

The New York Times, the jury is still out, etc. The readers will have to judge, the nation will judge, and the members of the institutions themselves will judge. In general, we think we would render a scotch verdict: we approve of some things the Establishment has done and disapprove of others. While we wish it would behave better—more courageously, with a quicker sense of justice and a stronger will to right social wrongs—we are on the whole glad it exists.”

This respect for the reader’s discrimination is admirable, but the contribution would have been greater had the authors presented a more venturesome conclusion, developed through their years of intimacy with the subject, on an issue whose resolution will do much to influence our national and international direction. [WV]

JACK: THE STRUGGLES OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

by **Herbert S. Parmet**

(Dial Press; xix + 586 pp.; \$14.95)

Bruce Miroff

Jack is a massively detailed account of the rise of John F. Kennedy. Historian Herbert S. Parmet has plumbed the archival riches of the Kennedy Library and conducted numerous interviews with Kennedy intimates in order to establish an authoritative narrative of Kennedy’s prepresidential years. His biography stops with Kennedy’s announcement for the presidency in January, 1960; a second volume on the Kennedy administration is promised.

Unfortunately, the wealth of material that Parmet musters cannot compensate for his deficiencies as a biographer. Parmet has not brought any distinctive insights or narrative gifts to his story. While providing an exhaustive compilation of Jack Kennedy’s doings and sayings, he seldom manages to get inside his subject. The externals of Kennedy’s prepresidential career are extensively aired; his desires, motives, and beliefs are rarely exposed. The result is a sluggish tale, frustrating in its unrealized possibilities.

In a brief prologue Parmet announces several major themes. Jack Kennedy’s biography can be understood, he suggests, as a “lifelong struggle for freedom” against a weak body and an over-

powering father. Through that struggle Kennedy matured into an independent, imposing personality; his personal qualities “were distinctive, more subtle than generally perceived, and not hitherto understood.” This distinctive personality became the key to his remarkable political mystique. “Kennedy, ...rising through the Eisenhower decade, gradually offered an alternative appeal: the desire that masses have demonstrated throughout history, to be led by wise, gifted superiors, congenitally prepared to show the way.”

Only the first of these themes—Kennedy’s life as an ongoing struggle—is actually developed in the course of the narrative. Parmet seemingly intends to portray the success of Kennedy’s struggle, but his evidence remains ambiguous. Kennedy’s courageous battles against disease and injury are amply documented, but the more difficult battle for independence from Joe Kennedy, Sr., is never definitively won. Parmet recounts numerous gestures of resistance against Joe; even Jack’s wartime affair with Inga Arvad, a woman under surveillance by the FBI because of her Nazi connections, is summed up as “another of his little rebellions, exasperating his father and satisfying his own free spirits.” Yet Joe continues to hover in the background, smoothing the way with his vast wealth and influence for his son’s rise. And Jack, despite frequent disagreements with Joe over political strategy and public policy, continues to rely heavily on his father’s “invaluable” assistance.

Parmet’s other themes—that Jack Kennedy had a distinctive and subtle character, and that his wisdom and personal gifts were instinctively grasped by the “masses”—are neither developed nor substantiated in the course of the book. Since Kennedy’s character is not revealed or analyzed in any depth, his purported subtlety remains obscure. Political wisdom and personal gifts are occasionally glimpsed, but the bulk of Parmet’s evidence suggests a conventional mind and a penchant for political expedience.

Indeed, for a biography that begins with a favorable view of its subject, *Jack* is full of unflattering material. Parmet’s research turns up some unsavory moments in the Kennedy rise to prominence. He shows that as a freshman representative Jack Kennedy adopted the same course as his colleague Richard Nixon, attracting public notice

through the grilling of “subversives” before congressional committees. Kennedy’s early and vigorous pursuit of Communists was used as a campaign highlight as late as his 1952 race for the Senate. When Adlai Stevenson came to Massachusetts during that campaign, he drew one of his statements from a memorandum prepared by Kennedy aide Sargent Shriver to praise the young Congressman: “I wonder how many of you know that it was Congressman Kennedy and not Senator Nixon who got the first citation of a Communist for perjury.”

Equally unflattering to Kennedy is Parmet’s research into the writing of *Profiles in Courage*, for which the senator received the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1957. Parmet credits Kennedy with conceiving the book and overseeing its writing. But his examination of Kennedy’s handwritten and dictated material for the book does not support the long-standing insistence by Kennedy intimates that Jack actually wrote *Profiles in Courage*. “At the working level, research, tentative drafts, and organizational planning were left to committee labor...[T]he burdens of time and literary craftsmanship were clearly [Theodore] Sorensen’s, and he gave the book both the drama and flow that made for readability.”

Parmet does succeed in demonstrating Kennedy’s growing political skills in his Senate years. He details Jack’s artful takeover of the Massachusetts Democratic party in 1956, designed to impress Adlai Stevenson with Kennedy’s value as a potential running-mate. He recounts Kennedy’s effective handling of the prickly labor-reform issue in 1958-59 as he positioned himself to make the run for the presidency. Yet, by the end of *Jack* it is still not clear why Kennedy, when he announced for president, could be considered well equipped for the job. Perhaps the second volume of Parmet’s biography can shed light on what this first volume fails to explain: why John Kennedy was an exceptional figure in modern American politics.

Jack is the most extensively researched biography of John Kennedy yet to appear. But Herbert Parmet has leaned too heavily on his research efforts, while failing to bring sufficient psychological and political imagination to his task. All research and no imagination make *Jack* a dull book. [WV]