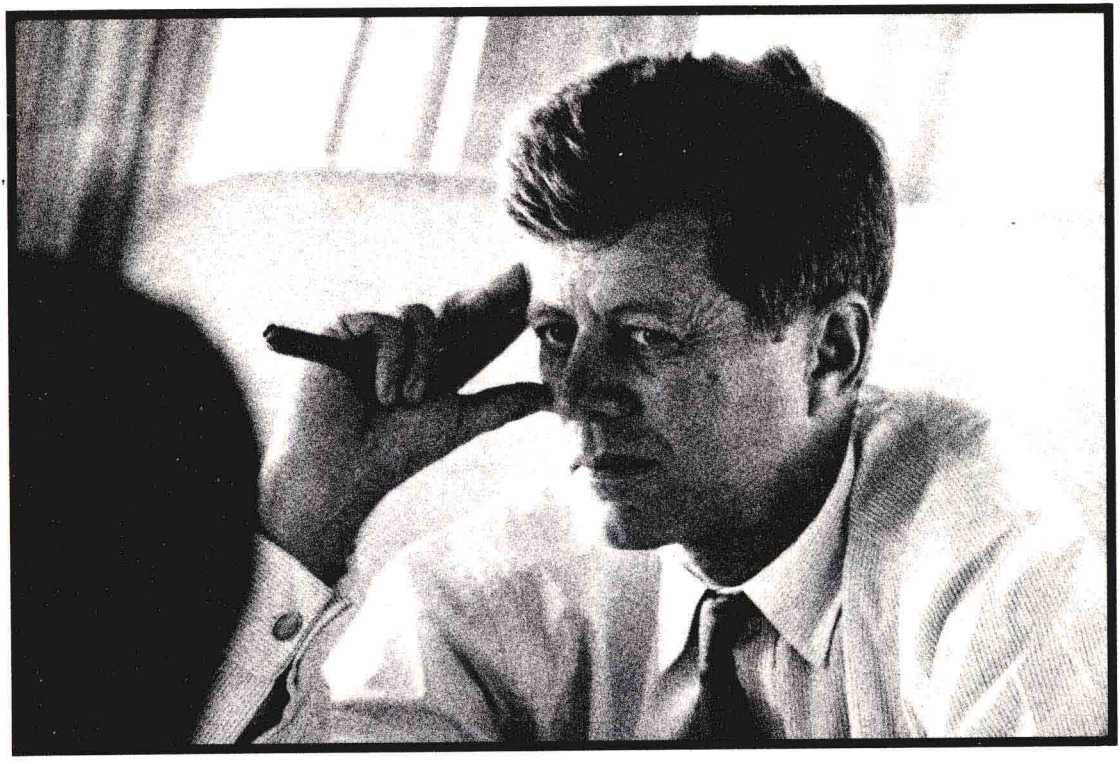
PRESIDENT KENNEDY



PROFILE OF POWER

RICHARD REEVES

ALSO BY RICHARD REEVES

The Reagan Detour

Passage to Peshawar

American Journey: Traveling with Tocqueville in Search of Democracy in America

Convention

A Ford, Not a Lincoln

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This book is for Fiona O'Neill Reeves

And for her mother, Catherine O'Neill

And her grandmothers, Dorothy Forshay Reeves
and Bridget Ruddy Vesey

John F. Kennedy's favorite book was Melbourne *by David Cecil, the biography of William Lamb, Viscount Melbourne, who was prime minister of Great Britain for seven years, from 1834 to 1841, serving as the political mentor of Queen Victoria. The book was published in 1939 and this is part of Cecil's description of the young William Lamb:*

"To be a thinker one must believe in the value of disinterested thought. William's education had destroyed his belief in this, along with all other absolute beliefs, and in doing so removed the motive force necessary to set his creative energy working. The spark that should have kindled his fire was unlit, with the result that he never felt moved to make the effort needed to discipline his intellectual processes, to organize his sporadic reflections into a coherent system of thought. He had studied a great many subjects, but none thoroughly; his ideas were original, but they were fragmentary, scattered, unmatured. This lack of system meant further that he never overhauled his mind to set its contents in order in the light of a considered standard of value—so that the precious and the worthless jostled each other in its confused recesses; side by side with fresh and vivid thoughts lurked contradictions, commonplaces and relics of the conventional prejudices of his rank and station. Even his scepticism was not consistent; though he doubted the value of virtue, he never doubted the value of being a gentleman. Like so many aristocratic persons he was an amateur.

"His amateurishness was increased by his hedonism. For it led him to pursue his thought only in so far as the process was pleasant. He shirked intellectual drudgery. Besides, the life he lived was all too full of distracting delights. If he felt bored reading and cogitating, there was always a party for him to go to where he could be perfectly happy without having to make an effort. Such temptations were particularly hard to resist for a man brought up in the easygoing, disorderly atmosphere of Melbourne House, where no one was ever forced to be methodical or conscientious and where there was always something entertaining going on. If virtue was hard to acquire there, pleasure came all too easily."

PRESIDENT KENNEDY

Introduction

The Emperor, Ryszard Kupscinski's book about the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, begins with the writer searching through Addis Ababa for the men who once were Selassie's court. Each tells his story of life around the King of Kings, from the man who took down every spoken word, the Minister of the Pen, to the high and rich officials whose lives could be made or broken by a glance or the hint of a frown in public from the man at the center of the world they knew.

It was a marvelous portrayal of life at court, the circle around power. Reading it, though, I found myself wondering what this all looked like to Selassie. What was it like at the center? Knowing little of emperors or Ethiopia, I began to think about what it was like to be the President of the United States. Though I had written books on three Presidents and had talked and corresponded with a fourth over the years, I realized that most of what I knew, or thought I knew, was basically the testimony of the men and women of White House courts, the circles around the power of each of those Presidents.

Eventually those thoughts focused on John F. Kennedy, the 35th President. I thought there were enough witnesses and enough records to try to reconstruct his world from his perspective. I was interested in what he knew and when he knew it and what he actually did—sometimes day by day, sometimes hour by hour, sometimes minute by minute. The timing was right, it seemed to me. Kennedy came to power at

the end of an old era or the beginning of a new, which was important because his words and actions were recorded in new ways. The pulse of communication speeded up in his time. At the beginning, his presidency was recorded by stenographers and typists; secretaries listened in and took notes during telephone calls. There were things we never see anymore: carbon paper, stencils, mimeographs, vacuum tubes and flashbulbs. Three years later, there were transistors, television sets in almost every home and tape recorders and Xerox machines in offices. Because of jet airliners, Americans suddenly lived only six hours from Europe.

The timing also seemed right to me because of the availability of new information and insight. The end of the Cold War resulted in new sources of documents and interviews, particularly in Moscow. A central reality of Kennedy's presidency was being the first modern Commander-in-Chief who came to office facing the possibility that a potential enemy had the military power to destroy the United States; the size of the Atlantic and the Pacific could not stop nuclear missiles launched from the Soviet Union. The Freedom of Information Act has opened new windows to the extraordinary events of those years—in Moscow and Washington, in Berlin, Birmingham, and Havana. Although far too much information is still hidden by government classification procedures and the defensiveness of the Kennedy family, it is now possible to separate fact from imagery in relations between Kennedy and the other significant men of power in the early 1960s, including former President Eisenhower, Premier Khrushchev, Charles de Gaulle, Harold Macmillan, Fidel Castro, Ngo Dinh Diem, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the President's own men, particularly Robert Kennedy and Robert McNamara.

Looking back, it seemed to me that the most important thing about Kennedy was not a great political decision, though he made some, but his own political ambition. He did not wait his turn. He directly challenged the institution he wanted to control, the political system. After him, no one else wanted to wait either, and few institutions were rigid enough or flexible enough to survive impatient ambition-driven challenges. He believed (and proved) that the only qualification for the most powerful job in the world was wanting it. His power did not come from the top down nor from the bottom up. It was an ax driven by his own ambition into the middle of the system, biting to the center he wanted for himself. When he was asked early in 1960 why he thought he should be President, he answered: "I look around me at the others in the race, and I say to myself, well, if they think they can do it why not me? '*Why not me?*' That's the answer. And I think it's enough."

Kennedy's public persona was generational. He was the first of the

men who did the fighting during World War II to become Commander-in-Chief. When Lieutenant (junior grade) John Kennedy, U.S. Navy, came back a hero, he moved first into a position prepared for him by a rich father whose own ambitions had evolved into plans for his children. The son was elected commander of a new Veterans of Foreign Wars post, named for his brother, a pilot killed in action over Europe: the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., Post of Boston. A year later he was a candidate for Congress with streetcar posters that read: "The New Generation Offers a Leader." By the end of the 1950s, the young veterans, the junior officers and enlisted men, 16 million of them, were in their thirties and forties. And they were frustrated. They had been expected to come back from their conquering roles, accept the cheers, and then act their age. Wait their turn.

Of all of them, it was Jack Kennedy who moved most boldly. The great shared experience of his generation was a major factor in neutralizing the fact that he was only the second Roman Catholic to run for President, and the first, New York Governor Al Smith, had been crushed in 1928. But the war had changed and was still changing America, a country almost one-third Catholic by then. One Nation Indivisible was an idea the United States needed to win: We're-all-in-this-together was made visual in patriotic World War II movies showing tough Irish and Italian kids from Brooklyn fighting alongside all-American towheads from Iowa. Last names were not such a big deal anymore to the young men coming home, and there could be no better answer to innuendo that Catholicism was somehow un-American than the one Kennedy used: "No one asked me my religion in the South Pacific."

Kennedy decided to run for President after the 1956 Democratic National Convention. Adlai Stevenson, the party's nominee, had thrown open the race for Vice President, and Kennedy, a thirty-nine-year-old second-term senator, could not resist going for it. He came close, finally losing the balloting to Senator Estes Kefauver. "I know now that you don't get far in public life until you become the total politician," he said after twenty-four thrilling hours of competing for delegate votes. "That means you've got to deal, not just with voters, but with the party leaders, too. From now on I'm going to be the total politician."

Three weeks after the convention, Dr. Janet Travell, who had been treating his back problems with massive injections of novocaine for the past five years, asked him: "You weren't really disappointed when you lost the nomination, were you?"

"Yes, I was," he answered. "But I learned that it should be as easy to get the nomination for President as it was for Vice President. Until then, I thought I would have to work first toward the vice presidency."

There was, he realized, no certain reward for such things as patience and loyal service, so he began the transformation to total politician by going to twenty-six states to campaign for the Stevenson-Kefauver ticket —and for himself. He courted the old pols and sought out young veterans of World War II, setting up a political network that responded to him above party. When Stevenson was defeated by President Eisenhower, Kennedy told an old friend, Charles Bartlett, the Washington correspondent of the *Chatanooga Times:* "Now, this is the time for me."

"You have plenty of time. Why not wait?" said Bartlett.

"No, they will forget me. Others will come along."

Kennedy stayed on the road, organizing friends from school and the war, using seed money from his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, who was worth $200 million or so. Getting national press attention was an essential part of the strategy, and the way to do that was to win a few primaries. He was not as interested in trying to collect bunches of delegates controlled by state political leaders as he was in appearing to be the inevitable nominee, impressing newspaper and magazine reporters and editors that he was the choice of Democrats outside Washington.

"Come out with me," he said in late 1959, to Bartlett. "You'll be surprised at the reaction I'm getting."

After only three 1960 primary victories, in New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and West Virginia, over only one campaigning opponent, Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey, Kennedy had the nomination won. He needed only a Southern running mate not totally offensive to the North, and the blessing of Adlai Stevenson. But Stevenson would not bend to him, still hoping for another run in 1960. "A bitter old man with a little thing," Kennedy said of him in private, describing what his party's most dignified leader looked like coming out of a shower. Stevenson returned the feeling, though his language was more polite: "That young man! He never says 'please' and he never says, 'I'm sorry.' "

Actually Kennedy understood manners and all the rules of appropriate behavior. But he did not necessarily believe they applied to him. His entreaties to Stevenson for support were polite and respectful. Up to a point. A few days before the 1960 convention, he asked Stevenson again. "No, I can't do that," Stevenson answered once more. Kennedy said, "Look, I have the votes for the nomination. If you don't give me your support, I'll have to shit all over you. I don't want to do that but I can, and I will if I have to."

For his running mate, he chose the one man who could do the most for him in November, Lyndon Johnson of Texas, the Majority Leader of the Senate. Many of his supporters were shocked and his campaign