

- He sought to make sanity and realism the core of his political philosophy.

HISTORY AS TRAGEDY*

KARL E. MEYER.

John F. Kennedy died a mortal on Friday and was already a legend when he was buried on Monday in a ceremony that strangely mixed tenderness and dignity. The princes and presidents lent pomp to the final rites and the demeanour of his widow was, as one reporter wrote, like that of a queen in classic tragedy. But what made the funeral unberably moving was the uncounted tens of thousands of young people who came from afar as if by invisible command to Washington. At freezing dawn on Monday, they formed most of a line far more than a mile long of those waiting to pass the President's coffin in the dimly lit dome of the Capitol. Until one stood with them, it was impossible fully to grasp what President Kennedy meant to the generation for which he spoke.

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For four days, beginning on Friday, television carried nothing but news about Mr. Kennedy's death and for once without commercial interruptions. As from another world, there were glimpses of Dallas and that city's slack-jawed police, then the funeral itself, endless panel discussions, and throughout the tolling of bells and the muffled beat of drums. Friends sought each other's warmth; floors were littered with newspapers; there was a mingled sense of incredulity, indignation and remorse as most of us became aware in Washington how much we had taken for granted the singular man in the White House

So soon afterwards, how can one pick up the fragments and make of them a meaningful pattern? Yet surely there is one — the theme of violence, both domestic and international. The

circumstances of his death were ironic enough — a sniper's bullet at high noon, fired by a madman, brought down a President who sought to make sanity and realism the core of his political philosophy. But even more ironic, the murder of this gifted man may make it possible for his far less imposing successor to approach unexpected greatness by carrying out the Kennedy' programme.

Johnson as President

During his early three years as Vice-President, Lyndon Baines Johnson remained a stranger to much of the world. He is no stranger to Washington. His strengths and weaknesses are far better known here than were those of Harry S. Truman in 1945. At the outset, it ought to be said that Mr. Johnson is a politician to the tip of his boots, a seasoned and shrewd craftsman with the capacity of being a big man. In terms of learning and intellectual insight, the new President falls short of the standards set by Mr. Kennedy — no brilliant dinners can be expected at the White House during the Texan's tenure. But in

terms of temperament, he is as much the prudent realist as the man he supplants.

The three pivotal facts about President Johnson are that he is a product of the South, the Senate and the stream of populism that forms one part of the Democratic Party's tradition. His identity as a southerner is at once an asset and liability — indeed, during his campaign for the Presidential nomination in 1960, Mr. Johnson vainly tried to describe himself as a westerner. It is an asset because his roots in Texas (which was a Confederate state) may tend to neutralize southern attacks. He is the first President from the South since the Civil War (Woodrow Wilson, born in Virginia, is counted as a New Jersey man). Since his renomination next year is considered certain, Mr. Johnson is in a position to nullify once and for all a demeaning 'law' of eligibility in American politics — that no southerner may head a national ticket. He can do for his region what Mr. Kennedy did for his religion.

But as a southerner, the President may be unavoidable.

ably identified with the racial barbarisms of his region. His own record is the best answer to this; as Senate Majority Leader he guided the passage, in 1958, of the first civil rights legislation to be enacted since Reconstruction days. As Vice-President, his speeches on civil rights have been unequivocal, and his efforts on behalf of non-discriminatory employment have won no applause from the bigots. It is conceivable that as a native southerner he can do more to heal the sickness of Dixie than could a Catholic from Boston, whose very manner was anathema in the South.

He is also a child of the Senate and his whole outlook is coloured by his years as a legislator. Few deny his efficacy as Majority Leader, though his manipulative approach irritated liberals. The Johnson technique was to find the common denominator, settle differences in the cloakroom, and obtain consent on the floor with a minimum of debate. He is far more familiar with the legislative process — and is more highly regarded by the ageing potentates on Capitol

Hill — than was the case with Mr. Kennedy. Circumstance has made Lyndon the President at a moment when Congress is floundering and the need for deft leadership obvious. In this area, his background will certainly not be a handicap.

Though he abhors political labels, his place in the spectrum is to the left of centre on many domestic issues. During the Thirties, he was a New Deal Congressman trusted by FDR, whom he idolised. His ideological background derives from the agrarian populism of the South — in exact counterpoint to the urban, Catholic, melting-pot background of Mr. Kennedy. As Mr. Johnson rose in the Senate hierarchy, he shifted to the middle — and on some issues, notably tax privileges for the oil plutocracy, he was solidly with the fight. But every politician responds to the pressures around him, and as Chief Executive of the United States Mr. Johnson has been vaulted to an eminence that changes the landscape around him. He will probably be more liberal as President than he was as Senator,

especially since he will be under more pressure from the left than Mr. Kennedy was.

Where there are the most reservations is in the broad field of foreign affairs. Mr. Johnson's utterances on foreign policy have been orthodox and uninspired — set pieces laden with Cold War clichés. Yet here his relative inexperience may assure a broad continuity because Mr. Johnson will surely lean heavily on his predecessor's advisers. Moreover, as Mr. Kennedy found, the intractable realities of the East-West stalemate, of ideological competition in poorer nations, and of coalition diplomacy all tend to restrict the choices open to any American President.

In fact, Lyndon Johnson may not only do no worse than Mr. Kennedy; he may do better. Three reasons can be advanced to support this hope. First, every new President has a honeymoon period in which he can expect national assent and, secondly, Mr. Johnson comes to his office at a critical time for his party — a national election is less than a year

away. As a matter of simple self-survival, the Democratic majority in Congress will most probably fall behind a new President in desperate need of a record to run on in 1964. Add to this a third reason — the way in which Mr. Johnson succeeded to office. He carries with him not only the emotional afterglow of a popular President, but he also takes command at a time of national contrition, when the country may be prepared to do for a dead John F. Kennedy what it was unwilling to do for John F. Kennedy alive. The brutal drama of the assassination has given the President a claim to greatness that was still only a promise while he breathed.

The Assassins

We may never know the full truth of the assassination, now that the suspected sniper himself has been murdered. Was Oswald the instrument for someone else, or did the motive force spring from his own psychopathic mind? The ineptness of the Dallas police led to the killing of the one person best able to clear up the matter — and we are left with

the all-too-pat explanation that a self-styled Marxist carried out in deed what the fanatic right wing has encouraged by word.

What is clear is that Oswald, if his guilt may be assumed, acted in accord with a dreadful American tradition. Four presidents out of 34 have now been murdered, while at least two others were brushed by death (FDR and Truman) and Theodore Roosevelt was almost killed when he campaigned for the Presidency in 1912. This record testifies to the deep stain of violence in the vaunted American way of life; in the end, Mr. Kennedy perished under the savage code of the old frontier.

Strangely, one of Lincoln's first political speeches saw in lawlessness the chief threat to American political institutions. Speaking in Springfield, Illinois, in 1838, a time when mob outrages 'form the everyday news', Lincoln warned that all the armies of the world, with a Bonaparte for a commander, 'could not, by force, take a drink from the Ohio or make a track

on the Blue Ridge.' He then said:

At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer if it ever reaches us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.

I hope that I am not over-wary; but if I am not, there is even now something of ill-omen amongst us. I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country; the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgment of courts; and the worse than savage mobs for the executive minister of justice.

It was only a few months ago that President Kennedy ventured into Alabama to exhort American citizens to support the rule of law. Only a few weeks ago, journalists visiting in Mississippi were told by responsible officials that the safety of the President could not be gua-

ranted if he should make a visit. And in Dallas, not long ago, an American who was twice Democratic candidate for the Presidency was assaulted by a mob worthy of Caracas or Baghdad.

In a very sombre sense, the unifying element in Mr. Kennedy's brief years as President was the attempt to apply the restraint of reason to lawlessness, domestic and foreign. The racial explosion was beyond doubt the most menacing event of the Kennedy years, and the menace survives his death. The recipient violence in Alabama or Mississippi finds its analogue in lawless relations of sovereign states, some of them armed with weapons that could (as Mr. Kennedy once said) make a funeral pyre of the world. It is no caprice that the right-wing fanatics of Dallas loathe with equal fervour both the United Nations and civil rights. That a President who ably defended both should die in that city is more than a tragedy of history; it is a warning portent of the power of satanic madness.

JFK: Nunc Dimittis

He came in with a snow-storm, and the setting was

flawlessly right on Inauguration Day, 20 January 1961. There was no premonition of tragedy, but rather a sense of rebirth in a capital mantled in beauty as the oldest President yielded power to the youngest man ever elected Chief Executive of the United States. More than a change of administrations, it was a change of generations, a change of outlook and most immediately apparent, a change of style. When John Fitzgerald Kennedy was sworn in, he appeared to fulfill Robert Frost's augury that an age of poetry and power was commencing in Washington. But the poetry is now hushed, and the promise wisely used is now an unfinished chapter in a volume entitled, 'Let Us Begin . . .' None of us suspected that in retrospect the Inaugural snow would seem as a shroud.

It is too early to fix Mr. Kennedy's place in history because so much of what he initiated was left for others to complete. But two of his achievements seem likely to take root. He was not a man given to easy commitments, but before his death he embarked on two major ven-

tures — for the first time in this century, he placed the power and might of his office behind a dispossessed race whose second-class status demeaned all citizens; at the same time, he took the world to the precipice of a war but followed his unexampled personal triumph by deeds intended to eliminate the risk of a holocaust through madness or miscalculation. The special pathos of his death is that he seemed on the verge of broadening his commitment.

Something else, however, is irretrievably lost — the brilliance of his presence, the glow of his style. To Americans like myself who were near to his age, he renewed our pride in our country and gave a dignity to the political calling. If we fretted at his failures and reproached him for his excessive caution, it was because we judged him in terms of his capacity for greater things. His unflinching wit, which he could turn on himself, his literacy, his physical grace and his sense of history were part of a harmonious whole. By vir-

tue of television, and his superb performance at press conferences, he became in life an intensely personal figure to millions; in death he leaves a mournful void.

A prodigious reader, he cherished not only learning, but the learned. His ideal of government seemed to be half academy, half precinct-headquarters. He opened the White House to anybody who could impart a ferment and his good humour as a host was legend. His favourite biography was Lord David Cecil's *Melbourne*, and the choice tells a good deal about the strengths and weaknesses of his self-definition. Like the urbane Whigs of Melbourne's age, he blended a studied detachment, broad if conventional interest in the arts, moderate liberalism, family pride and belief in reason. It is savage irony that this child of the Enlightenment was cut down by the very fanaticism that he sought to contain. The cause for which he stood remains in doubt, and the last page of his biography must be written with what Virgil called the tears of things.