JFK Era: Subtle, Sweep

By KARL E. MEYER
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He came in with a snowstorm and the symbolism was flawlessly right on inauguration day, Jan. 20, 1961.

There was no premonition of tragedy, but rather a sense of rebirth. The capital was mantled in beauty as the oldest president yielded office to the youngest man ever elected chief executive of the United States.

It was much more than a change of administration. It was also a change of generations, a change of outlook — and, most immediately apparent, a change of style.

When John Fitzgerald Kennedy became the 35th president, he appeared to fulfill Robert Frost's augury that an age of poetry and power was commencing in Washington.

Chapter Is Unfinished

But the poetry is now hushed, and the promise of power wisely used is now an unfinished chapter of a history entitled, "Let us begin . . ." We are left with memories of a singular and gifted man, memories that sustain us following a tragedy as unspeakable as it was incomprehensible. None of us suspected that in retrospect the inaugural snow would seem a shroud.

Every president is a bundle of men — the chief of state who admonishes us to be better than we are; the taskmaster of a bureaucracy; the champion of a party, and, not least, in this case the father of a family whose every trivial habit was watched and copied by the nation. More than most, President Kennedy made of these fragments of official functions a harmonious whole.

This swiftly became apparent during the first hundred days. If he did not give us a New Deal, he did provide an exhilarating vision of the dignity of political life. In every aspect of government — small and large — he insisted on trained competence, on grace and integrity, on idealism tempered with a shrewd awareness of the possible. If the substance of his program did not differ dramatically from his predecessor's, it certainly contrasted in style.

"Instinct for Reality"

The most obvious element of that style was articulateness. The clipped cadences of the inaugural address set the standard for his other great utterances as president. They

Also reflected the man, a man who could be ambiguous but who was seldom diffuse or banal.

"He brought an unsparing instinct for reality to bear on the platitudes and pieties of society," Mr. Kennedy once said of Robert Frost. The words applied to the president at his best.

Yet more fundamental than eloquence were Mr. Kennedy's sense of history, his courage, his temperance, his belief in reason — and all of these were laced with a potent dram of wit.

The president did not excel at slapstick or sarcasm; his weapon was irony, which he used like a rapier, and sometimes so deftly that the victim only slowly became aware that his head had been figuratively separated from his neck.

His favorite foil was the press, but, unlike some other great men, his sense of humor extended even to himself. He was never more memorably engaging that at the White House correspondents' banquet in May, 1962, at which he mockingly protested the rise in the ticket prices for the dinner — this, after the press had parodied his own attack on Big Steel.

Courage Was Understated

Only the other day, though it feels like a chasm of time, Mr. Kennedy deflated Barry Goldwater by remarking that the Arizona senator had spent a busy week in, among other things, selling the TVA and interfering in the Greek election.

With his death, President Kennedy has left Washington not only a sadder but also a colder place.

The courage in office was unadvertised, and was the more impressive for its understated quality. Though President Kennedy had his share of Irish temper, his nature was not choleric and his anger seldom became rancor. But when he felt personally betrayed, or when he believed that a deep principle was involved, he could display a spinal fortitude that belied his need for a rocking chair.

As a presidential candidate, he made what was probably his greatest speech before an audience of Protestant clergymen. The subject was religious bigotry; his delivery blended passion and precision; the place, ironically, was Dallas, Tex.

As president, his courage was twice tested by Cuba — first in failure, then in success. Perhaps the most impressive moment was his acceptance of full responsibility for the debacle at the Bay of Pigs — and his refusal to redeem a fiasco at the risk of American blood and a world war. And though the defeat cut cruelly and deeply into his self-esteem, he disdained making a ritual scapegoat of any adviser.

His Greatest Moment

In what was at once his greatest and most perilous moment as chief executive, Mr. Kennedy forced Nikita Khrushchev to pull nuclear missile bases out of Cuba before the eyes of the world — but he did not push the Soviet leader into a corner. With the full measure of his ability he honored his inaugural commitments: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate." In triumph, he showed the same restraint that earlier had marked his acceptance of bitter defeat.

Domestically, the strength of his backbone was demonstrated during a summer of racial discontent. Though the president was aware that his support of a strong civil rights program could rend his party and cost him popularity, he accepted both risks — with an almost awesome equanimity.

This detachment frequently drained the drama from his gestures and gave a misleading coldness to his presidency. Yet that was also an indispensable element of the Kennedy style — an abhorrence of posturing. As president, he placed more confidence in the verdict of history than in the clamor of the crowd. And the sense of history was perhaps the secret of his serenity.

A Prodigious Reader

President Kennedy was a prodigious reader who was steeped in the records of the past and absorbed by the literature of the present. His

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chief military aide, Brig. Gen. Chester V. Clifton, was astonished to discover that Mr. Kennedy even glanced critically over the monthly list of books like Barbara Tuchman's "The Guns of August."

From his reading, the president acquired a sense of detachment about himself and about the limits of his power. To his liberal friends, this trait was at once exasperating and winning; to them, he sometimes appeared more a Hamlet than a Hotspur. Like Lincoln, he seemed to feel that he was as much controlled by events as controlling events. In death, his view has acquired a poignant authority.

His favorite biography was Lord David Cecil's "Melbourne," a book about the urbane Whig who was Queen Victoria's first prime minister.

In both the flattering and unflattering sense, the choice disclosed something of Mr. Kennedy's definition of himself. For the Whig aristocracy, like the president's own family, blended moderate liberalism, an attitude of noblesse oblige, a conventional if broad ranging interest in the arts and a coolness about excessive commitments.

Craftsman in Politics

Above all, leaders like Melbourne who dominated British politics in the early 19th century were temperate men. They wanted to civilize power as much as to use it. They regarded noisy public dispute as a mark of political failure, not as a device for compelling consent.

In his relations with fellow politicians, as well as with the press, Mr. Kennedy showed a reluctance for turbulent combat. A gifted craftsman in politics himself, he understood the political problems of others.

When a president of Argentina campaigned for office on a platform calling for a cancellation of contracts with foreign oil producers, Mr. Kennedy's restraint testified to his fratenal feeling for another elective official's need to keep a promise.

The same tolerance marked his relations with a congress nominally dominated by his own party. He could be tough in private, but his voice was soft in public. Through all the vicissitudes of political life, he retained an abiding faith in the power of reason to affect the destiny of men. It was President Kennedy who saw to it that a "hot line" was installed in the White House to give reason a chance before mankind plunged over a brink.

His belief in human intelligence gave a glow to his style. More, perhaps, than any other president since Thomas Jefferson, Mr. Kennedy cherished not only learning but the learned. His ideal of government seemed to be part academy, part precinct club. His mind was open to fresh ideas, and his official residence was open to anybody — from nobel laureates to lowly subordinates who could impart a ferment.

Not Unlike Lincoln

It may be that when he took the oath of office, John F. Kennedy was still the carefree playboy of hostile propaganda, though the evidence is to the contrary. Lincoln was also more an ambitious politician than a prophet of freedom when circumstances contribed to make him president on the eve of civil war.

But the heights chill as well as elevate, and before long Mr. Kennedy comprehended the responsibility in his hands. In two speeches—at the United Nations in 1961 and at American university only a few months ago—the president disclosed his troubled reflections about a world that modern weapons could turn into a flaming pyre.

In private discussions, the president tirelessly reiterated his feeling that mankind walks a narrow ledge. However he had to zig and zag, the goal he sought was peace, and his methods were those of reason. Those who admired him never doubted his earnestness, though they were sometimes impatient with his caution.

A Savage Irony

He now belongs to history, and his confidence that time would soon bear him out, bringing the country to where the land was bright, remains an imponderable. So does his buoyant faith in reason.

For the most savage irony is that this Apostle of the Enlightenment, this advocate of rational discourse, was cut down by the very fanaticism that as president he sought to contain.

He paid with his life in a cause that remains in doubt. The last page of his biography must be written with what Virgil called the tears of things.