawn around the neck.

He came off that position quite slowly and in stages. His final conversion was about as remote as possible from that of Paul on the road to Damascus. He did not suddenly see the light; he saw the light and the dark.

Having been prepared to fight the Communists, he understood the way out of the war was to negotiate with them. But he had no illusions about their terms, nor was he one to exalt the Hanoi regime and its puppets. He coldly insisted that the terms for peace would be stiff — participation by the Communists in the political processes of South Vietnam.

He had the guts, in other words, to face up to the logic of his position. Unlike almost everybody else who has

had to do with Vietnam, he didn't fool himself.

There, I think, lies the distinctive quality of Robert Kennedy. He had strong inner feelings, and he acted on those feelings. Sometimes the results were good. Nobody, I think, could seriously quarrel with his efforts to limit violence in the Cuba missile crisis.

Sometimes the results were mixed. In going after organized crime, he also promoted wiretapping and other invasions of privacy. Sometimes the results were awful. I don't suppose any Kennedy fan would now defend the Southern judges he appointed as Attorney General on the theory that Sen. James Eastland could be bought off.

But for better or worse, these actions flowed from a core of personal feeling. When things turned sour, Kennedy knew it. More than that, he understood the fault was in himself, not the stars. So he would cut his losses, regroup his thoughts, and shift ground.

One result is the wide variety of impressions still current about his historic role. Though I remember him one way, I have no confidence that those who have established his reputation in a different way are wrong.

But I do know that those who pro-

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United Press International

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ject present ills upon his past record — those who blame him for the explosion in Vietnam or Watergate or the excesses of the counter-culture — are profoundly wrong. Indeed, if there is anybody the country needs now, it is Robert Kennedy.

He was not a hollow man beset by unavowed self-doubts who covered his

inner emptiness by playing roles. His inclination was to tell the truth to others and to himself. Stiff self-isolation was not in his being. So when he was wrong, he could adjust his position without making it seem, as more recent leaders have made it seem, that it would be the end of the world.

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