

# Behind the Smiling Public Man

**THE PAPERS OF ADLAI E. STEVENSON: Vol. III, Governor of Illinois, 1949-1953. Edited by Walter Johnson and Carol Evans. Little, Brown. 621 pp. \$15.**

By RICHARD J. WALTON

READING THIS FINE SERIES from the beginning evokes both rare pleasure and great sadness. Pleasure because it brings the reader closer to a man of uncommon decency, humanity, humor and quality as a public servant. Sadness because it reminds us of the kind of man we rejected at a time when so many of us are embarrassed by the kind of men we have selected. It is melancholy enough to contemplate Nixon or Agnew in themselves, but to compare them to the Adlai Stevenson of these public statements and private letters is to test them by a standard beyond them.

This is not to suggest that Stevenson did not have his ambitions, his vanities. He did, of course, but as his private letters demonstrate, he continuously subjected his own motives to the kind of rigorous self-examination that seems foreign to most politicians. The period of these papers was a crucial one. Almost immedi-

RICHARD J. WALTON is the author of *Cold War and Counterrevolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy and Remnants of Power: The Last Tragic Years of Adlai Stevenson*. He is now editing U Thant's memoirs.

ately after his inauguration as governor of Illinois, his wife left the executive mansion, with a formal separation and divorce to follow. This, his letters make movingly plain, distressed him terribly, as did his separation from the three sons he loved so much. Despite the feeling of loss, despite the feeling of guilt that he had failed as husband and father, despite a loneliness that sometimes threatened to overwhelm him, despite these things (or perhaps, in part, because of them), he threw himself, almost recklessly in terms of energy and time, into bringing progressive, reform government to a large, complex state with a legislature that was for half his term divided and for the second half entirely Republican.

There were, to be sure, some failures but there is no doubt that Stevenson was a successful governor, demonstrating great skill at politics, in both the broadest and narrowest sense of that word. His success was such that he quickly became a national figure and in public and private was often mentioned as a future president. This is pretty heady stuff for most politicians but Stevenson wrote to a dear friend: "Must Caesar forever gather laurels to be happy . . . The stuff of greatness is goodness, serenity, wisdom — not conquest. . . ." Politicians like to say that kind of thing in public to demonstrate their humility while scheming in private how to scramble up the ladder. Yet this kind of thoughtfulness is a constant thread in Stevenson's private correspondence. And his letters leave absolutely no doubt that he did not want the presidential nomination in 1952,

that he wanted to finish the job he had started as governor, that he doubted his capacity. Although a sense of duty prevented him from making a Sherman-like refusal of the nomination, he did just about everything short of that to ward it off.

Stevenson also had a sensitivity rare in politicians. When newsmen began to crowd around, sensing a major new political figure, he wrote: "I found this courtesy and voluble flattery from those who sniff the wind too sharply highly distasteful." Later, he came to like many newsmen and trust many, but he recognized early what many public figures never do: that although genuine friendship may follow, newspeople try to get close to public figures not because of their charm and intrinsic value but because they are the basic commodity of their trade and, all too often, because some vicarious satisfaction is obtained from being close to power and celebrity.

Many of Stevenson's public papers still make impressive reading: his statement as to why he made a deposition favorable to Alger Hiss, his veto of state antisubversive legislation, his scathing attacks on McCarthyism, his warning that the United States must "thread (its) way between imperialism and isolation, between the disavowal of the responsibilities of our power and the assertion of our power beyond our resources." And, of course, the celebrated veto of the Cat Bill, legislation that would mandate the restraint of cats to protect birds and even permit the use of traps to catch roaming cats.

. . . To escort a cat abroad on

a leash is against the nature of the cat, and to permit it to venture forth for exercise unattended into a night of new dangers is against the nature of the owner. Moreover, cats perform useful service, particularly in rural areas, in combatting rodents — work they necessarily perform alone and without regard for property lines. . . . The problem of cat versus bird is as old as time. If we attempt to resolve it by legislation who knows but what we may be called upon to take sides as well in the age old problems of dog versus cat, bird versus bird, or even bird versus worm.

Some readers will prefer the private papers, the letters that demonstrate Stevenson's concern for his family and friends, his self-doubts, his grace, his anguish, his constant

interest in young people and, as always, the funny stories. These letters give a marvelous view of life in the upper classes as Stevenson and his friends move easily, and gaily, amongst each other in modest and well-bred luxury.

As with the first two volumes, the editors have performed prodigies of research in digging up so many letters and they have skillfully provided useful commentaries so the papers and letters can be understood in context. The only cavil is minor indeed: some of the letters add little and in so long a book could profitably have been eliminated. This is a good book and I'm looking forward to the next one, dealing with Stevenson's remarkable first presidential campaign. □