

Bobby Without Tears

Love With Night:
The American Romance
With Robert Kennedy

Donald Steel
Simon & Schuster / 220 pages / \$23

REVIEWED BY
Mark Falcoff

For many years now we have been assaulted by an apparently endless cataract of books on the late Senator Robert Francis Kennedy, victim of an assassin's bullet 31 years ago last June. It is difficult to think of any other figure in American history, particularly one whose public career in its major phase lasted less than a decade, who was responsible for so much major legislation, and who never attained the presidency in his own right, meriting such continuous and copious attention. And the end, alas, is not yet in sight. Every anniversary of his death provokes a ritual outpouring of articles in the press, typically bemoaning his loss and calculating the hypothetical costs to our nation of his premature disappearance. Wholly typical in this regard is the remark of one journalist that "the yearning for Robert Kennedy—or somebody like him—is an open wound in some parts of America."

Those "parts" of America actually duce themselves to a rather small province, whose principal inhabitants are Morris Wofford, Jack Newfield, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., John Kenneth Galbraith, and Richard Goodwin, but whose importance has been artificially magnified by several activists of a certain age and an echo chamber of epigones in the media. Whatever else one might say about him, Donald Steel, author of *In Love With Night*, assuredly is not of their number. Quite the contrary. In this book he has set himself a two-fold purpose. One, to correct the record, which, as he shows,

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has been blurred beyond all recognition by Kennedy's adoring followers. And two, to address the question of why what he calls the Bobby Myth has endured as long as it has.

Although an American, Steel writes with the distance and detachment one might well expect from a European writer, someone who, like himself, is at once a sophisticated and iconoclastic man of the left, an admirer of Third World revolu-



tions (or at least of Third World revolutionism), and a firm anti-anti-Communist. (More than once while reading this book I thought of both Jean Daniel and Jean Lacouture.) While some of Steel's individual observations periodically irritated this reviewer, as indeed I suppose they would many readers of this journal, one cannot but admire the tenacity with which he attacks his subject, the ruthlessness and clarity of his argument, above all the uncompromising intellectual courage he brings to his task. This book is bound to be a very uncomfortable experience for a great many members of our cultural elite.

What Steel does, in the first place, is to walk us through the various episodes of Kennedy's life. He reminds us that Bobby was originally cast in a rather minor role in the Kennedy family drama, since he was the third brother and it was his elders who were expected to accomplish great things. Fate, however, intervened. When

his oldest brother Joe, Jr. was killed in World War II and the family mantle passed to Jack, Bobby did what he knew he must do—he became Jack's alter ego, his bad cop to Jack's good cop, and helped his brother into the presidency. Once there, he broke with precedent and risked considerable public criticism by taking a major cabinet position—that of attorney general, a curious appointment given that he had himself never practiced law.

Along the way he worked for a Wisconsin senator by the name of Joe McCarthy. This was no casual affair, a youthful indiscretion based on innocence

or naiveté, as so many apologists (and Bobby himself) would later tell us. Rather, it was wholly of a piece with his upbringing and the values of his parents—his father's rigid conservatism and his mother's dogmatic Catholicism—with perhaps a bit of Irish-American *ressentiment* thrown in for good measure. Steel makes the whole

business clear. Kennedy left the McCarthy committee not because he objected to the senator's objectives or methods, but because he found himself at a disadvantage in competition with another ruthless young man by the name of Roy Cohn, who became the senator's chief counsel. When McCarthy died several years later, censured by the Senate and languishing in deep disgrace, Kennedy took the matter deeply and personally. ("I have lost an important part of my life," he wrote in his journal.)

Prior to surfacing to broad public attention Kennedy had also served on a Senate subcommittee investigating criminal activities of organized labor—in this case, the Teamsters, then under the leadership of Jimmy Hoffa. While there were very real malfeasances worth investigating (the misallocation of union funds, intimidation of dissidents, collusion with gangsters, rigged union funds), Kennedy did so with

an absolute minimum of respect for due process. In spite of the same legal skills and elastic scruples which made him a valued member of the McCarthy team, in the end Kennedy failed to nail Hoffa. But the reckless zeal with which he pursued his prey horrified many liberals and civil libertarians. Kennedy returned the favor. "One of the reasons [he] professed such scorn for liberals," Steel writes, "was his belief that they desired the end but got squeamish about the means.... To his mind being liberal meant being weak, and there was nothing he held in greater contempt."

As attorney general in his brother's administration Kennedy showed no great interest in the issues that energized the more advanced sectors of the Democratic Party, particularly civil rights in the American South. In many ways this was to be expected. President Kennedy himself did not regard the subject as one worthy of great emotional expenditure—indeed, part of his charm, if I may say so, was his lack of passion on any political issue. Moreover, these were the days before black Americans' access to the ballot box was protected by federal law, and the Kennedy brothers understood that in order to win re-election in 1964 they were going to have to placate segregationist interests. They were brought to the issue, gingerly, only through the workings of our independent judicial system.

This is not to say that the Kennedy brothers could not be energetic when an issue showed promise of political gain, as in the case of their confrontation with top executives of the steel industry over pricing. When the corporate moguls—pompous, tactless, and easy to caricature—dug in their heels, Bobby let them know he would go after their income tax returns, and audit every business lunch right down to the last martini. Again, Steel reminds us that even those who agreed with the objective found the methods disturbing. "Like many crusades in search of righteousness," he writes, Bobby "showed a disturbing tendency to justify whatever behavior he found useful."

The Kennedy brothers were terrible enemies to have, and for all we can know, still are—beyond the grave. When it comes to dealing with even touchier top

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ics like the relationship of the Kennedy brothers to Marilyn Monroe, or even the mysterious circumstances surrounding her death, Steel draws back from any hard-and-fast conclusions. Is this merely a scrupulous historian's unwillingness to jump to conclusions in the absence of convincing evidence, fear of a lawsuit, or something even worse? Whatever it is, perhaps the author is well counseled to take a pass.

Evidently Robert Kennedy did not confine his interests to matters judicial during his brother's presidency. He was quite literally all over the map. Steel reminds us that he was an energetic, not to say fanatical, opponent of Communism in the Third World and an ardent advocate of what became known as "counter-insurgency," particularly in Southeast Asia. He was obsessed with getting rid of Fidel Castro in Cuba—a worthy cause, one might have thought, though Steel does not think so. However that may be, he clearly ties the Kennedy brothers to policies that today would strike horror in the hearts of their admirers, particularly involvement in various covert attempts to assassinate the Cuban dictator, and to mount an exile invasion to depose him. Steel's opposition to this sort of thing is based not merely on admiration for Castro himself (which he has the good grace and candor to put right out in front of us) but also on more prudential grounds—that the war against Castro "unleashed forces that it could not control." He hastily and I think too facilely links that effort to both the genesis of the missile crisis and even, arguably, to President Kennedy's own assassination. This is a clever way for a liberal to win a conservative argument, but it begs the question of

what the United States was *supposed* do when faced with a freshly-minted Soviet satellite ninety miles from its border armed to the teeth and determined spread its influence throughout the Caribbean and beyond.

It was, of course, the assassination of President Kennedy that marked the end of the "old" Bobby and the emergence of the "new." At first its political content was unclear beyond the capacity to exploit widespread national guilt, nostalgia, and celebrity appeal. Steel reminds us that Bobby would have been perfectly happy to have served as vice president to Lyndon Johnson, a man he held in the utmost contempt. It was only when LBJ ruled out Kennedy as a running mate in 1960 that he embarked upon an independent political career as Democratic senator from New York.¹

While the Democratic nomination was his for the taking, the election itself was far from a cake-walk, and in the end the loathsome Johnson's margin of victory in the state was three times that of the carpetbagger from Massachusetts. Once in the Senate, Kennedy showed no great interest in the affairs of that body, though he did dabble in some issues that showed important political potential, such as "community development" in the black areas of New York City. For example, he persuaded some of his friends on Wall Street and in the private foundations to finance a development project in Bedford-Stuyvesant based on job training, housing rehabilitation, and attraction of light manufacturing to the area. Steel puts this project under a microscope and finds it far from radical, and I suppose he is right. (He points out with perverse relish that President Richard Nixon's subsequent economic program, which involved a minimum national income, was consi

¹Somewhere in New York State there should be a plaque honoring those principled liberals who came out against Kennedy and in favor of his moderate Republican opponent, Senator Kenneth Keating. They include Gore Vidal, Paul Newman, the late Richard Hofstadter and James Baldwin, as well as journalist Robert Scheer and cartoonist Jules Feiffer. These people do not need to read Steel's book. They already know.

erably to the left of Kennedy's.) What the unfortunate Nixon lacked was Kennedy's (or probably, his speechwriters') "intellectual nimbleness," as Steel calls it, "to pitch to [both] radical leftists and centrist conservatives," criticizing LBJ's big government approach while at the same time pandering to emerging black nationalists with talk of "community control."

On Vietnam, Bobby was even more cynical and manipulative. According to Steel, shortly after his re-election President Johnson was giving serious consideration to pulling out of Indochina. Kennedy got wind of the fact and ordered his aides to draft a speech denouncing any withdrawal as a betrayal of American interests. The speech, of course, was never given, because Johnson eventually opted for a different course—bombing raids against North Vietnam and the dispatch of 200,000 American troops, a major step towards converting that conflict into an American war. This put Kennedy in a very difficult situation, and for some time he was unsure of which way to turn. But eventually his "hatred for Johnson...made it easier for him to reverse his course...once he had persuaded himself"—and more importantly—"could persuade others that it was now LBJ's war and not his brother's." It is a tribute to Kennedy's dexterity (and also the capacity for wishful thinking on the part of anti-war liberals) that he was able to pull this trick off without much difficulty.

Even so, Kennedy did not come forward with a clear anti-war position until another Democrat, Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, had found it a winner in the New Hampshire Democratic primary.²

Ironically, McCarthy had entered the race only because Kennedy, unsure of how the new dispensation would play, had held back. Once the results were in, Kennedy (who had assured his Minnesota colleague that he would not run) immediately double-crossed him and threw his hat in the ring.

Many years have passed since the 1968 Democratic primaries, and memories have grown a bit stale, allowing others to cover them with a film of nostalgia and outright fiction. Steel's account calls us clearly to order. In the first place, although Kennedy

won the Indiana primary, his victory at 42 percent was far from conclusive, all the more so since the remainder was split between two other candidates. More to the point, although a legend has grown up that in Indiana Kennedy proved that he alone of Democratic politicians could attract the support of both urban black voters and the white working class (many of whom were drawn to the maverick candidacy of Alabama Governor George Wallace), in fact in the entire state he carried only 11 of 70 predominantly white precincts, and in many of those the whites who voted for him discounted his civil rights-cum-abolitionist rhetoric, perceiving him as a "tough guy who would keep them [blacks] in check."

The next primary in Oregon was a clear disaster for Kennedy, since it was, as one of his campaign workers complained at the time, "one big white suburb." California, on the other hand, with its large black and Mexican-American population, was perceived as an electoral and psychological pot of gold. He and his people threw themselves into the race there with all they had. In California, as in Indiana, he won a technical victory (46 percent) but it was not the 50 percent or more he had hoped for, and more to the point, McCarthy was close behind with 42. The next primary—in New York—was a matter of days away and in a state where McCarthy's support among Democratic primary voters was unusually broad and deep. Before that test could be met, Sirhan Sirhan's bullet met its mark.

Apart from spinning out this narrative with a considerable richness of detail, Steel has much of interest to say about Kennedy's evolving political style. Kennedy's actual campaign proposals—as opposed to his rhetoric—were far from radical. He was critical of welfare and opposed to school busing to achieve integration, a guaranteed income, national health insurance, or job preferences. He did not even reject the anti-Communism that had gotten us into Vietnam. But he was the master of the art of the personal gesture. He was perhaps the first major politician to use the evening network news as a theater for psychodrama. ("We're going to do it in the streets,"

he told one of his speechwriters.) And indeed, as Steel writes, "his rhetoric was emotional and heart-moving." But, he adds, Kennedy and his people "had to do it through the street because that was the only way that this angry, emotional politician, lacking Jack's debonair cool, could reignite the Kennedy legend."

On the other hand, who knew what the crowds wanted, Steel asks, except for emotional catharsis, or "whether this raw emotion could be transferred into votes for a Kennedy presidency?" Indeed who? The capacity to manipulate crowds has propelled men to limitless power in societies less firmly rooted in institutions than our own—say, Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, Perón in Argentina, or Castro in Cuba. No doubt similar yearnings exist just beneath the surface in some quarters of the United States. Steel says that Bobby Kennedy "became a hero to millions of people looking for a hero," but he properly warns that "we should be wary of such a yearning. The need to follow, to serve, and to worship is not a healthy thing in a people." "Politics in a democratic society," he soberly observes, "is about interest groups and deals, not salvation."

Of course, for some people in this country—not many, to be sure, but some—politics is (or ought to be) precisely about "salvation." It is in these circles that the Bobby Myth has been hatched and nurtured for so long. That myth has acted as a repository for some of their more garish political fantasies, and it is not difficult to see why. The three decades since Robert Kennedy's death have not been particularly happy ones for the more dogmatic variety of American liberal—20 years of outright Republican rule and nearly eight years of a Democratic president who has had to share power most of the time with a Republican Congress. The social experiments associated with LBJ's "Great Soci-

²Steel reminds us that McCarthy did not actually win the New Hampshire primary, but he did garner 42 percent of the vote to LBJ's 49. While a technical loss, the psychological impact was enormous, since it suggested a deep dissatisfaction with a sitting president within his own party, and was obviously very influential in getting LBJ to retire from office.

ety” have been discredited in actual practice, and few politicians anxious to win election or re-election wish to revisit them.³

As it is, the first Democratic president to be re-elected to a second full term since Franklin D. Roosevelt has presided over a far-reaching reform of our welfare system—without regret and without apology.

In a broader sense, there is no leader in sight capable of building a majority constituency which unites both the satisfied and dissatisfied components of our society. It is perhaps also worth observing—one of the very few omissions in Steel’s book—that Kennedy’s political career coincides with that final moment in the history of American liberalism in which white males could pretend to

speak for the disinherited without fear of contradiction or embarrassment from within their own ranks—a golden age which still knew not Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, or Patricia Ireland. With Bobby Kennedy, affluent whites could feel adventurous and compassionate, self-righteous and unthreatened, all at the same time. As if that were not enough, his sudden death saved them from the disillusionment and despair of practical politics. No wonder they miss him. ❧

³Wholly characteristic of this state of affairs is the fact that the two Democrats who remain unapologetic advocates of semi-socialism, Senator Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) and actor Warren Beatty, have each chosen not to run for the presidency this year.

Frum also leaves out or scants subjects worthy of treatment in this popular history. He reports little about sports, but the 70’s saw the advent of free agency in professional sports (recall Andy Messersmith’s case) and their increasing commercialization (consider the Super Bowl). He covers the rise of investigative journalism but doesn’t report other key media developments—such as dying newspapers and the advent of cable television and the quantum leap in programming it would offer. And he much too briefly treats technology, giving it just a few paragraphs despite its obvious importance. Much that happened in the 70’s (think of the creation of Ethernet, the forerunner of the Internet) brought us modern digital life. Nonetheless, Frum has managed to include most of the big stories of the 70’s and he is right to see the decade as one that produced an upheaval in the habits, beliefs, and morals of Americans of every station in life.

The conduct of the Vietnam War and then the Watergate scandal damaged Americans’ trust in the federal government—a loss of trust codified in the 1978 independent counsel law. But Frum shows too, that the 70’s also marked the beginning of a loss of trust in the other large institutions that had shaped the nation for decades, including big corporations and trade unions. At times this loss of trust took the form of rebellion, which Frum says was one directed against the central planning and control that the public and private collectives alike required. “All too many Americans,” he writes, “had felt like cogs in the wheel.” A new individualism erupted, taking diverse political manifestations. “Resentment against the crimping and cramping of the individual personality inspired not only the New Left...but also the 1964 Barry Goldwater campaign.”

That disastrous campaign ultimately can be said to have succeeded when Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980. But the Reagan majority itself arose, as Frum shows, in response to certain events and trends: exploding criminality (which “utterly discredited the liberal ideas that had governed American public life” since World War II); repeated acts of terrorism; the genocide in Cambodia (which proved to be the death of “liber-

When It All Began to Go Very Wrong—and Right

How We Got Here: The 70’s: The Decade That Brought You Modern Life (For Better or Worse)

David Frum

Free Press / 418 pages / \$25

REVIEWED BY

Terry Eastland

“These are America’s best days,” writes David Frum, “its high noon of empire.” But Americans are not satisfied with all they have. They feel “less content, less secure, less proud” of their country than they did a half century ago. They are often nostalgic for those days, he says, but there is never any going back. And besides, America has experienced “the most total social transformation...since the coming of industrialism.” What has happened? “A people once collectivist, censorious, calculating, conformist, taciturn, obedient, puritanical, and self-confident has mutated...into a people that

is individualist, permissive, emotional, enterprising, garrulous, rebellious, hedonistic, and guilt-ridden.” Frum finds the answer to how we so mutated, of “how we got here,” in a generously defined 70’s, which starts around 1965 and runs through 1980.

Frum proves a mostly reliable guide to these years. His narrative sparkles with descriptions of events that one might think were Tom Wolfe’s, and the confidence of his judgments could remind readers of Paul Johnson. Like those two, Frum is a moralist, his abiding interest being human conduct and the ideas and rules and conventions that affect it.

This is evident in the book’s organization. *How We Got Here* does not treat the 70’s chronologically but thematically, and Frum’s themes evince his interest in human character, for they concern “trust,” “duty,” “reason,” “desire,” “rights,” and “regeneration.” Indeed, each of these words titles one of the book’s six parts. Though this organization effectively conveys Frum’s perspective on the 70’s, it is not always apparent why he treats material in one part of the book that would seem to fit as well or better in another.