

Jack Be Nimble, Jack Be Quick

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Whatever liberates our spirit without [also] giving us self control is disastrous. — Goethe

When the Continental Congress had met for weeks without resolution, Benjamin Franklin began to worry. Resolution must come quickly, he told his cohorts, else the people will realize all too quickly they can govern themselves without us. About the only thing positive to come out of the plethora of biographies on the Kennedys, especially those about JFK, is the reassuring underpinning that follows an eerie all-overish feeling. If a leader can govern this poorly and the country survive, there may be hope for America. Maybe we can govern ourselves!

This is especially encouraging, living as we do in the age of Billary. On the one hand, we have a President whom, it would appear, we are lucky to catch with his pants up, while on the other, we have a First Woman who is hornmad with the Will to Power. As this beast slouches its way to the city on a hill, ramming its paraphiliac nuisances down our throats, commandeering one seventh of GNP, and making us pay through the nose for it all, a biography such as this one by Richard Reeves (not to be confused with Thomas Reeves's *A Question of Character*) brings us a breath of fresh air. The picture we get of John Fitzgerald Kennedy is not a very pretty one. Yet somehow, though he did his level best to sack the country owing to his benighted fool liberalism and general ignorance of foreign policy, the US of A emerged from the myopia with a splitting headache and dog-mouthed hangover, yet intact. We will survive the Billary!

Reeves focuses on four principal areas: Jack's ambition, his health, his moral turpitude, and his execution (the word may be viewed as a zeugma) of Foreign and Domestic Policy.

Reeves's book is non-judgmental for the most part. There are occasional lapses where it

would appear the author is overwhelmed by the sheer incredible incompetence, and his words fail to hide his horror. But for the most part, the book is a daily chronicle of JFK's brief reign in Camelot, the American press's version of a Potemkin Village.

Throughout the book, one theme emerges: the Kennedy Ambition. Not only did Joe, Sr. have enough of it to float an ocean liner, but he passed it on to his children. It did not matter to any of them whether or not they were capable of a job, or even of coming up with a third-rate solution to a problem. What mattered most was that a Kennedy make the decision, attempt the solution, or resolve the crisis. The euphoria engendered by this, "I am in charge", attitude covered a multitude of sins, including the Kennedy Achilles heel, sexual infidelity. Reeves makes this point early on:

[T]he most important thing about Kennedy was not a great political decision...but his own political ambition. He did not wait his turn. He directly challenged the institution he wanted to control, the political system. After him, no one else wanted to wait either, and few institutions were rigid or flexible enough to survive impatient ambition-driven challenges. [JFK] believed (and proved) that the only qualification for the most powerful job in the world was wanting it.

Of course it did not hurt at all that his father was worth about \$200 million at the time, placing him in the richest one percent of all the world.

This overweening Kennedy ambition, manifested itself in many ways. When Jack went to Stevenson to tell him he, Jack, had the nomination wrapped up and would Stevenson give him support, Stevenson demurred. The erumpent Kennedy responded, "Look, I have the votes for the nomination. If you don't give me your support, I'll have to s*** all over you." Imagine how Stevenson felt. This newcomer from nowhere whose political résumé looked more vacant than a tabula rasa stood before him telling him to get on the wagon or get run over.

Unfortunately, this same chutzpah carried over to governing decisions. Kennedy usually decided a matter based on pragmatic conditions. This is a very important point. Almost no other factor mattered to him. For example, when Kennedy negotiated with Cheddi Jagan, prime minister of Guyana, Kennedy told him, "We consider ourselves pragmatists." He even told Jagan that he was not against socialism. About the only other factor that would suade Kennedy to move off his pragmatism was blatant Communism. At that point he would act, or, rather react. But even under such conditions, Kennedy sought a moderate pragmatic solution, and even appeasement.

Kennedy's pragmatism filtered over into other areas. It was more pragmatic to lie, for example, than to tell the simple unvarnished truth. The matter of his health emerged and re-emerged throughout Jack's campaign and presidency. When reporters got too close, Jack lied. If other reporters discovered the truth, Jack had their stories spiked. Many reporters did not even care. The ends justified the means.

When asked about his Addison's disease, often considered fatal, Kennedy replied, "I never had Addison's disease. In regard to my health, it was fully explained in a press statement in the middle of July, and my health is excellent." This from the lips of a man who had received the last rites from the Catholic Church *four* times as an adult. Dr. Max Jacobson, who later infused Kennedy with enough drugs for his television debates with Nixon, traveled with Kennedy regularly. Before it was over, he injected Kennedy with amphetamines, human placenta, painkillers and more. Reeves writes, "In a lifetime of medical torment, Kennedy was more promiscuous with physicians and drugs than he was with women."

Kennedy never missed a chance to prove his "vigor" to the press. But behind the scenes, Kennedy trusted canes to walk, crutches to rest his back, took various medications every day, and some days, every hour. He suffered from fevers as high as 106 degrees, spent half his days in bed (sometimes alone), and napped for an hour each afternoon.

Besides all this, Kennedy suffered from persistent venereal disease, stomach disorders that kept him on a bland diet for most of his life, deafness in one ear, and an ever-widening array of allergies. By the time Kennedy met with Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, post-Cuban crisis for Kennedy, and post-Profumo Affair for Macmillan, the prime minister noted in his diary that he was shocked by Kennedy's appearance, remarking that he was, "Very puffed, up, Very unhealthy." Kennedy had added cortisone treatments to his apothecary.

All of this would have been more than enough to prevent a 1980s presidential candidate from making it to New Hampshire. But if this were not enough, Kennedy's moral turpitude should have finished him. At least Jack was an equal opportunity derelict. When McNamara refused to appoint Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr. because he was, according to McNamara, "a drunk and a womanizer", Kennedy sighed, "I guess I'll have to take care of him some other way." JFK passed himself off as an intellectual when nothing could have been farther from the truth. Part of Kennedy's official biography showed him as a graduate of the London School of Economics and a student of the Marxist scholar Harold Laski. The only truth to this statement reposed in his having enrolled in the school in 1935; he *never* attended.

His lies were not limited to merely untruths about himself. During the campaign he denied, though he knew otherwise, that there was a missile gap. But he made the mistake of hiring the truth-telling McNamara who said there was. Did this present a problem? Hardly. Jack simply lied over his own cabinet officer. What is more incredible is that the press bought it!

If lies were the only error to which Kennedy's flesh were heir to, the matter of his presidency might not be so hard to take. But Jack's philanderings, now legendary, add insult to injury. Reeves is much more, how shall we say, prophylactic in his reporting about these indiscretions, but he repeats them all the same. From Jack's infidelity with the actress Angie Dickinson to his liaison's with mafia mistress Judith Campbell, all are

retold. Add to this the President's penchant for speaking crudely, even scatologically about his relations with women—and about women in general - and you have what under normal circumstances what would be called a rogue, a cad. One staff member said, “We're all a bunch of virgins, married virgins. And he's like God f***ing anybody he wants to anytime he feels like it.” Perhaps this staffer had confused God with Zeus.

While Americans were bedazzled by the Kennedy show, world leaders were not. Harold Macmillan thought Kennedy crude and unrefined; Khrushchev “savaged” Kennedy, or so Kennedy himself thought. Macmillan wrote in his diary that he thought Kennedy would “fail to produce any real leadership”. Kennedy's own handling of the Foreign Policy proved this in spades. In Kennedy's big three at bats, he struck out. The Bay of Pigs proved a horrible embarrassment; the Cuban missile crisis took us to the very brink of nuclear war; and the Vietnam crisis plunged us into the worst undeclared war we have ever known.

The missteps in the Bay of Pigs focused largely around Kennedy wanting it both ways: he wanted to appear tough and to appease. While Arthur Schlesinger Jr. pounded out lyrical memoranda to the President, Kennedy's failed leadership produced in-fighting between the CIA, the Department of Defense, and cabinet members. While the description in Reeves sound like a Marx Brothers rendition of “Night at the White House”, it hardly ended humorously. In the end, Kennedy called for a plan that allowed a back out up to twenty-four hours before air strikes would begin. Kennedy sought the least possible political risk at the expense of greater military involvement. He also demanded plausible deniability. The affair appeared to be like agreeing to marriage with an “altar clause” that allowed one to call the whole thing off during the recession.

The Cuban missile crisis produced a comedy of errors that sent mixed messages to Khrushchev. The Russian leader already felt uncomfortable dealing with a man younger than his own son. After their first meeting, Khrushchev pegged Kennedy as a man who would never act on his principles because he had none. When Kennedy made very feeble attempts to forestall the barbed wire in Berlin, it seemed only natural to Khrushchev that JFK would sleep through the missiles in Cuba. But, as was mentioned earlier, Kennedy never acted but reacted. He hated making a decision until he absolutely had to. With each step the Russian leader made toward aggression, Kennedy saw a way out, another step before having to draw a line in the sand. Of course no one would have wanted Kennedy to act in an ill-tempered manner. But surely he could have sent unmistakable and unwavering signs to the shoe-pounding Khrushchev before bringing the world to the very edge of annihilation. Kennedy drew the line in the sand only after it had been kicked in his eyes repeatedly.

Vietnam was just one more dumbshow in a play full of bad scenes. After the Bay of Pigs, the space race, and Berlin, Kennedy did not want to get pushed around any more. With little reliable information, he saddled the us with an indefensible government in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government, if it could be called such, proved nearly as bad as its northern aggressors. De Gaulle had warned Kennedy, “You will find

intervention in this area will be an endless entanglement.... You will sink into a bottomless military and political quagmire, however much you spend in money and men.”

Kennedy ignored De Gaulle's advice and pushed ahead with Vietnam. He told Galbraith he *had* to, having failed with the Bay of Pigs, Laos and now this. Whenever aids or second-tiered officials provided the Kennedy government with information to dissuade it from proceeding in Vietnam, Jack either replaced them or froze them out of the inner circle. Even McNamara knew they had goofed and said so in a memo later. But by then it was too late. Jack had taken the big foot of the us and stuck it firmly in the mud of Vietnam.

Domestic policy proved equally disastrous for the President. Though Kennedy is often associated with Civil Rights, he never voted *for* a program, and even against one or two, while serving in Congress. His cavalier attitude toward domestic problems when they no longer yielded useful political capital, led him astray frequently. After one agriculture speech during the 1960 campaign, Jack asked Mike Feldman, an assistant, if he understood what Kennedy had just said in a South Dakota speech because he sure hadn't. Said Jack, “Well, that's over. F*** the farmers after November.” Of course, after November, the farmers were only the first of a long list of “rape” victims.

The Civil Rights story that Reeves tells in this book is a marvel of bungling and waywardness. The picture that emerges is of a man who hated the corner he'd been backed into. Kennedy often dragged his feet, mimicked black dialog for friends, dogged Martin Luther King about his Communist associations, and put the space race, Vietnam, Cuba, Khrushchev, and virtually anything else before it. Kennedy's favorite Johnson story was when John Glenn blasted off for space and Johnson lamented, “If he'd only been black.”

Almost every federal action for the Civil Rights movement was staged. This is not to undermine the tensions of the situation, or minimize in any way the unspeakable horror of the brutally beaten or the unmercifully murdered. But the behind-the-scenes face-saving that Reeves records to have passed between Washington and southern locales yields unmitigated chagrin from the reader. Phone lines between the President and state officials in Alabama, Tennessee and Memphis teemed with plans over what would “look” the best and for whom. Meanwhile, the Attorney General, Kennedy's brother, was receiving information from Hoover on the “Tom Cat” antics of Martin Luther King. The President pressured southern congressmen with every political power he could think of, and even attempted a purge of Communists from the Civil Rights movement.

While Kennedy ultimately achieved the right result—blacks were eventually accorded, however inconsistently, the proper decorum owed any human being created in the image of God - one wonders over the process, the means. Evidence is now abundant that the Welfare State the succeeding Johnson Administration built could not have proved more deleterious for black Americans. Prior to its passage, blacks enjoyed relative family stability, nuclear family life-styles, and low illegitimacy rates. In return for what can only

be viewed as a modern version of the indentured servant, blacks now possess greater divorce rates, higher single-parent families, astronomical illegitimacy rates, and more violent crime involvement than any other race in the United States.

When one examines closely JFK's 1,000 days in office, one is shocked by the utter disparity between the myth and the reality. The myth is Camelot, a happy land, a happy time. The reality is one filled with bungling, decisions made on the run between illicit trusts and drug-induced miasmas. Kennedy did not surround himself with people who tried harder; he surrounded himself with people who knew categorically that one else could do better. These were political operators who knew what was best for the country, and who thought more of appearances than they did of democracy. In Kennedy's case it was a lust after ambition and a PLACE IN HISTORY.

But what amazes is not so much the legendary status of the Kennedys. What still astonishes is that after more than a dozen critical books on JFK and his gruesome brothers, this country still maintains pockets where the lovefest continues in all its bacchanalian frenzy. We lament, not that Kennedy had money or fame or fortune. What we lament is that he was allowed to earn his fame fortune and money on the backs of decent Americans while so many able-bodied men waited in the wings for a turn at leadership that would never be theirs. If only the Continental Congress had delayed just one day longer.....