

BOOK REVIEWS

Cathedocracy, or rule from the teacher's chair, the exercise of power by scholars, is a tempting theory of government. Is it not logical that the most learned should take the most important decisions? Cathedocracy worked well, for instance, in traditional Jewish societies. But, then, those were mere self-governing enclaves in Gentile states. They did not have to take ultimate decisions of peace and war—there is no word for army in Yiddish. Dr. Francia's Paraguay in the nineteenth century and Professor Salazar's Portugal in the twentieth were examples, albeit ruthless ones, of successful cathedocracies; both men ran their countries like highly disciplined academies, but only by isolating them from the contemporary world and at the price of storing up trouble for their successors.

At first glance, no country could be more remote from cathedocracy than the United States, with its strong democratic and egalitarian instincts. Yet many of the Founding Fathers had an academic bent. Books as much as battles helped to create the new Republic, and scholarly interpretations of its constitution by learned judges have shaped much of its subsequent history. American society has always revered education, not least in its higher reaches, and college presidents are, or were until recently, among the most respected groups in the country. Yet what happens when a professor/college president actually takes over? The triumph and tragedy of Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924, and President 1913-21) is one of the most instructive stories in the whole of American history, and the appearance of August Heckscher's scholarly, thorough, and dispassionate biography provides an opportunity to draw some of its lessons.

Wilson came of Scots or Irish Calvinist stock on both sides of his family. His forebears struck roots in the South, which left some traces on his public persona, but his culture was essentially British-American. The statesman he most admired was the great reforming Liberal, William Ewart Gladstone, and his intellectual mentor was the worldly-wise banker-editor Walter Bagehot, who wrote so well on the practical problems of governing Britain and her empire. Wilson's Calvinism went deep. As a youth he experienced a characteristic "awakening," believing himself one of the Elect, and he retained throughout

Paul Johnson's most recent book is *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830* (HarperCollins).

WOODROW WILSON

August Heckscher/Charles Scribner's Sons/752 pp. \$35

Paul Johnson

his life what he termed "faith pure and simple."

"My life would not be worth living," Wilson told a White House visitor in 1915, "if it were not for the driving power of religion." Religious certitudes certainly helped to bolster his political certitudes, not to say the self-righteousness with which he advanced his aims and which led the cynical French with whom he had to deal to call him "a lay pope." As Disraeli said of Gladstone, it was typical of him "not merely to keep aces up his sleeve but to insist God put them there," and similarly Wilson, who played hardball politics, insinuated he did so at the direction of Providence, likewise at his elbow when he wrote the Fourteen Points and planned the League of Nations. No one, not even Lincoln, used the quasi-religious rhetoric of the grand American tradition more effectively, or succeeded so often in conveying the impression that to oppose his policies was not merely impolitic but downright immoral.

Yet Wilson's family was also notable for teaching, reading, and non-conformity, and there were persistent liberal elements in his makeup as well. As Heckscher shows, he remained too much of a Southerner to do anything for blacks—quite the contrary—

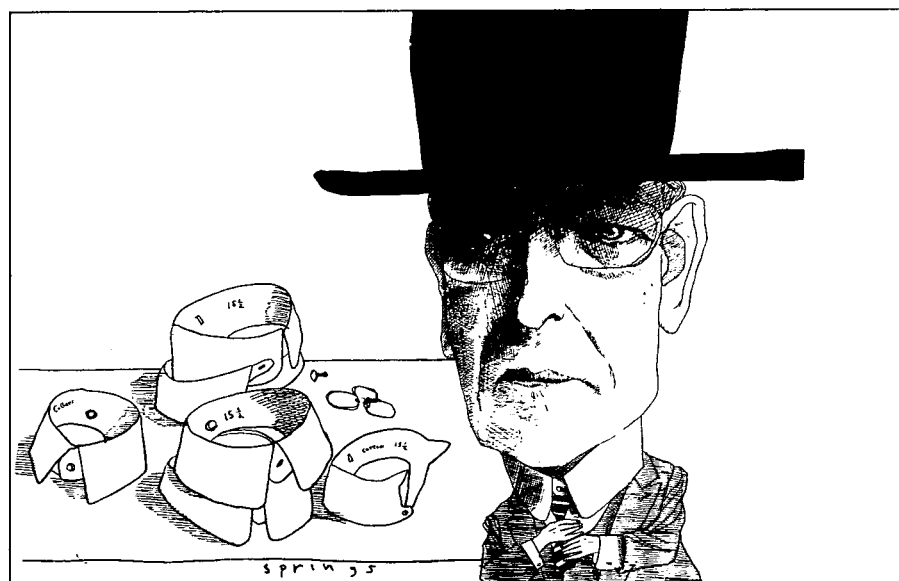
but he was almost totally without religious prejudice. Joseph P. Tumulty, his secretary and one of his closest advisers, was a devoted Roman Catholic, which raised many eyebrows at the time; and Wilson forced through, against much opposition, the appointment of the first Jew, the Boston lawyer Louis Brandeis, to the Supreme Court. Brandeis, for his part, had noted after their first meeting in 1912 that Wilson "has all the qualities for an ideal president—strong, simple and truthful, able, openminded, eager to learn and deliberate."

This tribute is worth setting against the image of Wilson as inflexible and arrogant. But the truth is there were many Wilsons. Though Heckscher sensibly does not engage in anything that smacks of psychobiography, the evidence he presents shows that Wilson was one of the most complex personalities ever to reach the White House. To begin with, he was not, as might be supposed from his mature career, an example of the relentless drive for success that Max Weber argued sprang from the "Protestant ethic" and, in particular, from its "salvation panic." He did not even learn to read until he was nine. Heckscher thinks he may have been dyslexic. More likely he was lazy and unmotivated. Upbraiding letters from his father suggest he long remained reluctant to work hard and, in particular,

to become a successful lawyer, as Wilson Sr. wished. What he wanted to do, as he eventually discovered, was to teach and write, above all to teach and write about the workings of government.

Once he had discovered this calling, and had overcome his father's opposition, his career took off and he worked with staggering dedication. He came to academic life at exactly the right moment. The American university was coming of age and entering a period of unprecedented expansion. Johns Hopkins, where he taught, had just introduced the best traditions of German scholarship. Institutions like Bryn Mawr were rapidly extending higher education to women: Wilson taught there, too, and proved himself admirably qualified to bring women into the circle of academia. The growth of both the universities themselves and the variety of subjects taught there produced a huge demand for textbooks, and here, too, Wilson's arrival was timely. It would not be quite true to say that he invented politics as a subject. But he made it fashionable and supplied it with much of its working material. He launched himself with an expanded Ph.D. thesis, *Congressional Government* (1885), still in print over a century later, and he followed it with a number of highly regarded and much-reprinted volumes, including *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (1889), a five-part *History of the American People* (1902), and *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908). To a great extent he became the American Bagehot.

But Wilson was not content to be a successful teacher and compiler of university textbooks. At Princeton, of which he was a devoted alumnus, he discovered, when he joined the faculty in 1890, that fundamental changes were needed, and this led him to seek power. Here, too, he was part of a trend. Harvard was being transformed by Charles Eliot, Johns Hopkins by Daniel Coit Gilman, and Columbia by Seth Low, to give only three examples of the new breed of academic statesman then emerging. At Princeton, an old-fashioned New Jersey college noted chiefly for the training of Presbyterian clergymen, Wilson got his chance to join these illustrious men when in 1902 he was elected its first lay president. His vigorous attempts to transform it into America's and the world's greatest university—by no means wholly unsuccessful—were ultimately frustrated by what he saw as the malign exercise of the power of money. His grandiose plans met with



opposition; and his opponents learned to entice wealthy alumni into providing huge conditional endowments skillfully designed to make Wilson's philosophy of education ineffective. Heckscher's account shows Wilson, hitherto interested chiefly in how government worked rather than in what it ought to do, driven by his anger at this abuse of money-power into becoming a liberal reformer. It was the tremendous internal rows at Princeton that led to his resignation in 1910 and turned Wilson from a student of politics into an active performer.

And an astonishingly masterful one, too. Within three years, this academic theoretician, who had compiled *Congressional Government* without once having visited Congress, was installed—via a spell as governor of New Jersey—in the White House. It is a paradox that the austere-seeming Presbyterian college president was brought into the squalor of New Jersey politics at the invitation of the Democratic party bosses, who ran one of the most corrupt machines in America. But Wilson, then and later, showed himself extraordinarily strong and wily at exploiting just such opportunities. He allowed the bosses to put him into the governor's mansion, then turned on them with righteous fury. Here, too, he took advantage of a trend. The city machines had been all-powerful since the Civil War, but in the year before Wilson emerged, bosses like Croker at Tammany Hall, Ruef in San Francisco, Platt in New York state, and Quay in Philadelphia had been stripped of their feathers. Wilson quickly discovered that his lecture-room skills served him well for platform oratory. Heckscher describes how, in the days before amplification, his fine voice and admirable, often spontaneous, choice of words could hold audiences of up to 35,000 spellbound. In fighting machine politicians he developed his own dignified but nonetheless ruthless brand of populism. He emerged as the hero of the notorious Democratic party convention at Baltimore in 1912, one of the longest, most dramatic, and fiercely contested ever held, at the end of which he beat the Missouri boss, James "Champ" Clark, decisively (though, as Heckscher notes—and it is another paradox—under the more recent "democratic" rules, Wilson could never have won).

The Republican party had dominated American politics since the Civil War, and throughout Wilson's day it remained, in numbers of registered voters, much the larger organization. But until Theodore Roosevelt came along, the Republicans had chosen a series of duds. The Democrats had done little better, though in Grover Cleveland they at least produced a man of some integrity. But Cleveland had had to contend with the

destructive rivalry of the great orator William Jennings Bryan, whose pseudo-intellectual crankiness made him a favorite with Democratic militants, won him the party's nomination three times, and—for the same reasons—made him unelectable.

Bryan's last great service to his party, however, was to help secure Wilson's nomination, which at last gave the Democrats a candidate of outstanding ability. Moreover, as a Southerner of liberal views, he was able to construct, for the first time, the classic coalition of Southern conservatives and northern and western progressives that was to remain the Democratic mainstay until the end of the 1960s. But the Republican following was such that Wilson was able to win in 1912 only because Roosevelt's Bull Moose party split the Republican vote. Wilson scored a miserable 41.8 percent, the lowest for an elected President since Lincoln's 39.9 in 1860. Even in 1916, after a successful first term, he only just squeaked home against a poor opponent, and again with a minority (49.3 percent) of the votes cast.

Yet Wilson's victory in 1912 was a turning point in American political history. He successfully stole Teddy Roosevelt's progressive clothes and gave back to the Democrats the political image they had possessed in the days of their founder, Andrew Jackson—identification with "the people." Not that Wilson was incapable of wheeling and dealing; quite the reverse. He rewarded Bryan by making him secretary of state, a hard-to-defend choice that smacked precisely of the "corrupt bargain" between Adams and Clay that had outraged Jackson and given birth to his Democratic party in the first place. All the same, the first Wilson Administration, in putting through a successful and coherent plan of much-needed reforms, has remained the model of all Democratic Presidents ever since. The Republican split not only put Wilson into the White House but also gave him a Democratic Congress. This was good fortune, but the way in which Wilson, who never sat in Congress, made himself the undisputed leader of the Democrats in both houses and persuaded them—along with many Republicans, too—to enact the legislative program he laid down, is without parallel in American history.

In Wilson's first year in office, the Underwood Tariff Act reversed the protectionist trend of sixty years, and the creation of the Federal Reserve system finally buried some of the most rooted prejudices in U.S. fiscal history. In the following year, 1914, the creation of the Federal Trade Commission and the Clayton Anti-Trust Act brought the Robber Baron era to an end. In 1916, the Federal Farm Loan Act (which created cheap agricultural credits) and the

Adamson Act (which introduced the eight-hour day) completed the legislative foundation of modern American democratic capitalism. It is, by any standard, an impressive record. By the end of his first term Wilson had not only overcome the handicap of being the first Southerner in the White House since the Civil War, but also enjoyed a degree of personal respect, and indeed popularity, that far surpassed that of the still lowly regarded Democratic party.

The emergence of the mature Wilson, stern, aloof, almost awesome, high-principled, incorruptible, was not entirely a natural process. Heckscher traces the stages whereby the original Thomas Wilson, known universally as Tommy, became Thomas W. Wilson, then T. Woodrow Wilson, and finally the Jovian deity, Woodrow Wilson. The patrician Wilson of the White House overlay an earlier and more meretricious figure, not afraid of being thought dressy. Heckscher has unearthed a memorandum in which the young Wilson itemized his wardrobe, listing 103 articles, including pairs of spats, pearl-colored trousers, and a blue vest. The earlier Wilson was boisterous, joked, sang songs, and told stories brilliantly. Until his second term, Wilson retained this last gift: along with Lincoln and Reagan, he was the President who used the apt and funny tale to most effect. But he was also fond of women, highly sexed, even passionate, and capable of penning memorable love letters. His first wife, Ellen, was a proto-feminist, and their marriage a grand love affair. But it did not prevent Wilson from striking up, in due course, an acquaintance with a frisky widow, whom he met in his favorite vacation haunt, Bermuda. This developed into a liaison, which led in time to a bit of genteel blackmail. Ellen's death was nonetheless a bitter blow. But Wilson soon recovered and found a second wife, another merry widow, the 42-year-old Edith Bolling Galt, like Ellen an emancipated woman, who owned Washington's most fashionable jewelry store and was famous for being the first woman in the city to drive her own car. She was tall, Junoesque, and "somewhat plump by modern American standards," as one of the President's secret servicemen put it. Having secured this statuesque lady, President Wilson was described by an associate as jiggling dance steps on the sidewalk and singing the current vaudeville hit "Oh, you beautiful doll, you great big beautiful doll!"

This light-hearted Wilson, however, retreated into the shadows as his second term involved him in war and, eventually, failure. Another Wilson, aggressive and even bellicose, jostled for the spotlight with Wilson the moralist and world

statesman. Like many prominent academics, Wilson had long possessed a talent for irritable abuse. During his second presidential campaign, he cabled the Irish-American leader, Jeremiah A. O'Leary, who had accused him of pro-British sentiments: "Your telegram received. I would be deeply mortified to have you or anybody like you vote for me. Since you have access to many disloyal Americans, I will ask you to convey this message to them." When, at the beginning of his second term, Wilson proposed a bill to arm merchant ships in response to the German U-boat campaign, a group of senators staged a filibuster, and Wilson issued a statement that made sensational headlines: "A little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own, have rendered the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible."

There was, in short, a mean streak in Wilson, and a tendency to resort to force when he felt his moral principles threatened. He tried to compel Mexico to conform to his democratic notions and sent General Pershing on a punitive expedition deep into the country that might well have ended in disaster or full-scale war. He intervened in Central America and the Caribbean more than any other President before or since. He was no pacifist; on the contrary. That being so, it is curious and tragic that he failed to take the United States into the European war in 1915, when the sinking of the *Lusitania* provided a valid pretext. Earlier American intervention might have shortened the war and prevented the fearful catastrophes of the

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years 1916-18, which changed the course of world history.

But here we come to the central paradox of Wilson: the way in which his moralism and his political pragmatism competed for mastery. During his first term, he developed an almost uncanny gift for perceiving the drift of U.S. opinion and giving it form, rhetoric, and a moral rationale—for leading it firmly in the direction where it was edging anyway. This skill underlay the success of his legislative program. For the first two years of the Great War, Wilson saw that most Americans wanted to keep out, and that there was no prospect of winning re-election except on a peace platform. So, with some difficulty, he held the balance between the combatants, and campaigned in 1916 on an aggressively pacifist platform. He avoided the charge of being indifferent to what was becoming a horrific struggle by identifying the United States, in a lofty, vague, but impressive way, with the long-term interests of the entire world. “In the days to come,” he ended his closing campaign speech, “men will no longer wonder how America is going to work out her destiny, for she will have proclaimed to them that her destiny is not divided from the destiny of the world, that her purpose is justice and love of mankind.”

Hence for the first time—but by no means the last—the Democrats won an election on a peace policy, and then proceeded to make war. Indeed, Germany’s resumption of indiscriminate submarine warfare early in 1917 made U.S. intervention more or less inevitable. But if Wilson did not exactly enter the conflict with relish, he did so nonetheless with great determination and thoroughness. He not only created a vast war machine but also penalized—some would say persecuted—those who opposed it, culminating in the first of America’s modern witch hunts, led by Attorney General Mitchell Palmer, perhaps the worst of Wilson’s many bad appointments. Moreover—and this is a point that Heckscher deals with inadequately; it is the most serious weakness in his book—the kind of war Wilson chose to wage created for the first time a federal appetite for a growing share of the GNP, and it set up the institutions and devised the methods whereby that insatiable appetite has since been fed. It was another turning point in American history, for though Big Government went underground under Harding and Coolidge, it reemerged under Franklin Delano Roosevelt and has strengthened ever since. As the pacifist Randolph Bourne warned Wilson at the time, “War is the health of the state.”

Wilson, to do him justice, saw some of these dangers. To meet them, and to

distance his America from the (as he saw it) disreputable war aims of Lloyd George’s Britain and Clemenceau’s France, he devised the Fourteen Points and the League of Nations policy. But to wage war with all America’s enormous resources, and at the same time to construct a peace that was not Carthaginian, was a difficult balance to maintain. It became more so as German behavior, up to and beyond the Armistice, led Wilson increasingly to distrust and despise the enemy. Hence Europe came to occupy all Wilson’s attentions and energies. Therein lay his, and the world’s, tragedy. It was not that most Americans did not support the war, or Wilson’s efforts to make a just peace. The evidence suggests that, properly led, Americans would have done all that Wilson could reasonably have required, including participating in a world secu-

War—might have been negotiated through Congress. But Wilson refused to compromise, or indeed to negotiate at all. He declined to make concessions that even the British, the strongest supporters of the League, would happily have accepted. As a result he got nothing, and the last, most disastrous, phase of American isolationism began.

Wilson’s behavior was so far from his earlier ability to get Congress to enact contentious domestic legislation, and so contrary to the constitutional practice he taught in his books and lectures, that it suggests a rapid decline in judgment, itself the result of a physical deterioration. One of the merits of Heckscher’s book is that he collates carefully all the medical evidence available on Wilson throughout his life. The evidence shows that from a comparatively early age he suffered from deep-seated, possibly in-

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ity organization. But his obsession with the affairs of Europe, and his actual—quite unnecessary—presence there during the Versailles negotiations, indicated that he had ceased to take note of what Americans were saying. He no longer intuited the American mood, then shaped and led it. Indeed, he did not lead at all: he commanded, and his commands were not obeyed.

The first sign of disaster came in the midterm elections of November 1918, which Wilson handled in a lackluster manner, and which produced a Republican Congress. Here was a clear signal to Wilson to bring the Republicans, who scented a revival in their fortunes, immediately into the peacemaking process and into the shaping of the postwar security plan. Wilson did no such thing. He had always tended to autocracy in foreign affairs. When Bryan resigned, he appointed a feeble official, Robert Lansing, as secretary of state, and when even Lansing proved difficult, sacked him and put in his place a personal crony, a nonentity named Colby Bainbridge. He treated the new Senate majority leader, Henry Cabot Lodge, as an enemy, and of course he became one. It has long been apparent from the evidence, and Heckscher’s recension confirms it, that through the League of Nations Wilson was the architect of his own destruction. American membership—and thus an American involvement in Europe that in all probability would have prevented a Second World

War—might have been negotiated through Congress. But Wilson refused to compromise, or indeed to negotiate at all. He declined to make concessions that even the British, the strongest supporters of the League, would happily have accepted. As a result he got nothing, and the last, most disastrous, phase of American isolationism began. Wilson’s behavior was so far from his earlier ability to get Congress to enact contentious domestic legislation, and so contrary to the constitutional practice he taught in his books and lectures, that it suggests a rapid decline in judgment, itself the result of a physical deterioration. One of the merits of Heckscher’s book is that he collates carefully all the medical evidence available on Wilson throughout his life. The evidence shows that from a comparatively early age he suffered from deep-seated, possibly inherited, circulatory problems. These produced a series of crises, one of which made him virtually blind in one eye, and which were plainly aggravated by overwork and strain. The President had great willpower, and could and did make extraordinary efforts to recover from these crises, but it is evident that for much of his second term he was unfit to hold office. Admiral Grayson, his personal physician, should accordingly have advised resignation, in the interests of both his patient and the nation. But he owed his rapid, and much resented, naval promotion to Wilson’s patronage, and the last thing he wanted was to see Wilson quit the White House. The President’s deteriorating health made him irritable, resentful of criticism, and quite unwilling to dissipate any of his remaining energies on conciliating his opponents. His physical condition effectively cost him the battle for the League of Nations some time before a massive stroke at the end of September 1919 destroyed his remaining usefulness as a public servant.

What followed was a scandal, from which no one emerged with credit. Edith Wilson had, from the moment of her second marriage, taken a close interest in the presidential power structure. She had helped to oust Wilson’s chief crony, Colonel House, and had stripped Tumulty of much of his influence. She now engaged with Grayson in a conspiracy to conceal from Congress and the public the true state of the President’s health and his incapacity to conduct the nation’s business. This involved play-

acting in which the helpless invalid collaborated, insofar as he was able, when anxious congressmen were brought into his bedroom. It also involved Mrs. Wilson’s taking many executive decisions herself, and forging her husband’s signature on public documents. The fraud should have been prevented by Lansing. But he proved pusillanimous and, even when sacked, failed to expose it. The man who had the right and duty to take over, Vice President Thomas R. Marshall, also flunked his responsibility. Marshall was a singularly unambitious man, quite content with his humdrum role. Thus, in effect, an unelected woman governed America, insofar as it was governed at all, for the last year-and-a-half of the Wilson presidency.

The stricken Wilson made a limited recovery, oddly enough surviving his unfortunate Republican successor, Warren G. Harding, and dying in 1924. His widow Edith lived on until after John F. Kennedy, another President handicapped by serious illness, entered the White House. In the meantime, the world paid a heavy price for Wilson’s obstinate refusal to admit the political consequences of his physical state. It is a daunting story, and Heckscher tells it plainly, truthfully, and without sensationalism.

Wilson’s career, as I say, holds many lessons. One is that intellectuals sometimes make successful rulers: a man who teaches the art of government can also practice it. Cathedocracy can work, at least in peacetime. But governing is a two-way street. Wilson began to make mistakes when he stopped listening, when he continued to lecture but ceased to converse, a corruption of power from which all rulers are liable to suffer—Margaret Thatcher is a recent example—but which in his case was catastrophically accelerated by illness. Hence, not the least of the lessons is the need for objective medical supervision of anyone who holds as much lawful power as an American President. I say objective because the political supervision of a ruler’s health is open to the strongest objections: for example, following Lenin’s first stroke, it was Stalin who got the Central Committee to appoint him medical superintendent of Lenin’s well-being, a maneuver that led directly to the final breach between the two men. But the fact that as recently as the early sixties a U.S. President became seriously dependent on amphetamines, as the result of reckless medication of which even insiders knew nothing, shows that the “Wilson Problem” is recurrent. And, since the great of the earth habitually develop a close, often fiercely personal relationship with their medical adviser, its solution will not be easy. □

**PETER LAWFORD:
THE MAN WHO KEPT THE SECRETS**
James Spada/Bantam Books/504 pp. \$22.50

M. G. Lord

The first time I saw Peter Lawford on television was in the late sixties. I was twelve or thirteen, and even with a child's susceptibility to trendiness, I sensed that this withered actor with Beatle bangs, gray mutton-chop sideburns, and a Nehru jacket could be dismissed as an old fool. So if I was shocked by James Spada's new biography of Lawford, it was not because of any disclosures about Lawford's late-in-life substance abuse: it seemed perfectly logical that a washed-up actor who fought bankruptcy with gigs on "The Gong Show" would seek solace in chemicals. Nor was it because Lawford, who was once married to John F. Kennedy's sister Patricia, procured starlets for in-laws Jack and Bobby: the former President and attorney general were indiscriminate about sexual partners; why should they have been fussy about a go-between?

No, what astonished me was that anybody—especially a style-conscious creature like JFK—had ever taken Lawford seriously. Without irony, Spada tells us that, just as Kennedy assembled "the best and the brightest"—people like Theodore Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.—as his presidential advisers, he turned to Lawford, the soon-to-be slobbering juicer and junkie in the Nehru jacket, for tips on dress, in recognition of Lawford's "sophistication, his savoir faire, and his sartorial flair."

True, at the time, Lawford's look was a little different: more Cary Grant, less Timothy Leary. And he had powerful Hollywood cronies, like Frank Sinatra, leader of the infamous Rat Pack, a group of overgrown juvenile delinquents who used the word "dig" when they meant "understand." Thanks to Kitty Kelley's widely reported allegations of a romantic link between Old Blue Eyes and Nancy Reagan, it's hard to remember a time when Sinatra had Democratic sympathies. It's also hard to figure out why the mob-connected crooner and his untalented friends captured the imagination of the American public.

Spada doesn't make it any easier. To insure that his gossipy, tabloid tone is untainted by profundity, he steadfastly refuses to interpret any of his facts or

M. G. Lord is a columnist and cartoonist for New York Newsday.

even place them in context. His style as a biographer is to bulldoze dirt onto the reader, without ever sifting through it or relating one shovelful to another, as when he piles up the details of the sexual affairs between Marilyn Monroe and the Kennedy brothers—first Jack, then Bobby. This is unfortunate, because important nuggets are lost in the debris: To this day, how many Americans know that Bobby paid Marilyn a visit on the day of her death and left Los Angeles a few hours after her alleged suicide? Or that Lawford, who introduced Monroe to the Kennedys, combed through the sex goddess's apartment while her corpse was still warm to remove all evidence of the "Catholic family men." Spada also implies that, by ignoring Monroe's desperate phone calls on the night of her death, Lawford hastened her demise, knowing that she had threatened to tell all and wreck Bobby's career.

The Monroe coverup was the nearest thing in Lawford's life to a finest hour. An unaccomplished actor, philandering husband, and disastrous father (he gave his son cocaine as a present on his twenty-first birthday), Lawford could at least do something right: procure women. He not only hooked up his high-ranking pals with top-of-the-line sexual appliances like Monroe, he made sure nobody took a fall if the appliances started to break down.

Lawford stands in sharp contrast to Stephen Ward, the other notorious procurer of the 1960s, whose bungling brought down an entire British government. Ward was a social-climbing osteopath who fixed up Conservative Minister of War John Profumo with chorus girl Christine Keeler. (This was before one referred to political bimbos as "model/actresses.") Unfortunately, Keeler also had a thing going with an accused Soviet spy, and when the story leaked to the press it led to Profumo's resignation, Ward's suicide, and the election of a Labour government. Lawford's skill and discretion are all the more impressive when he is compared with a less efficient practitioner of the same craft.

Although Spada doesn't mention Ward, his prologue suggests another provocative analogy: that Lawford was

a sort of male Marilyn—an insecure, pretty man with gender-identification problems (when Lawford was a child, his mother dressed him as a girl) who was destroyed by a weakness for drugs, booze, and the wrong guys. Although Spada drops the analogy, the reader can't help but stumble upon clues to substantiate it. Lawford married and had many girlfriends, but his strongest attachments seem to have been to men—specifically Sinatra and JFK. In fact, one of the few moments when Lawford's behavior strayed from the reptilian to the vaguely human was when he learned of President Kennedy's assassination: he wretched and sobbed on the floor of his Lake Tahoe hotel room.

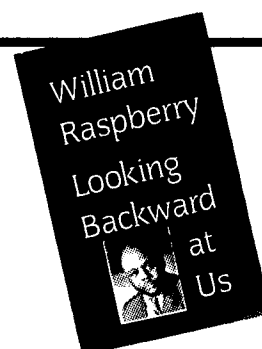
Certainly Lawford's mother contributed to his misogyny. Even a feminist opposed to the practice of blaming Mom would have to admit Lady Lawford was trouble. A serial marrier, vindictive drunk, and ruthless social mountaineer whose frigidity drove her first husband to kill himself, May Lawford (née Bunny) never wanted to breed. While married to her second husband, however, she overcame her aversion to "that horrible, messy, unsanitary thing that all husbands expect from their wives" and conceived Peter adulterously in order to snare her third husband, Sir Sidney Lawford, and, with him, the title "Lady."

Peter's childhood was played out against the backdrop of her alcoholism. Thwarted in her own theatrical ambitions, she pushed him toward the stage. When he was ten, she ordered his tutor to stop teaching him math and Latin so that his career options would narrow. Her pushing finally paid off, but, curiously, once he obtained a contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, she turned on him. At a time when studios could break contracts if performers violated a rigid moral code, she once tried unsuccessfully to convince Louis B. Mayer that Peter was homosexual.

Whatever modest affection Lawford might have felt for her was replaced with loathing. Although Spada never makes the connection, one has to believe that the intensity of Lawford's passion for the Kennedys was a function of his mother's enduring antipathy toward them. Long before Peter tied the knot with Patricia—back when Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr., Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, urged appeasement of Hitler—Lady Lawford referred to the clan as "those barefoot Irish peasants." "The fire of hell," she spat, "isn't too hot for old Kennedy." In 1960, she threatened to take to the streets with a "Vote for Nixon" banner.

It's hard to say whether the Kennedy connection made or destroyed Lawford, whose career from the sixties on fizzled

to the point that he was largely forgotten by the time of his wretched death in 1984. If he hadn't been distracted by the responsibilities of pimping, throwing orgies, and covering up, would he have been remembered as a great—or even a competent—actor? Did he guzzle, snort, and toke to blunt fantasies of what he might have achieved? Or was it to blunt memories of what he had, in fact, done? □

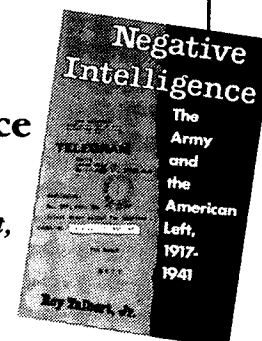


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