

His Times
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(original sec)

The Transformation of Bobby Kennedy

Marshall Frady

Robert Kennedy and His Times
by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.
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They were, to be sure, spectacularly flawed—of an ore much mixed with brazen, base elements. But if nothing else, it can be said that the Kennedys afforded this society of the common man and the commonplace with something very close to its first national mythic saga—a line of jaunty and audacious, but strangely star-crossed princes in an American house of Atreus. “I guess the only reason we’ve survived,” the third dryly quipped, with his two older brothers already gone and his younger brother having just capsized in a small plane, “is that there are more of us than there is trouble.”

(EXCERPT)

But Cuba presents, perhaps, their most puzzlingly consistent and profound failure of historical perception. Whatever else it was, and however authoritarian it turned out to be, the Cuban revolution seemed the most original and dramatic political event to have occurred in this hemisphere in this century, with Castro himself an almost Tolstoyan figure in the profusion of his exuberance and imagination—Shelley, indeed Byron, could have dreamed him up. Among all the premiers and statesmen over the globe, he was at least the one figure who seemed unquestionably, tumultuously alive. But he also, along with his revolution, hugely traumatized the proprietorial interests in the United States, as the weary and meager spirit of constricted self-interest is liable to be critically intimidated by the sudden advent of a larger vitality, and driven to extinguish it. It was a trauma that eventually became a kind of accelerating hysteria, growing out of that sensation

of helplessness, of being outside history, of the apparent impossibility of unmaking the historical reality of Castro and Cuba now. That hysteria generated before long covert deployments into Cuba of “nonlethal chemicals to incapacitate sugar workers,” as Schlesinger recites it, schemes for “spreading word that Castro was anti-Christ and that the Second Coming was imminent—an event to be verified by star shells sent up from an American submarine off the Cuban coast.”

What is particularly bizarre, though, is that the Kennedys would have been caught up to such a degree in this mentality—a blind credulousness in full play through the bloody fantasy of the Bay of Pigs, when, as Robert Kennedy recorded, “We kept asking them when the uprisings were going to take place. Dick Bissell [of the CIA] said it was going to take place during the night.” Even after the missile crisis, this oblivious fixation persisted, with Robert Kennedy urging that they “must do something against Castro, even though we do not believe our actions would bring him down.”

Nevertheless, Schlesinger would seem to exempt them convincingly from any complicity in actual initiatives to execute Castro—perhaps most persuasively in his exposition of the staggering extent to which the CIA by then had ramified into a virtually unmanageable and rampant phenomenon of myriad bootleg twilight operations, free-lance arrangements with Cuban exiles, the Mafia. In the course of this account, what is displayed is the true secret phantasmagoria—Mafia contracts with the CIA, government wiretaps on Dan Rowan’s Las Vegas telephone—that decade in America had come to.

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It was, in a way, like some climax of America's passage, after World War II, from the last vestiges of its parochial innocence into a full-lusty involvement at last in the complex and possibly Mephistophelean exhilarations of global power. The Sixties then became a kind of decade of judgment, visiting a sudden bedlam on America, a berserkness, an uncontrollability of after-effects. Castro, alluding to "terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders," warned, "We are prepared to...answer in kind," and disgruntled Mafia intermediaries vowed, "Mark my words, this man Kennedy is in trouble.... He is going to be hit." Cuban exiles, after what they regarded as the double betrayals of the Bay of Pigs and then the consolidation of Castro's reign in the missile crisis resolution, distributed manifestoes that "only one development" would redeem them now, "if an inspired Act of God should place in the White House within weeks a Texan known to be a friend of all Latin Americans."

Maxwell Taylor recounted to Schlesinger how, when Jack Kennedy was informed of the execution of Diem in Vietnam, he lurched to his feet and "rushed from the room with a look of shock and dismay on his face which I had never seen before," and Schlesinger himself adds, "I had not seen Kennedy so depressed since the Bay of Pigs." Several months later, Schlesinger says, "on the day after Kennedy's funeral, Johnson, showing Hubert Humphrey the portrait of Diem hanging in the hallway of his house, said, 'We had a hand in killing him. Now it's happening here.'"

(EXCERPT)