

# JFK and the Role of the President

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The tenth anniversary of John F. Kennedy's death finds his political heirs in full cry against the office of the presidency, which he prized above all others and filled so briefly but so well.

His former aides, like Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., are

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warning "runaway presidency" and the "imperial presidency." The

Democratic senators who claim the Kennedy mantle are competing in the denunciations of an office one says has grown "larger than life and larger than law."

One wonders whether any of them has reviewed what Mr. Kennedy said about the presidency in the National Press Club speech of Jan. 14, 1960, that marked the opening of his White House campaign.

To reread those words in today's atmosphere is startling, for Mr. Kennedy sounds as if he lived, not just in another decade, but another political world. One can conclude, with the revisionist historians, that he was the evil genius who seduced a gullible generation into granting the White House the power that spawned Vietnam, Watergate and a hundred other horrors.

Or one can conclude, as I would, that the current drumfire of criticism of the power of the President is misdirected, and go on to re-examine, with Mr. Kennedy, the conditions that make the exercise of that power legitimate.

"Whatever the political affiliation of our next President," he said that day, "whatever his views may be on all the issues and problems that rush in on us, he must above all be the chief executive in every sense of the word. He must be prepared to exercise the fullest powers of that office — all that are specified and some that are not."

Mr. Kennedy quoted with approval Woodrow Wilson's statement that "the President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can," and said, almost eagerly, that if the next President "is the man the times demand," he would discover "that to be a big man in the White House inevitably brings cries of dictatorship."

"Domestically," he said, "the President must initiate policies and devise laws to meet the needs of the nation. And he must be prepared to use all the resources of his office to insure the enactment of that legislation — even when conflict is the result."

As for foreign policy, the John Kennedy of 1960 reads even more peculiarly in today's climate. "It is the President alone who must make the major decisions of

our foreign policy," he said. "If a brushfire threatens some part of the globe, he alone can act, without waiting for the Congress." In the question period, the New York Times reported, "Mr. Kennedy expressed the belief that the vast presidential powers embraced the ability 'to place us in a war . . . without the consent of Congress.'"

Well, there it is, and no amount of Camelot camouflage can disguise the fact that John Kennedy argued a view of presidential power diametrically opposite to that which is in fashion today. Embarrassing? No, because the point is that he argued it, openly and boldly, in defiance of a popular President Eisenhower, who symbolized an opposite concept of leadership, at the very outset of what was, for Mr. Kennedy, an uphill campaign.

"This was," as James Reston wrote in his column that day, "no attempt to ride the current popular waves of illusion . . . honest men and women will differ and differ violently about the senator's characterization . . . but right or wrong, he has at least started to

discuss serious issues in a major arena where they cannot be ignored or brushed off . . . what Senator Kennedy is at least attempting to do is to force these issues into the open."

Forcing issues into the open was the way he ran his campaign and it was the way he governed. There was nothing timid about his approach to power, but he understood that the exercise of power was legitimate only when those he sought to lead understood and approved the purposes for which it was used.

Thus, the Kennedy years became a time of great debate — over church-state relations, policies for economic growth, civil rights, the space program, defense needs and, yes, Indochina. John Kennedy led that debate, deliberately forcing issues into the open, because he understood that his role as President required him to organize his party for partisan debate and to occupy the "bully pulpit" to stimulate broad discussion of national purpose.

In all these areas, President Kennedy accepted that the public judgment, rendered through the political process, would ultimately control his use of presidential power. Where that public judgment was equivocal, as it was in many cases, he delayed; where it was clear, he acted.

He did not lock the reality of choice, enter war by stealth or conduct a presidential campaign by covert subversion of the opposition.

It was his tragedy and the country's that a murderer cut short his effort to demonstrate the utility of this kind of presidency. It is a greater tragedy that his two successors have been men

who exploited the power of the presidency, without accepting the preconditions which Mr. Kennedy understood made the exercise of that power legitimate.

But every syllable of his Press Club speech reminds us that he would protest that diminution of the presidential office is not the answer to the abuse of its power.