



SCHOOL of
GRADUATE STUDIES
EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

East Tennessee State University
Digital Commons @ East
Tennessee State University

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Student Works

8-2006

The Life and Public Career of Robert F. Kennedy.

Daryl Anthony Carter
East Tennessee State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carter, Daryl Anthony, "The Life and Public Career of Robert F. Kennedy." (2006). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 2211.
<https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/2211>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

The Life and Public Career of Robert F. Kennedy

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of History

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in History

by

Daryl Anthony Carter

August 2006

Dr. Elwood Watson, Chair

Dr. Stephen Fritz

Dr. Ronnie Day

ABSTRACT

The Life and Public Career of Robert F. Kennedy

by

Daryl A. Carter

There have been many notable politicians in the United States during the twentieth century. Some, like Teddy Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, were known for their swagger and appeal to the common man. Others, like Bill Clinton and Franklin Roosevelt, were known for their charisma and intelligence. However, one in particular was known for caring, compassion, strength, and determination. Robert Francis Kennedy lived in interesting times, surrounded by large egos and near mythical figures. But Kennedy was arguably one of the most important figures of the last fifty years. The ideas and ideals that he espoused still resonate nearly forty years after his tragic demise. What made Robert Kennedy so unique was the circumstances of the last four and half years of his life (November 1963-June 1968). The RFK we remember today was not exactly what he really was during life. In addition, he went through a transformation unparalleled by many of his generation. This thesis tracks the life of this very important figure and shows how the assassination of his brother, John F. Kennedy, forever changed him into a titanic figure in American history.

DEDICATION

To the love and my life, Crystal, and to the joy of my life, Gracie.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“The Life and Public Career of Robert F. Kennedy” has been more than a year in the making. Throughout the process there have been many ups and downs. For me this project has been far more than just the capstone of the master’s degree: it has been my life. It was taken me to Washington, D.C. and Boston and has seen countless hours on the telephone and the internet. Furthermore, considerable amounts of time were spent in Sherrod Library at East Tennessee State University. However, this process has been the most rewarding, exciting, and illuminating experience of my life.

While I have done massive amounts of work of this project, I could not have accomplished this feat without the love, support, understanding, and help from many, many people. I wish to thank the staff of the National Archives in Washington, D.C. whose assistance has been immeasurable. Next, the direction and help I received from the staff of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library made the completion of this project a reality. I also want to take the time to thank the eminent historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Civil Rights leader, Congressman John Lewis, D-GA for being so kind as to sit and listen and answer the questions I posed to them. It is something that I will never forget. What can I say about East Tennessee State University: they have been of the utmost professionalism, encouragement, and assistance to me. Dr. Cecilia McIntosh and the of the School of Graduate Studies always helped me and approved a much needed grant that financed my trip to Boston in February; this project would not have been completed without them.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of Drs. Stephen Fritz and Ronnie Day for their support throughout the last year. They have helped me considerably since I

was an undergraduate and I want them to know that I appreciate it more than words can say. Last, but not least, I want to especially thank Dr. Elwood Watson who chaired my thesis. Over the last year and a half, Dr. Watson has been a mentor, friend, professor, and benefactor. I truly appreciate his patience, ideas, ambition, and flexibility. My graduate education would have been lessened without him. Thank you for everything.

On a personal note, the last year has been a taxing year for my family. Especially, the love of my life: Crystal. She has been as understanding as any woman could possibly be. I thank her from the bottom of heart and am eternally appreciative. Our daughter, Gracie, has been a particular joy in my life and this project. Her zest for life and constant demands upon me, have made me a better person. My parents, Joseph and Deborah, as well as my sisters, Stephanie and Lisa, have been a rock which I could always depend on. Their encouragement, interest, and devotion have made this possible. Without my family and God, I would not be the man I am today.

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
DEDICATION	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	7
2. RFK: 1925-1951	10
The Beginnings	10
3. RFK: 1951-1961	26
Making A Name In D.C.	26
4. RFK: 1961-1963	53
Civil Rights	53
5. RFK: 1961-1963	77
The President's Man	77
6. RFK: 1963-1968	98
Transformation	98
7. CONCLUSION	121
BIBLIOGRAPHY	123
VITA	127

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During the twentieth century there have been many interesting and important political figures in the United States. However, few of those very notable figures have captured our imagination in a way that transcends race, class, or generation. Robert F. Kennedy was one such figure. Born into immense wealth and equipped with the best education money could buy, RFK was an unlikely hero of the middle class, working class, and poor.

Although Kennedy would bristle at being labeled a liberal, he was certainly a progressive minded individual. As a result of the Kennedy political machine and the myth makers from Cambridge, Boston, Washington, New York, and elsewhere, Robert Kennedy has become an ultra “bleeding heart” liberal. Furthermore, it has been suggested that he was just a naïve, idealistic person of good deeds. Nothing could be further from the truth.

RFK was from the old school of politics. He was practical and he was idealistic. The bare knuckle world of politics was something he understood well and in which he excelled. RFK was a skilled political operative and dedicated public servant. He was a political giant during an era when there were many other larger than life figures.

While his judgment was considered excellent, he had weaknesses. The main area of vulnerability was the Kennedy family. His devotion to them, coupled with the fact that he submerged his own ambitions to advance theirs, fostered an environment where moral and ethical blind spots caused him to do things that he would have otherwise never done. Bobby took being his brother’s [Jack] keeper to another level.

There was, however, one event that irrevocably changed his life: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. RFK'S world was shattered when his brother died. His mannerisms changed, his outlook on life changed, and his commitment to the underdog was solidified and became personal.

In Chapter one, I will discuss RFK'S birth and childhood in the rambunctious Kennedy clan. In addition, the reader will gain an appreciation of his unique position within the family and how that laid the foundation for the rest of his family. Finally, we will see Robert's progression through college and law school and how those years and World War II helped develop his character.

Chapter two will discuss Bobby's first job in government and his relationship with Sen. Joseph McCarthy. His role of his brother's keeper began during this period as we discover his involvement in the most critical events of Jack Kennedy's professional life. This chapter also explores how congressional legal work gave illumination to Robert as to what his passion in life was to be and culminates with the 1960 election of Jack Kennedy as president of the United States.

Chapter three will examine Kennedy's reaction to the civil rights movement as Attorney General. His relationship and influence with the president is discussed. His changing position towards Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others who were fighting for the freedom in America and his assassination will be the subject of focus.

In Chapter 4, we will see how crucial Bobby's role was as the President Kennedy's main man. This chapter will dissect his role during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the test ban treaty, the beginning of détente, and matters of a personal nature for the president. All of this, of course, takes place during his years as Attorney General.

The fifth and final chapter will discuss the gut-wrenching turmoil in which Bobby found himself after November 1963. We will trace Kennedy's slow return to public life and his utter contempt for Lyndon B. Johnson. We will see his politics change radically from what they previously had been. In addition, this chapter will explain how everything that happened between 1963-1968, would not have been possible without the death of John Kennedy. It will dispel the myths surrounding what RFK was in life.

The reader will uncover the complex, moralistic/fatalistic aspect of the man. Finally, the reader will see how the events of November 1963 turned him into the figure whom Americans remember today.

CHAPTER 2

RFK 1925-1951

The Beginnings

On November 20, 1925 Robert Francis Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts. He was the seventh child born to Joseph and Rose Kennedy and the third son in this Irish Catholic family. During this time in Boston, the Irish were generally on the lower end of the economic and social spectrum, but the Kennedys were not typical Irish Americans. They were an upper class family with wealth and political connections. In fact, Brookline was not particularly welcoming to Irish Catholics; it was a haven of Protestantism. The North and South End of Boston had the highest concentrations of Irish in any part of the city. Many of these people were poor, uneducated, and barred from the political, social, and financial power centers of the city. Being Irish in Boston was comparable to being Black in the South, which equaled a second class citizenship and indignity and poverty. However, the Irish were resourceful and resilient in their efforts to amass political, cultural, and social power. By the time of Robert Kennedy's birth the Irish had gained control of Boston politically. Robert never saw the horrors of poverty and injustice in his childhood but was rather pampered by servants, butlers, tutors, and nannies. There were also trips to the Kennedy summer home, Malcolm's Cottage, in Hyannis, Massachusetts, which by 1933 became the family's permanent home. During the winter season, the Kennedy's enjoyed the sun and warm temperatures in Palm Beach, Florida. Hyannis was just the place where a family could make their own rules, all the while keeping up appearances with the white Protestant elite of Cape Cod.

Robert also had another advantage in his youth that helped give him the freedom to grow undisturbed: two older brothers. Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., born in 1915 and John Fitzgerald Kennedy, born in 1917, were the subject of Joseph Sr.'s intense attention. Joe, being typical of the time period, was much more concerned with the development and lives of their sons as opposed to their daughters, and Joseph Sr. was no exception. In comparison with his brothers, Robert was small, unimposing, and to a certain extent ignored by his father. Over time, however, Robert would grow to become a tough, intelligent person who would rival his brothers and lead his father to later remark that of all his sons, "Bobby is the most like me...he is as hard as nails."¹

Joseph Kennedy, Sr. was a hard working, ambitious, and, some would say, corrupt man, who was intent on becoming part of the Brahmin society of Boston. P.J. Kennedy, Robert's paternal grandfather, was a powerful ward boss, businessman, and a self-made man. John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, Robert's maternal grandfather, was a powerful Boston mayor and political power broker. Both sets of families were Irish Catholic and were first generation Americans of immigrant parents who had left Ireland in the mass migration during the great potato famine of the 1840's. There was a sense of unity in Irish Boston that held people and families together through trying and difficult times. Ironically, this was not a trait that Joe Kennedy passed onto his children. Joe Sr. believed that being Irish and Catholic was a social, political, and professional hindrance. He felt that he and his family had suffered numerous social slights because of anti-Irish prejudice. Determined not to allow this type of discrimination affect his future prospects, Joe often refused to use his surname for fear that it would reveal his social and religious roots. His parents were also determined that he would not attend Catholic school but

¹ Quotation of Joseph P. Kennedy, PBS: "*The American Experience: The Kennedys*."

instead would enroll in Boston Latin School. At the time Boston Latin was a prestigious prep school that had a reputation for being the school of the elite. As one chronicler of the Kennedys has noted, “young Joe Kennedy was not at Boston Latin only to study and play sports. He was also there to meet and mingle with the sons of proper Bostonians.”² For the young future patriarch this was the true beginnings of his education and was something that he would instill in Robert and his other sons: connections and how people perceive you are the things that matter. From Boston Latin he attended Harvard University where he received his degree in business in 1912. In those days the most prominent and respected families sent their sons to Harvard, not so much to get an education but to gain the social contacts that would be invaluable to them in their professional and personal lives. It was also the bastion of Protestantism from which the captains of government and industry often began their careers.

After Harvard, Joseph Kennedy set out to make as much money as he could. He worked as a state bank examiner and was the president of Columbia Trust Bank; this was a bank that catered to the Irish community and that was partly owned by P.J. Kennedy. He then took a job with Galen, Stone, a financial firm with offices in Boston and New York. It was there that young Joe Kennedy learned to manipulate the financial markets through now illegal stock pools and unscrupulous journalists, who would elevate the stock in question through the media until the stock reached a certain point. When the stock reached that point Kennedy and his co-conspirators would unload the stock and reap the enormous profits.

² John H. Davis, *The Kennedy's: Dynasty and Disaster, 1848-1983*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984), 33.

Joseph P. Kennedy solidified his ties to the powerful by marrying Rose Fitzgerald, daughter of Mayor John Fitzgerald, in October 1914. Within the next six years the couple produced four children: Joseph Jr., John F., Rosemary, and Kathleen. Of course by 1925, with the birth of Robert, there were seven children.

Robert Kennedy's mother, Rose, was born to a relatively prosperous and prominent family. She was the toast of Boston and a debutante; she was frequently seen with her father at political and social events throughout Boston. This was because she was her father's favorite child and because her mother was a social recluse. She enjoyed-- and more importantly understood-- the rough and tumble world of Boston politics. Although her husband would never take advantage of her considerable talents in this area, Rose was a major presence in the political campaigns not only of her father but also all four of her sons.

In 1925, the Kennedy family was a fixture in Boston social and financial circles. They were wealthy and somewhat powerful but not well respected. The upper crust of Boston considered them to be nouveau riche and upstarts who came from the wrong side of the tracks. There is no doubt that Joe's business practices, which by that time were becoming well known, contributed greatly to the disdain and lack of respect with which the family was held. But the Kennedy children had little knowledge or understanding of such matters. Robert and his siblings existed in a world that was tightly controlled by their parents. Being the seventh child had its advantages. Robert was one of the youngest, but he had sisters born both before and after him. This gave him some breathing room from the intense attention of Joseph Sr. But living in the Kennedy household also had disadvantages. "What I remember most vividly about growing up,"

Robert Kennedy told Jack Newfield in later years, “was going to a lot of different schools, always having to make new friends, and that I was very awkward. I dropped things and fell down all the time.”³ “I was,” Robert said, “the seventh of nine children, and when you come from that far down you have to struggle to survive.”⁴

Being the third son of Joseph Kennedy was very difficult. Joseph Jr. and John commanded the attention of the father and with the age differences Robert was often left to the care and nurturing of his mother Rose. Because of this he did not receive the amount of attention from his father that he so desperately desired so he acted out in ways that were sometimes reckless and even dangerous. Robert needed to find a role for himself and at this early age he was beginning to take on the role of family protector and enabler. “Extremely defensive about his family, he seemed to have responded to his own remote standing in the family hierarchy by adopting a rigid and fierce protectiveness about the family name.”⁵ Once in school he physically attacked another student for making disparaging remarks about his brother Joe Jr. He also became consumed with the need to please his parents and siblings. Never a good student, Bobby tried to improve his grades but often failed to gain the scholastic achievements of Joe Jr. and Jack. In addition, Bobby was the constant object of criticism from the other children. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, one of Bobby’s older sisters, once said that he “would never amount to anything.”⁶ One can see in Robert’s early years the ruthless, tough, dogmatic, and fierce personality traits beginning to take shape.

³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Robert Kennedy And His Times. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 22.

⁴ Ibid, 23.

⁵ Evan Thomas, Robert Kennedy: His Life. (New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 2000), 33.

⁶ Ibid, Photograph 2.

On December 7, 1941, everything changed for the Kennedy family and the country. The United States was attacked by Japan at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The entry into World War II so deeply feared by Bobby's father, the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James, had come to fruition: America would stand and fight. This was of great concern to Joe Sr. because of the fact that three of his four sons were draft eligible. At the time of the attacks Joe Jr. was 26, Jack was 24, and Bobby was 16. Considering the fact that most thought that the war would last several years; all three brothers would have to serve the United States Armed Forces. Both Joe Jr. and Jack had joined the military shortly before Pearl Harbor. But there were always other concerns that had to be addressed, such as the political fallout that Joe Jr. and Jack would have to deal with if they didn't serve and how to have the boys serve in non-combat zones such as Washington, D.C. and London where the danger would be minimal: these were the concerns that were paramount in the Ambassador's mind as the American war machine began to move in position. However, there were somewhat different concerns for Joe Jr., Jack, and Bobby, such as restoring honor to the family name that had been tarnished when Joe Sr. refused to serve in World War I, adventure, patriotism, and, especially for Bobby, the desire to see action. This was a passion throughout his life, and he would almost come to worship men who exemplified valor, courage, and bravery under fire. But Bobby would have to wait until his last year at Milton Academy, in 1943, to enlist in the U.S. Navy's V-12 program that trained young men to become officers. The program, which was under the control of the Navy at Harvard, allowed the young men to gain their college education while completing their training on weekends and during the summers. It was a program that ran parallel to the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) in

which various branches were used to supplement the military academies. In order to understand Robert one has to know that men of action and courage always held a special place in his heart. Later in life he would say that he would have liked to have been a paratrooper. Joe Jr. and Jack were both serving and the itch to see combat was immense, but it was not to be. While in training in Maine at Bates College in the V-12 program he wrote to friends outlining the issue of his discontent, lack of action. He even thought that flying like his brother Joe might be the answer. But he failed the mandatory flight physical; two tragic and somewhat unforeseen events occurred that would shake his foundations: Jack became a national hero when his PT boat was sunk by a Japanese destroyer and the eldest son, who was the model child of the family, Joe Jr., was killed while flying a plane laden with bombs over the English Channel. These tragic events caused great pain and confusion to all members of the family, but RFK was more troubled than he would acknowledge. It created a power vacuum among the siblings, but it also made Robert want to serve all the more. But he would never serve in an active unit during wartime, nor would he see the horrors that his older brothers saw firsthand. This fact was a source of embarrassment and self pity. Consequently, Kennedy began to develop a romantic sense of what war really is. Kennedy eventually did enlist in the Navy and served, ironically, aboard a brand new destroyer named for his late brother: USS Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. “The ship steamed to Cuba, where Kennedy grew bored by the sunsets...His shipmates regarded him as a quiet loner and barely noticed when he left the ship.”⁷ “In May 1946, Seaman Second Class Kennedy was discharged from the navy.”⁸ He served aboard ship for less than a year and upon his discharge he went back

⁷ Ibid, 45.

⁸ Ibid, 45.

to Harvard University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1948. At the age of twenty-three Robert was still a boy in a man's body, both mentally and physically. Unsure of anything except his low status within the family, he was accepted by the University of Virginia School of Law. Virginia had long been known as the school of the rich and famous; after all it was founded by Thomas Jefferson. The institution also had a reputation for admitting students who came from privileged backgrounds but could not compete academically at institutions such as Harvard and Yale.

Virginia was much different from Harvard or Boston. It was located in the South and was a state that had a rich political and military heritage. Names such as Washington, Lee, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe come to mind, but it was also a hotbed of Jim Crow. The subtle and sophisticated racism in New England was very different from the very blatant racism and frequent violence that was always present in the South. The things that RFK saw there would impact him many ways, but for the most part he did not consciously deal with those matters until later in life, when professional and intellectual concerns forced him to do something about injustice and inequity in American society. But he did make efforts to have Black speakers at Virginia, much to the chagrin of the administration of the University and the locals. This was a pattern in Kennedy's early life: see injustice and either out of righteousness or out of spite for bureaucracy and ignorance do something to rectify or at the very least make others accountable for their wicked behavior. These types of altruistic actions were not begun or emulated by the Kennedy family until much later in the twentieth century. In fact, Ambassador Kennedy was a racist. By attending law school, something his older brother Joe Jr. never got the chance to complete, RFK started to receive some real attention and

respect from his father. “He is just starting off and he has the difficulty of trying to follow two brilliant brothers, Joe and Jack. That in itself is quite a handicap, and he is making a good battle against it,” old Joe wrote in the spring of 1948 to a friend.⁹ In fact, the decision to enter law school was not easy nor was it clear cut for Robert. He had pondered going to graduate or business school. “I just didn’t know anything when I got out of college. I wanted to do graduate work, but I didn’t know whether to go to law school or business school. I had no attraction to business, so I entered law school.”¹⁰ This was a decision that affected his entire life and public career.

In addition, Kennedy was also learning the political ropes. As early as John Kennedy’s first congressional campaign in 1946, Robert was a major part of the Kennedy political machine. It was a role that he did not necessarily like but something for which he was perfectly suited. Robert had the knack for organization and toughness that was extremely useful in running political campaigns. Despite being dominated by his father in these early years it was he who ran the day to day operations of the campaigns. He became very good at it and by 1960 most pundits, politicians, and journalists would consider him one of the most talented and leading political operators in the business. This endeared him to the family and solidified his place as the family protector.

It was during this time that Robert Kennedy also met the woman who would become his wife and bear him eleven children: Ethel Skakel. She was the daughter of a prominent Catholic family from Greenwich, Connecticut. Fun-loving and full of spunk, she must have reminded Kennedy of the vivacious Kennedy women. She was a classmate and roommate of Jean Kennedy in Manhattan. They initially met during the

⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy And His Times*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978) 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 81.

Christmas holidays in 1945, but neither paid too much attention to the other at first. Robert was searching for stability and calling in life, along with more trivial pursuits such as football at Harvard and political campaigns. Originally, Ethel was a girlfriend of Jack Kennedy, but their relationship never found commonality. There was something about her that appealed to the often dour and overlooked Bobby. She was funny, energetic, and loyal. Because of these endearing traits, she took to the Kennedy family like a duck to water. In addition, Ethel was also extremely devout in her religious beliefs. A staunch Catholic during this period in her life, she thought seriously of becoming a nun. In the initial years of acquaintance and courting, Bobby himself had his sights on Ethel's sister Pat. But again personalities stepped in the way to force the hand of fate. Bobby and Ethel were too much alike to take for granted or dismiss. She traveled from Manhattanville College in New York to Charlottesville, Virginia on weekends to visit her future husband. Bobby reciprocated by making the journey to Manhattan. She was everything that he would need in a wife. Ethel was never interested in having a career or using her education to promote herself and in that way she was not all together different from many young women of her generation who went to college to major in husbandry and obtain their "Mrs." She graduated in 1949 and moved back home to Greenwich, Connecticut. The romance continued even after she and Bobby had second thoughts. Ethel's inclinations concerning the Catholic Church grew stronger during this time, much to the chagrin of Bobby. In frustration Bobby asked to no one in particular, "How can I fight with God?"¹¹ However, everything worked out and Bobby and Ethel were engaged by the Thanksgiving holiday of 1949. On June 17, 1950, Robert Frances Kennedy and

¹¹ C. David Heymann, *RFK: A Candid Biography of Robert F. Kennedy*. (New York: Dutton/Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998), 54.

the former Ethel Skakel of Connecticut were married in St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Greenwich. "By 11:30 a.m., some two thousand guests filled St. Mary's Roman Catholic."¹² In the tradition set by Joseph Kennedy, and because this was the first marriage of any of the sons, it was a massive and elaborate affair. Many of the guests were people in positions of great power and influence, such as Senator Joe McCarthy of Wisconsin, Arthur Krock of *The New York Times*, and various colleagues of Robert's brother and best man; Congressman John F. Kennedy. It was a society wedding that was one of the social events of the year.

Once again one can see the seriousness of Robert Kennedy in his decision to become a married man. In stark difference from his older siblings, Joe, Kathleen, and Jack, there was a growing maturity and evenhandedness that was clearly a trait all of his own. When Kathleen Kennedy married a Protestant aristocrat from England, Billy Harrington, it could be said that the marriage was not completely out of love and respect, but rather, a show of rebellion against the fiercely Catholic Kennedy clan. Even more superficially, it was an effort to emulate the Brahmin of Boston and the aristocratic class of Protestant England with which she had become very fond. Her second engagement, after the death of her first husband, was to another British Protestant, Lord Fitzwilliam, and the same reason could be applied. Joe Jr. was known for his love of women and playing the field, but it is impossible to think that he would have been anywhere near ready to make such a serious commitment to a relationship in the years immediately following the war, despite the fact he was the eldest child. There were the rumors that he would have married before the war was even over. Finally, Jack Kennedy, who by now was publicly known, thoroughly enjoyed his bachelorhood, but in 1953 was forced by his

¹² Ibid, 57.

father to marry because it was believed that an unmarried politician would never be considered a serious candidate for high office. In fact, Jack was later shocked and maybe a little envious of his younger brother's decision. RFK was never known as a completely cool and rational fellow in his decision making, but in his judgment Ethel was the right person to become his bride. It was a choice that he never regretted nor ever was unhappy with making. It is important to remember that while he was courting, engaging, and marrying Ethel, he was a law student at the University of Virginia where he was an extremely active. Therefore, one can see the cool, methodical man that at the time was not as easy to fathom, but would become readily recognizable in later years.

If marriage was an eye opening experience, law school was enlightening. Robert Kennedy was in a world where ideas, concepts, and philosophy were as much of a student's life as beer and sex was to the undergraduate student body. It was a world where things made sense and there was a logical step of steps that were easy to follow. If there was something that didn't make sense, there were steps and procedures that could be taken to remedy the situation. Although RFK never would become the traditional attorney-at-law, he did gain a strong legal foundation and background that helped tremendously in his wars on political enemies and adversaries that were of the criminal element like Jimmy Hoffa. The ideas of justice and law and order began to fill his consciousness for the first time, although it is probable that even he did not realize it at the time. In later years, RFK remarked, "I can't say that I laid awake at night thinking about civil rights before I became Attorney General." But the foundation was finally there. He was very active on the campus of UVA during his time there. Besides Ethel, "the other extracurricular highlight of RFK's time at UVA consisted of his work with the

Student Legal Forum, which had been established to bring distinguished citizens from the outside to speak at the law school.”¹³ Of course a student of his background and wealth had numerous personal and family connections that he relied upon for his work on the Student Legal Forum. While he was president of the student organization, he invited many family associates and prominent figures to the Charlottesville campus to speak to the law school. Mainly, these were friends of the family, but others were not and the decision to have those persons invited drew the ire of the UVA Administration. A Black diplomat named Ralph Bunche was asked to speak by RFK. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the South was a hotbed of racism and segregation. Everyone was separated according to race. For example, whites had their own restrooms, neighborhoods, schools, and even residential parts of town. That same type of separation was in place for the black population, except that their livelihoods, education, and very existence was “inheritably unequal.” [The United States Supreme Court ruled in 1896, in the infamous and landmark case of Plessy v. Ferguson, that the now reprehensible idea of “separate, but equal” was indeed constitutional.¹⁴] This was the society in which Robert Kennedy was living while attending law school. “Ralph Bunche, who as a UN peace negotiator had won a Nobel Prize,” was to speak at the University.¹⁵ Some students, faculty, and administrators were disgusted and horrified at the prospect of a Black man addressing the all-white University. But they were not the only problem Kennedy faced in this daunting proposition: Bunche also caused a headache for sponsors by refusing to go unless the audience was integrated. Eventually, Kennedy won over the racist student body and faculty and administration and Bunche delivered his address to a racially integrated

¹³ Ibid, 54.

¹⁴ The U.S. Supreme Court, Plessy v. Ferguson (1896).

¹⁵ Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*. (New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 2000), 55.

audience. “It is reassuring to see the stirrings of Kennedy’s social conscience in these early episodes, and there is no doubt that he was sincere in his identification with the downtrodden.”¹⁶

In 1951, while Robert and Ethel were waiting for the birth of their first child, RFK finally graduated from the University of Virginia, School of Law. Kennedy didn’t bother to attend his graduation ceremony. As with many in the upper crust of society, Kennedy was probably busy with other details in his life and the degree itself was nothing more than a prerequisite. It is fair to say that RFK was already thinking of his prospects and worrying, privately, that he would have to put off his own plans in order to help his brother Jack who was planning to run for a United States Senate seat in Massachusetts, that was held by incumbent Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., a Republican, World War II veteran, and the scion of one of most prominent Massachusetts families. Now that Kennedy had completed his academic qualifications and sorted out his military ambitions, as much as he possibly could, he now had to decide what he would do. There were many options out there in the early 1950s for a man with his education and background. He could have gone into business or practiced law on Wall Street, but for a Kennedy, the only route was public service to the nation and the private commitment to family. “After graduating in the middle of his law school class, Robert Kennedy had, with his father’s help, secured a job at the Justice Department.”¹⁷ He began his government and legal career trying a political corruption case in New York City. It was shortly after this that RFK was approached by his old Harvard football buddy Kenneth O’ Donnell, who was working with then Congressman John Kennedy, to

¹⁶ Ibid, 56.

¹⁷ Ibid, 59.

help run the 1952 senatorial campaign. It was not a job Kennedy wanted, nor initially liked, but family pressure was stiff. “He (Kennedy) said that he didn’t know anything about politics or Massachusetts.”¹⁸ Kennedy also told O’Donnell “I’ll just screw it up.”¹⁹ However, RFK’s self doubt and ambivalence about such a project were deceptive for he knew that he could never turn his back on his brother or the family. In the early years of the Kennedy family’s political existence, roughly 1946-1960, political campaigns were a family affair; everyone was involved. It is also imperative to understand that Joseph P. Kennedy was, at this time, a political pariah and his mere presence on the campaign trail could possibly lose entire factions of the electorate. This was undoubtedly the most pertinent reason that RFK became campaign manager for the 1952 Massachusetts Senate race and subsequent races in the years ahead. While Old Joe distributed the money and made the phone calls to important politicians in the state, RFK ran the campaign with an iron fist; often to the annoyance of his father and the candidate.

As we have already seen thus far, Robert F. Kennedy was a very complex and difficult man. He had also grown up in arguably one of the most exciting eras of the past one hundred years. At the age of twenty-six, in 1951, he had observed war, massive socioeconomic change, a dramatic rise in civil rights activity, and had received degrees from two of the top institutions of higher learning in the United States, Harvard University and the University of Virginia. In addition, he had weathered personal tragedy in the deaths of Joe Jr. (1944) and Kathleen (1948) and undoubtedly pondered the fate of his oldest sister Rosemary, who was permanently institutionalized after a failed lobotomy in 1941. The family, with the exception of Joe Sr., had little knowledge of

¹⁸ Ibid, 59.

¹⁹ Ibid, 59.

what happened to their loved one, initially including Rose. Furthermore, while there is evidence to suggest that RFK was very much a spoiled adolescent, the fact was that he was indeed a man, ingrained with some childish tendencies and outbursts, but one who was maturing socially and politically. These facts would not become readily apparent until the last years of his life, but the foundations were clear. The “runt” of the family was indeed on his way to public prominence. In addition, the years ahead would prove rewarding as well as challenging, professionally and personally, for RFK, but he would also continue his role as family protector and go-between for Joe Sr. and Jack which would yield fabulous political dividends. Emotionally and psychologically, however, the costs would be high.

CHAPTER 3

RFK 1951-1961

Making a Name in D.C.

After law school Robert Kennedy, though his father's political connections, began working at his first real job. "He became a member of the Massachusetts Bar in 1951 and went to work in the Criminal Division of the United States Department of Justice."²⁰ His job was to investigate political corruption in New York. This task, perhaps, was the beginning of his fascination with the seamy underworld of America. The smoky backroom that combined with the corruption of the normally legitimate and democratic processes seized upon the heart of Robert, who was genuinely concerned about the underdog and the brain of Robert whose interest bordered on fixation. He was truly in his element and in the next few years would gain the tools and necessary experience to engage in a major fight against the evils of political and labor corruption.

In New York, Robert was exposed to the vile actions of criminals normally separated from the upper class. In one such incident, he was with a group of New York Police Officers when they raided an apartment in the city and found a grown man sexually molesting a two year old child. The officers proceeded to throw the man from the window to the street, where they subsequently picked him up and threw him in the squad car for the ride to jail. While deeply shocking to the young Robert, it further whetted his appetite for more similar types of action.

²⁰ Background Material on Robert F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Pre-Administration, Personal Files, Box Number 1, The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum (JFKPL) Boston.

One of his primary responsibilities was presenting “criminal income tax cases to a Federal Grand Jury in Brooklyn, New York. At that time he was made a Special Assistant to the Attorney General. His work and that of his colleague ultimately resulted in the indictment of the former Commissioner of Internal Revenue Joseph Nunan and the former Assistant Commissioner Daniel Bolich for criminal evasion.”²¹

Robert Kennedy did not stay in the Criminal Division for long, as his brother Jack was preparing to run for the United States Senate in 1952. Once again family obligations interrupted his professional life. Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. was the incumbent Republican Senator from Massachusetts and the scion of one of the most prominent families in the state. For the Kennedy family this was a golden opportunity to advance the career of their favorite son, congressman Jack Kennedy, and to settle the score with the Brahmins of Boston. Mark Dalton was the campaign manager in past campaigns for Jack and was slated to be the campaign manager in '52 but quit because of verbal abuse from Joseph Kennedy. One who was involved in the campaign was Kenneth O'Donnell, a long time friend and Harvard classmate of Robert. O'Donnell called Bobby to ask for his help. “With Dalton’s departure and the staff leaderless, morale weakened and the campaign, O'Donnell thought, was headed toward ‘absolute disaster.’ In the midst of the chaos, O'Donnell decided that unless Jack’s brother Robert took over, the fight would be lost. Calling Robert in New York, where he was working for the Justice Department on a federal case, O'Donnell pleaded with him to take a leave of absence from his work and return to Massachusetts.”²² “‘Don’t drag me into it,’ Robert responded, explaining in an angry tone that he loved what he was doing in the Justice Department... ‘I’ll screw it up,’

²¹ Ibid, P.2.

²² Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys: An American Saga*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 761.

he warned, ‘and...I just don’t want to come.’”²³ However, Bobby’s sense of family and obligation won out after O’Donnell told him that the campaign would be over without his participation.

As we have seen earlier, family and obligation were recurrent themes in Bobby’s life. The campaign was a no holds barred political fight in which the Kennedys and Bobby in particular, would cement their reputations as smooth, cold, and brilliant political operators and a force to be reckoned with in Massachusetts politics and later national politics.

It also continued and solidified a pattern which the Kennedy family began in 1946: running their campaigns independently from the local and state Democratic parties. This is one of the most overlooked and ignored facets of the Kennedy political machine. Joe, Jack, and Bobby all realized that running for office with the state and local Democratic organizations came with a laundry list of obligations that would most likely negatively impact the family. But there was also a feeling that they could not rely on the party to help. “We couldn’t win relying on the Democratic political machine...so we had to build our own machine,” Bobby later explained.²⁴ When someone runs for office, often they run with the consent and support of their respective parties; which means that they are beholden to them. This was something that the Kennedys felt was unnecessary. Joe’s money, contacts, and influence provided all the support that Jack needed to win and allowed the family to set its own course. The family party, however, was somewhat resented, not only by its opponents, but by the rank and file Democratic Party leadership. But in the end there was little that anyone could do to stop the Kennedy juggernaut. The

²³ Ibid, P. 761.

²⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *Robert Kennedy And His Times*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978),94.

pattern would be followed successfully again in the 1958 Senate race and the 1960 presidential campaign.

Bobby's main responsibility was to keep the wheels of the campaign greased and running smoothly. In addition, "his part of it-organization-was in its nature an affront to the old-line politics of the state; and Robert himself, twenty-six years old, cocky, unknown except as a millionaire's son, pressing, always pressing, was an affront to old-line politicians."²⁵ He devoted his entire being to helping Jack win. But Jack was not always enthusiastic about the presence of his little brother. The campaign was filled with hard-nosed political maneuvering and scheduling that exhausted the candidate. It was also special in that Bobby and Jack used new techniques to appeal to voters. The campaign created the "Kennedy Teas," for which Rose and Jack would send out letters to housewives across the state to meet the candidate and his mother. So women donned their best dresses to see the charismatic congressman. It can be argued that the '52 campaign was the beginning of Camelot, at least in Massachusetts. It was also when "the 'ruthless Bobby' idea seems to have been born."²⁶ His callous and contemptuous manner in dealing with other campaigns and politicians earned him the disdain that so many others had expressed in private. However, that was not the concern of Robert, for as always his chief concern was his family, primarily Jack.

1952, however, was a Republican year and the going was rough for any Democrat, especially one challenging an established and experienced incumbent senator. Deals on the side had to be made to add to the candidate's treasure chest, including Robert's father, Joe, bribing the publisher of a Boston newspaper to endorse Jack.

²⁵ Ibid, 95.

²⁶ Ibid, 95.

During the last weeks and months of the campaign, the outcome was still in doubt and the Kennedy machine needed added support. The *Boston Post* had recently been purchased by John Fox, but he was in desperate financial straits. Joe Kennedy realized that he was vulnerable, so he approached him and offered a \$500,000 “loan” to catch up on his bills with the understanding that he would endorse Jack in the coming election. This episode further illustrates the control and influence the elder Kennedy had on the campaign. More than fifty years after the campaign it is impossible to determine exactly what Robert knew and when, but it stands to reason that he must have had some inkling as to what his father was doing. Years after the fact, during the White House years, Jack admitted in private that they “had to buy that paper.”²⁷ Robert did know that his father would operate outside of his personal knowledge. However, eight years after the ’52 campaign, Bobby would discover that the old man did things on the side that would irritate him and potentially imperil Jack.

On November 4, 1952, Jack scored one of the few Democratic electoral victories in the nation as he defeated Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. by more than seventy thousand votes. The Kennedys had finally bested the Brahmins at their own game and Jack Kennedy returned to Washington in January 1953 as a United States Senator. Bobby, as well, proved himself a skillful political operative and dedicated brother. Now, Bobby could return to Washington to the field he had pursued: committee legal work and investigations of corruption.

The campaign was exhausting but it was now over and Bobby needed to find work. Sen. Joseph McCarthy had been a long time friend of the Kennedy family; Joe even donated large sums of money to Jack’s campaign committees. In 1953, McCarthy

²⁷ Ronald Kessler, *The Sins of the Father*. (New York: Warner Books, 1996),341.

began his chairmanship of the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations. Joe Kennedy had contacted McCarthy to persuade him to appoint Bobby to the position of Chief Counsel of the committee, but McCarthy decided that the flamboyant, homosexual attorney Roy Cohn would be Chief Counsel. As a favor to the old man, Bobby was made Assistant Counsel.

The committee, under the direction of McCarthy and Cohn, began to root out alleged communists in the Government. This was the “Red Scare,” that destroyed so many decent people because of the reckless manner in which the investigations were conducted. McCarthyism was born and Bobby would be in the thick of it. Joe and Bobby both thought a lot of McCarthy and Bobby believed in the cause of uncovering and destroying communist subversives. “Robert Kennedy threw himself into the investigation, summoning witnesses and relentlessly digging up the facts.”²⁸ “He took the leading part in the Subcommittee’s inquiry into trade on the part of our allies with Red China during the Korean War.”²⁹ He also dealt extensively with Greek ship owners, who were known to have business contacts with China. “As a result of those conferences the owners of 327 vessels pledged to refrain from trade with Red China.”³⁰ Kennedy’s work on the Committee was praised by many including journalist Arthur Krock and Sen. Stuart Symington. The Committee was so impressed with his work that they gave him a pay raise: from “\$4952.20 to \$5334.57.”³¹

²⁸ Arthur Herman, *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining The Life And Legacy Of America’s Most Hated Senator*. (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 223.

²⁹ Background Material on Robert F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Pre-Administration, Personal Files, Box Number 1, (JFKPL).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Schlesinger, 102.

However, this was dangerous territory for a young politically ambitious fellow with a brother in the Senate. McCarthy's investigations kept the nation spellbound as everyone wanted to know who in the government were communists and how high did the subversives rank. It should have been apparent to Kennedy early on that McCarthy was not only overzealous but reckless. While Kennedy did not realize it at the time, the decision by McCarthy to have Cohn advise the committee was fortuitous in that it ultimately gave Robert the breathing room necessary so that he would not have to take any blame. If one can imagine the fear, speculation, and amazement brought about by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr in 1998 when he was investigating President Clinton's sexual peccadilloes, then it is somewhat easy to understand the paranoia McCarthy instilled in the minds of millions of Americans. Bobby tried to defend him whenever possible, but McCarthy was out of control.

The reckless manner in which McCarthy and Roy Cohn were conducting the Committee bothered Kennedy, however, but not as much as the aggressive Cohn who had bested him to become Chief Counsel.³² By July 1953, Kennedy left the Committee before McCarthy disgraced himself. The Army-McCarthy hearings signaled the downfall of the senator from Wisconsin. Unable to substantiate his claims that the Army was full of communists, Americans finally saw Joseph McCarthy for what he really was: a pathetic, lonely, opportunistic loser.

The Eisenhower White House in 1953 set up a Commission, headed by former President Herbert Hoover, to reorganize the Executive Branch of the federal government. The first commission ran from 1947-1949 under President Harry Truman. Joe Kennedy lobbied to get appointed to the Commission and with Bobby out of the McCarthy

³² According to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

Commission, Joe brought him along to be Assistant Counsel. At this point in Bobby's burgeoning career, he had already established the well-worn pattern of his father: not staying in one job for too long and knowing when to resign.

The Hoover Commission was not the place Bobby needed to be. With the old man on the commission, Robert knew that he would not have the autonomy he so badly desired. In addition, he resented the heavy handed manner with which Joe ruled over him. Needless to say, Kennedy left after half a year on the job. The next assignment would be far more beneficial in the long term than the previous posts he had held.

January 1954 brought the opportunity that that young Robert so desired: Chief Counsel for the minority (Democrats) of the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations. The opening came about as a result of irritation with Democratic Senators Symington, Jackson, and McClellan with the overbearing micromanagement of Joseph McCarthy. It was also the first chance Kennedy had to take on an opponent within the Government. Many think that Jimmy Hoffa and Lyndon Johnson were the first to experience the often harsh, vicious, and intense scrutiny that Bobby inflicted on so many. Roy Cohn, however, was the first person to be bitten by the aggressive and dogged Kennedy.

Robert's animosity for Cohn began in 1953, when Cohn was chosen over him to become Chief Counsel of McCarthy's Investigations Committee. Cohn was younger than Kennedy and equally ambitious. In addition, Kennedy thought that with McCarthy as a close family friend, the senator should have remained loyal to him. By this time Kennedy was not so much in favor with McCarthy anymore. Furthermore, Cohn and his boss were close to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and Bobby was not. As a matter of fact, Hoover held young Robert in contempt for his often boorish behavior. Most of the

conflict was behind closed doors, outside the viewing public. But Kennedy had made his first “enemy” and there would be more in the years ahead.

The Investigations Committee work continued to be dominated by the issue communism and subversives. Kennedy was on the minority side now and when the battle over the Army came about, the proverbial dung hit the fan. Sen. Scoop Jackson, D-WA, was accused by Cohn of writing materials that could be construed as favorable to Marxists. Not only was this simply a case of attacking a political enemy, but Cohn threatened Kennedy that they would destroy Jackson. As many would find out later, threatening Bobby was the wrong move to make. As Cohn recounted years later, ““Bobby Kennedy’s job was to write out pertinent questions for the Democratic senators to ask at the hearing. In this Schine plan he saw an opportunity to gibe at us. He fed his questions to Senator Jackson, who used them to fire a barrage of ridicule...They picked at point after point in Dave’s plan, finding something hilarious in each. And every time Kennedy handed him something, Senator Jackson would go into fits of laughter. I became angrier and angrier.””³³

Attempts to bully Kennedy eventually led to near fisticuffs, as did this time with Cohn. But Kennedy had shown that he was equal in intelligence and more than willing to duke it out if necessary. By the end of the Army-McCarthy hearings, Kennedy and the other Democrats on the Committee came out smelling like roses, while McCarthy was permanently destroyed. At this point, Kennedy pitied the senator from Wisconsin. Eventually, the drunken McCarthy died in 1957 after disgracing himself, and having been censured by the Senate for the conduct that brought ill-repute upon himself. But Bobby,

³³ Schlesinger, 113.

ever loyal to friends, attended the funeral in Appleton, Wisconsin and was the only member of the Kennedy family to do so.

After the McClellan hearings, Robert Kennedy continued building his reputation as a tough, smart government attorney and ever more important political ally of his brother, Sen. John F. Kennedy. Between 1955 and 1957, he was the Chief Counsel and Staff Director of the Senate Investigations Committee. However, in 1956, Robert assisted Jack in his bid for the vice-presidential nomination. Democratic National Convention nominee, Adlai Stevenson, threw open the nomination to the convention. Jack felt that it would be a great opportunity to advance his career. Robert's job was to help in any way he could and, as always, to put needed distance between Jack and Joe Sr. Joe felt that Stevenson was a loser.³⁴ It is imperative to remember that while Jack had gained some independence from their father, the old man still had considerable control. But this time Jack and Bobby were acting without his consent. The previous political occasions, races for Congress, committee assignments, and political positions were agreed upon by the father. Running for vice-president was entirely different. In addition, it was a momentous moment for Bobby and Jack because it was the first time that either one of them deliberately went against their father. On their own it would never have happened, however, together they could display their independence.

The campaign for the vice-presidential nomination was contentious. The main opponent was Tennessee Senator and fervent anti-organized crime politician Estes Kefauver. Sen. Kefauver was a distinguished and established older politician, who arguably deserved the nomination. However, Kennedy appeared strong early on and, more importantly, he began to make a national name for himself. Robert gained much

³⁴ PBS, *The American Experience: The Kennedys*, 1994.

more knowledge in how not to run a national campaign and how to approach a national convention. This was essentially the test run for the 1960 race. Robert learned how to count delegates, establish contacts within the party hierarchy, and strategize outside the narrow confines of Massachusetts.

1956 was a non-starter for Jack Kennedy, but the national attention and “the drama of that race made John Kennedy a national figure.”³⁵ Robert was gaining much needed experience that, in many ways, he was forced to receive. As usual family came first and 1956 was no exception. The success that Jack Kennedy earned in defeat propelled him into the presidential frontrunner slot heading into his 1958 reelection campaign. In addition, Robert was about to embark on an epic odyssey that would make him a national figure in his own right; his first grand opportunity came in tackling labor and management corruption.

Robert had first worked with Sen. John McClellan on the minority side of the Senate Committee on Investigations. But now they would work more closely than ever before and come through American homes via television to expose the seamy underbelly of the United States. The labor movement in the United States began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. American workers were continuously abused and neglected by employers through lack of compensation, lack of benefits, and lack of uniform work hours. By the 1950s labor unions had taken a firm hold in the United States and were a dominant force in Democratic Party politics. Corruption, however, had sunk its claws into the labor unions throughout America. One organization, in particular, was notorious: The International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

³⁵ Ibid, Ted Sorenson Quote.

As early as the 1950s with the Kefauver Commission, organized crime had taken center stage in the American consciousness. During the early years of the twentieth century, massive immigration of Irish and Italians into the melting pot of America had brought both the most desirable of workers and, at times, the worst parasites humanity has to offer. These criminals, e.g. Al Capone, Meyer Lansky, Albert Anastasia, “Lucky” Luciano, Carlo “Don Carlo” Gambino among others, created powerful syndicates that controlled prostitution, gaming, the garment and trucking industries, and last but certainly not least many, many labor unions.

During its 1956-57 session, the Senate created the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field. The creation of this special committee was originally in doubt because of the political sensitivities about going after organizations that controlled millions of rank and file employees and millions of dollars that helped the Democratic National Committee (DNC). While the stated purpose was to look into misuse of funds and mismanagement by both labor and employers, the seemingly real objective was to go after corrupt labor unions. Robert was intrigued by this opportunity when a man named Clark Mollenhoff, “a relentless investigative reporter for the Des Moines Iowa *Register-Tribune*, convinced Kennedy and...Sen. John McClellan, that racketeering, especially in the Teamsters Union, deserved the subcommittee’s attention.”³⁶

This was a sensitive subject for Robert and the Kennedy family as a whole. Coming from Boston, with its ethnic diversity and reputation for corruption, the prospect of serving as Chief Counsel of a committee that had the task of investigating misconduct

³⁶ Robert F. Kennedy, *The Enemy Within: The McClellan Committee’s Crusade Against Jimmy Hoffa and Corrupt Labor Unions*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), X.

was risky. In addition, the Kennedy family allegedly maintained long contacts with organized crime figures dating back to the beginning of prohibition. In fact, Robert's father had resisted the idea on the grounds that it would hurt the family, particularly Jack. "Robert Kennedy wanted to become Chief Counsel of the Labor-Rackets Committee and his father disapproved of that."³⁷ Ultimately, the old man was afraid of political consequences on his presidential aspirations for Jack in 1960. But Bobby was not to be deterred.

Kennedy, as was his custom, went full steam ahead into his responsibilities as Chief Counsel. Since he first began working in the Government after he graduated from the University of Virginia School of Law he was intrigued with investigations and the seamier side of life. His close relationship with committee chairman John McClellan and the fact that his brother, Sen. John Kennedy, was also on the committee, allowed him to operate with considerable latitude. Kennedy surrounded himself with distinguished and skillful people from all walks of life, such as attorney and former FBI agent Walter Sheridan, newspaperman Pierre Salinger, former Harvard football captain and best friend Kenneth O'Donnell among others. The announcement of the formation of the committee created a huge response from the public in the form of letters, packages, and phone calls with information and leads concerning misconduct in labor unions.

Early in the work of the committee came the revelation that Dave Beck, president of the Teamsters, was corrupt as well as his heir apparent, James Riddle Hoffa. However, Beck was not to become the primary focus of the committee, just the first domino to fall. He had a paper trail that was two miles long. For instance, "Dave Beck

³⁷ Interview with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. 9-26-05.

had sold his house to the union a couple of years before for \$163,000.”³⁸ Jimmy Hoffa, however, was the man who was much more difficult both to nail down and remove. Powerful, arrogant, and everything that Kennedy himself was not, Hoffa proved to be, for the most part, Kennedy’s equal in cleverness and toughness. Quickly uncovered, were the most basic of transgressions committed by the Teamsters, which led to other accusations of illegality or unethical conduct by the Teamsters leadership. “There are at least seven areas, admittedly controversial, where there is considerable agitation by part of the public and certain Members of Congress for some form of Federal action. They were:

1. Misuse of pension and welfare funds.
2. Misuse of union funds.
 - (a) Financial statements filed with the Labor Department be examined for accuracy;
 - (b) Treasury Department to be given power to examine the books and records of tax exempt organizations.
3. Trusteeship.
4. Democratic processes-secret ballot.
5. Terrorism-violence.
6. Organization picketing.
7. Use of union money for political purposes.”³⁹

³⁸ Kennedy, 10.

³⁹ Speech by Robert Kennedy delivered on 10/17/1957 to the Princeton Club of Washington, D.C. Robert F. Kennedy Papers: Pre-Administration, Working Files, Select Committee, Speech File, 1957-1959, Box 112, JFKPL.

These were some of the most important stated objectives of what became known as the Senate Rackets Committee. But these goals were much easier set than accomplished. Robert Kennedy faced stiff resistance from many witnesses who were afraid of retribution and others who lacked both the will and the honor to face the music. It was not uncommon to hear a witness plead the fifth on difficult or embarrassing questions. This is where Kennedy made his first indelible mark in the minds of Americans. His pugnacity, razor sharp wit, and intelligence demonstrated that he was not a man who one wanted coming after him. In the beginning, Hoffa was not the direct target of the committee, but after an attorney named John Cye Cheasty contacted Kennedy with information, Hoffa became, in the vernacular of the law enforcement world, a major person of interest. “This is what he told me--and what he testified to at Hoffa’s trial: James R. Hoffa, he said, had given him \$1,000 in cash as a down payment to get a job as an investigator with our Committee. Hoffa wanted him to be a spy and furnish secret information from our files. Cye Cheasty had taken the \$1,000, and then had come to me.”⁴⁰ If Hoffa was really trying to put a “spy” on the committee, then he was afraid of what they would find and was as corrupt as many others had claimed he was.

Kennedy helped set in motion a plan to catch Hoffa. Cheasty met with Hyman Fischman, a lawyer and friend of Cheasty, whom Hoffa used to approach him with the offer. They soon flew out to Detroit for a meeting with Hoffa to settle the arrangement. “The Teamster leader gave Cheasty \$1,000 in cash and agreed to pay him \$2,000 a month if he got the job with us.”⁴¹ Cheasty became a double agent at the request of Bobby. This was just one more damning piece of Hoffa’s duplicity. Throughout 1957, Robert

⁴⁰ Kennedy, 37.

⁴¹ Kennedy 38.

Kennedy became more and more of a presence in the committee hearings and in public. On July 1, 1957, *Life* magazine ran a close up article on Robert Kennedy titled, “Young Man with Tough Questions.” In it he was quoted as saying, “It makes me boil inside to see people come before the United States Senate and just lie and evade.”⁴² In addition, Bobby gave his take on the importance of his job and why men as young as he could do the same: “Lots of young lawyers could handle a job like mine if people would stop thinking of 35 as the minimum age of real responsibility.”⁴³ It was this type of self-deprecating humor and earnestness which endeared him to many. Furthermore, he was also sending a very clear signal to those listening that his generation was ready for leadership. He most likely did not realize it, but in effect he was saying just that. However, that was not the only message that came across in the hearings; with Bobby going after witnesses in a very abrasive and direct manner, it made his brother and fellow committee member, Sen. Jack Kennedy, look more distinguished and presidential. That would help immeasurably in 1960.

Kennedy was making his name in Washington as a man with whom one should not tangle. While there were, of course, other members of the Committee and Sen. McClellan was just as committed to rooting out corruption in the unions, Bobby was the dominant and driving force. He wielded great power in hiring and firing staff, choosing which investigations would receive the Committee’s full attention, and the direction in which the Committee would head. His confrontations with Jimmy Hoffa and others during the hearings kept the nation spellbound. In the august confines of the Senate Caucus Room, combined with the national mood, senators, staffers, ordinary people, and

⁴² Interview with Robert F. Kennedy, by *Life*, July 1, 1957.

⁴³ Ibid

mostly certainly the labor unions kept a close eye on the hearings because of the sensitivity of the issues at hand.⁴⁴

Here Bobby was in his element; investigating, probing, taking on men and institutions of ill repute. The work, however, also had another angle that greatly appealed to him: good versus evil. He was a man with a conscious and a personal sympathy for the underdog. The rank-in-file of the labor unions were at the very heart of his being. The desire and the need to align himself with the underdog did not become fully visible until the mid-1960s, but during the 1950s he was establishing himself as a man who could be trusted with the interests of the majority of Americans who worked hard and simply wanted a better life for themselves and their families.

There was also a practical element to all of this. Kennedy believed that the corrupt figures in the labor movement were a, “menacing enemy within our national economic framework-an enemy that is the shame of our nation.”⁴⁵ In addition, the abuses of power, the lack of “democratic processes,” and blatant disregard for the rights of American citizens eat away at his conscience. He was also battling the federal bureaucracy in the form of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover had long proclaimed that the mafia or La Cosa Nostra was a phantom group; that it did not exist. In undertaking those investigations, it forced the government to give some sort of acknowledgment that it did exist. “Hearings were conducted over a period of two and a half years and included over five hundred open hearing sessions. During this time we

⁴⁴ widely reported in newspapers and others close to Capitol Hill.

⁴⁵ Kennedy, 166.

heard 1,525 sworn witnesses (343 of whom took the Fifth Amendment) give testimony that filled fifty-odd volumes and totaled more than fourteen million words.”⁴⁶

Although the actions of the committee showed that there was indeed corruption and misconduct rampant in the labor movement, bureaucratic resistance and inaction seemingly continued to reign. This was of major disappointment to Robert Kennedy. “The lack of action by the Department of Justice is disappointing.”⁴⁷ “We exposed improper activities on the part of at least fifteen attorneys and fifty companies and corporations around the country, with the exception of the Bar in the State of Tennessee, no management group or bar association has taken any steps to clean house.”⁴⁸ Despite charges of corruption, exhortation, murder, assault, tax fraud, income tax evasion, among others criminal infractions, very little changed in interim period of time. The misconduct was deeply rooted in the very institutions that whether government or private sector swore allegiance to the constitution and the American people. Finally, Robert reminded Americans that, “To meet the challenges of our times, so that we can later look back upon this era not as one of which we need be ashamed but as a turning point on the way to a better America, we must first defeat the enemy within.”⁴⁹

There were other unions and employers that were scrutinized by the Committee. It was also critical of the following unions: Bakers, Operating Engineers, Carpenters, Textile Workers, Mail Deliverers of New York, among others. In addition, Robert did not fail to mention employers who were complicit in the wicked agreements in corrupt figures. He even devoted an entire chapter to them in his book, *The Enemy Within*. It

⁴⁶ Kennedy, 167.

⁴⁷ Kennedy, 318.

⁴⁸ Kennedy, 318.

⁴⁹ Kennedy, 325.

was discovered that reporters and reputable organizations such as *The New York Times* also were in cahoots with men of ill-repute.⁵⁰

The Rackets Committee built an impressive record and was widely acknowledged as competent. It also trumpeted startling conclusions. “During the course of its investigations, as chairman of the select committee, we found abundant evidence of the assumption of dictatorial powers by unprincipled men who posed as labor leaders. They stripped the rank-and-file members of their democratic rights by the manipulation of bylaws and constitutions and by the use of legal technicalities and protracted legal devices.⁵¹ In addition, the Committee said, “There is much evidence of infiltration by criminal elements...the Committee found wholesale looting of union treasuries by unscrupulous and dishonest labor leaders and found instances where management conspired and connived with dishonest leaders to gain favorable contracts to the detriment of the rank-and-file members.”⁵² The work and experience Kennedy gained from this assignment would prove invaluable later.

While Bobby was tending to business in the Senate Caucus Room and the corridors of the Capitol, Jack Kennedy was continuing to make major headway toward the Democratic nomination in 1960. He won his senate reelection campaign in 1958 by a record margin (at that time) against token opposition. He won with 73.6% of the vote total of 1,362,962 votes.⁵³ Furthermore, he had become a Pulitzer Prize winner for his

⁵⁰ Kennedy.

⁵¹ Final Report of the Select Committee On Improper Activities In The Labor Or Management Field, P.3. Delivered on March 30, 1960. Report No. 1207, U.S. Senate, 86th Congress, 2nd Session.

⁵² Final Report of The Select Committee On Improper Activities In The Labor Or Management Field.

⁵³ Kennedy election statistics compiled by Dave Powers to Jack Kennedy, Pre-Administration, Political Files, 1952 Senate Campaign; Political Miscellaneous, 1953-54; 1960 Campaign and transition, Box 1, (JFKPL).

book *Profiles in Courage*.⁵⁴ The three years of the Rackets Committee had made Robert Kennedy a star, but obligations to family were once again to take precedent.

Going into 1960 Robert Kennedy's options were limitless. He could have gone into private practice or run for office in his own right. The 1960 presidential race and Jack's campaign, however, forced Bobby's hand. The decision to run the campaign was reminiscent of the decision to run the 1952 senatorial campaign. For John Kennedy, Robert was the "only choice" for the position of campaign manager.⁵⁵ He joined the campaign at the end of 1959; just a short time before Jack's announcement on January 2, 1960, that he intended to run for the Democratic nomination.

Whether Bobby realized it or not, this was his element; he was perfect for campaign manager. "Robert Kennedy's genius as manager lay in his capacity to address a specific situation, to assemble a competent staff, to inspire and flog them into exception deeds and to prevail through sheer force of momentum."⁵⁶ Furthermore, "he was impatient with politics, and he loathed the glad-handing and backslapping."⁵⁷

The Kennedy race for the Democratic nomination and the federal election was fraught with political risk and great possibility of failure. Jack Kennedy was relatively young and inexperienced compared with the Republican heir apparent: Richard Nixon. He had served in the House and Senate since 1946, but had established a reputation around Congress as a lightweight. There is some truth to this for Jack was often bored with the humdrum of a legislator's life. Furthermore, he was low on the seniority pole; which made things difficult without help from people like Richard Russell and Lyndon

⁵⁴ Kennedy, John F., *Profiles in Courage*.

⁵⁵ Schlesinger, 192.

⁵⁶ Schlesinger, 193.

⁵⁷ Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*. (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 90.

Johnson. He was also known as a playboy, someone with great concern about foreign affairs but not necessary competent. All of this was essentially accurate.

During this time it can be argued that RFK was the serious brother and that conclusion could not be challenged. However, there were other problems that he had to address. Jack's philandering was well-known and his physical ailments were always close to the surface of public attention. In addition, RFK and JFK had to cope with the virulent anti-Catholic attitudes of America circa 1960. This more than any other issue threatened the campaign from January to November.

The United States in 1960 was not quite as culturally pluralistic it is today. It was a nation that was heavily segregated and where racism and xenophobia were rampant. Catholics were distrusted throughout a vast majority of the country. One of the main fears that was vocally pronounced was that a Catholic president would be more loyal to the Pope than to America. While this was simply irrational, prejudice rarely is rational or logical. This among other issues, mainly the Cold War, was a constant concern and worry throughout 1960.

Womanizing was another major issue for the campaign of special concern to Bobby. He, more than anyone else, realized the perils of Jack's personal life. After all, "that family had no tradition of monogamy."⁵⁸ A subject as sensitive as womanizing could blow the campaign out of the water. In addition, it is imperative to remember that this was 1960, not 1992, where the peccadilloes of another presidential candidate, Bill Clinton, could be successfully handled. The country, at that time, was still in somewhat of a puritanical mindset, where morality mattered and personal decency was expected for public figures. In essence, RFK had to be the go-between with several women who were

⁵⁸ Interview with William Walton, PBS, *The American Experience: The Kennedys*, 1994.

seeking the senator's attention. Also, RFK had to be the conscious of the candidate, constantly reminding him that his indiscretions if left unchecked could doom the campaign.

The next issue which RFK had to handle was the father. By 1960, Joe Kennedy was almost a mythical figure in America. He was controversial, ambitious, corrupt, and perceived as a former defeatist/Nazi sympathizer. During those days there was a moniker that followed the campaign: "Jack and Bobby run the show, while Ted's in charge of hiding Joe."⁵⁹ Essentially this was an accurate description of events. While RFK ruled the campaign with an iron fist, Joe Kennedy was putting his money and influence to work to ensure victory for Jack. One could even say that Joe and Bobby were co-campaign managers.

However, the meat and potatoes of the campaign early on was the fight for the Democratic nomination. The Kennedy campaign rolled into states like Wisconsin, West Virginia, Texas, California, New York, among others, not to just win votes, but to prove to the wider audience that an Irish-Catholic man could possess broad appeal with the majority of voters who never attended a campaign event. RFK, behind the scenes, was making phone calls to influential party elders, labor union leaders, state party people, and anyone else that could help the campaign. He was a brilliant tactician and it showed.

Bobby was deeply offended by what he saw and learned during the Rackets Committee hearings, but what he saw in the Appalachian region of the nation shocked him. The poverty, disillusionment, and squalor were something that he had never seen before and it genuinely touched him. He was determined to do something about it, but not until the campaign was over, as evidenced by his subsequent actions.

⁵⁹ PBS, *The American Experience: The Kennedys*, 1994.

Many scholars, historians, and journalists, among others, have suggested that dirty politics were employed by the Kennedy campaign, and they would be correct. However, in the interest of truth, both the Kennedy and the Nixon campaigns played dirty. This was the rough and tumble political world that Bobby was operating in and, considering the fact that his ultimate client was none other than his own brother, Bobby willingly accepted that proposition as long as it helped his brother. It was a blind spot that potentially could have led the campaign astray.

He trashed Sen. Hubert Humphrey at every opportunity and with his father made sure that money was no problem. There were widespread accusations of payoffs going to people in positions to make things happen. As the late Speaker of the House and Kennedy supporter Congressman Tip O’Neill recounted in an interview in 1994, “they spread money around like it was never seen.”⁶⁰

In July 1960, the Kennedy campaign rolled into Los Angeles for the Democratic National Convention. At this point, Jack was the frontrunner, but others were hoping that he could be defeated. Robert left nothing to chance. He canvassed the entire convention and tallied the delegate totals. He realized that Jack had to win it on the first ballot. Lyndon Johnson, the Senate Majority Leader and 1960 hopeful, began to mount a campaign from the floor. Johnson was arguably the most accomplished majority leader in American history and was the senior senator from Texas. Those factors could swing the election in November. Humphrey was all but eliminated and Stuart Symington and Adlai Stevenson, who was the Democratic nominee in 1952 and 1956, were only nominal competition. Bobby realized quickly that the race was between Lyndon and Jack. He also realized that Wyoming, the last state on the roll call, would decide the nomination.

⁶⁰ Interview with Tip O’Neill, PBS, *The American Experience: The Kennedys*, 1994.

There was just one problem, only twelve and one-half of their fifteen votes were committed to the Kennedy campaign. “So Bobby sent me to talk to the chairman and ask him if the vote came down and the difference was those three votes, would he agree to go for it? And he said ‘you gotta be kidding me. You really think that it is going to be in those three votes; whether or not your brother gets the nomination?’ I said yes and he said, ‘well if it comes down to that, you’ve got it. I’ll take those votes away from Lyndon Johnson.’”⁶¹

Bobby was right on the mark and the Wyoming chairman followed through on his promise and Jack won the nomination. Next was the decision about whom to place on the ticket as vice-president. Lyndon Johnson was the obvious choice for Jack, but Bobby hated the choice. He considered Johnson to be a man of poor taste and an embarrassment to the campaign. This was one of Bobby’s worst strategic and tactical decisions, because the campaign needed Johnson for his expertise, experience, and favorable ratings in the South. Luckily, Bobby was overridden by Jack and Johnson was placed on the ticket. It was ultimately a decision that both Lyndon and Bobby would regret. However, as difficult as the process was to win the nomination, the race against Richard Nixon was going to be much tougher. Nixon was more experienced in national elections.

Robert Kennedy spent the fall crisscrossing the country cajoling party people and intimidating others whose loyalty to Jack was suspect. Furthermore, for as tough as he was on staffers and party, he was equally rough on the candidate himself. Jack was not spared from the sometimes vicious criticism from Bobby. Once he chastised Jack for not paying enough attention to the campaign. In essence, Bobby really cemented his reputation as a ruthless, smart, and no-holds-barred political operative. But it is

⁶¹ Interview with Sen. Edward Kennedy, PBS, *The American Experience: The Kennedys*, 1994.

important to remember that while he was tough, he was not reckless with the campaign. Jack realized this as did others, such as their father Joe who put Bobby into position in the first place.

Despite the myth that the Kennedy campaign was methodical and well-oiled, the campaign was somewhat chaotic. The Kennedys were political opportunists and when events arose that were good for the campaign, they seized upon them. For instance, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested on October 19, 1960, along with eighty others, in Georgia while trying to sit in a restaurant in Atlanta. “When he refused to pay \$500 bail, he was sentenced to four months hard labor at a Georgia State penitentiary known for its brutal treatment of black inmates.”⁶² Nixon did not believe that it was appropriate for him to intervene; but the Kennedys found a gold mine ready for the exploitation. Jack called Mrs. King, but Bobby, out of a sense of opportunism and moral fortitude, called the judge who had sentenced Dr. King and pleaded for his release. “King was released the next day, and when word of Bobby Kennedy’s call was made public, Daddy King told a cheering crowd waiting in Atlanta for Martin’s return that he had ‘a suitcase full of votes, and I’m going to take them to Mr. Kennedy and dump them in his lap.’”⁶³ This worked wonders in the minds of progressive whites and blacks across the nation and it unwittingly put the Kennedys in the position to be forced to help facilitate the civil rights movement later on. Cynically, however, it was a brilliant political ploy to garner the support of the Black community that ultimately proved crucial in the November general elections.

⁶² John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of The Movement*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 120.

⁶³ Lewis and D’Orso, 121.

The last great event of the 1960 presidential campaign was the three live debates between Kennedy and Nixon. These debates were disastrous for Nixon. He came off as shady and sub par compared to the radiant and articulate Jack Kennedy. Robert was just as cunning as ever. He made sure that the heat was turned up in the studio so that Nixon would be uncomfortable and sweaty on television. In addition, when Nixon asked him how he looked before a debate, Bobby, knowing he had no makeup on, told him that looked great. The reason that Nixon did not suspect the motivations of the Kennedys more was that he and Jack had been good friends since 1946. It was a tragic mistake for Nixon because while the people listening on the radio thought that Nixon had won, the majority who saw the debates on television believed Kennedy had won. Bobby and Jack had taken advantage on Nixon in a most opportunistic manner, displaying Nixon as a dupe, and it made the race a dead heat on Election Day.

Election Day brought the Kennedy campaign back to its origin: Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. Bobby spent the day canvassing by phone the nation to check the vote tallies in key states and precincts. The vote was tallied throughout the night. It wasn't until morning that Bobby knew he and Jack had won by the slimmest margin of the twentieth century. While Jack and others went to bed early that morning not knowing the outcome, Bobby stayed up until there was no doubt left. Bobby, over the course of the past eleven months, had toiled for not just his brother but the Kennedy family. In the interim period of time between the election and the inauguration, many things would have to be decided. For RFK, he had to decide his next move. Little did he know on the morning after the election that he would be continuing his role as Jack's protector and conscious.

Over time, Robert Kennedy had developed from the wet behind the ears recent law school graduate to the seasoned and well-respected government lawyer and political operative. He had cemented, through not by design, his future with Jack and become a successful author with his first book, *The Enemy Within*.⁶⁴ Finally, just ten years into his professional career, he was married with several children and about to become the second most powerful man in Washington. Events were now beginning to overtake RFK. Now he had no choice but to roll with them.

⁶⁴ Robert F. Kennedy, *The Enemy Within: The McClellan Committee's Crusade Against Jimmy Hoffa and Corrupt Labor Unions*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

CHAPTER 4

RFK 1961-1963

Civil Rights

On November 8, 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts was elected president of the United States by the slimmest margin in American electorate history to that date. The Kennedy family had finally achieved victory over the suspicious and ardent cold warrior Vice-President Richard Milhous Nixon. However, Nixon was right to be suspicious because of the widespread allegations of election fraud. Possibly more than anyone else John Kennedy knew that he owed his victory to two people- his father and his brother Bobby, among others such as Richard Daley. Robert had become over the previous few years an indispensable and invaluable asset to the family and most importantly to the new president-elect. However, the election was over and now Bobby needed to decide what he was going to do with his life. Initially, there was no clear idea of what should be done with Bobby. Larry O'Brien and Sargent Shriver "were placed in charge of the talent hunt for Cabinet and other officers. No specific role was spelled out for Bob Kennedy...but clearly it would continue to be a key one."⁶⁵ There were several choices that he pondered during that interim time period. But Joe Kennedy had already decided what Bobby's future occupation should be: Attorney General of the United States. This absolutely disturbed Bobby for he believed that charges of nepotism and cronyism would quickly follow and damage his brother's presidency before it even began. It is fair to say that Jack didn't like the idea much either. This was not arrogance or a lack of gratefulness on Jack's part as much it was differences between the two men. As I have mentioned earlier, Jack was eight years older than Bobby and they were not

⁶⁵ Theodore Sorenson, *Kennedy*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1965) 258.

personally close as children or in adulthood. Furthermore, the two men associated themselves with opposite social circles; many times when the two brothers teamed up against their father they were able to get what they wanted or at least some wiggle room to maneuver, but this did not happen this time. Clark Clifford, presidential confidant to Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson as well Kennedy family lawyer, was sent to Hyannis to try to persuade the elder Kennedy to drop such a proposition. He gave Kennedy a presentation and historical analysis of the importance of the Attorney General throughout history and a number of administrations. But to no avail, for the old man was adamant and told Clifford, "I appreciate what you have told me and the thoughtful way it was presented, but I wish to leave you with one final thought: Robert Kennedy is going to be the next Attorney General of the United States."⁶⁶

So reluctantly the president-elect and Bobby agreed and RFK's name was submitted to the United States Senate for the fourth highest level Cabinet position: Attorney General of the United States. After the confirmation hearings, Robert was officially sworn in with other Administration and Cabinet officials on January 21, 1961. There was opposition, but nothing sufficient enough to derail his confirmation. At the outset of the Kennedy White House neither Robert or Jack or anyone else for that matter could have imagined the AG as anything else other than the nation's top law enforcement officer. But almost immediately, Robert became just as valuable as a political advisor as he was in the campaign. However, this was not going to be easy. RFK and the President had partially been elected on the platform that they would do more to help the Black community. In addition, they would enforce the laws on the books and pass a new, bolder, and stronger piece of civil rights legislation. But these were not the private goals

⁶⁶ Quotation of Clark Clifford, PBS: "*The American Experience: The Kennedys*."

of the Kennedy White House. In the beginning civil rights, the cold war, and domestic troubles were just a number of issues on the agenda that the Kennedy brothers wanted to control enough to prevent any escalation during the White House years. These facts are not widely known, but they are some of the most sensitive details of the Kennedy White House. However, in the beginning everything seemed so possible and there was a certain “feeling of headiness in the Administration.”⁶⁷ “Those were the days... when we thought we were succeeding because of all the stories on how hard everybody was working,”⁶⁸ Bobby remarked after the first hundred days. In the Black community and the South in particular, there were issues to confront and resolve and the Kennedy White House and Justice Department could never be described as entirely concerned with the plight of American Negroes. It was a cynical use of the Black community for the purpose of winning a presidential election. However, unknown to Jack or Bobby, civil rights was going to force itself to the forefront of American politics.

Since the end of World War II, Black Americans, especially veterans, began seriously organizing grass roots efforts to push for more rights. Among those rights were voting rights, job discrimination protection, equal housing, and last but not least, the franchise, the right to vote. These issues had been simmering below the surface for fifteen years by the time Robert Kennedy became Attorney General. In the campaign, Jack Kennedy “did promise to end discrimination in federally supported housing and to appoint more blacks to government positions. But he was a Democrat, and the Democrats were the party of the white South. The Southern bloc controlled not only their own states and most of the popular votes that went with them, but they controlled

⁶⁷ Quotation of Theodore Sorensen, PBS: “*The American Experience: The Kennedys.*”

⁶⁸ Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1965) 279.

Congress and most of its committees as well.”⁶⁹ Therefore, it is obvious that the Kennedys were in a difficult political position. During this early period Robert wanted his Justice Department to focus on the denial of voting rights and eliminating the violence against blacks that was so prevalent in South, nothing too inflammatory but effective and progressive. He could not imagine the turmoil that was to explode in the South.

Southern governors were reacting to the rhetoric coming from Washington with the same type of disdain and contempt that Abraham Lincoln encountered one hundred years before during the Civil War. The Civil Rights Movement was essentially a battle between State vs. Federal rights for the hearts and minds of the American citizenry. Obviously, the Kennedy White House was hesitant to take too tough a stance on civil rights, but Robert Kennedy and his sense of justice and fairness forced a more active and confrontational course of action. Although RFK had much more progressive feelings on race than his brother, it is fair to assume that without his role as Attorney General he would not have even begun thinking about taking action on civil rights. There is a trend that author Evan Thomas, most notably, has articulated, but others as well identified in Robert Kennedy, that when forced to confront a delicate issue, he immediately became enraged at being put in such a position, and then when he had enough time to seriously ponder the issue in question, he would act with vigor, enthusiasm, and purpose. We saw these character traits in the last chapter in regards to communists and Jimmy Hoffa. But in the beginning, the Kennedys took a slow approach to civil rights. One step they did take was to create the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity in February 1961. It was a little step, but an important one.

⁶⁹ John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. (New York: A Harvest Court Book, 1998) 117.

“We came in with a high level of commitment to civil rights but probably started fairly slowly. The action tended to begin with the Freedom Riders early that summer of 1961.”⁷⁰ The Freedom Riders were a group of volunteers “for a campaign to test desegregation in interstate transportation facilities-the Boynton decision-by sending black and white passengers on buses into the South.”⁷¹ It was initiated and organized by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The Freedom Riders were on a perilous course that angered white bigots across the South. “The action tended to begin with the Freedom Riders early that summer of 1961.”⁷² While their (Riders) travels into the heart of Dixie began somewhat quietly, the physical and verbal confrontations that Robert Kennedy and his Justice Department and the White House knew were going to come came in May when the civil rights workers entered the rugged city of Anniston, Alabama. “They were attacked and their bus was burned, and some of them were beaten. When they got to Birmingham, it happened again.”⁷³ Then, if that wasn’t bad enough, Greyhound refused to provide drivers. This action irritated RFK, for, in part, he believed it was cowardice that forced the bus company to retreat in the face of despicable southern racists, and because he believed that the Freedom Riders had a constitutional right to go wherever they wanted. However, Governor John Patterson gave some assistance to get the Riders on their way. The buses went onto Montgomery and the result was the same, for the protection that the Riders were using disappeared. John Seigenthaler was sent down as RFK’s eyes and ears

⁷⁰ Interview with Ramsey Clark. Interviews by Jean Stein, Edited by George Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970) 94.

⁷¹ John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. (New York: A Harvest Court Book, 1998) 128. The Boynton decision was a landmark verdict handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court which banned segregation “to all terminals for interstate travel.”

⁷² Interview with Ramsey Clark. Interviews with Jean Stein, Edited by George Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 94.

⁷³ Interview with Burke Marshall. *Ibid*, 95.

but was brutally beaten. Herein lay the problem which the Kennedy Administration was trying to address: how do we enforce the laws on the books and not have our people and the civil rights workers beaten and murdered? There was not an easy solution to it because it was so sensitive and the Kennedy Administration was still in its infancy and had been publicly embarrassed by the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. Furthermore, how could the Justice Department or the Federal Government protect every Black person, without taking over the South by force? In 1860, that approach was devastating and costly. Kennedy needed to figure out a way to make it work.

RFK needed to strike a deal. “Robert Kennedy made a proposal to Dr. King. It was that if Dr. King would call off the Freedom Rides, he would honor Dr. King’s counterproposal; if he could get a pledge from Governor Patterson that night, and within the next few days from the Governors of the other Deep Southern states, that at some predetermined time there would be desegregated use of the terminal facilities.”⁷⁴ However, neither Patterson nor the other governors were going to agree to such terms. This revealed the relative inexperience and naiveté of Bobby and the Kennedy White House. “None of them had had to deal with a racial situation of this magnitude before. They had no map, no directions, not even a sure sense of the scope of what was unfolding in the South.”⁷⁵ In addition, there were other pressing issues for RFK and JFK. The Bay of Pigs fiasco created serious doubt about the competence of the current administration. Furthermore, President Kennedy was preparing, with Bobby’s assistance, to meet with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna. This is important because it shows the priorities of the Kennedys at the time of the turmoil in the South. President Kennedy even remarked one

⁷⁴ Interview with John Maguire. Ibid, 100.

⁷⁵ John Lewis, with Michael D’orso, *Walking with the wind: A Memoir of The Movement*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 144.

day to a top aide while watching the civil rights disaster on live television: “Can’t you get your goddamn friends off those buses.” Therefore, it should be no surprise that a foreign policy president did not initially pay large amounts of attention and time to a domestic matter which affected a minority group of Americans and which threatened to erode the fragile Democratic Party coalition. Bobby was also guilty, to a certain degree, for he was also looking toward the Vienna conference. Although it may have conflicted with his position as the nation’s chief law enforcement officer, at the failed invasion of Cuba in April, President Kennedy resolved to make RFK his chief aide. Thus the beginning of an unprecedented and unique relationship began.

“The wave of anger and outrage alarmed the Kennedys. They were sickened by the hatred and brutality of the whites who had attacked and imprisoned us in South Carolina and Alabama and Mississippi, but they were just as upset with us. They felt we were instigators, stirring up more trouble than was necessary.”⁷⁶ This is a key part of the Kennedy White House and the Robert Kennedy pre-1963. During the 1960 presidential campaign, the Kennedy campaign made many promises to the Black community in regard to civil rights, enforcement, and new, stronger legislation to address the plight of a majority minority of American citizens. Furthermore, RFK and JFK at the outset of the Administration had a specific agenda not to further alienate the powerful Southern lawmakers who were threatening the White House agenda from the beginning. In addition, they had initially made promises to the Black community that they did not want to fulfill.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 178.

“ ‘I won’t say I stayed awake nights worrying about civil rights before I became Attorney General.’”⁷⁷ This statement, captured by the one of the most loyal of loyal Kennedy staffers, exemplifies the general mindset RFK had entering the Cabinet. Furthermore, it shows that he had not yet found his place in arena of civil rights.

For all of Bobby’s lack of seasoned experience, he did understand the most basic of Southern feelings toward race and integration. “‘The hardest problems of all in law enforcement...are those involving a conflict of law and local custom.’”⁷⁸ Robert Kennedy spoke those words in 1961 at commencement exercises for the University of Georgia. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that while Kennedy had somewhat of a clear understanding of the issues, he needed a personal stake in the events in question to grasp the severity and moral importance of the situation.

In regards to the Freedom riders and other sticky situations in the South, Kennedy relied, at least partially, on the assistance of Senator James Eastland, the powerful lawmaker from Mississippi. He considered him a reliable person in that he could trust him and Eastland could deliver on promises. However, Eastland was also known as a racist. This led civil rights leaders to refer to the Kennedys unfavorably as “The party of Eastland.”⁷⁹ That comparison was something of an irritation to JFK and RFK. Kennedy thought that patience was a virtue and at times thought that Dr. King and his colleagues were pushing too hard. Once in a heated exchange with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Kennedy told him, “That is the problem with you people, you want too much too fast.”⁸⁰ While this was a comment that was scarcely imaginable a few years later, it adequately

⁷⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 287.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 294.

⁷⁹ Interview with John Lewis, November 4, 2005.

⁸⁰ Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His life*. (New York: A Touchstone Book, 2000), ?.

summed up his feelings at that time. Furthermore, it also unequivocally made clear the position of the administration.

Robert tried to walk a very difficult line between his own personal feelings regarding the atrocities occurring in the South and the cool, pragmatic views of President Kennedy and other advisors. The Administration was also trying to make friends out of enemies. For example, “President Kennedy was cautious in ‘61, ‘62, and ‘63...he was concerned about his reelection. He didn’t want to do anything to offend Southern white democrats; so he appointed some of the worst judges to the bench.”⁸¹ This did not help relations with Dr. King and other civil rights leaders. RFK was no exception to this anger! Even Bobby Kennedy said during the Freedom Rides that ““there should be a cooling off period.””⁸² The most basic fact is that Kennedy, despite his personal sentiments towards the objectives of Blacks in the South, wanted order. He at least thought that the conflicts could be adjudicated; that there was no need to demonstrate, march, or in any other way provoke violence from the White bigots in Dixie. However, Bobby, as well as the President, were forced on several occasions to use federal power, specifically federal troops, to restore order and enforce court orders obliging the powers of the respective Southern states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. The non-violent aspect of the civil rights movement really put RFK in a corner because not only were white Southerners watching, but so were tens of millions of Americans of all races who had been led to believe that the Kennedy Administration would do everything it could to help the defenseless, brave young men and women risking their lives for freedom. It is imperative to understand that only in the early 1960s did television become a must have

⁸¹ Interview with John Lewis, November 4, 2005.

⁸² Ibid.

household item. Ironically, the Kennedy/Nixon presidential debates in October 1960 helped make the television set one of the most important tools of mass communication. This greatly affected the opinions of many Americans who had no idea that such hatred, violence, and evil were alive and well in a nation that held its liberty so dear. It is one thing to hear of such matters, it is something entirely different to see with one's own eyes. For Robert and Jack Kennedy, public perception and appearances were a very delicate issue, and they didn't like controversial and/or negative press. Basically, they wanted to control and manipulate events.

However, there were other issues that had to be addressed. Black Americans wanted more than just the opportunity sit down at lunch counters, ride buses, enter public universities, and make use of public facilities, they wanted to right to vote. This issue out of almost all the other issues was the most controversial, because if the Blacks could vote, they could seriously affect the balance of power in the Congress and the southern Statehouses. RFK did say after the fact, "I thought a good deal more needed to be done. I felt that of course this was the area in which we had the greatest authority; and if we were going to do anything on civil rights, we should do it in that field where we had the authority."⁸³ This was the reasonable, logical, and methodical approach to the issue of civil rights. In addition, coincidentally, RFK's viewpoint sided with the conservative approach to the volatile issue of constitutional rights, that it should have been taken slowly. In Kennedy's rationale, "that was the key to opening the door to all of what they wanted to accomplish in education, in housing, in jobs, and public accommodations. All

⁸³ Interview with Robert Kennedy, *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words*. Interviewed by Anthony Lewis, 102.

rested in having the vote and being able to change the situation internally.”⁸⁴ This also reflects the cold, political operator that was RFK. It also shows that he believed that, for all the grandstanding and dramatics, if it did not succeed, it was worthless. It appears that he was implying that the Civil Rights Movement would have been seriously damaged as well if there was no progress. This further shows the tension between Bobby Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King appreciated the help he did receive from the RFK Justice Department but was impatient at best concerning the host of other issues that were on the table. In addition, the relationship between the two men was icy from the start, which immediately made cooperation difficult. The issue was further complicated by RFK's personal feeling of being, “torn, torn, wanted to be loyal to his brother, he was very, very close and wanted his brother, the president of the United States to succeed. On one hand, he was concerned about the politics, but at the same time he knew in his gut that discrimination/segregation had to be eradicated and he wanted to find a way to do it. But he wanted to encourage the South to do it in a way so it would not appear that the strong or strong hand of the federal government was forcing them to do it.”⁸⁵ However, it was at those crucial times, for example the Freedom Riders stuck in Birmingham, Alabama, that Kennedy's “righteous indignation” came to the forefront.⁸⁶ It is disturbing to think about how much could have been done had Kennedy and King gotten along better.

The feeling of anger and resentment toward the Kennedy Administration from Civil Rights advocates rose with every progressive step taken by the White House abroad. The Peace Corps, financial aid to Cuba exiles, the Alliance for progress, military

⁸⁴ Ibid, 103.

⁸⁵ Interview with John Lewis, November 4, 2005.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

and political support for Berlin, West Germany, and assistance for the South Vietnamese was like a cold, wet slap in the face to Blacks in the United States. The idea that Blacks could fight, die, pay taxes, and toil for the greater good of the nation and not receive the respect, protection, and opportunities afforded to White Americans was appalling. This respective disagreement was nothing new. After the veterans, especially Black veterans, returned from World War II, the itch to be truly free and an equal part of this nation propelled them to act. The foundation of the Civil Rights Movement, lay not necessarily in the 19th century, but the immediate years following the war that supposedly preserved freedom, liberty, and man's inalienable rights. While political priorities of former administrations were just as hurtful, the white hot anger towards the Kennedys was unique. It was unique in that they had made more promises than any previous administration and Blacks were a major factor in the 1960 election. They did not seek to make trouble for the Kennedy White House for the sake of making trouble, but because they truly believed that they had finally found a White politician who would help them rise to an equal station within the United States, and therefore achieve the American dream.

The years of 1961, '62 and '63 were arguably the most significant years in modern American history. While Bobby Kennedy certainly wanted to do more for Blacks, he was also the president's right aide man and alter ego. The great ideological, economic, and military struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union were at the height of tension. Nuclear holocaust was a real and perilous threat that hung over the United States and the world, like a cloud just waiting to release its lethal contents. These issues of Berlin, Cuba, and Vietnam were critical because of their respective grave

implications on everyone. The Kennedy White House, especially RFK, could not afford to devote their entire being to that one critical issue. But the Kennedy White House did have one major accomplishment during 1961, the Housing Act of 1961. While no one should make excuses for the cautious and hesitant behavior of Robert and Jack Kennedy, they should understand that there were perilous issues on the table at the time. Sweet righteousness, however, often took a back seat to current issues of the day.

By all accounts, 1962 was a year of foreign policy. Little with regard to civil rights, in comparison to foreign affairs, was accomplished. RFK and the president continued to refuse to budge on the long expected and promised Civil Rights bill. Roy Wilkins, civil rights advocate and cabinet level official in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, discussed the general sentiment of Blacks in an interview with PBS in 1994: “It seemed to me that the Kennedys wanted to have it both ways; they wanted to appear to be our friends and they seemed to be the brake on our Movement; they wanted to have it both ways.”⁸⁷

Violence and hatred reared its ugly head again in October when James Meredith, a young black man in Mississippi, tried to enroll at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. Once again the South and RFK were at the forefront of the news. The question of the matter was how to get Meredith enrolled without a bloodbath in the streets in and around Ole Miss. There were allegations that Robert tried very hard, unsuccessfully, to persuade Meredith not to enroll. However, in an interview with Anthony Lewis, Kennedy flatly denied that he in any way tried to influence Meredith. But there is most likely some truth to the charge. RFK understood the volatile nature of the situation and was not keen on the prospect on repeating past confrontations. He admitted that he did

⁸⁷ Interview with Roy Wilkins, PBS, “*The American Experience: The Kennedys*”, 1994.

speaking with Thurgood Marshall, then a lawyer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Burke Marshall, Kennedy assistant for civil rights, in the same interview, reported that the Meredith situation was not anything new and that it dated back to January 1961. “He applied in January of ’61 for the university, but I didn’t have any conversations with Meredith until it was done.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, Kennedy, in trying to find a reasonable solution, made contact with Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett. But RFK did feel personally connected to Meredith. ““Oh, God. I hope nothing happens to Meredith...I feel responsible for him. I promised we’d back him up all the way.””⁸⁹ Governor Barnett was an old Dixiecrat and a rabid racist who had no sympathies for Blacks. Barnett was also the man, who as a sitting governor, walked into the trial of Bryon DeLa Beckwith and shook his hand. Beckwith was the man who was eventually convicted in 1994 of the assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers.

The purpose of these communications was to “avoid basically was having to send troops and trying to avoid having a federal presence in Mississippi. In my judgement, what [Barnett] was trying to accomplish was the avoidance of integration at the University of Mississippi, number one. And if he couldn’t do that, then to be forced to do it by our heavy hand-and his preference was with troops.”⁹⁰ With violence and defiance on his mind, Barnett stood fast in the face of intense pressure of the RFK Justice Department and the Kennedy White House. Much like Governor George Wallace in neighboring Alabama in 1963, Barnett wanted a showdown. The origins of such aggressiveness and insolence dated back to the Civil War. In the mindset of most southerners, people coming down from the North to do and/or force any policy upon

⁸⁸ Interview with Burke Marshall, *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words*. Interviewer Anthony Lewis, 159.

⁸⁹ Schlesinger, 322.

⁹⁰ Interview with Robert Kennedy, *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words*. Interviewer Anthony Lewis, 160.

them was repugnant. Disingenuous and bellicose in his rhetoric, Barnett was also appealing to his core constituency and protecting himself politically. RFK understood, however irritating, that in essence the grandstanding was somewhat necessary. By September the matter had escalated to the violence that was so feared by RFK and others in Washington. “That September, the whole country watched as federal marshals sent in to protect James Meredith, the first black student ever to enroll at the University of Mississippi, were attacked and overwhelmed by a mob of 2,500 white rioters carrying clubs and guns and screaming, ‘Kill the nigger-loving bastards!’ and ‘Give us the nigger!’ By dawn the next day, more than half of the 320 marshals were wounded, and two bystanders—a French journalist and a jukebox repairman—were killed.”⁹¹ According to Congressman John Lewis, a civil rights leader and a member of the famed “Big-Six,” James Meredith was never a part of the Movement and was really a “strange bird.” However, with the constitution, court orders, and the RFK Justice Department behind Meredith, Mississippi could not hold out forever. Kennedy stayed late in the evenings during the critical period to try to resolve the situation without further bloodshed. Marshals, troops, justice officials, and others were on the ground to help stop the violence. Meredith and his protectors were staying in temporary housing on the Ole Miss Campus, which furthered angered the degenerate white racists to the point where Gov. Barnett requested that Meredith be taken off campus. However, Kennedy was far too smart to fall for such a ploy. “I knew that if we took him off campus, we’d never get him back on the campus.”⁹² There was a sense at the White House, where Bobby was keeping President Kennedy informed as to the new developments and pondering various

⁹¹ Lewis, 193.

⁹² Interview with Robert Kennedy, *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words*. Interviewer Anthony Lewis, 163.

options, that this was another disaster on par with the Bay of Pigs fiasco a year and one-half ago. One option that was workable was to position federal troops in Memphis, Tennessee where they would be just a stone's throw from the action if martial law had to commence. National Guardsmen were also seriously considered for the preservation of law and order. In this critical time, Kennedy's true feelings of sympathy and his opinion that law and order were paramount came to the forefront, not just to resolve the matter at hand but because of his belief that without it there is nothing but chaos. He was able to finally force Barnett into submission by telling him that because he had brokered a back-room deal with him and the President that JFK would go on national television and tell the world that troops were in Mississippi because the Governor had broken his word.⁹³ In the end, by helicopter and ground, and more than 23, 000 troops in tiny Oxford, at the point of bayonet, Ole Miss finally complied with court orders to integrate. Finally, Meredith was admitted and tensions cooled down and in 1963, James Meredith became the first Black person to graduate from the University of Mississippi.

“Quick to identify with the disaffected youth, RFK was one of the first White leaders to see the drift towards Black Power, the growing militancy of Black activists impatient with compromising leaders and official timidity.”⁹⁴ However, it should be duly noted that at this time, those feelings and observations, were tempered by Kennedy's sensitivity to the possible political ramifications of the Civil Rights Movement on his brother's Administration. In the rarified world of the White House, there is always a fire that needs to be put out, a document that must be finished, and intelligence briefing that must go unfettered. In the aftermath of the turmoil in Mississippi, President Kennedy and

⁹³ Thomas, 202.

⁹⁴ Thomas, 196.

Attorney General Kennedy found out that the Soviet Union was installing offensive nuclear weapons on the island of Cuba. The nation, and indeed the world, would hold its collective breath and hope that nuclear war would not break out. This is a tragic event for the Civil Rights Movement because it took the focus away from the justice being denied to millions of Americans. Furthermore it took Robert Kennedy out of the issue for a considerable amount of time (several weeks). He had to deal with matters of state as basically a co-president. However, by the middle of November, the crises had been resolved to an uneasy but satisfying conclusion. On November 20, 1962, President Kennedy signed into law, by way of executive order, an edict prohibiting racial discrimination in federally funded housing. This meant that no longer could property owners or federal and state agencies dealing in commercial real estate discriminate against those of color. RFKS fingerprints are all over this critical executive order and once again show the tendencies of the Kennedy Justice Department and White House respectively. Kennedy still believed that a moderate, gradual approach was not only appropriate but necessary. In later years, he would be led to believe that such matters were of the utmost importance. While Kennedy once referred to 1961 as a “very mean year,” 1962 was probably more difficult and contentious than either he or anyone else could have ever imagined. “The Oxford crisis, most all the military intervention, shocked the white South. It also shocked the Kennedys. They had never thought it would come to this. Their assumption in 1961 was that unreasonable problems would yield to reason and law.”⁹⁵

At the beginning of 1963, the administration was still trying to work through the issues of the previous year. Attorney General Kennedy, however, could not have had the

⁹⁵ Schlesinger, 325.

smallest inkling as to what New Year had in store. The culmination of violence, civil unrest, and great political triumphs and horrible tragedies marked the year as a seminal moment in American history. April brought back to the forefront the dividing and delicate issue of race relations in the United States. Violence and demonstrations began in earnest when Bull Connor, the infamous rabid racist, turned his policemen and police canines loose on civil rights workers marching peacefully through Birmingham, Alabama. The objective of the demonstrators was to integrate all facilities of a commercial or business nature. One must remember that in the South at that time, signs saying, “Colored Restroom,” or “White Restroom” were still common and strictly enforced. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wanted “to do something dramatic to shake Washington from its torpor. His target was Birmingham.”⁹⁶

Once again Kennedy had to face a volatile situation in the South, where the name Bobby had already become synonymous with the epithet “nigger”. The Governor of Alabama, George Wallace, was dogmatic, provocative, and defiant in the face of the federal government. He proclaimed that “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation Forever!” was what the South intended to adhere to. Kennedy and the President did not want any further trouble in the South and had asked Dr. King not to go to Birmingham, but Dr. King refused. He was arrested on a misdemeanor charge of violating a local injunction. Burke Marshall was sent down to Alabama to try to make some headway but found the situation intolerable. Neither Whites nor Blacks were talking and something had to be done about that in order to make any progress. Federal troops were once again sent to the South to deal the rash of violence that engulfed the troubled state. Even Dr. King’s younger brother had his home firebombed. Rioting went

⁹⁶ Thomas, 242.

on for several days because Police Chief Bull Connor refused to stop it or at the very least couldn't stop it. "The events in Birmingham abruptly transformed the mood of the nation. Churchmen, whose piety had studiously overlooked what John Quincy Adams had called the foul stain on the American conscience, idealistic students, recently preoccupied with disarming the United States and leaving the Soviet Union the great nuclear power in the world, ordinary citizens, complacent in their assumptions of virtue, were for a season jerked into guilt and responsibility."⁹⁷ As a result of the turmoil in Alabama and awakening of the American conscious the integration of those facilities mentioned earlier, businesses, restroom, etc, was successful but not without a price. Kennedy's role in these events was of a hands-on, informed, and careful leader. He was not afraid to delegate responsibility to his subordinates, but the final decisions always rested with him and the President and no one was going to undermine them.

What is really being looked at here, then, and now, is revolution. There was an icy chill of foreboding that was unmistakable; Kennedy knew it, President Kennedy knew it, the civil rights people knew it, and most certainly the white man knew it. Although the revolution never completely materialized, by the late 1960s the nation seemed to be coming apart at the seams.

The summer of 1963 was an awe inspiring time for the United States. In June, President Kennedy gave two major policy speeches that infected the nation with enthusiasm and hope and reason. One was the speech at American University concerning the Soviet Union and the beginnings of détente and the other was a speech made on national television from the Oval Office concerning civil rights. June 12, 1963, will

⁹⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 959-960.

always be remembered as the night the President of the United States declared civil rights for all people as a moral issue. However, it is imperative to understand that the speech would not have been possible without Kennedy. The speech declared that all people, whether black or white, were entitled equal rights and equal opportunity. But without the persistence of the Attorney General the speech most likely would never have been made. At this time the Kennedy White House was already planning to send the Civil Rights Bill to the Congress for its consideration. In fact, eleven days earlier the White House sent a message to Capitol Hill concerning the bill. In the supplemental message to Congress the President said, “In short, enactment of ‘The Civil Rights Act of 1963’ at this session of the Congress—however long it takes or however troublesome it may be—is an unavoidable necessity.”⁹⁸ “In this year of the Emancipation Centennial, our obligation is to insure the blessings of liberty for all Americans and their posterity—not merely for reasons of economic efficiency, world diplomatic and domestic tranquility—but, above all, as I have said many times, ‘because it is right’.”⁹⁹ Kennedy believed that while there was certainly limitations on the progress that could be achieved, he understood clearly that at that moment something innovative and bold had to be pursued. The president, of course, had somewhat a different view of the situation: believing that the entire civil rights movement was politically dangerous. While President Kennedy deserves credit for his role in pushing for more freedom for Blacks, he also should be criticized for dragging his feet on the issue to the detriment of his legacy, the movement, and believers of freedom and justice.

⁹⁸ Supplemental Message on Civil Rights June 1, 1963, 14. Robert F. Kennedy Papers: Attorney General Papers: General Correspondence: Civil Rights, Legislation, 01/1963-09/1963. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 14.

The end of the summer of 1963 saw the greatest mass demonstration that the nation had ever seen. The March on Washington, culminating with eloquent speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lewis, was a peaceful exercise of the right to assemble. However, the Kennedy Administration, including Kennedy, were deeply concerned about the possibility of violence in the streets of the nation's capital. It is imperative to understand that the meeting place of the demonstrators was the Lincoln Memorial, facing the Washington Monument and adjacent to the White House/Eisenhower Executive Office Building Complex. The proximity to the corridors of federal power was a bit unnerving to the best and brightest at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. as well as to the predominately old White men circulating the rooms and offices of the august Capitol Hill buildings on the other end of the National Mall. The Civil Rights Movement was expeditiously approaching the zenith of its existence. Furthermore, the plight of Southern Blacks had by that time had reached into the homes of most Americans via the television set. Originally, the March was to take place in the "legislative galleries," but had been moved to the Lincoln Memorial.¹⁰⁰ It is now clear that the White House and the Justice Department were deeply involved in the planning and execution of the event. This is most likely an effort to keep the events from spinning out of control and to reap any and all political benefits that may have come as a result of the March on Washington.

Discussion of the March had begun quite awhile before and it was commonly assumed that Dr. King, Jr. was its creator. "It originated with a man named A. Phillip Randolph, an elder statesman of the movement who, in 1925, had founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, one of the most effective civil rights and labor

¹⁰⁰ Ted Sorenson, *Kennedy*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 504.

organizations of its time...People respected him for both his appearance and his achievements.”¹⁰¹ Months earlier, when President Kennedy had announced his support for a sweeping new civil rights bill, amid the violence and civil unrest throughout the country, Randolph and Bayard Rustin, another civil rights leader, began to look toward producing a major protest and demonstration in Washington, D.C. The March was loosely based on the model Randolph had threatened to use in 1941, which forced President Franklin D. Roosevelt “to issue an executive order forbidding discrimination in defense industry hiring.”¹⁰² In fact, the original objective of the March was not civil rights altogether but jobs and economic opportunity for all Americans. However, the proverbial snowball grew and what was small became very complex and large. In June 1963, the civil rights leaders had an audience with the president in the White House. Kennedy was there as well to listen and discuss the prospect of such an action. The meeting with JFK, RFK, and LBJ ended somewhat unceremoniously with both sides unsure of the other. Randolph had gone toe to toe with the Kennedys and informed them that there would indeed be a March; to abandon it would cause serious problems within the organizations and the Movement. It is safe to say that at that moment a stalemate had been reached. The cautious and politically sensitive Kennedys had seen the passion and strength of the Black Leaders and while somewhat impressed with the strength of their convictions were irritated at the prospect of potential violence again.

The March on Washington went off without a hitch. There was no violence, only peace and arguably one of the best speeches of the last fifty years. The Kennedys were thrilled that everything went so well. However, Kennedy proclaimed that he and his staff

¹⁰¹ Lewis, 203.

¹⁰² Ibid, 203.

were the reason that it went off so well. “It was very, very badly organized.”¹⁰³ Furthermore, Kennedy was concerned about communists participating in the event. “It was just that we kept track of the people who were communists and who might get involved in it around the country-whether they were being included or excluded-I think mostly through the head of the NAACP,” (Roy Wilkins).¹⁰⁴ Finally, Kennedy was also very critical of John Lewis of SNCC and the speech he delivered at the March. In Lewis’s speech, he mentioned the word revolution and issued some harsh language toward the White America that sided with the racists. Bobby and Burke Marshall did not like this. “It was a bad speech...there was an attack on the country. It attacked the president.”¹⁰⁵ At this point, RFK sympathized with the marchers, but his overwhelming concern was the fate of his brother.

From August until November the Civil Rights Bill stalled in Congress. In addition, with the Administration’s attention on other matters, such as the Cold War and negotiations on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, Civil Rights seemed to simmer for the time being. Furthermore, the president and Bobby were beginning to focus on the upcoming presidential election. In November 1963, JFK decided to take an early campaign swing through Texas in part to mend some fences between Lyndon Johnson, Ralph Yarbrough, and John Connally. At 12:30pm central standard time, while riding in an open motorcade in downtown Dallas, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. It was the end of the New Frontier and the Kennedy White House. While the nation struggled to come to grips with the death of the president, RFK was shattered. Finally, at the age of thirty-eight, the

¹⁰³ Interview with Robert Kennedy, *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words*. Interviewer Anthony Lewis, 227.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Robert Kennedy, *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words*. Interviewer Anthony Lewis, 228.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Robert Kennedy, *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words*. Interviewer Anthony Lewis, 229.

most critical event in the life of Robert had happened. He would never be the same, nor would his politics or personal life.

RFK's life had been defined from birth to November 22, 1963, in terms of obligation to family. He had always been subordinate to his older brothers and his father, but now he was effectively the patriarch of the Kennedy family. Joe Kennedy had suffered a massive stroke in December 1961 that rendered him an invalid. Without the father, possibly the greatest star in Bobby's life went out with the death of Jack. Now he was trying to cope with a number of emotions that were normal with the death of a loved one. In addition, he was never able to tell anyone that he felt personally responsible for his brother's fate. As if that was not enough, the motions of government did not pause for bereavement. Lyndon Johnson was now president and Bobby's power in Washington had evaporated within a few seconds. Where was he going to go from here? What to do next? Could he return the family to its rightful place, the White House? These were questions that occupied talking heads, but also Bobby himself. Kennedy was, as we shall see, never quite the same person after Jack's death. While he would demonstrate the same tenacity and intellect between 1963-1968 as he had always done, he was forever changed. He embarked on a short but epic odyssey that would change not only himself but the nation.

CHAPTER 5

RFK 1961-1963

The President's Man

The presidential election of 1960 was a brutal affair filled with charge versus countercharge. Bobby had brilliantly run the Kennedy campaign with youth, vigor, and hard work. After the election, RFK had to find what to do next. However, Joseph Kennedy had other ideas. The position of Attorney General is very important for it, in essence, is the president's enforcement arm. It oversees all aspects of federal law enforcement and is the beacon looked to by the various local and state agencies. The idea of handing that position over to a thirty-six year old former government attorney was unfathomable to many. In addition, he was the president's younger brother, which brought about charges of nepotism. RFK did not like the proposition, nor did his politically cautious brother.

Old Joe Kennedy, however, felt that that was the only position that Bobby should take. He was already helping Jack with the transition, particularly the selection of persons for the many positions that the new president had to fill. The meetings between Jack and Bobby occurred at "Jack's home in Georgetown."¹⁰⁶ "Jack met with a lot of these people alone or with me."¹⁰⁷ Joe told both of his sons that Bobby was going to be Attorney General in order to round out the Cabinet. Both resisted to no avail and eventually sent Washington wise man and Kennedy family attorney, Clark Clifford, to try and persuade the father that it was not a good decision.

¹⁰⁶ Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, ed., *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 39.

¹⁰⁷ Guthman and Shulman, 39.

In the face of the father's opposition, Bobby and Jack relented. With his selection as Attorney General, the president completed his "ministry of talent."¹⁰⁸ On January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as the thirty-fifth president of the United States. The next day Robert was sworn in at the White House as the new Attorney General. It was the beginning of a complicated yet rewarding relationship between Bobby and Jack.

The first few months of the administration, Robert acted in a manner consistent with previous heads of the Department of Justice with little overt interaction with the White House. He went through the normal processes of moving into his office and assembling staff to help him with the overall operations of the Justice Department. One problem that he faced, and the president as well, was J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Hoover had been the head of the FBI for many decades and was arguably the most powerful person in government. He controlled people, legislators, and even presidents. Hoover was an avid gossip and a skilled manipulator. Moreover, he also had tens of thousands of files on a large number of people, including the Kennedys. Bobby knew, as did the president, that Hoover had to be handled delicately.

April 1961 provided the first true test for the Administration. In addition, the events of that month also changed the president's opinion about having Bobby so close to his administration. During the last part of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's tenure in office, he and his advisers came up with a plan to remove Cuban premier Fidel Castro from power. Castro had seized power by toppling democratically elected and American backed President Fulgencio Batista. Initially, the American government did not know what to make of the new Cuban leader. In short order, though, Castro aligned himself

¹⁰⁸ Theodore C. Sorenson, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 257.

with Nikita Khrushchev and the Soviet Union, proclaiming himself a Marxist. This was at the zenith of the Cold War and having the first communist state in the Western Hemisphere ninety miles off the coast of Florida was intolerable. They hatched a plan to use Cuban exiles to invade the island and make their way to Havana where, with the Cuban people behind them, remove Castro. But Eisenhower ran out of time.

When President Kennedy took office he began receiving pressure from the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon to approve the operation. The operation left serious doubts in the president's mind; however, he decided to give final approval. Fifteen hundred or so Cuban exiles, supported by the CIA and the military, landed at the Bay of Pigs. It was a disaster. Most were captured and more than a hundred were killed. President Kennedy refused to provide air support for fear that doing so would reveal American involvement.

It was quickly discovered that the United States was behind the attempted overthrow of Castro. In addition, it humiliated the president at home and around the world. Overconfidence combined with substantial misplaced trust in the CIA conspired to nearly wreck the new administration in its infancy.

This proved the most important event in the history of the Kennedy administration. Most think of the Cuban Missile Crisis or Civil Rights, but the Bay of Pigs was the most important because it forced the president to reevaluate his staff and question where he was getting his information. Thus, enter Robert Kennedy. At this time RFK became the president's most trusted and arguably competent advisor. As the late legendary Washington wise man Fred Dutton said, "there is always a bit of egos and vanities among the White House staff that need to be handled with some care, which only

a president finally realizes. But he didn't have to worry about that with Bobby."¹⁰⁹ From that point forward Bobby would be the go to man in the administration and the man whom the president trusted the most.

RFK became intimately involved with every aspect of policy, both foreign and domestic, for the Kennedy administration. For instance, he was heavily involved with the Alliance for Progress, Cuba, assassination plans for Castro, the Cold War, Berlin, Vietnam, Civil Rights, and the White House legislative agenda. "Within the cabinet, Robert Kennedy became a constant and steady liberal force."¹¹⁰ Furthermore, "his distinctive contribution was to fight unremittingly for his brother's understanding that foreign policy was not a technical exercise off in a vacuum but the expression of a nation's internal policy and purpose."¹¹¹

Along with his duties as the president's most trusted advisor, Bobby was also unleashing his vitriolic agenda against organized crime in America. One such Mafioso that particularly irritated the Attorney General was New Orleans crime figure Carlos Marcello. Less than three months after RFK took office on April 4, he personally ordered that Marcello be arrested and dropped off in the jungles of Guatemala, (with no notice or legal recourse). This was payback for Marcello's arrogant and condescending behavior before the Rackets Committee and the revelation that Marcello had been ordered out of the country more than eleven years before but had never left.¹¹²

The task of taking on the mafia was filled with risk. The Kennedy family's connection with organized crime dated back to prohibition, when Joe Kennedy conspired

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Fred Dutton, PBS, *The American Experience: The Kennedys*, 1994.

¹¹⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 701.

¹¹¹ Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 702.

¹¹² As evidenced by his presence in the United States.

to produce, ship, and sell liquor illegally. If that was not enough, there were widespread reports of mafia involvement in the 1960 presidential election on behalf of Jack Kennedy. Bobby was once again, with the full power of his office, displaying his righteous indignation at people who preyed on regular people who were just trying to attain and live the American dream. “It was not as if Kennedy had decided to go after the mob and the Teamsters out of abstract prejudice. The Rackets Committee had dug up a mass of concrete information on lawbreaking. As Attorney General, he felt an obligation to pursue that information.”¹¹³

As head of the Justice Department, Kennedy not only pursued criminals, he also pursued legislation to fight organized crime. One such instance was in 1961, when legislation to curb organized crime and racketeering was before the Congress. The “main target of our bill is interstate travel to promote gambling. It also is aimed at the huge profits in the traffic in liquor, narcotics, prostitution, as well as the use of these funds for corrupting local officials and for their use in racketeering in labor and management.”¹¹⁴ This piece of legislation (H.R. 6572) was the precursor to the present day Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act of 1970 (RICO). Kennedy wanted to put some teeth in the federal code to take down criminals.

It was so important to Bobby that he delivered no less than eight major speeches on the subject of organized crime around the country.¹¹⁵ It also shows the personal commitment he had toward justice. Whether he knew it or not, there is no doubt that out

¹¹³ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy And His Times*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 285.

¹¹⁴ Statement of Robert F. Kennedy before Subcommittee No.5 of the House Committee on The Judiciary on May 17, 1961. Robert F. Kennedy Papers: Attorney General Files, Speeches, 1961-1964, Box Number 2, JFKPL.

¹¹⁵ Information gathered from a list of Major Addresses by A.G. Robert F. Kennedy. Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Attorney General Files, Speeches, 1961-1964, Box No. 1, JFKPL.

of all the positions in the Cabinet and White House, the best place for him was Attorney General. It forced him to focus on the inequalities in society.¹¹⁶ As a lawyer and a man, he believed that, “it is the law which enables men to live together, that creates order out of chaos. We know that law is the glue that holds civilization together.”¹¹⁷

One of the myths of Kennedy circulated by what I call the “cult of RFK,” is that he was a bleeding heart liberal. That is simply not true. He was tough, tenacious, moralistic and a believer in the ideal of justice. The sense of justice included protecting democracy and representative government. In the case of Grey v. Sanders, Kennedy personally argued before the United States Supreme Court in favor of proper apportionment in legislative districting.¹¹⁸ “But Bob Kennedy was always clear in his own mind that equal protection of the law, and due process should require that everybody’s vote for the state legislatures and for Congress be given equal weight. And that’s the way the Court finally went.”¹¹⁹ This was a critical issue because legislators were using political power to gerrymander districts into areas that were more politically favorable. The practice resulted in the violation of the 14th amendment, guarantee equal protection of the law. In fact, the case would never have been heard if it had not been for the landmark Supreme Court case of Baker v. Carr.¹²⁰

While there were many issues that Kennedy had to deal with, foreign policy was foremost. He was arguably the president’s principal advisor. He was intimately involved with then highly classified programs and projects, such as Operation Mongoose. It was

¹¹⁶ Narrator, PBS.

¹¹⁷ Address by Robert F. Kennedy at the Law Day Exercises of the University of Georgia Law School in Athens, Georgia on May 6, 1961. Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Attorney General Files, Speeches, 1961-1964, Box No. 1, JFKPL.

¹¹⁸ Grey v. Sanders 372 U.S. 368 (1963).

¹¹⁹ Interview with Burke Marshall. Stein, Jean interviews by, and Plimpton, George editor, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), 81.

¹²⁰ Baker v. Carr 369 U.S. 186 (1962).

an operation to invade Cuba with mercenaries, exiles, and intelligence/military operatives. They trained in Miami and Louisiana where the climates and terrain were similar to those of Cuba. It is imperative to remember that RFK was also an ardent cold warrior, especially during the time he was Attorney General. In addition, he approved of sabotage missions, crop burnings, and hit and run operations against Cuba.

Cuba was not the only concern of interest to Kennedy; he also became involved in matters of high diplomacy. The war in Southeast Asia was also at the forefront of the Kennedy administration. While most believe that American involvement began with Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson, it really started during the Eisenhower administration; when France was defeated and withdrew from Vietnam. That action concerned the cold warriors in government and America started sending “advisors” to the region to assist and train the democratic South Vietnamese against the communist North Vietnam. There was a concept that was very much alive at the time, the domino theory, which stated that if Vietnam fell to the communists, which was being supported by both Red China and the Soviet Union, then so would all of Korea, Thailand, Laos, and Burma. Obviously, this was completely unacceptable. The war for the “Third World” really started with that simple yet narrow view. Furthermore, it was an extension of the Truman Doctrine, a policy of containment of Soviet expansion. Kennedy traveled all over the world as a goodwill ambassador for democracy.

In October 1962, U-2 reconnaissance over Cuba took photos that revealed the presence of nuclear weapons in Cuba. The Cold War had reached its zenith. There was no doubt that RFK would be in the thick of it at the White House. “On Tuesday morning, October 16, 1962, shortly after 9:00, President Kennedy called and asked me to come to

the White House.”¹²¹ Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had entered into a military alliance with Fidel Castro and placed nuclear weapons in Cuba, ninety miles south of Florida. These missiles were capable of hitting Washington, New York, Oak Ridge, Shreveport, or almost any other important location in the eastern continental United States.

Placement of nukes in Cuba came as a shock to high level officials in the administration. “No one had expected or anticipated that the Russians would deploy surface-to-surface ballistic missiles in Cuba.”¹²² Now the crucial decision was what action should be taken against the U.S.S.R. At the time the president and his advisors believed that the best course of action was to make sure that the sites were authentic. Next, the public and the Russians should not be tipped off to the discovery until the White House had a better grip on the situation.

The president and the attorney general created one of the great emergency/war cabinets in history: the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. This group was officially created by President Kennedy by the order of “National Security Council Action Memorandum Number 196 as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, ‘for the purpose of effective conduct of the operations of the executive branch in the current crisis.’”¹²³ Many were a part of this most important committee: President Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Ted Sorenson, Kenny O’Donnell, Dean Acheson, Maxwell Taylor, Dean Rusk, the Joint Chiefs, Robert McNamara, and others in key positions. They meet in secret to discuss three main options: 1. doing nothing, 2.

¹²¹ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 19.

¹²² Kennedy, 20.

¹²³ Kennedy, 41-42.

launching an air attack, and 3) instituting a naval blockade.¹²⁴ Of course, to acquiesce in the face of Soviet aggression was unfathomable to everyone. Two options, therefore, remained and neither was particularly desirable. If that was not enough, the midterm elections were less than a month away. The highly partisan atmosphere in Washington was another major concern for the brothers Kennedy. “The autumn days of September and October were filled with charges and countercharges.”¹²⁵ However, it was far more than just the political fortunes of members and candidates for office, it was the fear that the situation could push the committee and the president into a position that was ill conceived and irreversible.

One must remember that the White House was receiving plenty of pressure from hawks in both parties about the administration’s protection of the country against the Soviet menace. Considering the delicacy of the situation, Kennedy reverted to an old family habit to get a better handle on the matter, (of using a back channel, outside of the normal processes of the State and Defense Departments). Kennedy’s distrust of the federal bureaucracy and overwhelming confidence in his own abilities led him to contact Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin. The ambassador informed Bobby that there was no need for concern and that Khrushchev did not seek to embarrass the president. “I pointed out that I felt he had a very strange way of showing his admiration; that what the Russians had been doing in Cuba was a matter of the deepest concern to the United States; and that his protestations of friendship meant little alongside the military activities in the Caribbean.”¹²⁶ Here we see a man who is completely engaged in not only work, but a

¹²⁴ Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 509.

¹²⁵ Kennedy, 21.

¹²⁶ Kennedy, 22.

man putting his devotion to the nation, most importantly to the president, on display. He was tough and the Russians knew it.

It was also a breakdown in intelligence that led to that perilous time. The intelligence community had failed to predict or foresee that the Soviet buildup in Cuba could include missiles, especially nuclear weapons.

The Intelligence Community, in its National Estimate of the future course of events, had advised him on each of four occasions in 1962 when they furnished him with official reports on Cuba and the Caribbean—that the Russians would not make offensive weapons available to Cuba. The last estimate before our meeting of the 16th of October was dated the 19th of September, and it advised the president that without reservation the United States Intelligence Board, after considerable discussion and examination, had concluded that the Soviet Union would not make Cuba a strategic base. It pointed out that the Soviet Union had not taken this kind of step with any of its satellites in the past and would feel the risk of retaliation from the United States to be too great to take the risk in this case.¹²⁷

Keeping in mind the failure of the Pentagon and CIA, it is no wonder why RFK distrusted the federal government and felt that he had to be completely involved.

Many of the hard-liners in the administration were advocating a massive first strike. However, RFK took a different position: that it (an unprovoked strike) would be a terrible thing in the world, because it would have the United States attacking a sovereign nation without warning. Furthermore, he realized, as did the president, that there had to be another way out. It would have to include a measure to help the Russians save face.

¹²⁷ Kennedy, 23.

The Executive Committee of the National Security Council met for several days pondering various options. In those meetings other substantive issues came to light. For instance there was a belief by the military establishment that if the administration did not respond with force, then the Russians would take aggressive action in Berlin.

The military leaders decided that force was required. However, that position was not supported by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara or Bobby Kennedy. Kennedy supported the naval blockade of the island. In doing so he was demonstrating both his vision and practicality. “I supported McNamara’s position in favor of a blockade. This was not from a deep conviction that it would be a successful course of action, but a feeling that it had more flexibility and fewer liabilities than a military attack. Most importantly, like others, I could not accept the idea that the United States would rain bombs on Cuba, killing thousands of civilians in a surprise attack.”¹²⁸

The forethought displayed by Bobby showed that he believed that the right decision had to be moral. Opinions like his thoroughly irritated the hawks. One hawk in particular was Air Force General Curtis Lemay, who believed that America should bomb first and ask questions later. On October 22, 1962, President Kennedy delivered an address to the nation which told the citizenry of the new and perilous developments as well as to warn the Soviets of dire consequences if they persisted to put offensive missiles in Cuba. The president told the nation of the measures being taken and the strength of the intelligence that the government had collected. The warning he (the president) gave Khrushchev was far more chilling: “It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full

¹²⁸ Kennedy, 29.

retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.”¹²⁹ There is no doubt that RFK’s fingerprints are all over that speech.

What occurred over the next several days were complex negotiations between RFK, JFK, their subordinates, and their Soviet counterparts. No one knew how the Soviets would react and the United States Armed Forces was placed on high alert as the nation prepared for war. Khrushchev was taken aback by the serious rhetoric and forceful posturing of a man (JFK) that he had always thought of as a lightweight. He thought, because of the events of 1961, that he could bully the young president and his administration, but he was sadly mistaken.

Once the naval blockade was in place, there was nothing that could be done; the Soviets were on their way and had received orders to fulfill their missions. U.S. serviceman abroad ships near Cuban waters waited impatiently, then finally they made out the Russian ships in the distance. It was the moment everyone, especially RFK, had reluctantly waited for. Optimism was not high in Washington during these tense two weeks. The Soviet premier was given a face saving way out of the conflict, removing missiles in exchange for American assurances that it would not invade Cuba and private agreement to dismantle obsolete missiles in Turkey, but how rational or belligerent with Khrushchev? No one knew.

With both navies in the warm waters south of Florida involved in a colossal stare down, the order finally came to turn back. Nuclear war, more specifically nuclear holocaust, had been avoided. Ambassador Dobrynin, of the Soviet Embassy, met with RFK, by request, at 11:00 a.m. at the Justice Department on Sunday. “He told me that the message was coming through that Khrushchev had agreed to dismantle and withdraw

¹²⁹ Nationally televised address by President John F. Kennedy from the Oval Office on October 22, 1962.

the missiles under adequate supervision and inspection; that everything was going to work out satisfactorily; and that Mr. Khrushchev wanted to send his best wishes to the president and to me.”¹³⁰ Finally, one of the gravest threats that the world had ever witnessed was over. However, while there was anger and disappointment within the Kremlin at their perceived defeat, there was no gloating on the part of RFK or the White House.

RFK utterly understood, as did President Kennedy, just how close they came to the end of civilization. The crisis cemented the Kennedy Administration reputation as the best and the brightest; however, much of the successful resolution of the conflict was due to luck. The decision to use peaceful means to resolve the conflict was in no small way directed by Kennedy. While RFK was just one of many individuals who worked night and day to bring a comfortable end to the Cuban Missile Crisis, no one can underestimate his influence within the administration or with the president. He had established himself as a smart and tough statesman in his own right and drew an example of how the government should go about its business in times of great strife. According to Kennedy, “the final lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis is the importance of placing ourselves in the other country’s shoes.”¹³¹ After the events of October 1962 were over, RFK seemed to take on even greater status in the administration and influence over the president and the agenda of the White House.

Following the tense days of October 1962, RFK appeared to have begun to relax and concentrate on substantive issues at home as well as abroad. RFK himself continued to focus on issues dealing with Cuba. “There remained Operation Mongoose. There

¹³⁰ Kennedy, 84.

¹³¹ Kennedy, 95.

remained the Bay of Pigs prisoners.”¹³² Operation Mongoose was effectively dead after the Cuban incident.¹³³ Furthermore, it was not at the heart of RFK, but the fate of the Bay of Pigs prisoners did concern him greatly.

Bobby undertook secret negotiations with the Cuban government to obtain the release of the imprisoned men. The Cuban leader made what essentially amounted to a ransom list. “Castro had given his list of drugs and medicines-ten thousand items, specified in detail-to the unflagging James Donovan in mid-October, two days before the world knew of the Soviet missiles.”¹³⁴ Kennedy enlisted the help of his most trusted aides and associates in the endeavor; people such as Joe Dolan, Nicholas Katzenbach, Louis Oberdorfer, John Nolan, Barrett Prettyman, James Donovan, John Douglas, Mitchell Rogovin, Lawrence Houston, Edwin Guthman among others.

Kennedy used every available asset to insure delivery of the goods and the release of the prisoners. This entire episode illustrates once again the moralistic impulses of this most complex man. His concern for the men whom he had essentially placed in harms way bordered on the personal. Before the events of November 1963, this was a side of RFK not widely seen by the public: compassionate, moralistic, accountable. In the past he was viewed through the skeptical lens of doubt and ambition.

On December 24, 1962, 1113 Cuban prisoners were released from Castro’s prisons in Havana and elsewhere. “When the last of the 1113 prisoners had disembarked, Donovan called Katzenbach called Kennedy at Hickory Hill, where he was surrounded by his children on Christmas Eve: ‘Bob, they are all in; its over.’”¹³⁵ RFK followed

¹³² Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 533.

¹³³ Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 534.

¹³⁴ Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 534.

¹³⁵ Schlesinger, Jr. *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 537.

through and saved the lives of those men whom had nearly given their lives in the fight for freedom. On December 29, 1962, President Kennedy spoke to the survivors in Miami, Florida. However, RFK was onto the next challenge at hand. A man of his position, energy, and responsibility had little time for extracurricular activities or down time to reflect on recent successes. 1963 was going to be the most exciting, horrific, and life changing year of Robert Kennedy's life.

The third year of the Kennedy administration began with a cautious optimism that the troubles of the past, political and otherwise, were finally gone. In addition, 1963 seemed to promise an evening of the proverbial keel and the buildup to the 1964 presidential election. The tension filled thirteen days of October 1962 had led to the realization that the Cold War must be cooled down to a rational level. RFK and the president began to consider restrictions on the use of nuclear technology. But they were still committed cold warriors, especially Bobby.

The fight between democracy and communism would have to be more earnestly fought in the Third World. Enter Vietnam! The origins of America's involvement there dated back more than a decade at that point. However, there were deep divisions within the administration as to what should be done. As most people at that time, Bob was deeply committed to protecting South Vietnam from its communist aggressors. While most people remember RFK's fierce opposition to the war in 1967 and 1968, in 1963 he was making very hawkish statements approving of American involvement. "The loss of all Southeast Asia if you lost Vietnam. I think everybody [in the administration] was

Hickory Hill is located in McLean, Virginia. It was originally the home of John and Jackie Kennedy, but after a miscarriage they sold the sprawling home to Robert and Ethel Kennedy; in the late 1950s. Currently, Bobby's widow, Mrs. Ethel Kennedy, lives there. She also spends time at Bobby's other estate at the Kennedy Compound in Hyannis, Massachusetts.

quite clear that the rest of Southeast Asia would fall...It would just have profound effects on our position throughout the world.”¹³⁶ It is imperative to remember that throughout his life, Bobby was a doer not a watcher and his predilection toward action in Vietnam must be tempered with that understanding. In addition, matters were looking better than they were to look later. “In the first place, we were winning the war in 1962 and 1963. Up until May or so of 1963, the situation was getting progressively better.”¹³⁷ That was because of the fact that they were somewhat successful.

The war was not only a watershed moment for the RFK, but for mankind. The focus on technology, smart weapons, and the creation and use of counterinsurgency spelled the end of traditional warfare. Troops in Vietnam faced an enemy that did not wear uniforms, used primitive yet highly effective warfare skills (guerrilla warfare), and was undaunted by the technical superiority of the United States. Furthermore, it must be understood that RFK, along with others in positions of knowledge, did not fully comprehend the situation. Blinders of ideology and politics led to the tragic mistakes that he would later acknowledge.

If the professional responsibilities held were not enough, he had to keep guard over the president’s indiscretions. The constitutional obligations held by Jack and his keen sense for political survival did not prevent him seeking out the comforting touch of women other than wife. He once remarked that they couldn’t touch him when he was alive and when he was dead who cared.¹³⁸ Jack was known for his selfish behavior, especially with women, but his behavior was putting the administration and by correlation, the nation at risk. This was the very real situation in the White House with

¹³⁶ Guthman and Shulman, 393.

¹³⁷ Guthman and Shulman, 395.

¹³⁸ Quote from PBS.

which RFK had to cope. Essentially, he had to use his name and influence to keep scandal seeking reporters and political enemies from getting too close to the real John Kennedy. It was a most untenable position. If anything, the president's libido increased after the Cuban Missile Crisis. This was the sleazy part of RFK. He was never more ruthless, manipulative, and vicious than when the president was in potential danger.

In May of 1963, President Kennedy delivered the commencement address at American University. It was one of the most important speeches he ever made and revealed the new rationale within the White House concerning the Soviet Union. Détente had begun in earnest. RFK, in no small way, was responsible for this change in diplomatic direction. As I have noted earlier, he realized the need for the cooling of tensions and the need for law and order and reason in both the nation's domestic and foreign affairs.

On August 5, 1963, Great Britain, the United States, and the U.S.S.R. signed the partial nuclear test ban treaty. It was a crucial first step toward relieving the feverish pitch of recent months and years by prohibiting atmospheric, underwater, outer-space testing. On September 24, 1963, the United States Senate ratified the agreement; bringing the Kennedy White House a major victory.

RFK certainly does not deserve the lion's share of the credit but should receive his fair due because it is scarcely imaginable that President Kennedy would have done much of what he did without Bobby's able assistance. Furthermore, while he [Bobby] was not "brains," he was the sounding board for the president. He was concerned about the future and the legacy of himself and his brother. RFK wanted history to look kindly

on the Kennedy years and for it to live up to its self proclaimed reputation as “the best and the brightest.”

However, the strain of office and the complications of his personal involvement in the Civil Rights battles in the South had made him a liability to the president. That fall he offered Jack his resignation. It was tendered in “September or October of ’63...But [JFK] said no. You know, the fact that I wasn’t going to be around as Attorney General would have, I thought, helped.”¹³⁹ The fact that he was willing to relinquish the best job of his career and the power that came with it further evidences Bobby’s committed to his brother and his future over his own.

Everything in the fall of 1963 seemed to be going well. The election was a year away and pundits were predicting a major victory in November of ’64. In early November, the president decided to make an early campaign swing through Texas. Texas was hostile territory for Kennedy, filled with very conservative, racist Dixiecrats. In addition, the president was trying to repair a very nasty split within the Texas State Democratic Party. Lyndon Johnson was the native son, but John Connolly was the governor and their personal ambitions and jealousy, among other issues, were threatening to disunite the party in this crucial semi-Southern state. President Kennedy was not terribly enthusiastic about the journey, but as the head of his party he had to try to resolve, if he could, the problem.

On the morning of November 22, 1963, JFK flew aboard Air Force One to Love Field in Dallas at about 11:30a.m. The last hour of his life was ticking away. Back in Washington, Bobby was tending to his normal duties and he had returned to his home at Hickory Hill for lunch. As the president’s limousine turned the corner of Houston onto

¹³⁹ Guthman and Shulman, 330.

Elm, the assassin or assassins took aim and a few seconds later, 12:30p.m., blew a major hole through Jack Kennedy's head; he was fatally wounded.¹⁴⁰ He was subsequently taken to Parkland Memorial Hospital where he officially expired at 1:00p.m., Central Standard Time. Later that day, Lyndon Baines Johnson, the Vice-President of the United States, became the thirty-sixth president.

Robert was informed of the events in Dallas by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover at Hickory Hill. He had been presiding over meetings concerning organized crime. "He took Robert Morgenthau and the chief of Morgenthau's criminal division, Silvio Mollo, out to Hickory Hill for a swim and luncheon."¹⁴¹ RFK was in shock but was still able to function enough to tend to personal matters, such as calling family, associates, and going to the White House to protect the slain leader's papers and to question officials.

From the very beginning, he was suspicious of the activities of certain elements of the government. In the oval office, he directly asked CIA Director John McCone if his organization had anything to do with the murder. Of course he did not accept any responsibility for himself or the CIA. In addition, when the casket bearing Jack's body returned to Andrews Air Force Base and was taken to Bethesda Naval Hospital, he helped direct the autopsy. "At Bethesda Hospital on Friday night, the doctors performing the autopsy had been instructed by the White House physician, Dr. George Burkley, not to make a written report on the slain president's adrenal glands, which had been atrophied by Addison's disease...Kennedy would be taking care of macabre chores for months and

¹⁴⁰ I mention "assassin or assassins," because ultimately the official conclusions are in dispute. The Warren Commission, in 1964, found no evidence of anyone participating other than Lee Harvey Oswald. However, the House Select Committee on Assassinations, in 1978, found that there was a high probability that a conspiracy was involved in the murder of President John F. Kennedy. There are two official reports of the assassination to date.

¹⁴¹ Schlesinger, Jr. *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 607.

years to come.”¹⁴² John Kennedy was returned to the White House late Friday night, where the coffin was placed in the East Room to await its journey to the Capitol Rotunda and burial at Arlington National Cemetery on Monday November 25, 1963.

Ever the protector, Bob became the crutch on which Jackie used to hold onto. But no one could really provide comfort or solace for him. If the matter was not difficult enough, he had to deal with the fact that Lyndon Johnson (LBJ) was now his boss and was sitting in his brother’s chair. “There were four or five matters that arose during the period of November 22 to November 27 or so which made me bitter-unhappy at least-with Lyndon Johnson. Events involving the treatment of Jackie on the plane trip back and all that...on Saturday and starting moving all my brother’s things out Saturday morning at nine o’clock.”¹⁴³ LBJ’S insensitivity at that tragic time was unfathomable to Bobby and it was something for which he never forgot. While Robert never liked Johnson, and the feeling was mutual, the events of November 1963 forever put Johnson on RFK’S most hated list.

The death of Jack Kennedy left a gaping hole in Kennedy. He had devoted his entire adult life to his brother’s professional pursuits. In addition, by 1963 he had finally come to grips with his role as brother/protector/alter ego. He was shattered almost beyond recognition. That was combined with fear that his own actions had inadvertently led to the murder. We must remember that RFK was dealing with gangsters, spooks, and was involved in the type of skullduggery that most people only read about. He was the heir apparent yet had no clue as to what came next. Would he retire from public life? Would he serve LBJ as he served his brother? Would he take a new direction in life?

¹⁴² Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*. (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 280.

¹⁴³ Guthman and Shulman, 406.

Finally, at the age of thirty-eight, Robert Francis Kennedy had experienced the most painful, significant event of his life. Nothing would ever be the same. In the wake of the assassination, no one thought that Attorney General Robert Kennedy would ever become the crusader/advocate that he was to become.

CHAPTER 6

RFK 1963-1968

Transformation

The death of President John F. Kennedy left Kennedy without an anchor in his life. Further complicating matters for Robert was the fact that his father, Joe Sr., was not there to help him sort through his options. In December 1961, Joe Sr. was stricken by a massive stroke that left him a mute, partially paralyzed shell of a human being unable to wield the sort of influence he once had. Upon the death of Jack, Bobby became the head of the Kennedy family. Like so many other people, Bobby became the protector and comforter for a family that was shattered by the untimely and brutal murder of a loved one.

Professional responsibilities, however, still loomed large. He was still the Attorney General of the United States. But after Jack's death, sensing his loss of status and power within the government, he began to neglect some of his duties. He couldn't just resign immediately because that would have looked bad. Instead, he soon began to immortalize Jack around the country by naming buildings, airports, and schools after him. In addition, by December 1963, RFK was already planning for the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. "On Monday, December 16, 1963, Arthur Schlesinger and I entered the spacious office of the attorney general-its walls decorated by the multicolored, scribbled drawings of small children-ostensibly to discuss plans for the Kennedy Library."¹⁴⁴ Family obligation was nothing new to in the sense that he it was he, not

¹⁴⁴ Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988), 246.

Jack, who had for years been the president of the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation.¹⁴⁵ The foundation was a vehicle dedicated to protecting and creating the memory of the eldest Kennedy son, providing Joe Kennedy with a tax-exempt organization for his money, and using that money to influence people and groups. In addition, he continued to protect his brother's legacy by using his influence to keep unsavory details of the man out of public view. Even though the man was dead; Bobby was still his brother's keeper.

In the wake of the assassination, RFK was adrift in a sea of emotions that threatened to consume him. "Sardonic withdrawal seemed to distance the anguish."¹⁴⁶ Most people thought that, as the nation's chief law enforcement officer Robert would investigate his brother's murder. However, they were mistaken. To investigate JFK'S death was not only a conflict of interest but utterly a waste of time. "He refused to involve himself in the problem of who had murdered his brother. He 'never really wanted any investigation,' Nicholas Katzenbach thought."¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, "investigation would only protract the unbearable pain."¹⁴⁸

Shortly after the burial of Jack Kennedy, President Lyndon B. Johnson created a presidential commission to investigate the events surrounding November 22, 1963. It eventually concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman and that there was no conspiracy in Dallas.¹⁴⁹ The Commission was led by Chief Justice of the United States

¹⁴⁵ The Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation was established in 1946, two years after the death of its namesake, by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr. It is still in operation today in Washington, D.C., where Sen. Edward Kennedy is now the president. The foundation, philanthropy in nature, concentrates on mental disease.

¹⁴⁶ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 613.

¹⁴⁷ Schlesinger, Jr., 614.

¹⁴⁸ Schlesinger, Jr., 614.

¹⁴⁹ The President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy Final Report. Created on November 29, 1963 and its final report was presented to President Johnson on September 24, 1964.

Supreme Court Earl Warren. Members of the Warren Commission were Sen. Richard Russell, Sen. John Sherman Cooper, Rep. Hale Boggs, Rep. Gerald Ford, Mr. Allen Dulles, and Mr. John J. McCloy. Their findings were extremely controversial.

“The assassination punctured the center of Robert Kennedy’s universe. It removed the hero-brother for whom he had submerged all of his own great competitive instincts.”¹⁵⁰ Today, it would be said that Bobby was suffering from clinical depression. He essentially became an insomniac and began wearing some of Jack’s clothes. “He would slouch at his desk in the Justice Department and stare out the window. He lost weight and lacked vitality.”¹⁵¹ During this mournful period, Kennedy started his intellectual journey for the meaning of life and death. Jack Newfield, who knew RFK said, “When I asked him when he began to read poetry, he answered, ‘Oh, at the very end of 1963, I think.’”¹⁵²

It was an important period for him because the reading of poetry of other works transformed him into a much more spiritual and intellectual vibrant person. The reading did not just include poetry but tragedies, the Greeks, philosophy, and more contemporary works that forced his mind to think in ways that it never had before. In the interim period of time between the winter of 1963-64, Kennedy could not dispose of his mourning color.

He visited Arlington National Cemetery frequently and went on long walks, whether at home or work, to try to find solace. “Bobby was bruised emotionally and spiritually...sometimes he really wasn’t with it.”¹⁵³ “The assassination was also the

¹⁵⁰ Jack Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir*. (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc 1969), 29.

¹⁵¹ Newfield, 30.

¹⁵² Newfield, 30.

¹⁵³ Quote from PBS, *The American Experience: The Kennedys*, 1994.

catalyst that accelerated other changes...He began to identify himself with a romanticized notion of what his brother stood for-peace, Negroes, the next generation.”¹⁵⁴

Kennedy spent the months following the assassination in a haze. His appearances at the White House dwindled and his performance, at best, could be considered average. As 1964 progressed, it was clear that he could not continue on as Attorney General. He began to speculate on to what to do next. Running for elective office in Massachusetts was out of the question because Teddy was already a United States Senator. RFK did have serious interest in becoming LBJ’S vice-president but not to serve the Democratic Party or Johnson but to carry on his brother’s initiatives. Johnson sensed that was Kennedy modus operandi.¹⁵⁵

If his personal and professional troubles were not enough, on June 19, 1964, the youngest of the Kennedy sons, Teddy, nearly died in a plane crashed. Ted broke his back in the crash and has struggled with, at times, severe back pain ever since. The blow to Bobby was almost too great. Outside of the hospital, he made two very important statements that summed up his current feelings: 1) “If my mother stopped having children after the first four, she would have nothing now. I guess that is why we survive; there is more of us than there is trouble” and “Somebody up there doesn’t like us.”¹⁵⁶

The Democratic Party of New York was looking for a candidate to challenge incumbent Sen. Kenneth Keating and rumors started made their way through political circles in both New York and Washington. In the beginning Kennedy resisted becoming a presidential candidate in 1964. He was still thinking of the vice-presidency. As the Democratic National Convention neared, Johnson tried to control every aspect of it. The

¹⁵⁴ Newfield, 31.

¹⁵⁵ Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*. (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 292.

¹⁵⁶ Quote of Robert Kennedy from PBS.

convention was to be a spectacular affair remembering the fallen president and continuing the work of Jack Kennedy through Lyndon Johnson. He scheduled a meeting with Bobby in the White House where he informed him that he would not be a candidate for the vice-presidential nomination. The meeting destroyed what, if any, relationship between the two men.

There was a bitter-sweet moment for Bobby on July 2, 1964, when Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964.¹⁵⁷ To make matters worse, Johnson was against sending the bill to Congress in 1963, but in '64 was all too willing to take the credit.¹⁵⁸ It was an important bill that had originally been sent to the Congress by John Kennedy; however, it stalled. It took the legislative skill and determination of LBJ to get that bill through the Congress. However, RFK more than anyone else, with the exception of LBJ, made that signing happen. He had strongly urged President Kennedy to send the legislation to Congress and had forcefully advocated for it before Congress and the public. Yet, Johnson treated him as a glorified staffer on the day of the signing; relegating him to the background and handing out pens used to sign the Act.

Then came August 1964 and the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Johnson scheduled RFK'S appearance for the last night, thus avoiding a potential surge, from the delegates, to nominate Kennedy for the vice-presidency. Instead, Johnson nominated Sen. Hubert Humphrey from Minnesota. When Kennedy finally made his appearance, it was an emotional affair for both the crowd and the speaker. The people in the convention center were hysterical at the sight of RFK that night. They gave him a standing ovation that lasted twenty minutes. At that moment,

¹⁵⁷ 377 U.S (1964), The Civil Rights Act of 1964.

¹⁵⁸ Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, ed., *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 410.

Kennedy had the look of a man who was all alone. He looked vulnerable in the way that was heart touching and unusual for such a stern public figure.

Two days before the convention, however, he finally announced his candidacy for the Senate, in New York. The date was August 22, 1964. This was relatively late in the political season to be running, but Bobby had to remove himself from the Johnson administration. Such an act was automatically perceived as a shot at Johnson and the first move toward a Kennedy restoration. Furthermore, it was thought that with RFK's friends and associates in the House and Senate, as well as labor unions, intellectuals, and the media, that a fissure had occurred in the party. This was because it was considered an open break with Johnson.

After receiving the state party's nomination on September 1, he resigned his position in the Cabinet as Attorney General. On September 3, Bobby notified the president in writing, "As you know, I have accepted the Democratic nomination for United States Senator from the State of New York. It would not, of course, be compatible for me to campaign for this high office while continuing to serve as attorney general."¹⁵⁹ While the letter was rather perfunctory, he did not miss the opportunity to remind Johnson of the Kennedy successes. "The Civil Rights Act, originally proposed by President Kennedy, was signed into law by you. Similarly, I believe the new Criminal Justice Act will come to be regarded as a landmark contribution of the Kennedy-Johnson administration to criminal procedure and the fair treatment of citizens, regardless of their means."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Robert F. Kennedy Resignation Letter, 09/03/1964. ARC Identifier:193965, National Archives.

¹⁶⁰ Robert F. Kennedy Resignation Letter, 09/03/1964.

The campaign for the Senate was going to be tough. Keating was experienced and the incumbent. In addition, Kennedy was labeled a carpetbagger because of his birth and association with Massachusetts. Immediately, the editorial pages criticized Kennedy and mocked his legitimate life long ties to New York. In fact, Kennedy spent a majority of his life growing up in Bronxville and Riverdale, New York. The Kennedy family also had apartments and houses in the New York City area. But some of this criticism was justified. Kennedy's primary residence was Hickory Hill in McLean, Virginia and his sort of vacation home was the Kennedy compound in Hyannis, Massachusetts.

The battle against Keating went across the entire state. Media, however, followed Kennedy in a manner in which they cover presidents. RFK faced huge crowds everywhere he traveled; many just wanted to see a Kennedy in person. He understood this clearly and told aides that "that was for him [JFK] not for me."¹⁶¹ While Jack Kennedy was treated as a rock star in 1960, RFK was treated not just as a rock star but as almost a second coming of the late president.

Election Day 1964 was a nervous time for RFK and his campaign. The polls had been showing Kennedy trailing Keating leading up to the election Tuesday. However, Kennedy carried the day. The vote percentage, though, was not as big as some people thought. "That's when I learned that there are a lot of people who don't attend the rallies who vote."¹⁶² "He won by 719,693 votes, greatly helped by Johnson, who carried the state by 2.7 million."¹⁶³ Johnson's support was the most ironic aspect of the election victory. The man whom RFK detested played a large part in his triumph.

¹⁶¹ Frequent statement made by Kennedy and recounted by several aides.

¹⁶² Quote of Joseph P. Kennedy II, PBS. Kennedy II, born in 1952, was the eldest son of RFK.

¹⁶³ Schlesinger, Jr., 675.

On January 4, 1965, Bobby Kennedy was sworn in as a United States Senator. He had survived the perils of his first campaign. But January 1965 was a difficult time for Bobby as he had to think of what could have been. It should have been a triumphant time for the Kennedy family, especially Bobby. Jack should have been elected to a second term thus completing the dream of the father and the political ambitions of the president himself. Furthermore, RFK had to watch, on January 20, as Lyndon Johnson was sworn into office in his own right.

Bob would not be alone in the Senate; he was joining his younger brother Teddy who was first elected to finish the term of Jack in 1962. The Senate was a place where seniority mattered. It was also a place where freshman senators were normally seen and not heard. However, Kennedy was a national figure and possessed the greatest asset in politics at that time, the name Kennedy. Already declared moniker, the heir apparent, forced the media to follow the senator's every move.

At this time RFK began to form his own version of the Roosevelt Brain Trust. He combined old friends and colleagues with new, impressive, and accomplished young men. Among these men were Peter Edelman, Adam Walinsky, Ed Guthman, Joseph Dolan, Frank Mankiewicz, Wes Barthelmes, Angie Novak, Ted Kennedy, Ted Sorenson, Richard Goodwin, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and others who helped him wade through issue after issue. In addition, he found fellow senator with whom he could interact: Walter Mondale, Fred Harris, Joseph Tydings, Birch Bayh, and John McClellan. While people did not realize what was happening at that time, Kennedy was creating what has been called a shadow government.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ In a PBS special, Kennedy staff member Peter Edelman discussed the fact that Senator Kennedy had compiled a "shadow government."

RFK was essentially involved in an epic battle for progressivism with the progressive Lyndon Johnson. It was personal and it was, as Jeff Shuler noted in his book *Mutual Contempt*, the feud that defined a decade.¹⁶⁵ Kennedy's senate career was defined by his contemptuous relationship with the colorful Texan.

It appears that Kennedy really began to find his stride in the Senate where he was able to indulge in his passions as an advocate. These included issues such as education, welfare, criminal behavior, poverty, race, and civil rights. Kennedy was becoming the embodiment of his brother's myth.

The Watts rebellion in South Central Los Angeles in August 1965 drew him back to these issues. It showed him the deep divisions within the United States. The nation was beginning to come apart at the seams. Kennedy sympathized with the young liberals were demanding recognition and reform but was not happy about the violence and demonstrations they used to illustrate their point. Despite his inclination toward the people advocating change, he was still a law and order man. This was the divide between Bobby from the World War II generation and the Baby Boomer generation. Bobby was still of the belief that the United States was a special place that just had to be fixed. Some of his followers were of the opinion that revolution had to begin. So he started looking around himself, at the wider world outside Washington, at the problems plaguing society.

One such cause which he took up was a little known section of New York City called Bedford-Stuyvesant. This was an extremely depressed area adjacent to Harlem where nearly 500,000 Blacks and Puerto Ricans were packed together in decaying homes and economic depression. Bobby, after touring the area, followed a familiar pattern: first

¹⁶⁵ Jeff Shebol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud That Defined a Decade*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997).

he was angry about having to deal with the issue, second, he got angry and went to work. He enlisted foundations like the Ford Foundation, the Taconic Foundation, and Astor Foundation to help with substantial grants and resources. Sen. Kennedy brought every member of the business community into the fold that he could persuade. Bedford-Sty was the test case to improve the conditions of minorities in the inner cities through hard work on the part of the inhabitants and the support of elected officials and the business community.

However, it was for more than that, it was a prime example of RFK's philosophy and commitment to racial justice. He believed that government and the elite have a responsibility to the least in American society. It also showed in graphic terms the consequences of earmarking so much money for foreign entanglements such as Vietnam. The one matter which he agreed upon with Lyndon Johnson was the aims of the Great Society. But he felt that President Johnson was not doing. Moreover, he was disturbed by Johnson's escalation of the war in Southeast Asia, as evidenced by his dramatic increased of troop deployments.

The fight for freedom was also dear to his heart. This was a direct result of JFK's death. He was personally connected to the dispossessed, the underdog, the put upon by the fact that they became his concern because he felt he had lost everything when Jack died. Never a good public speaker, the events of November 1963 enabled him to speak authenticity to people who were in pain. They could sense his grief and his genuine concern for them as people through the open wounds left after John Kennedy's death.

Kennedy educated himself on the true conditions of Blacks in America. He traveled to the Deep South and Appalachia to see for himself the poverty and desperation

that was all too known by the poor Whites and Blacks indigenous to those areas. Inner Cities around the nation were also visited by the junior senator from New York. The adulation Kennedy received was a source of irritation for his colleagues in the Senate as well as President Johnson. Blacks began to trust Kennedy as did Latinos, South Americans, Central Americans, and poor people throughout the nation. But he did not restrain his fact finding activities to the United States.

Sen. Kennedy also traveled the globe. One such place he visited was South Africa. During those days South Africa was gripped by the evil called Apartheid. South Africans were overcome with excitement at the sight of the moral crusader from America. Kennedy's goals were not only justice but to provide witness to the evil in the world and to make progress toward alleviating those demons from the lives of the people it affected most. His agenda bordered on demagogy, but it was also an appeal to reason, justice, and humanity. "Our aim was not simply to criticize but to engage in a dialogue to see if, together, we could elevate reason above prejudice and myth."¹⁶⁶ He was also combating the agents of intolerance, racism, and ignorance. Furthermore, it provoked RFK to ponder whether or not God is Black. Touring the country he learned that those people were subject to some of the most awful elements in humanity. But he was buoyed by the resilience, determination, and humanity of the young Blacks in the cities, universities, and rural areas. As far as Bobby was concerned, change had to come from the youth. This revelation gave him acute insight into the plight of America and what would have to happen to make America a better place for everyone involved.

Another issue that he devoted himself to was the plight of migrant workers in Southern California. Cesar Chavez had been organizing farm workers to demand better

¹⁶⁶ Robert F. Kennedy, "Suppose God Is Black," *Look Magazine*, August 23, 1966, 44.

pay, improved working conditions, and adequate housing for his people. Peter Edelman brought the issue to Kennedy's attention in early 1966. He agreed to go and meet with workers. It was an issue that he understood all too well. Organized Labor was something that Robert had dealt with, at that point, for many years. As chief counsel to the Rackets Committee he investigated, at length, the inner workings of America's labor unions.

When Kennedy finally met with Chavez they instantly connected.¹⁶⁷

Characteristic of Kennedy when confronted with injustice, he delved into the problem by probing into the matter with Chavez and the authorities. Meeting with both sides also showed Kennedy's judicial nature. In other words, in order to get a grasp on the situation, he had to research both sides of the argument. But the matter was transparent: those workers were being abused, mistreated, and exploited by White businessmen. RFK worked to show the discrimination and un-American activities of law enforcement and business in relation to the farm workers.

Between 1965 and the end of 1967, Kennedy was gaining a grip on who he was and what he wanted to do. "He was not a blend of good works. He was a power operator personally."¹⁶⁸ He had found his calling in the plight of the underdog. Class, America's dirty little secret, was at the heart of his being. The concern and attention devoted to poor people of all races proved his ultimate concern was for the underclass. Even Indians became a serious concern to him. Sen. Kennedy visited reservations throughout the United States to see for himself the conditions in which Indians were mired. Bob was identifying with literally every single group that suffered in relative silence.

¹⁶⁷ Edelman, 45.

¹⁶⁸ Quote of Fred Dutton, PBS.

By 1967, America was in the full throes of rebellion. The pressure upon Sen. Kennedy to challenge President Johnson was increasing daily. 1968 was a presidential election year and Johnson was expected to run again. President Johnson was undoubtedly concerned about the possible challenge and was keeping tabs on all of RFK's activities. LBJ's trust in Bobby was virtually nonexistent, but they did want many of the same things. However, the issue of Vietnam made their already strained relationship irreconcilable.

As early as April 1965, Bobby was looking at Vietnam in a new light. "Late in April Bobby Kennedy came to see me in the White House. The newly elected Senator from New York had several things on his mind, and one of them was a possible bombing pause."¹⁶⁹ This shows that Kennedy, by the time he entered the Senate, was starting to harbor grave reservations about American involvement in Vietnam. It is important to note that he was in a much different position than LBJ. He was a senator, not the commander-in-chief. Johnson was concerned about his reputation as president; Kennedy was worried about America's reputation and condition.

Vietnam was a moral issue to Kennedy. The idea of sacrificing billions of dollars and the lives of the innocent appalled him. RFK was an early advocate for a settlement that would end the carnage. "Above all we need the will for a peaceful settlement; and once we go to negotiations, we need the wisdom and persistence that will be required to find a satisfactory solution."¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, "We owe no less to ourselves, to our people, and to those whose land we both protect and ravage. In that land, the stakes are very high: They are the home of the child in a jungle village, the hunger of a man driven

¹⁶⁹ Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 136.

¹⁷⁰ Robert Kennedy, *To Seek a Newer World*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 218.

from his farm, the life of a young American even now preparing for the day's battle."¹⁷¹ Kennedy was finally seeing the results of the rhetoric spewed out by American policy makers including his own past statements.

Bobby's public comments on such human issues were unequivocal. Peace talks needed to begin at the earliest possible date. Unfortunately, those talks would not reach to both fruition and a satisfactory conclusion until January 1973 when President Richard Nixon announced the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam. But it has to say that Kennedy played a major role in both the escalation and the push to leave the quagmire in Southeast Asia. "I'm sure that the administration of President Kennedy made mistakes, of which I was personally apart of; so if it's a matter of blame, there is enough to blame to go around for everyone."¹⁷²

By mid-1967, Kennedy was angling for a way to enter the race for the Democratic nomination. Johnson's popularity was beginning to take a serious dip among the electorate. Sen. Kennedy was increasingly thinking that the time to make his move was upon him. However, associates were concerned that such a move would destroy his career. He was only 41 and he could run in '72, '76, '80, or 1984. Washington powerbroker and consul to presidents Clark Clifford cautioned him about pursuing such a bold move. Even his last surviving brother, Teddy, had doubts as to the wisdom of challenging the incumbent president of his own party. "My concern was that the race was going to become personalized. That the issues he cared about the most, ending the war, the cities, minorities, were going to become submerged."¹⁷³ Bobby was certainly

¹⁷¹ Kennedy, 218-219.

¹⁷² Quote of Robert F. Kennedy, PBS.

¹⁷³ Quote of Sen. Edward Kennedy, PBS.

worried about taking on LBJ. If nothing else, Bobby had a healthy respect for the office of the presidency and political power of its current occupant.

However, the anti-war faction of the Democratic Party was pushing RFK to run, and he was most assuredly sympathetic to them. Further complicating matters was the pressure from members of his inner circle, such as Peter Edelman and Adam Walinsky among others. “I believed that it was his responsibility to run and get elected president.”¹⁷⁴ The reports from Vietnam and the continuing cost of human life, at home and abroad, combined with the TET Offensive was presenting a moral as well as a political crisis for Kennedy.

In January 1968, Kennedy announced that he was not going to be a candidate for president. In addition, he was going to support the Democratic ticket of Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey. The response to his statement was swift among the left; they rallied around Sen. Eugene McCarthy. It seemed as if he had lost his emerging base and permanently postponed his destiny. Even one of his aides left his office due to his disgust with Kennedy’s decision.

While Kennedy proclaimed his support for Johnson/Humphrey, he still maintained his outrage over Johnson’s decisions and personally hungered to return to the White House. Between January’s announcement and March 15, 1968, Bobby was still angling into the race. Bobby’s trepidation was obvious and most knew it was only a matter of time for few could imagine RFK suffering through another four years of LBJ. On March 4, Bobby asked Fred Dutton to see what his brother thought of the move. However, Ted was already resigned to the idea. Furthermore, ““I [Ted Kennedy] think

¹⁷⁴ Quote of Adam Walinsky, PBS.

Bob is going to run...and it's up to us to make some sense out of it.”¹⁷⁵ The decision was extremely difficult. However, RFK'S ambitions and contempt for the current administration and other presidential contenders consumed him.

On March 16, 1968, from the Senate Caucus Room in Washington, D.C., Robert Kennedy announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States. Now there was no turning back. Video of the speech clearly showed the pressure and strain upon the man at that very moment. In a strong clear voice he spoke:

I do not run for the presidency merely to oppose any man but to propose new policies. I run because I am convinced that this country is on a perilous course and because I have such strong feelings about what must be done, and I feel that I'm obliged to do all that I can...I run because it is now unmistakably clear that we can change these disastrous, divisive policies only by changing the men who are now making them. For the reality of recent events in Vietnam has been glossed over with illusions...I cannot stand aside from the contest that will decide our nation's future and our children's future...At stake is not simply the leadership of our party and even our country. It is our right to moral leadership of this planet.¹⁷⁶

Now there was no turning back. The speech itself reflected the deep division within RFK about the journey he was about to embark upon. Furthermore, the talk exposed the transformed Bobby from the cold political cautiousness associated with Jack and his career as the “Assistant President.” For instance, while the speech was grounded in facts, it also was full of moral indignation at the current state of affairs. It reflected his anger at

¹⁷⁵ Newfield, 211.

¹⁷⁶ Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's Announcement of his candidacy for the presidency on March 16, 1968 in the Senate Caucus Room, Washington, D.C.

being left to the sidelines in what he certainly considered our nation's most perilous moment. Finally, it demonstrated his unequivocal refusal to buy into the argument of President Johnson or anybody else.

The news sent official Washington into a state of near hysteria. It instantly created great drama in a race that was already creating massive attention across the nation. Of course, the immediate reaction was cynicism based on the fact that Kennedy realized just how well McCarthy did in the New Hampshire primary against LBJ. However, others were excited that Bobby finally had thrown his hat in the race. There was no doubt as to deep feelings on both sides; most people did not (except those around Kennedy) realize the complex psychological battle going on within the man.

The next eighty-five days would prove to be the most grueling period of RFK's short life. Swept up in the crucible of change versus status quo while running a campaign from behind by himself, tested every bit of strength Bobby possessed. His public statements no longer would contain any veneer of civility toward Lyndon Johnson.

In 1964, the transition from operative to candidate was difficult, but now it was harder. Kennedy began working eighteen hour days to catch up with McCarthy in the upcoming primaries. In addition, Bobby was facing the challenge from Vice-President Hubert Humphrey; who was not focusing on the primaries but instead was traveling the country wrapping up delegates. This was very important because Kennedy or McCarthy, for that matter, could have won the primaries but still lost the nomination because Humphrey had the delegate's votes in his back pocket. The delegates are what's important at the nominating convention.

The normal obstacles that any candidate faces were increased by the animosity towards Kennedy's late entry into the race. "Even those of us who had anticipated an outburst were astonished by its virulence."¹⁷⁷ Despite the venomous attacks from politicians and pundits and loyalists to other campaigns, Kennedy encountered massive, enthusiastic crowds everywhere he traveled. The crowds grabbed him, touched him, tore his clothing, and one such fan even stole his shoe.

The primaries included Kansas, Nebraska, Oregon, California, Illinois, among other states. Kennedy was building support throughout the nation; that support, in no small part, came from Kennedy's stance on Vietnam. The contrast between the two men was becoming clear and Kennedy had the advantage of having a media that literally covered his every move. Attention like that gave him much necessary exposure and presented him with considerable leverage. The coverage was more than fifty years in making.

Joseph Kennedy, by 1968 an invalid, had been building an empire of friendly journalists and ceaselessly promoting the family and its exploits. By the start of the '68 campaign, RFK no longer needed to ask for the help of friends in the press. Furthermore, many considered his candidacy the beginning of the fulfillment of JFK's unfinished tenure. For RFK it was like running against a ghost. All of this combined with his already legendary zeal and moralistic/fatalistic outlook on America resonated with millions. "The national leadership is calling upon the darker impulses of the American spirit-not, perhaps, deliberately, but through its action and the example it sets."¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Schlesinger, Jr. 861.

¹⁷⁸ Schlesinger, Jr., 863.

On March 31, 1968, the entire road to the nomination changed drastically. President Lyndon B. Johnson announced in a speech on Vietnam that he was not seeking a second term as president.

With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the Presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.¹⁷⁹

1968 had been a strange and difficult election year, but the sudden announcement by Johnson everything had turned upside down and the race for the Democratic nomination had regressed into a free-for-all.

Everything changed for the nation on April 4, 1968. While in Memphis, Tennessee where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was leading a group of sanitation workers, he stayed at the Lorraine Motel. Around 6:00pm while standing on the balcony with Jesse Jackson, Sr. and others, a sniper fired a shot. The bullet struck King in the face. King died shortly after. It was devastating news for Kennedy to see this man whom he always held at arms length, but was truly an admirer of the principles he stood for. Kennedy was on his way to a rally in Indianapolis where he was going to speak to a largely Black crowd. A reporter came aboard Kennedy's plane and delivered the bad

¹⁷⁹ President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address to the Nation Announcing Steps to Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting His Decision Not To Seek Reelection on March 31, 1968 from the White House.

news.¹⁸⁰ The news was difficult to bear. This was the violence and intolerance with which Kennedy had been so concerned. “Kennedy looked pretty awful. He was exhausted from the grind of round-the-clock campaigning, and the shock of this news had really hit him hard. You could see it in his face.”¹⁸¹ Aides to the senator debated whether or not it was prudent for him to address the crowd and deliver the news on Dr. King. They were concerned that the largely Black audience would turn on RFK. Never one to walk away from a fight, Bobby walked directly into the potential storm.

RFK on that night “spoke to heart and soul of America.”¹⁸² He was probably the only white man in America who could speak to Blacks at that time and not be physically assaulted.

For those of you who are Black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all White people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a White man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times...Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and to make gentle the life of this world.¹⁸³

The speech was also notable because he did something he never did in public: he spoke of Jack Kennedy’s death. It was another turning point in the long running grief in RFK

¹⁸⁰ Jules Witcover, *The Year The Dream Died: Revisiting 1968 in America*. (New York: Warner Books, 1997), 153.

¹⁸¹ John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of The Movement*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 406.

¹⁸² Quote of John Lewis, PBS.

¹⁸³ Robert F. Kennedy Speech on April 4, 1968 in Indianapolis, Indiana.

associated with Jack's death. After the speech the crowd, in shock and disbelief, returned quietly to their homes. While many cities burned that night, Indianapolis was subdued. Bobby, joined by Ethel, attended the funeral in Atlanta days later. Bereavement over the slain leader, however, would not stop the race towards the nomination. Kennedy returned to the campaign trail as increasing numbers of people turned their lonely eyes and their hopes for change to Bobby Kennedy.

Bobby had to regroup and focus on exactly what he was going to do as president. In addition, he had to separate himself from Eugene McCarthy. The transition was not easy. "He had gained a lot of strength from Lyndon Johnson."¹⁸⁴ With LBJ out of the way, Kennedy became to focus on the issues which were so dear to his political and personal being: the inner cities, education, jobs, Vietnam, etc. He won in the Mid-West, but lost in Oregon. It was the first election loss for any son of Joseph Kennedy. The loss reinforced the importance of the California primary.

Kennedy campaigned from the northernmost areas to the San Diego area in the southernmost region. He targeted the inner cities and rural areas, anywhere a vote could be found. It is fair to say that no previous Kennedy campaign, including Jack Kennedy's 1960 race, was ever in such a precarious position. But California was a Democratic state full of Blacks, Chicanos, Mexicans, and others with strong inclinations toward the candidacy of Kennedy.

The RFK campaign fought tooth, nail, and claw for every vote in the Golden State. On the day of the primary, June 5, Kennedy rested a bit and continued traveling the state until he reached Los Angeles where he would either give a victory or concession speech. By late in the evening the trend was unmistakable, Kennedy had captured

¹⁸⁴ Quote from PBS.

California with more than the 49% of the vote. Minutes after midnight, he addressed the elated crowd assembled at the Ambassador Hotel.

The speech really summed up what was transpiring in the United States in 1968.

What I think is quite clear is that we can work together in the last analysis, and that what has been going on within the United States over the period of the last three years-the division, the violence, the disenchantment with our society; the divisions, whether it's between Blacks and Whites, between the poor and the more affluent, or between age groups or on the war in Vietnam-is that we can start to work together. We are a great country, an unselfish country, and a compassionate country. I intend to make that my basis for running of the course of the next few months and now its on to Chicago and let's win there.¹⁸⁵

No one could have known at that moment, but RFK had just delivered his last speech. The party on the platform made its way off stage to leave the hotel. The senator, along with his wife and others, make their way into the kitchen pantry, where Kennedy was shaking hands with hotel staff. Sirhan Sirhan was lying in wait. Suddenly, he sprang forward and fired several shots. RFK was fatally wounded. As he laid on the floor Ethel rushed to his side, as he spoke his last words, "is everyone alright." Soon he was unconscious, never to wake again. Paramedics rushed him to Good Samaritan Hospital. He survived a little over twenty-four hours before Jacqueline Kennedy told the doctors to cease all efforts and let him die. Ethel was in no shape to do it herself. On June 6, 1968, in the early morning hours, Robert Francis Kennedy was pronounced dead.

¹⁸⁵ Robert F. Kennedy's California primary victory statement on June 5, 1968 from the Ambassador Hotel.

Following the death, RFK's body was flown to New York, where on June 8 he was given Mass and an eloquent eulogy by the last surviving son of Joseph P. Kennedy: Teddy.

My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life, to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it. Those of us who loved him and who take him to his rest today, pray that what he was to us and what he wished for others will someday come to pass for all the world.¹⁸⁶

The speech summed up who Robert Kennedy was in life, failed to reveal to complexity of man. After the Mass, the funeral entourage traveled by train to Washington, D.C. As nightfall dawned, the casket finally reached its destination and was taken by hearse to Arlington National Cemetery. He was buried within twenty yards of his brother Jack Kennedy.

At the age of forty-two, with a wife and eleven children left behind, Robert Francis Kennedy finally reached his destiny. The nation grieved once again and tried to make sense of the increasingly dangerous world in which they were living.

¹⁸⁶ Eulogy delivered by Sen. Edward Kennedy on June 8, 1968 at St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The end of Robert Kennedy's life brought a complex man personal pain to a tragic close. It also was a primary example of how United States became a country on the verge of anarchy and revolution. The events of June 1968, combined with death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the social unrest at the Democratic National Convention, America was in deep trouble.

Kennedy cast a long and heavy shadow across the political spectrum of our national life. His memory has been evoked on a regular basis by politicians since his untimely death. But his life was exemplary of what men should be: questioners of themselves, life, truth, justice, and faith. This combined with a keen sense of introspection, forced Kennedy to make the most out of his short time on this planet.

RFK's pursuit of corrupt figures, justice for the underclass, and goals to make the daily lives of every human being better evidence the facts set forth in the previous chapters. What is apparent, however, is that the actions and positions he so forcibly took after Jack Kennedy death were grounded throughout his life. There is no doubt that November 1963 was the catalyst for drawing out his personal commitment. The reason for that was that he felt he had lost everything at that point.

It is quite clear that Robert Francis Kennedy was one of the most influential and powerful figures of not only his time but the twentieth century. In addition, his influence continues to this day, as politicians continue to invoke his memory, his ten surviving children using their unique status to advocate for RFK's ideals, and the laws concerning

firearms that are on the books partially as a result of his assassination. Bobby Kennedy was indeed a renaissance man.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

U.S. Documents

163 U.S. 537 (1896), Plessy v. Ferguson

Final Report of The Select Committee On Improper Activities In The Labor Or Management Field. March 31, 1960.

372 U.S. 368 (1963), Grey v. Sanders

369 U.S. 186 (1962), Baker v. Carr

Final Report of The President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy. September 24, 1964.

Final Report of The House Select Committee on Assassinations. January 2, 1979.

Pub. L. NO. 88-352, Stat. 241, Civil Rights Act of 1964

Special Collections

The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

Robert F. Kennedy Papers

-Pre-Administration Files= political files, working files

-Attorney General Files=speeches

-RFK Senate papers= 1964 campaign

-Presidential Campaign papers= political files, speeches

The National Archives and Records Administration

Archives I, Washington, D.C.

-selected documents from the Robert F. Kennedy Papers, 1937-1968

Includes 71 multi-page documents digitized by NARA. They are collected from all four series of the RFK Papers.

-Congressional Record-Senate for the following years: 1965-1968.

-Records of Senate Select Committees, Record Group 46

Oral Interviews

Rep. John Lewis, November 4, 2005 at the Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., September 26, 2005 by telephone.

Primary Sources

Davis, John H., *The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster, 1848-1983*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984.

Edelman, Peter, *Searching for America's Heart: RFK and the Renewal of Hope*. Washington, D.C.: George Washington University Press, 2003.

Goodwin, Doris Kearns, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys: An American Saga*. New York: Touchstone, 1987.

Goodwin, Richard N., *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties*. Boston: Little, Brown, And Company, 1988.

Johnson, Lyndon Baines, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*. New York: Holt, Rinehart And Winston, 1971.

Kennedy, Robert F., *The Enemy Within: The McClellan Committee's Crusade Against Jimmy Hoffa and Corrupt Labor Unions*. New York: Harper & Row, 1960.

Kennedy, Robert F., *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1971.

Kennedy, Robert F., *To Seek a Newer World*. New York: Bantam Books, 1967.

Kennedy, John F., *Profiles in Courage*. New York: Harper & Row, 1957.

Kennedy, Maxwell Taylor ed., *Make Gentle The Life Of This World: The Vision Of Robert F. Kennedy*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.

Lewis, John with D'Orso, Michael, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of The Movement*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998.

Newfield, Jack, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1969.

Schlesinger, Arthur Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965.

Schlesinger, Arthur Jr., *Robert Kennedy And His Times*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1978.

Sorenson, Theodore C., *Kennedy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

Witcover, Jules, *The Year The Dream Died: Revisiting 1968 In America*. New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1997.

Salinger, Pierre, Guthman, Edwin, Mankiewicz, Frank, and Seigenthaler, John, eds., *"An Honorable Profession:" A Tribute to Robert F. Kennedy*. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968.

Guthman, Edwin, and Shulman, Jeffrey eds., *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words, The Unpublished Recollections Of The Kennedy Years*. New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

Stein, Jean interviews, and Plimpton, George ed., *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970.

Secondary Sources

Burner, David, *John F. Kennedy and a New Generation*, 2nd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005.

Cassidy, Sheila L. ed., *Remembering Jack and Bobby: A Kennedy Anthology*. Sedona, Arizona: In Print Publishing, 1992.

Dallek, Robert, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003.

Herman, Arthur, *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining The Life And Legacy Of America's Most Hated Senator*. New York: The Free Press, 2000.

Hudson, James A., *RFK: 1925-1968*. New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1969.

Kessler, Ronald, *The Sins of the Father: Joseph P. Kennedy and the Dynasty He Founded*. New York: Warner Books, 1996.

Perret, Geoffrey, *Jack: A Life Like No Other*. New York: Random House Trade Paperback Edition, 2002.

Shebol, Jeff, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud That Defined a Decade*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Thomas, Evan, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*. New York: A Touchstone Book, Published By Simon & Simon, 2000.

Articles

Kennedy, Robert F., "The Soviet Brand of Colonialism." *New York Times*, April 8, 1956, pg. SM15.

Kennedy, Robert F., "Suppose God Is Black." *Look Magazine*, August 23, 1966, 44-48.

Close-Up, "Young Man with Tough Questions." *Life*, July 1, 1957, 80-84.

Documentaries

The American Experience: The Kennedys. PBS, 1994.

RFK: His many Sides. Biography, 2005.

Crisis. The Robert Drew Collection, 2003.

Primary. The Robert Drew Collection, 2003.

The Speeches Collection: Robert F. Kennedy. MPI Home Video, 1990.

VITA

DARYL A. CARTER

- Personal Data: Date of Birth: July 18, 1979 Place of Birth: Sacramento, California Marital Status: Single
- Education: Public Schools, Johnson City, Tennessee East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; Political Science, B.S., 2004 East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; History, M.A., 2006
- Professional Experience: Professional researcher and historian for the Tennessee State Museum; Johnson City, Tennessee, 2006-present Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, College of Arts and Science, 2006
- Honors and Awards: School of Graduate Studies Research Grant, East Tennessee State University.