



Kennedy

Hugh Brogan

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Hugh Brogan
Wivenhoe
22 May 1996

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- DD* = The Pentagon Papers: *The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam* (Senator Gravel edn, Boston: Beacon Press 1971)
- KOH* = Kennedy Memorial Library, Oral Histories
- LTW* = John F. Kennedy, '*Let the Word Go Forth*': *the speeches, statements, and writings of John F. Kennedy, 1947 to 1963*, edited by Theodore Sorensen (New York: Delacorte 1988)
- PC* = John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Pocket edn 1961)
- PP* = *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy*, 3 vols (Washington, DC 1962–64)
- RK, Words* = Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman (eds) *Robert Kennedy in his Own Words* (New York: Bantam 1988)
- Schlesinger, *RK* = Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *Robert Kennedy and his Times* (London: André Deutsch 1978)
- Schlesinger, *TD* = Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Fawcett Premier edn 1971)
- SP* = John F. Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace*, edited by Allan Nevins (New York: Harper 1960)
- WES* = John F. Kennedy, *Why England Slept* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson 1962)

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THE KENNEDY PROBLEM

'Profiles in Power.' Irresistibly (for all I know, intentionally) the title of this series calls to mind *Profiles in Courage*, the book for which John Fitzgerald Kennedy was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1957. The echo suggests his unquestionable entitlement to a place in a catalogue which also includes Elizabeth I, Cardinal Richelieu and David Lloyd George; but in fact it is far from self-evident. As President of the United States Kennedy undoubtedly wielded great power, as much as the modern world can give to anybody, perhaps as much as anybody has exercised in all history; but it was his so briefly! Only two years and ten months separated his inauguration as President of the United States from his murder; as Theodore Sorensen said bitterly on hearing the dreadful news, 'they wouldn't even give him three years.'¹ Of the forty presidents, only six have served shorter terms than Kennedy's; only two in the twentieth century have done so (Harding and Ford: not names with which Kennedy would care to be associated). At his inauguration he said, 'Let us begin'; his successor, on inheriting his office, said, 'Let us continue'; but while it is clear that Kennedy finished little, it is not obvious that he started much. The great affairs of his time, it might be urged, were well advanced before he came to power. He passed his years in the presidency learning his job and mastering the issues, but was cut down before he could prove what he had learned or put it to use. I do not accept this view, but I have tried to face it.

A profile can only be a sketch. Short though Kennedy's life was, it was crammed with incident and great events, many of which I have had to leave out entirely. Readers wanting a full account will have to look elsewhere. But it has been my

purpose to provide enough information to justify the contention that Kennedy's was indeed a highly significant presidency, in which decisions were taken and choices made that, for good and ill, changed the course of history and still make themselves felt; that it was a lens through which the United States and the US presidency can effectively be studied; and that, because of the Kennedy personality and the fantastic circumstances of his death and its aftermath it was, so to say, a magical episode, the investigation of which carries the normally pedestrian political historian very far indeed from corridors of power and air-conditioned archives. Kennedy, in short, was important. (It does not need to be argued that he was interesting: the ever-growing library of books about him makes the point for me.)

In making my case I have been assisted by the mere lapse of time. In the last analysis, hindsight is the historian's only privilege, and where recent events are concerned it is, self-evidently, not available. Very little of the material in the Kennedy literature can be categorised as truly historical. This was not necessarily the writers' fault: the time was simply not ripe. Now it is ripening. More than thirty years have passed since Kennedy was president; thirty years is the conventional definition of a generation, though given modern rates of longevity forty might be a more realistic figure. At any rate, thirty years seems to be the period after which current affairs begin to become history: the presidency of Kennedy's immediate predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, has already become the property of academic historians, and is debated by them with the right scholarly mixture of detachment and curiosity. Kennedy's turn (I thought and think) has surely come. There is no longer any justification (if there ever was) for adding to the high pile of tendentious pamphlets even if the author's experience is that of one who, when young, saw Shelley plain, greatly admired him, and was like all the world appalled by his assassination. True impartiality may be unattainable, but that need not impede the work of depicting Kennedy's performance as president, of defining the problems and choices that confronted him, and of trying, through examination of his record, better to understand his office, his country and his times. There has been enough outpouring of grief, anger, prejudice, eulogy and abuse. The time has come to try for the beginnings of a permanent judgement, that forever unattainable prize which historians are obliged forever to seek.

Time has already begun to change the most fundamental categories of interpretation. For instance, Kennedy was most evidently a Cold War president, and the Cold War is over. One of the minor consequences of this tremendous fact has been to make most studies of Kennedy's foreign policy obsolete: some are still valuable for the raw information which they contain, and for their authors' mental powers; but they are obsolete, past appeal, for their interpretation, and the historian, who, having lived through the Cold War, has most probably been bent to a view of the world which must now be discarded, has the additional burden of fighting free of other scholars' theories and assumptions, theories and assumptions which, only yesterday, seemed beyond question. It does not matter which school they belong to: left, right or centre, they must all be consigned to the dustbin. The same may be said, if perhaps less emphatically, of studies of Kennedy's domestic record: the Reagan years have come and gone and nothing behind them looks the same. Kennedy is no longer part of our present; he belongs to a definable historical period, and the task is to define it.

Yet not all the controversies in which he was involved are now dead. The Cold War is over, but argument continues about the United States' place in the modern world, and what new international order can and should be worked for. Thirty years have amply vindicated the wisdom of the policy on civil rights which Kennedy was driven to adopt and which Lyndon Johnson carried to fruition in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but the American dilemma remains as acute as ever. The economic and fiscal problems which pre-occupied Kennedy are even more pressing than they were in his time. The office of the presidency, of which he had so articulate a view, is still the centre of American politics and of all debate about American power and purposes. There have been no political assassinations in the United States recently, but America still leads the world in death by private gunshot, and every year almost as many people die in this way as US servicemen died in the whole of the Vietnam War. And the memory of that war, in which Kennedy for a time played so crucial a part, still bedevils the formation and execution of American foreign policy. So if it is ever reasonable to study the past in order to master the present, it is reasonable in this instance. It may not any longer make much sense to take sides about Kennedy's perceptions and decisions, but it is well worth asking

why he acted as he did, in order to understand not just America in the 1960s, but also America today.

The scholarly obligation to weigh the extent to which time has changed our concerns with the Kennedy presidency has led me to say as little as possible about the Kennedy myth. It could not be excluded entirely, but it is such a large and potent subject that to do it justice would have required a quite different book, in which the questions of policy and action would have vanished. Jack Kennedy was only intermittently deceived by his own legend (though he was always ready to encourage it when it seemed politically profitable); he would have been appalled by the extent to which it has blotted out concern with the real issues with which he grappled, and his real achievements. It is doubtful if time will ever wholly rescue his reputation: after all, the one thing which everyone knows about Henry VIII, after four hundred years, is that he had six wives. Yet for forty years after Abraham Lincoln's assassination, conspiracy theorists supplied an alarmed and bewildered public with fanciful explanations of the event, but at length the market dried up and no more was heard of them. Byron's sex life eclipsed his poetry in interest for more than a century after his death, but that can largely be explained by the brilliance of the letters in which he chronicled his love affairs, and by the sensational nature of his exploits – everything from incest to homosexuality (Kennedy's sexual adventures seem insipid in comparison). Nowadays, at last, his verse once more commands its proper attention. The history of the Kennedy family, that mixture of saga, tragedy and soap-opera, has served far more often as a distraction from the effort to understand history than as a serious theme. It is like those studies of Napoleon which chiefly concern themselves with Josephine and Marie Walewska. True, the Kennedy legend is an invaluable means for investigating the American consciousness, with particular emphasis on its sentimentality, gullibility and prurience; but the writer of a mere profile can ask to be excused for omitting trivia, even though the market for tittle-tattle and fantasy is unexhausted.

A profile need not be based on fresh archival research, and anyway new information, however much I had uncovered, would be unlikely to make any fundamental difference to understanding Kennedy and his times. We already have more data than we can easily digest. It is the brevity and incompleteness of Kennedy's career which make it baffling, and nothing will alter