

Whit Stillman

## NEW FRONTIER DAYS

A Camelot memoir.

*Two decades have passed since a Dallas, Texas, assassin's bullet brought to an end the presidency of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and with it the period known as the New Frontier. Arthur Schlesinger, Theodore Sorenson, and Pierre Salinger have written the basic history of the Kennedy Administration. Henry Fairlie and Benjamin Bradlee have revised and supplemented it. Now a Wade Rawson, Jr. has come forward with his own memoir of those years.*

### Manhattan Prelude

Late one January afternoon a little more than a week before John F. Kennedy was sworn in as the thirty-fifth President of the United States, the telephone rang in the living room of my parents' Manhattan apartment where I was watching television.

I had gotten in the habit of watching television weekday afternoons as a way of unwinding after a long day in the fourth grade, before starting in on homework. The school I went to was considered by its students the hardest in New York and in fourth grade really piled on the homework. Yet somehow a whole day's living had to be packed in before an eight o'clock bedtime.

The telephone call was from Washington, D.C.—my father was to call back Operator No. 6 there. It turned out to be an invitation for him to meet with Treasury Secretary-designate Dillon before the inauguration. There Dillon asked him to join the Treasury in a key international financial policy post. He accepted and, as was characteristic with the new administration, began work almost immediately. My mother found a townhouse

in Washington's Georgetown section and made plans to move in at the end of the school year with my sister and me. We were excited at the prospect of New Frontier Washington, although it meant sacrificing the momentum we had built up at our New York schools.

### Washington, Fall 1961

"Life in 1961 will not be easy," President Kennedy said in his State of the Union message. "The hopes of all mankind rest upon us."

Washington in the fall of 1961 was the capital of a Free World under siege—and the sense of challenge this inspired reached down to the elementary school level. School's opening in September followed closely upon the conclusion of the tense Berlin crisis. At the first school assembly an old man who had been Secretary of State under Truman spoke about the problems of the Cold War. His pessimistic outlook was not one most of us could accept. At least

the male members of my class thought in terms of a fairly-certain ultimate victory over Communism.

The school we were being sent to was Virginia Country Day, across the Potomac from Georgetown. The decision to go there rather than to one of the superior National Cathedral-affiliated schools stemmed from my mother's conviction that country environments were healthier for young people—an idea going back to Rousseau's day.

The parents of many (and possibly most) Country Day students were involved in government, politics, diplomacy, or journalism, and these tensions were brought into the classroom. A number of students were dropped off at school by their fathers on their way to work at the Central Intelligence Agency's new Langley, Virginia, headquarters nearby. For national security reasons it was against the school rules to ask another student what his or her father did.

Otherwise Virginia Country Day encouraged an intensely "aware" attitude among its students. At Halloween emphasis was put on collecting money for UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund. Before Christmas we were encouraged to buy sets of UNICEF greeting cards. At assembly on United Nations Day each middle school student was assigned to represent a U.S. member nation by raising a miniature version of its flag when its name was called out. Individual classes raised money to "adopt" poor children in foreign countries. Their photos and grateful letters were later posted on classroom bulletin boards.

Periodically throughout the year drives were also mounted to collect toys, food, clothing, and cash for Washington-area charities. At the Fall Frolic, money was raised for the school's scholarship fund.

The school authorities' idealistic efforts were, however, undermined by widespread juvenile delinquency. Much of the money raised for UNICEF and orphans in South Korea never actually reached them. The dues-filled strongboxes class treasurers held in their desks were found looted—with the treasurers themselves sometimes suspected. Cheating on homework was epidemic. Oddballs could expect regular beatings. All this must be recorded—it, too, was part of the New Frontier years in Washington.

### A Capital Chronicle

Coming to Washington in a junior capacity meant exclusion from first-hand experience in the daily workings of government. On the other hand, I could watch the events of those years unfold from a more distant perspective than was possible for a Schlesinger, Salinger, Sorenson, or Bradlee, although never from the distance Fairlie attained. From this intermediate perspective the New



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Frontier appeared as a series of interesting but apparently unrelated episodes and impressions. Any authentic account must reflect that. Do not expect, therefore, the ponderous analysis and interpretation with which professional historians interlard their chronicles of past events.

At the start of the New Frontier much was said in the press about the style and sophistication the new administration was bringing to Washington. Coming from Manhattan's prestigious Lexington Avenue, my parents could not honestly be impressed by whatever sophistication Washington had gained. The group they saw most frequently included Frank and Sue Roosevelt, the Leffingwells, Anne Post Turner of the Cincinnati newspaper family, and the columnist Charlie Balsam. They were often included in the highly charged dinner parties given by the columnist Joseph Alsop and his wife, Susan Mary Alsop. From the rounds of embassy dinners and receptions they became particularly friendly with the Czech Ambassador and his senior aides, often joining the more fashionable Eastern European set for a nightcap at the end of a busy diplomatic evening. At home their conversation was studded with exotic names such as India Edwards and Alger\* Biddle Duke.

They also often entertained at home, putting me in a position to make some first-hand observations about Washington social life. More bourbon and less scotch was served at Washington cocktail parties than in Manhattan. Partygoers were excessively friendly with young people passing hors d'oeuvres.

Dinner parties tended to be smaller than those for cocktails. Among the guests at a typical 1962 dinner party were Assistant Defense Secretary and Mrs. Adam Yarmolinsky, the Leffingwells, and a beautiful younger woman named Polly Fisher. The rest were nonentities. For a time later that evening I sat out of view on the stairway and overheard Mr. Yarmolinsky speak interestingly on Defense policy. Some of what he said seemed extremely sensitive for dinner-party circulation.

For members of my generation in Washington the weeknight routine was far less hectic. A bus brought us back from school around 4 p.m.—3 p.m. for public school students. After a short post-school "decompression period" and homework came the Huntley-Brinkley Report's pictorial coverage of the new administration.

Nearly every night there was film of a Kennedy speech, news con-

ference, bill-signing, parade, military review, or whirlwind trip. During the Kennedy presidency even Rose Garden ceremonies became enthralling. The young presidential couple were mesmerizingly "glamorous" and, in fact, reminded me of my parents.

On some Saturday mornings my father allowed us to accompany him to his Treasury office. The building was a maze of huge, deserted corridors on weekends. The atmosphere was impersonal. My father's own office, however, was jammed with mementoes—personal, political, official, and semi-official. On the walls were inscribed photographs, framed letters, frames enclosing a letter and a photo, and one enclosing a photo of a bill-signing, a pen, and a letter. Prior to these visits I had grimly assumed that office work must be like elementary school, only with longer hours and almost no vacation. But my father just read and dictated replies to his correspondence, talked on the phone with political colleagues, and read the *Congressional Record*, things which he enjoyed doing anyway.

Early in the New Frontier period my father was confronted with a difficult situation involving questions of judgment and national security. "Herb," an English instructor he had known at Harvard before the war, had now reappeared in a sensitive government intelligence post. Although not politically active himself, Herb had associated with members of the Communist clique which took over the Harvard Student Union in 1939. My father's concern was that if Herb had secretly become a Communist then and remained one, he would have to be considered a

security risk. But to report this ran the risk of engaging in McCarthyism.

"The political context of the thirties was completely different from what it is now," he said. "Then there were 30 million unemployed. Marxism seemed to offer an explanation."

Finally he decided to mention the matter in an unofficial way to the Secret Service, which was under Treasury jurisdiction. Even this gave my mother concern.

"You can never tell where something like this is going to lead," she said. "But I suppose you have to do what you feel is right."

In late November and early December 1961 my sister and I undertook the biggest job of our lives up to then—addressing, stuffing, sealing, and stamping the massive batch of Christmas cards my parents were sending out that year. My father was considering a congressional race in 1962 but had not decided which of two New York State districts he could represent more effectively—or whether to run at all. As a compromise, cards were to be sent to Democratic party activists in both districts, further swelling an already large list.

During the envelope-sealing phase, to avoid dehydration, we consumed huge quantities of Seven-up—Coke and Orange Crush, we found, left a tint on the envelope flaps.

Payment was at the rate of two cents for each card completed, so with over a thousand cards to be sent out, quite a bit of money was involved.

In April 1962 official Washington



was gripped by the steel crisis. On Tuesday, April 10th, U.S. Steel announced a series of price increases and was shortly joined by most other steel producers. The Administration moved to roll back the increases. A tense couple of days followed.

On Friday afternoon my mother met my sister and me at the door as we returned from school.

"The steel companies have backed down," she said. "This is a tremendous victory for President Kennedy. It completely makes up for the Bay of Pigs."

The steel crisis success did not, as it turned out, soften the hostility of the Administration's right-wing critics. Books with such titles as *Capital Coverup* and *White House Whitewash*, purporting to expose corruption and treachery in the federal government, were showing up in paperback book racks. Small new publishing concerns based primarily in the West and using such ominous-sounding imprints as Casa Liberty, Conestoga Books, Freedom Ranch Press, and Circle Wagons fed the growing hate literature. *Newsweek* did a special report on the radical right extremist groups. Said President Kennedy in a speech: "There have always been those on the fringes of our society who have sought to escape their own responsibility by finding a simple solution, an appealing slogan or a convenient scapegoat."

Promotion came quickly for my father at Treasury, as he moved from "Assistant to the Undersecretary" to "Deputy Undersecretary." Within the department, however, a rivalry had developed between him and Robinson Weil, a wealthy Texas businessman recently appointed with Vice President Johnson's strong backing. Both men hoped to fill the next Treasury Assistant-Secretaryship to open up. Weil was widely respected in Washington as a self-made man who had left profitable business interests to join the Administration. That Weil had made the bulk of his fortune during five years in Texas state government was, my father felt, also open to less positive interpretation.

#### Capital on the Cape

On Friday afternoons that summer my father was sometimes able to get a ride on the official plane to Otis Air Force Base not far from the President's Hyannisport headquarters, and then continue on to Martha's Vineyard. There was a sizable New Frontier element on the island and in the village of Chilmark, where we

\*sic







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**CONTTEL**

went, a pervasive New Frontier spirit, although the only other Administration officials actually there were Presidential Science Adviser Jerome Wiesner and a few others. The atmosphere was one of strict informality. Styles which later became national were incubating in Chilmark that summer. The singer James Taylor was there as a North Carolina doctor's son. Barefeet were required wear among Chilmark young people in 1962. By the end of the decade the whole nation was barefoot.

#### Washington, Year Two

In September we returned to a still-sweltering Washington. Almost the entire Kennedy legislative program remained to be enacted. The off-year election campaign was beginning in earnest—with Nixon running against Brown in California and Morgenthau against Rockefeller in New York. My father, who had decided against a congressional race, still chafed under the Hatch Act's restrictions on government employees' political activity. For me September meant advancement to a higher grade and

bedtime at a more realistic hour.

When school did open I found few surprises. It was again just a question of killing time during the day until returning home to watch history unfold.

In October the Cuban missile crisis broke the school routine. Intense bull sessions on the likelihood of nuclear war began on the bus to school, continued through recess and lunch period, and resumed on the bus trip home. Many students' fathers were staying all night at their offices in crisis-related work. The conviction

that Washington would be the first target in any nuclear exchange dominated all our speculation. The atmosphere was like that of London during the Blitz except that nothing happened.

Christmas Week 1962 put my parents in a difficult situation. Their Eastern European diplomatic friends had showered them with expensive presents. They were flattered, but federal rules prohibited their retain-  
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Fred Barnes

## THE NEW REAGAN AGENDA

A losing formula.

A few years back, a cloud passed over Milwaukee Brewers shortstop Robin Yount, prompting him to declare, against all good sense and logic, that he might quit major league baseball to become a professional golfer. At the time, Yount was rated as perhaps the brightest young prospect in the American League. Nonetheless, he was inclined to try another sport, and not his best sport at that. But fortunately for Yount, the cloud drifted on, his mind cleared, and he stayed with the Brewers. Soon, he established himself as the premier shortstop in baseball. And in 1982, he led the Brewers to the American League pennant and won, for himself, the most valuable player award.

It may not leap out at you why the Yount affair has any relation to presidential politics, but bear with me. There is a relevant analogy here to the way President Reagan has been preparing himself to campaign for a second White House term. It is as if Yount had indeed switched to golf, joined the professional tour, and become not a rival to Tom Watson, but a mediocre performer who finishes well back in the pack. In Reagan's case, what has been switched is the agenda. In his eager-

ness to assuage blacks, women, and Hispanics, the President has abandoned the populist conservative agenda that helped him defeat Jimmy Carter three years ago and has instead invoked the conventional liberal agenda. So doing, Reagan is not playing his best sport, and his efforts to appeal on the basis of the liberal agenda have ranged from the embarrassing to the merely unpersuasive.



The President, one of his more savvy advisers commented, "is off his game." He is like Yount at golf, adequate at best. And if he stays that way, he stands to lose the 1984 election.

True, there is method in Reagan's madness; there is a rationale. Reagan and his strategists want to dampen black anger at his Administration in hopes that the black voter turnout (virtually all Democratic) in 1984 won't soar dramatically. They want to narrow the gender gap. They want to assure that Reagan holds the 30 percent or so of the burgeoning Hispanic vote which is needed to win states such as Texas and California that have large Hispanic populations. And most of all, they want to convey to the vast moderate middle of the American electorate that Reagan is concerned about minorities and women and the downtrodden. The message from Reagan is, I care.

This is an important message for the President to trumpet. The trouble is that he is doing it so crudely, and in such misconceived fashion, that it is backfiring dangerously. Before black, women, and Hispanic groups, Reagan invokes the liberal agenda and argues that he scores well when judged on its terms. And maybe he does score reasonably well, but he

isn't likely to leave the leaders of these constituencies convinced. Most are full-throated critics of the President. Feminists object to his opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and his support for a constitutional amendment banning abortions. Black leaders are still mad about his social spending cuts and his refusal to go along with busing and affirmative action. Hispanics, with the exception of Cuban-Americans, simply look askance at Republicans.

By concentrating his wooing on leaders of these constituencies, Reagan gives them a high-visibility platform on which to criticize him anew. "He's trying to appease people who understand his [real] agenda is different from theirs," said Congressman Newt Gingrich, the Georgia Republican. By trying to play off the liberal agenda, he makes all the more obvious his shortcomings when measured against that agenda's goals. Moreover, he draws national attention to that part of his record which is the most difficult to defend; he rekindles the so-called fairness issue. That, of course, puts him on the defensive, and Reagan, like most politicians, is always more compelling when he is on the offensive. Defending his record by the standards of the liberal agenda, he is deflected from proclaiming the conservative agenda and its vision.

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