

UNDER COVER

Memories and Heroes

In 1984 Orwell portrayed the future in order to safeguard the past, hoping to defend the autonomy of history and political memory against the terrible possibility expressed by the slogan "Those who control the present control the past."

As Orwell knew, a people's memory sets the measure of its political freedom. The old times give us models and standards by which to judge our time; what has been suggests what might have been and may yet be. Remembering lifts us out of bondage to the present, and political recollection calls us back from the specializations of everyday existence, allowing us to see ourselves as a people sharing a heritage and a public life. A democratic election is properly an act of collective remembrance.

In America's 1984, however, our political memory is failing. Part of the change in our remembering is natural enough. William Leuchtenburg's *In the Shadow of FDR* (Cornell University Press; \$19.95) observes that since 1945 the majority of Americans have defined a successful presidency in terms of their memories of Franklin Roosevelt. All of Roosevelt's successors have been forced to wrestle with his remembered example. Even those who have little regard for FDR have been constrained, by the logic of democratic politics, to put at least one foot in his steps. Yet, as Leuchtenburg notes, the youngsters who cast their first vote for Roosevelt in 1932 are in their seventies today, and Americans in their thirties know Roosevelt only at second hand. The memories are waning, the old allegiances thinning out. This decline should not be exaggerated; as Jimmy Carter learned to his cost, there is still strength in the ancient loyalties. Nevertheless, fewer Americans have a clear idea of what FDR stood for, and while Roosevelt is esteemed, he is no longer the nonpareil: Asked to name the president they most admired, the respondents in a recent poll picked Kennedy over FDR.

For President Reagan, Roosevelt is still an unrivalled hero, but Reagan's devotion says something much more alarming about the extent of our forgetfulness. In 1980, Reagan quoted Roosevelt repeatedly, almost always out of context; FDR *did* say, for example, that the government ought to "quit this business of relief," but only in favor of a national guarantee of employment. It is even more striking that Reagan distorted his own relation to FDR, implying that he voted for Roosevelt only once—in fact, he appears to have voted for him all four times—and that he began to have doubts about the New Deal very early in the game. Reagan even asserted, in 1981, that Roosevelt, had he lived, would have used government "the other way," toward decentralization and deregulation. Of course there are political reasons for Reagan's attempt to enlist Roosevelt, and there are equally good reasons for Reagan's effort to make himself appear more consistent and less of a turncoat than he was in fact. But as Leuchtenburg observes, the president appears to believe his fabrications, and his sincerity is more disturbing than guile would be. It reflects

Reagan's 1984-like ability to manufacture whatever past the present needs and to shrug off inconvenient recollections. At bottom, Reagan admires Roosevelt's style and his success; Reagan's Roosevelt is an image without substance, and in this the president's memory is similar to that of a growing number of Americans.

American admiration of John F. Kennedy—the only candidate, so far, to succeed to FDR's place of honor—rests almost entirely on Kennedy's excellences of style and on his presumed promise. Kennedy is the first and so far almost the only political hero of the television era. Television does badly with politics and political things. The most important concerns of politics—the common good or civic virtue, for example—are invisible and best understood through speech. Television prefers the visual and tends to dissolve political life into so many separate individuals, shrinking the public into the private. In NBC's "Kennedy," center stage was claimed by personal, and especially by sexual, relations and conflicts. Public speech was introduced only in a few quips and catch phrases. Similarly, while politics is four-dimensional, television tends to rely on two. Great art can sometimes save the medium from itself, but this is the exception and not the rule. NBC portrayed J. Edgar Hoover as a malevolent lunatic, giving no hint of the terrible ability and personal force that established Hoover's ascendancy. Our memories of Kennedy, so heavily shaped by TV, are likely to be as flat and as unpolitical as the medium itself.

Yet at best Kennedy is inadequate as a model for presidents. Kennedy's glamor and ability invites a kind of fantasy. Hence, though his brief presidency offers little evidence of achievement, it is possible to believe that Kennedy would have performed prodigies; that although he embroiled the United States in Vietnam, he would have extracted us in time (or, for the hawkish, that he would have found the way to win); that although he showed little real concern for domestic policy, he would have become a great leader in the cause of equality. Kennedy's presidency haunts American memory, as Leuchtenburg says, because JFK seems "forever in pursuit, forever unfulfilled, but also 'forever young.'" We remember Kennedy as we do our own adolescence, as a time of infinite possibility, before we chose to forgo some opportunities in order to pursue others. There is a sad justice in this: Kennedy's greatest failure, the Bay of Pigs, resulted because he would neither abandon the venture nor commit to it the forces needed for success.

Politics, like adulthood, is grander than fantasy. James MacGregor Burns once wrote that Kennedy, "in love with political effectiveness," lacked the appreciation that, just as all political choice is ambivalent, political greatness is often inseparable from defeat. In that "tragic quality" as well as in cunning, as a lion as well as a fox, Roosevelt was a master and Kennedy a bright apprentice.

Americans would be well advised, as Leuchtenburg implies, to go on "waiting for Franklin D." until we are certain of a better exemplar. "No man and no force," Roosevelt asserted in 1942, "can abolish memory." Let us hope so, this 1984.

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