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KENNEDY: THE MAN AND HIS LEGEND

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Kennedy's tenure of the White House was the shortest since the United States became a world Power. The youngest President to come, he was the quickest to go. There can now be no Age of Kennedy, with a gradual fulfillment of policies and a descriptive meaning for a whole epoch of American life. The most that he was able to do was to open doors through which others, if they have the will and the capacity, may be able to walk.

Compared with the greatest Presidents of American history therefore he inevitably leaves more promise and less achievement behind him. Yet, aided perhaps by the manner of his death, it is difficult to believe that his name will not live with theirs. He will be the great "might-have-been," the sym-

bol of fate in its most vicious and retaliatory mood.

Yet his achievement was by no means all still to come. He had revitalized Washington and, still more important, he had led the world with almost faultless skill and precision through the most dangerous crisis in its existence. The hackneyed criticism of John Kennedy is that he was a cold and calculating man, unwilling to take political risks, unable to infuse great-crises with the warmth of human sympathy. This criticism is at once exaggerated and irrelevant.

Calculation

Of course he was capable of political calculation. No one who has read the story first of his fight for the nomination, then for the Presidency, can doubt that he

was a political planner of the most careful and determined kind. I am very glad that he was. Otherwise Richard Nixon would have been in the White House for the past three years.

To suggest, however, that he habitually subordinated vital policy decisions to narrow political considerations is nonsense. In and after the Cuban crisis he did precisely the reverse. So anxious was he not to damage the future world prospect by any humiliation of Khrushchev that he completely failed to bring home to the American people the magnitude of the victory which he had won.

His decisions were, admittedly, not emotional ones. But who would have wished that they were? To cite the Cuban crisis once again, the essence of his strength was his ability to watch the cases for and against the different courses of action being built up or destroyed, without rushing into a prior commitment to one or another; and then, when all of the relevant information and arguments were available, to make a clear decision in favour of the one that seemed

best. He himself attributed the wisdom of the choice to the time that was available for the process; at least equal credit should be given to his own capacity to evaluate the evidence objectively.

No doubt the reverse side of the coin was a certain hardness of presentation. As a speaker he had force and clarity, and at times a touch of eloquence. When I first heard him at the height of his Presidential campaign on Columbus Day, 1960, I listened to him making five New York speeches on that day. All of them were invigorating, one or two of them were moving. His command of widely contrasting audiences was complete.

He was not, perhaps, an orator in the fullest sense. The play and interplay between himself and the audience was not sufficient for that. Despite his Massachusetts-Irish, he could never have made a vast audience in the Boston Bowl chant back slogans at him as Roosevelt did in 1940. Nor could he pick out with inspired timing the one moment for a launching of an idea and the one simple phrase in

which to do it, so that millions of stolid minds might be shifted.

But this is a rare gift indeed, and liable to be perverted even when it exists. For most practical purposes Kennedy's eloquence was a worthy and persuasive vehicle for his clear and cogent thoughts.

His private personality was far removed from that of a man who lived a life of narrow political calculation. That he had gaiety and charm goes without saying. But he also had sustained intellectual interest and zest. As any President must do, he saw an almost unending stream of visitors. But he chose them on the basis of who would interest him just as much as who would be useful to him. And he gave enough time and contributed enough energy to these interviews to make them an exchange of ideas and not merely an empty formality.

I saw him in this way one evening last January. When I came into the room he was standing talking to Sorensen, Salinger and a naval aide. In a moment they left and he settled down in his rock-

ing chair; there were no further interruptions for 40 minutes.

Rapid fire

Three features of the conversation remain imprinted on my mind. The first is that he talked about half the time and encouraged me to do the same. Almost any other Head of Government would have struck a different balance. Either he would merely have answered questions or he would merely have asked them — perhaps resting his mind during the answers. Kennedy chose the much more stimulating and exhausting middle course. He asked a series of rapid fire questions about all sorts of subjects — economic growth, Europe and de Gaulle, the Labour Party. He interrupted the answers, he gave his own views, he followed up a weak or unconvincing reply by forcing one hard against the ropes.

My second memory of this conversation, therefore, is that it was peculiarly intellectually testing. My third memory is that the President, during these interchanges,

contributed two pieces of original, rather unconventional analysis. That, again, was unexpected from any Head of State.

Yet the inexorable intellectual vigour was only one facet of Kennedy's personality. He could turn his mind in much more frivolous directions. He could switch away from the highest affairs of State and back again with the greatest speed. He had the self-confidence to feel that he could always get his eye back on the ball at the right moment.

Self-confidence

This self-confidence (not for a moment to be confused with a misplaced arrogance) was indeed one of the great changes which the New Frontier brought to Washington. It stemmed directly from the President. He gathered around himself a team of outstanding intellectual quality. They were not strikingly experienced in affairs of government. They were not strongly politically connected in any traditional sense. They came from Harvard and the Ford Motor Company and from

private law practice. But together — McNamara, Robert Kennedy, Bundy, Gilpatric, Sorensen — they amounted to a most formidable group.

Kennedy's great gift was that he could use them effortlessly. He trusted them. They respected him. He could give them the freest of rope without ever endangering his own command. Whether the same system can work equally well under another President remains to be seen.

Under Kennedy, however, it performed the great service of increasing the respect of the American people for their system of government. He was elected by the narrowest of majorities after a bitterly fought campaign. He replaced the most widely popular President in American history. He was young and relatively inexperienced. His politics were disliked by most of America's more prosperous citizens. Yet there was hardly ever a whisper that he was not up to the job.

He was frustrated by the conservative majority (partly Republican and partly De-

mocratic) in the Congress. He provoked disagreement and criticism and satire. But he and his Administration were never sneered at or patronized. They greatly in-

creased the prestige not only of the executive branch of American government but of democratic leadership throughout the world. — *The Observer*, November 24, 1963.

SOVIET REACTION

Normal Moscow radio programmes were suspended. The news announcements were followed by organ music. This was an unprecedented tribute. Russian television played Tchaikovsky's Pathetique Symphony after a news bulletin. It went off the air later, still playing solemn music. Moscow radio stayed on the air, also playing funeral music.

A person of broad outlook who realistically accepted the situation and tried to find ways for negotiated settlement of the international problems which now divide the world. The Soviet Government and the Soviet people share the deep grief of the American people over this great loss — SOVIET PREMIER KHRUSHCHEV, to *President Johnson*.