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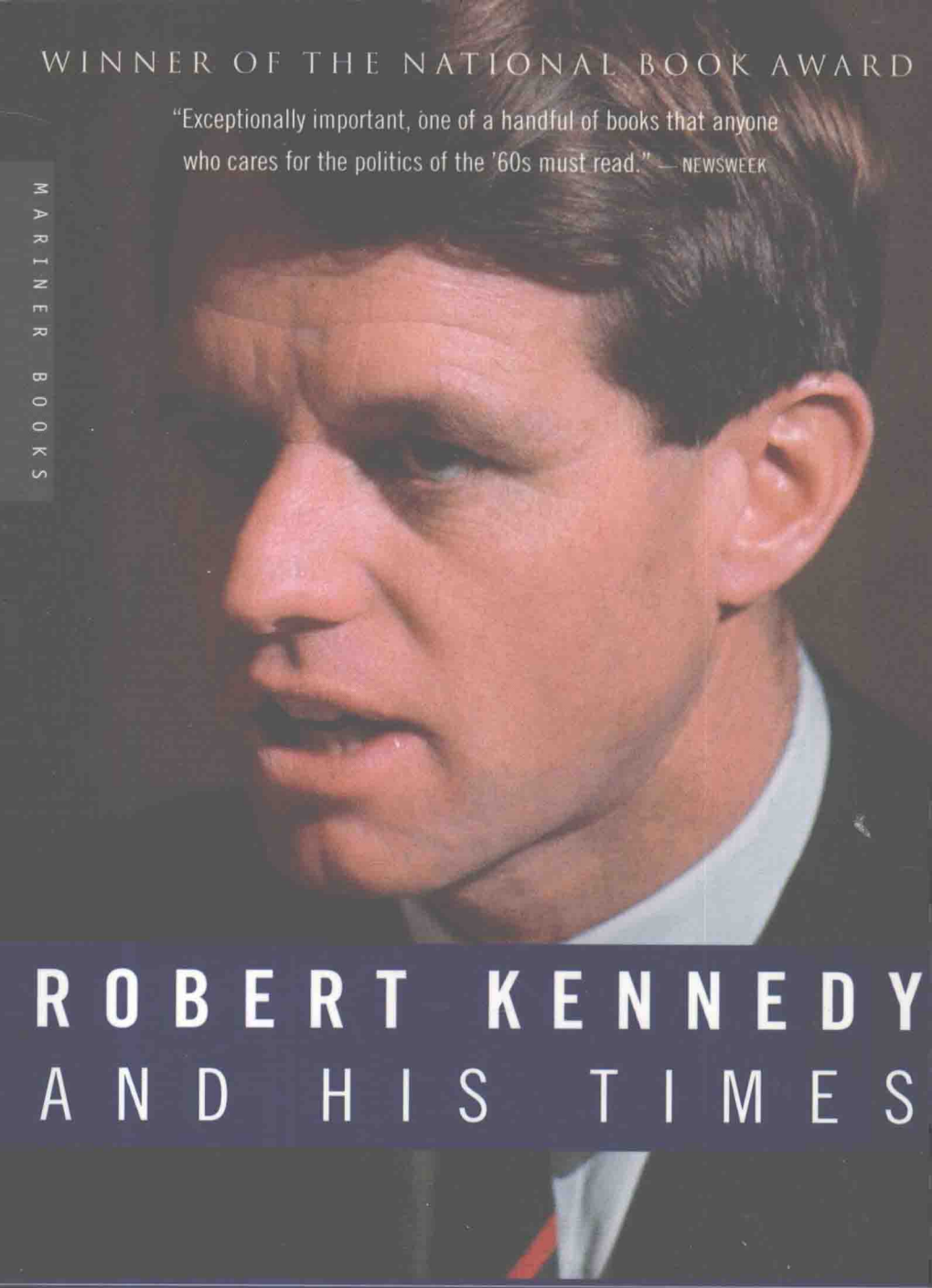

ROBERT KENNEDY AND HIS TIMES

ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR.

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A Mariner Book
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON NEW YORK

First Mariner Books edition 2002

Visit our Web site: www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
ISBN 0-618-21928-5

Printed in the United States of America
QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Great men, great nations, have not been boasters and buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it.

—EMERSON

Acknowledgments

I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL to Jean Kennedy Smith and John Douglas for their careful reading of the manuscript. Though I did not adopt all their suggestions, their contribution to a clearer and more accurate text has been indispensable. I equally thank and absolve other friends who took time from overcrowded lives to read, correct and improve portions of the book — George W. Ball, Richard Boone, William Bundy, William B. Cannon, Ramsey Clark, Archibald C. Cox, Frederick W. Flott, Michael V. Forrestal, Richard Goodwin, David Hackett, Barbara Wendell Kerr, Mieczyslaw Maneli, Burke Marshall, Clark Mollenhoff, Lloyd Ohlin, Joseph L. Rauh, Jr., Pierre Salinger, Stephen C. Schlesinger, Frederick A. O. Schwarz, Jr., John Seigenthaler, Stephen E. Smith.

Obviously the book could not have been written had it not been for the great generosity of Ethel Kennedy in permitting me unrestricted access to the papers of Robert F. Kennedy. I am also greatly indebted to the Kennedy family for letting me see the collection of family papers herein designated as the Hyannis Port Papers as well as the papers of Joseph P. Kennedy and Stephen Smith in New York. All these collections will go in due course to the Kennedy Library in Boston. Like all students of the recent political history of the United States, I have benefited immeasurably from the ready and expert cooperation of the directors and staffs of the presidential libraries — especially of Dan H. Fenn, Jr., John F. Stewart, William W. Moss, Joan-Ellen Marci and so many others at the Kennedy Library, which houses the papers of John F. Kennedy, Frank Mankiewicz, Burke Marshall, Theodore C. Sorensen and William vanden Heuvel as well as the transcripts produced in the John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Programs; and also of archivists

at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Austin, Texas, and the Herbert Hoover Library in West Branch, Iowa. Selections from Robert Kennedy's FBI files, made available to me under the Freedom of Information Act, are designated in the notes as 'RFK/FBI/FOIA release.' I thank Jules Feiffer, Mary Bailey Gimbel, Richard Goodwin, David Hackett, Thomas Johnston, Patricia Kennedy Lawford, Allard Lowenstein, William Manchester, Mieczyslaw Maneli, John Bartlow Martin, Barrett Prettyman, Jr., Abba Schwartz, James Stevenson, William C. Sullivan, Felicia Warburg, James Wechsler and Theodore H. White for their kindness in making personal papers available to me; A. J. P. Taylor and the Beaverbrook Foundation for sending me copies of the correspondence between Joseph P. Kennedy and Lord Beaverbrook from the Beaverbrook Papers; the late Herman Kahn and the Yale University Library for facilitating my consultation of the papers of Walter Lippmann and Chester Bowles; and John C. Broderick and the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress for the papers of James M. Landis and Hugo Black.

I stand in particular debt to the oral history interviewers who have done so much to enrich and amplify the record of the time: Anthony Lewis, William Manchester, John Bartlow Martin and John Stewart for their interviews with Robert Kennedy; the host of volunteers who conducted interviews for the Kennedy Library after the death of John F. Kennedy; and the expert corps of Kennedy Library professionals who have interviewed close associates of both John and Robert Kennedy — notably Roberta Greene and L. J. Hackman, who between them conducted more than sixty interviews, and to many others. Jean Stein generously allowed me to see the oral history interviews she undertook for her invaluable book, edited in collaboration with George Plimpton, *American Journey* (New York, 1970). I thank especially the innumerable interviewees who kindly permitted me to quote from their transcripts as well as many other persons, cited in the notes, who allowed me to interview them directly.

At Houghton Mifflin, Richard McAdoo watched the book stretch out in time and length with exemplary patience, and Helena Bentz Dorrance prepared the manuscript for the printer with exemplary thoroughness. I must also thank Luise Erdmann for reading the proofs and Julia Stair for an excellent index.

Once again I rejoice to express my unlimited gratitude to Gretchen Stewart and to Mary Chiffriller for the devoted and meticulous care they expended on typing several drafts of the manuscript, collating texts, checking references, getting the manuscript to the publisher and meanwhile keeping a busy office in a semblance of order. President Harold Proshansky and the Graduate School of the City Uni-

versity of New York, especially the efficient librarians, were helpful at all times. Above all, I thank Alexandra Emmet Schlesinger, who not only read the manuscript with fastidious and unerring eye but suffered and sustained the author during the throes of composition; and I thank our children still at home, Robert Emmet Kennedy Schlesinger and Peter Cushing Allan, for putting up with it all.

ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR.

Foreword to the 2002 Edition

WHY ON EARTH should the death in the mid-twentieth century of a forty-two-year-old politician, whose career consisted of a mere four years in a president's cabinet and another four years in the Senate, strike such a nerve in the twenty-first century? Why does his face on the television screen still provoke such a keen sense of loss? Why do books about Robert Kennedy continue to appear? Why does his life have poignant meaning not just for those of us old enough to remember him in action but for so many young Americans who were not even born in his lifetime?

For young Americans, Robert Kennedy's older brother, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, is now a historical figure, a leader who belongs to the ages. The causes with which he is identified—the Cold War, the missile crisis, Vietnam—seem to the young almost as remote as the Spanish-American War was to my generation. But Robert Francis Kennedy has a contemporary feel about him, a sense of enduring identification with the woes and injustices of today's world. His causes—the growing disparities of income and opportunity in the United States, racial justice, the redemption of the dispossessed and humiliated—are with us every hour. Robert Kennedy represents certain unfulfilled possibilities—possibilities that we know in our hearts must be fulfilled if we are ever as a nation to redeem the promise of American life.

The two brothers could hardly have been closer. Yet they had very different personalities, and this too may in part explain the divergence in the way people think about them. John Kennedy was a man of reason; Robert, a man of passion. John was objective, analytical, invulnerable (except to the assassin's bullet). Robert was subjective, emotional and acutely vulnerable. John enjoyed his friends. Robert

needed his friends. John was buoyant, Robert melancholy; John urbane, Robert brusque. As I have suggested in this book, John Kennedy was a realist brilliantly disguised as a romantic, Robert a romantic stubbornly disguised as a realist.

A striking thing about Robert Kennedy, and one reason for his continuing relevance, was his capacity for growth. His life may be divided into three acts. The first act could be entitled "His Father's Son." He was the smallest of the four boys, the gentlest and shyest, the least articulate and the least coordinated, the most dutiful. His father was absent during much of his childhood and when home was sometimes impatient with him. "I was the seventh of nine children," Bobby once said, "and when you come from that far down you have to struggle to survive."

Determined to win his father's respect and love, he began to harden his personality. The inner sensitivity remained, but a protective covering now formed over it. He became the Robert Kennedy who burst onto the public scene in the 1950s: an aggressive young fellow, opinionated, censorious, prickly, rigid, moralistic, inclined to tell people off and to get into fights. It was in this mood that he went to work for the infamous Joe McCarthy's Senate committee on investigations —a brief undertaking, soon terminated, with RFK returning to the committee as counsel for the Democratic minority and author of the minority report condemning McCarthy's investigation of the army.

The second act was soon to come—the act that could be entitled "His Brother's Brother." RFK made his political debut as manager of JFK's victorious campaign for the Senate from Massachusetts in 1952. The two brothers, separated by nearly nine years, had hardly had time to get to know each other. For all their personality differences, they now formed an intimate working partnership.

Under his older brother's influence, Robert began to lose his intolerance and rigidity. He grew more relaxed and rueful, acquired more ironic views of life and himself, developed a wry, self-mocking humor and in time displayed a personal charm against which editors warned their reporters. Drafted to run his brother's campaign for the presidency in 1960, Robert was tireless, intimidating and effective. Once elected, John persuaded a reluctant Robert to become attorney general.

Robert surprised the critics by assembling a staff of notable lawyers. He strove especially to bring the autocratic J. Edgar Hoover and his long untouchable Federal Bureau of Investigation under control. Hoover was then a national idol, and his obsession was the pursuit of Communists. RFK, whose 1960 book *The Enemy Within* dealt not with Communism but with organized crime, thought this nonsense. The

American Communist party, he told a newspaperman, "couldn't be more feeble and less of a threat, and besides its membership consists largely of FBI agents." The fact that his brother was president gave him more leverage than most attorneys general, and he forced Hoover against his will to divert budget and agents into two new fields —organized crime and racial justice.

The spread across the South of violent resistance to court orders made civil rights legislation by 1963 both a political possibility and, in the view of the Kennedys, a moral necessity. Opponents charged that Martin Luther King, Jr., the black civil rights leader, was controlled by Communist agents. The attorney general acceded to Hoover's request that King's telephone be wiretapped, confident that this would disprove the allegations. Meanwhile he called for legislation, introduced in 1963 and passed in 1964, outlawing discrimination, whether based on race, color, religion, national origin or (in the case of employment) sex, in public accommodations, employment, voting and education. It was the most far-reaching civil rights law since Reconstruction.

His brother assigned Robert tasks considerably beyond the Department of Justice. He especially valued Robert's ability to ask the tough questions and get to the heart of difficult problems. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, he brought the attorney general increasingly into foreign affairs. Cuba became a particular preoccupation. In 1961–62 Robert spurred on the Central Intelligence Agency to undertake Operation Mongoose, a foolish and ineffectual pinprick program of covert action—infiltration, arms drops, sabotage—against the Castro regime; it was not RFK's finest hour. There is no hard evidence, however, that he was aware, except as past history, of the CIA efforts, originating in the Eisenhower administration, to assassinate Fidel Castro.

If he was, as some claim, obsessed with the goal of overthrowing the Castro regime, Castro himself provided the perfect pretext when he accepted Soviet nuclear missiles in the summer of 1962. But during the missile crisis in October, RFK led the opposition to a military solution. "All our heritage and ideals," he said, "would be repugnant to such a sneak military attack," calling it a "Pearl Harbor in reverse." He negotiated a deal by which, if the Russians removed their missiles from Cuba, the Americans would in due course remove their missiles from Turkey. The Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev noted in his memoirs that the Americans were "open and candid with us, especially Robert Kennedy."

His brother's assassination in November 1963 devastated him. For weeks, for months, he wandered in grief. Yet in a paradoxical sense it

liberated him too. He had repressed his inner self since childhood, first to prove himself to his father, then to help his brother. In 1961 his father was disabled by a stroke; now his brother was dead. The third act was beginning: "On His Own." At last Robert Kennedy was free to become a voice and leader in his own right.

After the new president rejected him as a running mate in 1964, he won election to the Senate from New York. As senator, he welcomed the reforms of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society but found himself in growing disagreement over foreign policy, and finally, as the Vietnam War swallowed the Great Society, over domestic policy as well. The press often refused to accept such disagreement on its merits, presenting it instead as a political maneuver by which ruthless Bobby Kennedy was out to reclaim the White House. This response both irritated and inhibited him.

He identified himself increasingly with the excluded and desolate in America—Indians on reservations, Latinos picking grapes in California, hungry blacks along the Mississippi Delta, migrant workers in squalid camps in upstate New York, despairing families in rat-infested tenements in New York City. His oldest daughter, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, recalls his returning from the South as the Kennedy family was sitting down for dinner at Hickory Hill. "He entered our dining room ashen-faced and said, 'A whole family lives in a shack the size of this room. The children are covered with sores and their tummies stick out because they have no food. Do you know how lucky you are? Do you know how lucky you are? Do something for your country.'"

"Today in America," he said, "we are two worlds." His aim was to make the two worlds one. Always challenging, probing, testing, he sought new ways to empower people, to foster community self-development and self-reliance, to work out new structures by which people could sustain dignity and hope and devise workable means of helping themselves.

His sharp break with the administration came over foreign policy. He criticized United States intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 and concluded that Johnson had abandoned the reform aims of JFK's Alliance for Progress. "If we allow communism to carry the banner of reform," he warned after a tour of Latin America in 1966, "then the ignored and the dispossessed, the insulted and injured, will turn to it as the only way out of their misery."

As American involvement in Vietnam deepened, Kennedy called for bombing pauses and negotiation. When escalation continued, he evoked the "horror" of the war in urgent speeches. "Can we," he cried in 1968, "ordain to ourselves the awful majesty of God—to decide

what cities and villages are to be destroyed, who will live and who will die, and who will join the refugees wandering in a desert of our creation?"

His critique of the Vietnam War pointed toward a challenge to Johnson's renomination in 1968. But Kennedy hung back, still fearing misconstruction of his motives, and antiwar Democrats rallied around Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota. After McCarthy's success in the New Hampshire primary, Kennedy belatedly entered the contest. McCarthy fans denounced him as an opportunist. Johnson withdrew soon afterward, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey became the administration candidate.

Kennedy's was an uproarious campaign, filled with enthusiasm and fun. RFK had a wry wit and a satiric sense of the absurdities of politics and life. One newspaperman described it as a "huge, joyous adventure." At the same time, Kennedy was embarked on a desperately serious mission. Existing conditions in the United States, he said in speech after speech, were "not acceptable," and we diminished ourselves as a moral community when we accepted them.

His campaign generated wild enthusiasm as well as deep anger. His message of change brought hope to some, fear to others. Many saw him as a divisive figure, but he saw himself, especially after the assassination in April of Martin Luther King, Jr., as engaged in a mission of reconciliation, seeking to bridge the great schisms in American society —between white and nonwhite, between rich and poor, between age and youth, between order and dissent, between the past and the future. Recapitulating his message after he won the California primary, he took the shortcut through the kitchen of the Hotel Ambassador in Los Angeles.

What would have happened had he not been killed? He would certainly have had a rocky road to the nomination. The power of the Johnson administration and much of the party establishment was behind Humphrey. Still, the dynamism was behind Kennedy, and he might well have swept the convention. If nominated, he would most probably have beaten the Republican candidate, Richard M. Nixon.

Individuals do make a difference to history. A Robert Kennedy presidency would have brought a quick end to American involvement in the Vietnam War. Those thousands of Americans—and many thousands more Vietnamese and Cambodians—who were killed from 1969 to 1973 would have been at home with their families.

A Robert Kennedy presidency would have consolidated and extended the achievements of John Kennedy's New Frontier and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. The liberal tide of the 1960s was still running strong enough in 1969 to affect Nixon's domestic policies.

The Environmental Protection Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act with its CETA employment program were all enacted under Nixon. If that still fast-flowing tide so influenced a conservative administration, what signal opportunities it would have given a reform president!

The confidence that both black and white working-class Americans had in Robert Kennedy would have created the possibility of progress toward racial reconciliation. His appeal to the young might have mitigated some of the under-thirty excesses of the time. And of course the election of Robert Kennedy would have delivered the republic from Watergate, with its attendant subversion of the Constitution and destruction of faith in government.

RRK joined idealism in his purposes with realism in his methods. He was a man of passionate conviction. He was at the same time a tough and experienced politician who understood the uses of power and government. And he was a compelling speaker with unusual capacity to inform, move and inspire the electorate and to rally popular support for his programs.

His blunt challenge to the complacencies of American society made many uncomfortable; but his insistence that any individual who "stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice" can make a difference plucked a moral nerve, especially among the young. "Each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation."

RFK, as David M. Shribman points out, was one of only five men in American political history to be known by his initials. The others —Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Lyndon Baines Johnson—were all presidents.

Foreword

ROBERT KENNEDY died on June 6, 1968, at the age of forty-two — a decade ago as I write today. He lived through a time of unusual turbulence in American history; and he responded to that turbulence more directly and sensitively than any other political leader of the era. He was equipped with certitudes of family and faith — certitudes that sustained him till his death. But they were the premises, not the conclusions, of his life. For he possessed to an exceptional degree what T. S. Eliot called an "experiencing nature." History changed him, and, had time permitted, he might have changed history. His relationship to his age makes him, I believe, a "representative man" in Emerson's phrase — one who embodies the consciousness of an epoch, who perceives things in fresh lights and new connections, who exhibits unsuspected possibilities of purpose and action to his contemporaries.

He never had the chance to fulfill his own possibilities, which is why his memory haunts so many of us now. Because he wanted to get things done, because he was often impatient and combative, because he felt simply and cared deeply, he made his share of mistakes, and enemies. He was a romantic and an idealist, and he was also prudent, expedient, demanding and ambitious. Yet the insights he brought to politics — insights earned in a labor of self-education that only death could stop — led him to see power not as an end in itself but as the means of redeeming the powerless.

Any historian who has written about the 1930s as well as the 1960s must recognize a terrible monotony in our national problems. The conditions of misery and inequity that troubled Franklin Roosevelt and the New Dealers troubled the Kennedys twenty years later — after an interval during which, while misery and inequity persisted,