

A PENGUIN BOOK

**NORMAN MAILER**  
**THE PRESIDENTIAL PAPERS**



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The Presidential Papers



Norman Mailer was born in 1923 and went to Harvard when he was sixteen. He majored in engineering, but it was while he was at university that he became interested in writing; he published his first story when he was eighteen. After graduating he served during the war in the Philippines with the Twelfth Armoured Cavalry regiment from Texas; those were the years that formed *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). His other books are *Barbary Shore* (1951), *The Deer Park* (1955), *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), *Death for the Ladies*, a volume of poetry (1962), *The Presidential Papers* (1963), *An American Dream* (1965), *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967). *The Deer Park* has been adapted into a play and was successfully produced off Broadway.

In 1955 Norman Mailer co-founded the magazine *Village Voice*, and he was the editor of *Dissent* from 1952 until 1963. For his part in demonstrations against the war in Vietnam he was gaoled in 1967.

Norman Mailer has been married four times and has six children.



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*This book is dedicated to some ladies who have aided and impeded the author in his composition*

*They are*

Beverly Rentz Sugarfoot Bentley  
Jeanne Louise Slugger Campbell

*my daughters*

Susan  
Dandy  
Betsy  
Kate

*my adopted daughter*

*my secretary*

*my sister*

Jeanne H. W. The Invaluable Johnson  
Anne Morse Towel-Boy Barry  
Barbara Jane Alson

*and Sadie  
and Hetty Diggs  
and Every-Mae*



## Preface

*The Presidential Papers* were written while Jack Kennedy was alive, and so the book was put together with the idea that the President might come to read it. One did not mean of course that he would literally read it right away in that giant-killing literary stride of his (reputed to cross over more than half a thousand words of prose each minute) no, the author had the idea instead that people about the President might look at the book in pieces and parts, and conversations would ensue, over the years, who could be certain? The President might put his head into its pages for a few seconds. Thus, the book was inspired by a desire to have its influence. Slow that might be and near to subterranean, but it was a book aimed nonetheless at some favorite notions of the President and the American Establishment: therefore the irreverence of the prose was as necessary as the feathers on the shaft of an arrow. In America few people will trust you unless you are irreverent; there was a message returned to us by our frontier that the outlaw is worth more than the sheriff.

One was therefore irreverent to the President. But the extent of one's irreverence was discovered to be also the measure of one's unsuspected affection: that one discovered the day he was killed; discovered that again during the weeks of depression which followed. For he was no ordinary sheriff - he was an outlaw's sheriff, he was one sheriff who could have been an outlaw himself. Such Presidents can be quickly counted: Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy. One doubts if there are any others. While this is the only kind of sheriff for whom an outlaw can feel love, one should still of course not be excessively polite, for every sheriff must labor finally on the side of all those mediocrities who made a profit from mediocrity by extinguishing (let a new Marx rise up among us) the promise of others.

Still, John F. Kennedy was a remarkable man. A modern democracy is a tyranny whose borders are undefined; one discovers how far one can



go only by traveling in a straight line until one is stopped; Kennedy was not in a hurry to stop us. I would not be surprised if he believed that the health of America (which is to say our vitality) depends in part on the inventiveness and passion of its outlaws.

Then, of course, he was killed by an outlaw. Which is tragic, but not startling. For heroism often gives life to a creation which is bound and determined to kill the hero. Ultimately a hero is a man who would argue with the gods, and so awakens devils to contest his vision. The more a man can achieve, the more he may be certain that the devil will inhabit a part of his creation.

These theological illuminations are of vast use to the reader, doubtless; but they lead the author astray from the point to his introduction. He was trying to say that we have here a book which was written in part for a man very much alive. This book is now homeless for it has ceased to thrive inside its original intention. One had hoped to quicken the context of criticism, to darken the political soup with marrow. Now, like a displaced person, the book is a document. It speaks from the far cliff of a divide, from a time which is past, from history. Given these overtones, the book has an unintentional echo: it tells the story of a President and of a presidential time which was neither conclusive nor legislatively active, but which was nonetheless a period not without a suspicion of greatness, greatness of promise at the very least, for it was a time when writers could speak across the land in intimate dialogue with their leader.

He was a good and serious man one now suspects. Only such a man would neglect to cover himself with the pompous insulations of the state. Still, one would not retract what one has written: his faults were his faults, his lacks were his lacks, his political maneuverings were no better than the others, his dull taste was certainly his dull taste. But what one did not recognize sufficiently was the extent of his humor. That humor created an atmosphere in which one could attempt this book; now, as a document which circles mournfully about its subject, one can hear in the echoes of his absence the proportions of that humor, and thus feel the loss. Fifty years may go by before such a witty and promising atmosphere comes to life in America again. So the corridors are gloomy. 'He was a great man,' said a girl at a party the other night. 'No, he wasn't a great man,' I said. 'He was a man who could have become great or could have failed, and now we'll never know. That's what's so awful.' That is what is so awful. Tragedy is amputation; so many of the nerves of one's memory run back to the limb which is no longer there.

*Norman Mailer*

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## A Prefatory Paper – Heroes and Leaders

Since this book chooses to call itself *The Presidential Papers*, let it now be modest enough to explain its function. There are essays and interviews gathered here, a few poems, an open letter or two, some literary criticism, portions picked from magazine columns, a large section from an unpublished philosophical dialogue, there is altogether a fair part gathered of what has been written since *Advertisements for Myself* was published in 1959. What will not be found in this collection is a five-hour play which the writer has been seeking to improve for five years, as well as any of the work done on a long novel talked about in *Advertisements*. It is not wise to show this portion yet.

No, these short pieces (some of them not so brief – the three longest put together make fifty thousand words) are concerned for the most part, indeed were chosen for this collection because their subject matter is fit concern for a President. One is of course not throwing any disqualified devil's wishes into the ring for oneself, no, no, these are the Presidential papers of a court wit, an amateur advisor. They are papers written *to* the President, *for* him, they are his private sources of information. The President suffers from one intellectual malady – intellectual malnutrition. That particular anemia visits leaders surrounded by advisors who do not tell the truth. Advisors are dishonest because they are professional. By the developed habits of his craft, a professional automatically suppresses as much information as he divulges; nor is this to speak of the various kinds of information a professional is incapable of receiving because the

language necessary for the inquiry does not belong to his vocational jargon. So a President suffers intellectual horrors. His information is predigested – his mind is allowed as much stimulation as the second stomach of a cow. He is given not nuances but facts; indeed he is given facts not in whole, but facts masticated, their backs broken.\*

The natural work of the modern Presidency destroys a man's ability for abstract thought. He becomes able to think not of the mystery in the atom bomb but of its engineering. He sprouts a mind like a financial see-saw: on the one side percentages of overkill declared adequate for balancing Russian overkill, on the other budgetary calculations. A 25 per cent overkill will demand a disbursement of X billions which has Y probability of passing Z committee in Congress. It is all hard tough clear strategic thinking, the sort of thinking that the less literary seniors at Harvard used to do over the bridge table years ago. Now the stakes are higher and they're still doing it. One does well not to sneer at them: the sort of Harvard men who got into the bridge games in the House Common Rooms after dinner seem now to be the archetype of the kind of men who run the world: what they lack in imagination is filled with strategic estimate; what they do not know about moral depth is replaced by forthrightness and point-by-point program. I suppose the kind of man who goes to bed and worries even once a year, 'My God, what if, when all is said, the Russians are right?' or even worse, 'My God, what if, when all is said, the Russians are *half* right?' cannot ever become President in the twentieth century. The time he loses one night a year is enough to put him out of the race.

But let us not leave the President with his virtues and vices. He is presumably an expert on political matters which can be translated into arithmetic. He can recite government incomes and expenses, budgets, taxes, reserves; figures for the gainfully employed over the last individual ten years, and by ten-year periods; figures for armament in category, in gross; he can give you percentiles and/or profile curves on shifts in political party sentiment over twenty-five years in key political counties of

\* See Appendix A for a small demonstration of the accuracy in one of the President's typical general sources of information.

America; in two minutes he can look up the figure for additional square feet of housing built in 1962 against calculated need for new housing in Plan A, Plan B, Plan G; he can tell you the number of words in a speech by glancing at the pages; he can read six hundred words a minute and count on retaining 84 per cent of what he reads; he can give you the critical numbers and index factors on foreign trade, new investment in heavy industry, rate of failure against rates of incorporation for small business; the literacy rate; the projected farm surplus surpluses; the number of Communists in the American Communist Party, the number of FBI men in the American Communist Party; the number of United States Marshals in Southern cities who can be concentrated at a trouble point when a school is integrated, the number of schools which have been integrated, the number which have not; he can give you an estimate by denomination of the number of churches in America, the number of synagogues, orthodox, conservative, and reformed, he can probably make an informed guess on the number of clergymen in each state. It must be certain he has enough facts in his head filed under enough separate departments to make a fair extempore competitor for the *World Almanac*.

Now this is not the only qualification of the President. He happens also to have a personality which is agreeable to most (in a way that Thomas E. Dewey's was not, nor Richard Nixon's) and he is also a man of personal bravery, a fact one does well not to ignore. He studied for his occupation, he had the money to find it, and the family to help him find it. He has a sense of the tradition of the Presidency and a sense of history - he wishes to be a great man. Indeed he has every qualification for a great President - a sense of politics, a sense of mass response, a nose for propaganda, the ability to acquire information, the ability to keep cool when the world is in great heat, the wit to stop the legislative and administrative parts of the government from warring on one another, the perhaps excessive ability to avoid making needless enemies - yes, he has every qualification but one. He has no imagination. He does not have the kind of mind which can see a new solution to an old problem. Rather he manipulates the best single elements in the old solutions, and

applies his political craft to composing a package with new consumer interest. In effect it is the old apple pie still tasting of soggy cardboard and cheap flour, but the container is new – it has a picture on its cellophane cover which motivation research has discovered is more effective than the old cover for selling apple pie.

Now with the exception of his single large defeat in the Bay of Pigs and his single large victory after Khrushchev sent missiles to Castro, a victory and defeat which are linked umbilically to the island of Cuba, the President has done nothing new. One cannot point to any move in foreign affairs or labor or military spending or housing or education or race relations or popular culture which is radically different from the work of Truman or Eisenhower, different from the intellectual inspiration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. One can point to the Peace Corps perhaps, but there is something unctuous about its face in public relations. The Peace Corps seems to have inherited the political timidity of the CCC without its air of a barracks democracy.

No, there's no feeling of a new political atmosphere in the country. The liberals pump up their balloons, the conservatives flush out bile and bilge, but a real issue is never found. Politics is the art of the possible, and what is always possible is to reduce the amount of real suffering in a bad time, and to enrich the quality of life in a good time. This is precisely what is not being done in America. We are in a good time in America, a prosperous time, a time of relative wealth and relative lack of poverty which was created not by Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, nor Kennedy, but by the economic mathematics of finding an ever-expanding market whose ultimate consumer is the enemy soldier. We have been living in the curious but prosperous hollow of planned military obsolescence. In fact we have built so many different airplanes since the Second World War that soon there ought to be enough to give one to each high school class in the land.

But we've done nothing to approach the center of the problem which is that life in America becomes more economically prosperous and more psychically impoverished each year. The real life of America is not being enriched. It is suffering from political monotony. The President has commissions and commissars and

bureaus and agents and computer machines to calculate the amount of schooling needed to keep America healthy, safe, vigorous, proof against the Russians. To keep America *up*. Virility is the unspoken salesman in American political programs today: the politician slaps his facts and figures on the table like a shillelagh: curious are the vitamins implicit in a massive collection of facts and figures – it is as if a man who can keep that much information in his head might be able to maintain that much erection in his will.

The President has programs. They keep America *up*. His educational programs calculate floor space and cubic feet of breathing space. They pick pastel colors for toilets and study rooms, they pipe public address systems from auditoriums to classrooms, they have aerials for classroom television, side rooms for PTA functions, they do everything, they have everything. Everything but a good book.

There is a total and depressing lack of attention for that vast heart of political matter which is utterly resistant to categorization, calculation, or statistic. Politics is arithmetic, but politics is also rhetoric, passion, and an occasional idea to fire the imagination of millions. For his arithmetic the President gets a mark of 98 per cent. For his imagination: zero. For his passion: 40 per cent. For his rhetoric: 50 per cent. So this book has been put together for him. It is imperfect, incomplete, and somewhat deficient in its arithmetic. Its statistical studies are absent. Its grasp of the machinery of government is comparable at best to the sort of talented amateur mechanic who knows how to change a tire. But still there is something in this book, something useful to the President. This book has an existential grasp of the nature of reality, and it is the unspoken thesis of these pages that no President can save America from a descent into totalitarianism without shifting the mind of the American politician to existential styles of political thought.

If the question is now asked what can possibly be meant by 'an existential grasp of the nature of reality' or 'existential styles of political thought' the answer which is not without facetiousness can nonetheless only be that one must read this book. In the run of its pages exists the possible seed of the idea.



But can one at least give a clue? I suppose it would rest in the notion that the disease of the state is intensified when large historic ideas come to power without men to personify them or dramatize their qualities. It has long been the thesis of this self-appointed Presidential advisor that the FBI has done more damage to America than the American Communist Party. It has done it for a variety of reasons, some well-intentioned, some delivered from pits of foul intention, but the FBI has chilled the potentiality of America to enrich the private lives of its people. It has put a sense of inhibition into the popular arts and the popular mind. It has been an evil force. What has made it even more deadening has been the personality of its director, which is to say, the *lack* of personality in its director. The FBI has been a political idea; its essence could be stated: America is in need of a secret police whose devotion, dedication, untiring effort, professional competence and political purity entitle it to scrutinize every aspect of American life it deems worthy to scrutinize. The idea is fearful enough, but when no personality embodies it, no other personality may contest it. The cause of secret police-ness advances like a plague. So an existential President would look for a man with a salient personality to put as head of the FBI. Under such a man, the fortunes of the FBI would prosper or falter, but its activities would be dramatized, its victories would come from open struggle, and its success would cease to resemble the certainty of the house percentage in a gambling casino. The FBI would be forced to exist rather than proliferate. If its leader was not heroic as a man, the FBI would proceed to exist less, it would lose existence because it would be in open competition for existence with other organs of the government. But with an heroic leader it would prosper, it would *deserve* to prosper. Existential politics is rooted in the concept of the hero, it would argue that the hero is the one kind of man who *never* develops by accident, that a hero is a consecutive set of brave and witty self-creations. All heroes are leaders – even if, like Don Quixote, they have but one man to follow them – but not all leaders are heroes. An unheroic leader is a man who embodies his time but is not superior to it – he is historically faceless. Roosevelt was a hero, Calvin Coolidge or Herbert