

JOHN F. KENNEDY

Candidate on the Eve: Liberalism Without Tears

by James MacGregor Burns

Two years ago, when I began a full-scale study of John Kennedy as a Presidential aspirant, I knew him to be a superb campaigner, a wholly engaging person, and a solid supporter of the Roosevelt-Truman economic policies, but I was uncertain about the scope, intensity and durability of his liberalism. Clearly he wanted bread-and-butter liberalism, but on our great moral heritage of civil liberties and civil rights his position was not so clear to me.

A year ago, on finishing that study, I concluded that he had moved into a position of solid intellectual and political commitment to liberalism in its broadest terms, including civil liberties and civil rights. The haunting question remained: could he summon zeal and warmth and emotional commitment in defense of the positions he seemed to have arrived at through wholly cerebral processes? To the struggle for American survival Kennedy would bring bravery and wisdom, I felt, but whether he would bring passion and power would depend on his making a commitment not only of mind but of heart.

Today, on the eve of America's great choice, I believe that Kennedy in his campaign has deliberately prepared the way for the most consistently and comprehensively liberal Administration in the history of the country. Whether in the end he will, if elected, produce such an Administration is another question turning on the nature of the next Congress, events abroad, and other factors. But of Kennedy's absolute determination to stand behind liberal policies, I have no question.

For he has shown that determination in the sternest test a politician can face – the crucible of a Presidential campaign. As in all campaigns, there have been many advisers within the party as well as outside urging Kennedy to soften his line, to make concessions. He has not heeded this advice. Quite deliberately he has followed the Roosevelt-Truman-Stevenson tradition in the party, and where he has departed from his predecessors it has been to take a stronger line rather than a

weaker one, as in the case of medical care, aid to education, and civil rights.

A politician's beliefs can be tested by two measures – by what he says, and by the kind of people he gathers around him. On both these scores Kennedy has come through with very high marks.

Consider the Democratic platform. Kennedy's strength in the convention last July was such that he directly and indirectly dominated the writing of the platform. It is his program. Moreover, the Kennedy forces were so sure several weeks before the convention of winning the nomination that they were in a position to shape the platform to the needs less of a convention victory than of a final election victory. The fact that Kennedy demanded and received an emphatically liberal platform as the basis for his Presidential campaign is proof that he considers liberalism both politically wise and morally essential. It is instructive to compare, in this regard, the enormous concessions that Franklin Roosevelt made to conservatism when campaigning during the depression in 1932. And if Kennedy considers liberalism to be good politics for winning the Presidency, he would also consider it to be good politics in administering the Presidency, especially with Nelson Rockefeller looming as the most likely Republican candidate in 1964.

Perhaps an even better test of the durability of Kennedy's liberalism is the type of men he has gathered around him. As in the case of FDR, they are of two basic types – men of thought who advise him on policy and men of action who conduct the practical work of vote-getting. Also as in the case of Roosevelt, the men of thought have the decisive impact on policies and the men of action have the larger role in electioneering. Although one of the unique and impressive aspects of Kennedy's group is that the men of thought are also men of action, the crucial point is that the campaign technicians are not modifying policy to meet the needs of some special section such as the South or some special interest such as those who wish to boost tariffs. The liberal advisers, with their stable of intellectuals, are securely in control of policy-making, under Senator Kennedy's close direction.

But far more important than a candidate's immediate

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entourage – since he can, after all, change its make-up overnight should he wish – is the nature of his political allies, especially those who have their independent bases of power. I refer to the Senators and Representatives and pressure group leaders with whom the candidate has been conducting his campaign and with whom he would share power and influence in the job of governing the nation. These are the liberal Representatives such as Chester Bowles of Connecticut, Stewart Udall of Arizona, John Brademas of Indiana, Frank Thompson of New Jersey, Richard Bolling of Missouri, Edith Green of Oregon and scores of others. Kennedy's close political associates in the Senate have been Paul Douglas, Joseph Clark, Henry Jackson and (except during their struggle in the primaries) Hubert Humphrey. The leaders he conspicuously summoned to his councils at Hyannisport after the convention were Adlai Stevenson, Humphrey, Averell Harriman, and Mennen Williams. The group leaders he has been doing political business with are officials of the AFL-CIO, the NAACP, the Farmers Union and other such liberal organizations.

Intellectuals watching a politician in action like to ask: what does the man really believe, in the innermost recesses of his mind? The question is unrealistic. His political personality and outlook are defined in large part by the men to whom he turns for counsel, for then he establishes personal obligations to them and they can expect continuing access to him. If Kennedy leans so publicly on liberal advisers such as Archibald Cox, and on liberal aides such as Theodore Sorensen, during the campaign, when the Republicans try to make political capital out of it, should he lean any less on these advisers and aides once he has attained the relative security of office?

Is It the Ghostwriters?

Some would dismiss all this with the cynical observation that Kennedy has purchased his liberal image by hiring scores of liberal advisers and speech writers. Many have wondered whether Kennedy had simply tested the political winds and trimmed his craft in a way that seemed most likely to catch the popular breezes and carry him to the White House. His conduct of the campaign has, I think, stilled this suspicion. He has repeatedly departed from his prepared texts not to soften his liberal stand but to emphasize it. The TV debates, above all, have shown how false is the claim that Kennedy was dependent on his ghostwriters. That this man, terribly alone before 60 million viewers and listeners, could so decisively have spilled out a cataract of names, statements, legislation, dates, quotations and doctrine was illustrative of the enormous reservoir of information and ideas within that bright and capacious

mind. He has shown himself deserving of Walter Lippmann's recent description: "It has been truly impressive to see the precision of Mr. Kennedy's mind, his immense command of the facts, his instinct for the crucial point, his singular lack of demagoguery and sloganeering, his intense concern and interest in the subject itself, the stability and steadfastness of his nerves and his coolness and his courage."

I do not pretend that the proof I am offering is anything new. Quite the contrary, all the items that I have mentioned – the nature of the Democratic platform, the kind of political associates Kennedy has gathered around himself, his articulation of liberal ideas under fire – are well known to anyone who has watched his performance. And here lies the supreme irony of the role of liberals in this campaign. For although they know all this, although Kennedy has taken a liberal posture few would have dreamed likely three years ago, many liberals are in effect still sitting out the 1960 election.

Most of these will vote for Kennedy. Some will even give money to the national campaign or put Kennedy bumper strips on their car. But they will vote for Kennedy largely in order to vote against Nixon, if they show up at the polls at all. And any contribution they make to the campaign will be a kind of reflex action set off by the political sights and smells and sounds of October during the quadrennial election year, rather than an act produced by their own commitment to a candidate. The question remains: why?

The answer lies in part, I think, in the kind of men who are running Kennedy's campaign. They are no more – and no less – ideological than Jim Farley or Hugh Johnson were, but whereas Johnson or Farley could deliver themselves of a good New Deal speech when need be, Kennedy's election technicians hardly bother. And certainly they are a tough, cool bunch lacking in the kind of humility that Nixon has affected so successfully. Sometimes the toughness and coolness make one wince a bit; in August, when the failure of the special session of Congress and other campaign woes had lowered morale in the Kennedy camp, his aides were saying that morale would be at a low ebb during the next month but would then start rising – probably the first case in politics of built-in, predicted and automatically compensated pessimism.

Another reason for the apathy of some liberals is that Kennedy still makes no symbolic concession to them in the image he creates. He deals in specifics rather than in generalities. Occasionally he gets off a somewhat moving sentence as he did last month when he told the Liberal Party meeting that "liberalism is not so much a party creed or a set of fixed platform promises as it is an attitude of mind and heart, a faith in man's ability through the experience of his reason and judgment to increase for himself and his fellowmen the

amount of justice and freedom and progress which all human life deserves." Yet one feels that such a sentence *was* probably ghostwritten and that the real Kennedy shows most clearly in his handling of concrete problems. One misses in Kennedy, too, traits that Nixon has mastered – oversimplification, timing for emphasis, repetition, the use of cloudy symbols to obscure positions. One almost wishes that Kennedy would "ham it up" – that he would give the crowd a really big wave of his hand, that he would give a baby – or even a woman voter – a really lusty kiss, that he would end a telling point in such a way that the crowd would get a chance to give a big cheer, that when suggesting that we leave Mr. Truman's profanity up to Mrs. Truman he would do so with a broad smile so that we could be sure he was in on the joke too. But this is not Kennedy's way – nor is it Kennedy's way to manufacture an artificial and meretricious political style. Hence we simply have to face the fact that he may never offer liberals anything like Wilson's magnificent rhetoric or Roosevelt's warming eloquence or even the "give-'em-hell" bombast of Truman.

No Tragic Hero

But the reasons for some liberals' noncommitment to the Democratic candidate go deeper than all this. Their main difficulty with Kennedy, I think, is that he has been too successful – heir both to wealth and great political opportunity, a hero in the war, a winner in all his political battles, the possessor of glamor and good looks and of great political qualities that seem not earned but almost magically endowed. The trouble with Kennedy is that he lacks liberalism's tragic quality.

By liberalism's tragic quality I mean that so many of its finest and most passionate causes, like Spain, have been lost causes; that so many liberal heroes have had their tragic denouements, as in Lincoln's assassination, Wilson's defeat on the League, and Roosevelt's death in office; that the pursuit of great causes has often been far more rewarding emotionally than their realization; that the great achievements of liberalism have often ended, desirable though they might be, in labyrinthine legislation and huge social-welfare bureaucracies, as in the case of social security or the TVA.

Kennedy simply is – or at least has been – too successful. If he should die tomorrow in a plane crash, he would become at once a liberal martyr, for the liberal publicists of the land would rush to construct a hero out of a young man of wealth who ran the most liberal campaign in history, or out of the young Catholic who defied the forces of bigotry, or out of the wounded P-T boat commander who would not risk the life of a single American for the defense of the strategically worthless

islands of Quemoy and Matsu. But Kennedy today, in sharp contrast to Stevenson, who from the beginning in 1952 and all through 1956 seemed to be fighting impossible odds, gives the impression of being too much in control of his fortunes and too much destined for success. His seems to be a liberalism without tears.

It would be easy to say that Kennedy in office will develop the passionate, evocative qualities that this brand of liberalism demands, just as Franklin Roosevelt did in the White House. For the Presidential office does work its magic on a man. But in Kennedy's case such a prediction might not come true. For he is a different type of liberal from any we have known. He is in love not with lost causes, not with passionate evocations, not with insuperable difficulties; he is in love with political effectiveness.

In Kennedy, American liberals are encountering a different kind of leader – one who missed out on much of the rhetoric of the liberalism of the 1930's but who instead constructed his liberalism slowly and belatedly and painstakingly out of his own 14 years in politics, in years of parliamentary struggle and legislative draftsmanship. His liberalism may be all the more sound and durable precisely because it was so constructed. But it is not Stevenson's liberalism, nor Truman's. It is his.

In office he would establish, I think, a kind of policy machine – with all the efficiency, productivity and dispassion that such a term denotes. Because government would have to act quickly along many lines across broad fronts, a Kennedy Administration would be obsessed with the formulation and execution of one specific program after another. He knows, I think, that the liberal agenda of the 1960's will be executed not simply in a dramatic "100 days" but in a thousand days of persistent action, that the campaign to get the country moving forward will be fought in hundreds of little, drawn-out battles in Congressional committees and cloakrooms, in government bureaus and United States embassies abroad. Such a far-flung campaign will indeed call for a policy machine powered by a steady flow of Presidential authority. But of the liberal direction of that machine there can now be no doubt.

Some liberals might find such an Administration a bit dull, especially if it were successful; few of us will be thrilled by the policy machine. Yet I think there are many of us too who feel that action is so vitally needed, so long overdue, on so many wide fronts of national purpose that we might be willing to sacrifice some of the intoxication of liberal evocations – as long as we knew that federal aid to education, an FEPC, a start on disarmament, more generous immigration policies, and all the rest, were actually going into effect.

Kennedy in his own way has shown his intense commitment to liberalism. When will the hold-out liberals show their political commitment to him?

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