

THE KENNEDY LEGACY FOR WORLD POLITICS

What, in that legacy, can we draw upon for the future?

Kenneth W. Thompson

History tends to deal harshly with those who judge men and events before the full weight of evidence is in. The scales are tipped in ways that students of current history cannot always anticipate. Conscious of this, many of our most distinguished Western historians hesitate to write about twentieth-century history, let alone contemporary events. Great American statesmen share this sense of awe and uncertainty about measuring the fragments of history which they may have had a part in shaping. It was Lincoln who observed that his only choice was to do the best he could and pray that in the end history would judge him kindly. No one can be sure that noble intentions will lead to desirable ends, for the scroll of history unfolds according to its own mysterious inner logic.

Any effort, therefore, to appraise the three turbulent and challenging years that lie behind us or to pierce the veil of the future is fraught with pitfalls. Who can with confidence assert at this moment in history that the second confrontation in Cuba or the nuclear test ban or the Kennedy policy at the Berlin Wall opened the way to a new and brighter day? Who can know that someday men will say that the beginnings of a détente with the Soviet Union go back to the patient probings and testings of Soviet intentions in which the President and Secretary of State Dean Rusk engaged? Who can assert with any finality or certainty that a policy of unequivocal support of national self-determination everywhere in the world will, in the long view of history, prove more successful than, say, Wilsonian self-determination which led to the Balkanization of earlier and more ancient empires? Or who can say that the greater pragmatism of the Kennedy administration saved it from the failures of other regimes equally devoted to great ideals? Who can trace those strains of policy that lead to a better world or those, however noble their purpose, that without intending it have made life on this planet more precarious?

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Observers of the contemporary scene are trapped by the endless compulsions and drives that make pundits of us all. Loyalties and commitments to a political party color assessments of what is good or bad, right or wrong. Devotion to a leader or a cause divides the universe into friends and foes. This may be providential for it frees men, otherwise troubled by the endless flow of complexities, from lives of desperate uncertainty and confusion. Yet the need for choosing sides and lining up for or against policies and leaders drives us to premature judgments. It is pressures such as these that propel us to find answers on the basis of evidence or conviction that would scarcely prompt answers of such finality in the lives of our families, our church, our business or professions or community groups.

In the workaday world men on the job learn to live with unfinished business and to accept success and failure as all in the day's work. Newspapers and journalists who, according to Enlightenment thought, were to emancipate all peoples from ignorance have in practice fed and reinforced this trend. Day in and day out, with but a few exceptions, they aggravate and perpetuate the football stadium psychology that dominates public life. They help citizens to cast their public philosophy in the frame of a score sheet of victories and defeats. Every problem presumes a solution; for every unsolved issue there is the proper policy. We call upon leaders to give us the answers and these in turn become hardened into simple doctrines that liberate from the painful and irritating business of hard thought. Doctrines and plans persist long after they have outlived their usefulness. Thus simple isolationism and internationalism tended to be universalized by the faithful. And in the kind of world in which we live, this approach seems inevitable; it is not the accident of a particular administration or personality. We are all of us captives of a culture that alternately assigns heroic and villainous proportions to its public executives and their policies.

In this context, each observer who writes about an episode in our political history must be on guard. This is particularly true as we survey an administration cut off in full flower. Not since Lincoln have

the whole of the American people experienced the full depths of national tragedy and disaster so profoundly and so personally. And all Americans are haunted by a nagging concern that the social and political atmosphere from which the accused assassin took nourishment may somehow be the outgrowth, if in exaggerated form, of our political culture. Must we not confess that very possibly the hate and extremism that periodically erupt across the land are fed by the claims and counter-claims, charges and counter-charges that in the words of political leaders and their self-appointed interpreters fill the air? Are we all at fault to the extent we participate in political discourse that resounds with promises that can never be fulfilled, accusations that no man can fully answer, and the discrediting of politics among young and old? When we fail to speak out against extremists of the right or left, are we not guilty of acceding to forces that can destroy any healthy society?

That the President should die at the hands of a force he was striving to control and manage is the bitterest of irony. Both on the domestic and international front, John F. Kennedy from the beginning labored to dignify the pursuit of manageable tasks. Most of the business of government calls for patience and persistence. Woodrow Wilson has written that "politics is the slow boring of hard boards." In these terms, politics is less rhetoric than hard work. The image sought is that of a mind at work. The President's top-level Cabinet appointments reflect his design. Indeed that remarkable group around him whom pundits early dismissed as mere technicians have proven themselves the equal of the ablest Cabinets in American history. It is a tribute to President Kennedy's objective approach to the tasks of government that he sought the best men for the highest appointive offices. He did so in the face of political and national pressures no less pervasive than those which have colored the judgment of so many of his predecessors.

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By these appointments and by his vigorous conduct of the office, President Kennedy intended to emphasize the demands and the opportunities of public life. Public service can test the mettle of the most talented citizens. No one can dispute the fact that young men increasingly channeled their aims and energies toward careers in the service of their country as they had not done since the early days of the New Deal. The Peace Corps is one expression of this trend, but so is the quest for office of men like John Glenn and coach "Bud" Wilkinson of

Oklahoma. If an administration talks only of cleansing the stables of the ill-equipped and the disloyal, it can hardly expect to rally the same talent as one which speaks of the great tasks that lie ahead. It is part of the Kennedy legacy that government service was endowed with greater dignity and respectability.

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On the world scene, the stress likewise fell on the demands and the complexity of foreign policy and the fact that the conduct of foreign relations, like a woman's work, is never done. Indeed Kennedy's approach was a fusion of two apparently incompatible strains. On one side, he dealt with the goals and objectives of policy in simple and unambiguous terms. The accent was on the essentials of valid American policy in a world of change. He said less than Lincoln, for example, might have said about competing aims which statesmen must keep in balance. But on the other hand, President Kennedy felt free to discuss and sometimes to analyze the complexities of making foreign policy in free societies. He ranged across the spectrum of government in helping busy citizens and friends abroad to grasp the points of responsibility in a democratic order. Where in the machinery is a policy at any moment of time? Who must be consulted? Who has a right to be heard? What are the constitutional requirements and the political imperatives? These and other central issues were faced and not skirted, and in several of his finest hours, the President conducted what was in effect a rigorous national seminar for ordinary men and women who might be reaching out for greater enlightenment and understanding.

But more important still, President Kennedy helped significantly to change the temper of the nation's approach and reshape expectations toward the immediate solution of outstanding problems. He must have been tempted as others had been before him to claim more than the circumstances allowed. Total victory captures followers more readily than a policy that speaks of moving one step at a time. Particularly in an era of cold war, the popular statesman scores points not by analyzing but by announcements that they no longer exist. No one is reassured by talk of a stalemate. As others have pointed out, it is part of the phenomenon of contemporary nationalism that the unfulfilled aspirations of men, whatever their station in life, are projected vicariously upon the national government. It is expected to achieve on the international stage those things that have escaped men in their per-

sonal lives. They realize in national grandeur what they have failed to achieve in personal greatness.

More than any other President in modern times, John F. Kennedy taught the importance of restraint in foreign policy. Whether the issue was Cuba or the armaments problem or Charles de Gaulle, the objective response was seemingly calculated on what Catholic thinkers have called the principle of proportionality. The response must be proportionate to the provocation or the threat. During the course of the past three years, the citizenry heard less about principles or final answers or simple solutions and more of measured discriminations and harsh choices and responsibilities for a generation or more. Sometimes the underlying principle was clearly defined, as in addresses at American University and the University of Washington. But frequently the deed was more eloquent than the word. The lesson was embedded in a course of conduct that slowly and imperceptibly seemed to have become a part of our contemporary approach to foreign problems. Having had so brief a history, the President's lesson of restraint will endure only if others give it expression.

The President's attitude or state of mind in foreign policy brought to bear most strikingly on the normalization of Soviet-American relations. He and his colleagues were prompt to identify forces of change within and surrounding life in the Soviet Union. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had earlier talked of the prospects that a new generation of post-revolutionary leaders would chart a course more devoted to peaceful change and to internal economic and social development. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had taken initiatives in reopening the channels of communication with Soviet leaders. The task of President Kennedy was to continue, often in the face of genuine provocation, a process that others had begun but to intensify the effort, refine and improve it and, above all, to persist.

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The late Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, repeatedly asked for new diplomatic techniques and innovations in the search for political settlement. The cause of peace is not served by a too passionate commitment to but one method of negotiation. The United Nations is an appropriate forum for international discussions and a framework within which quiet negotiations can go on. NATO and other regional organizations are meeting places for serious consultations among those whose vital interests are geographically circumscribed. Yet the price of power in national and in-

ternational life is responsibility. The great powers must be willing to explore each others' interest and intent. If they hesitate to confront one another at some level of discourse, their lesser allies may press them to meet. It will not do for a great state to opt for one or the other avenues of discussion; all routes to peace must be kept open. The diplomat has more than one keyboard on which to play. He can neither be exclusively for U. N. diplomacy nor for bilateral parlays nor regional conferences. He must use them all.

The Kennedy administration, partly because of the consummate skill and judgment of the parties most immediately involved, rallied a score of techniques in pursuing the relaxation of tensions. Presidential envoys, special missions, high-level talks and multilateral diplomacy—all these and more were tried and tested. Lines of authority are of course difficult to maintain across so broad a spectrum, yet the ultimate responsibility came to a focus on the President. It may be that the most lasting effect was the authentic and valid quality given to a way of viewing international relationships. Americans were told their government would never fear to negotiate nor would it negotiate from fear. The principle then was buttressed by methods from a well-stocked storehouse of diplomacy. This part of the Kennedy legacy of a more sophisticated approach to diplomacy is deserving of mention and emphasis.

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Thus it is in the realm of method that the legacy is richest. The more prudent and rational management of relations at home and abroad is of a piece. Essentially, it means coping with trouble when it appears. It leaves problems and collisions to be faced as they arise. It of course entails no less following a goal or purpose wherever it may lead. As a people, we have a penchant for hoping and believing that matters can be settled once and for all. Yet a review of the successes of recent administrations helps to remind that every new agenda is a continuation of earlier ones. Hence there is still on the agenda of American foreign policy a European problem despite the progress wrought by Europeans and the Marshall Plan. The United States, which had disregarded security requirements before two World Wars, has fashioned bold and costly national security programs, yet who would say we have no military problem with which successive administrations must cope. Throughout the range of foreign relations, the recurrent theme is continuity. Even the dynamics of a revolutionary age have not altered this fact.

Therefore, the agenda of foreign policy problems in the post-Kennedy era involves problems both new and old. European states increasingly assert their autonomy; their voices are no longer those of the weak and the dependent. General de Gaulle believes that Europe can recover its authority only if any European association is founded on the power of one or more strong European states. American policy can scarcely hold to its credo of self-determination and deny France or others this right. Yet security in a thermonuclear age depends upon power that is greater than national power. It may involve groupings of states and some link with one or more of the super-powers. The claims of France and the imperatives of security in a highly insecure world are not easily reconciled. To the extent that they can ultimately be brought into harmony, the legacy of President Kennedy's patient, resolute and matter-of-fact management of conflicting interests must be brought into play.

Moreover, those who would build on the first steps of the nuclear test ban treaty must heed what can be learned from the beginnings. Throughout the Kennedy administration, the portals of contact were always kept open. At times, the Rusk-Gromyko

conversations most resembled a long-playing record. For the Russians, there could, however, be no mistaking the fact that they enjoyed a possible opening to the West, and with the further deterioration in Sino-Soviet relations this proved an opportunity which they seized. If further advances are to come in the control of the arms race, the style and method worked out for maintaining contact must be preserved.

Finally, world politics is burdened down with a large list of unfinished business. No answers were found in the Kennedy era to the German problem, Communist China, Cyprus, Kashmir, the Arab-Israeli dispute or European unification. Most of these problems will be with us for the foreseeable future. They have deep historical roots and touch men at points of strongest emotions. Outsiders who would help, offend as often as they serve. Yet once more conversations must go on, changing circumstances be explored, and willingness of states to make concessions determined. If these are the problems we face, the legacy the young President left us when he was torn away has permanent and enduring value for the problems of world politics tomorrow and perhaps for all time.

ON POWER IN JUDAISM

What is the junction of power and morality?

Steven S. Schwarzschild

With respect to the morality and legitimacy of power a schematic view which is held by many, including probably most Jews, was recently expressed again by the late and learned David Baumgardt (*Living Legacy—Essays in Honor of Hugo Hahn*, N.Y. 1963, pp. 20-23). The view, summarily put, amounts to this: there is, on one hand, the attitude of a few radical Christians—to limit ourselves to the Western world—who condemn power as in itself evil and sinful; they take New Testament statements like "turn the cheek" and "do not judge" literally. But they are neurotic and, what is worse, unrealistic, for they open gates to the victory of injustice and brutality. There is, on the other hand, the undisguised worship of power. It is practiced not only

by politicians like Machiavelli and taught by philosophers like Nietzsche, but it is also often stimulated by professed and accepted spokesmen of an ethic of love and decency. To document the last claim, Baumgardt, for example, cites Thomas Aquinas' approval of feudal masters whipping their disobedient servants and of rulers killing or maiming their rebellious subjects, the Grand Inquisitor, and the fact that even basically moral nations "intervene" in the gross immoralities of other nations only at the point that their own self-interest is likely to suffer. Finally, there is the *via media*, which the Jewish philosopher Baumgardt—like many others—discerned in Judaism, according to which power is in itself essentially neutral, which is prepared to use power without worshipping it, and which tries to combine love with justice.

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