

THE

# KENNEDY AT WAR

**The Kennedys: An American Drama**  
By Peter Collier and David Horowitz  
Summit Books, \$20.95

By John B. Judis

Intent on wringing maximum profits from so potentially arid a field as political history, the publishing industry has created genres (intimate histories, family sagas) to blend voting records with Gothic romance. But the Kennedy family has itself combined soap opera and high politics, and the Kennedys exercise a fascination that cannot be reduced to the causes they are identified with.

Peter Collier and David Horowitz's family portrait, subtitled "An American Drama," is a thoroughly gripping story that sheds considerable light on the political history that the Kennedys contributed to.

Like Joan and Clay Blair's *The Search for JFK* and Richard Whalen's *The Founding Father*, Collier and Horowitz's book benefited from the principal Kennedys' opposition to their project. The Kennedys told Collier and Horowitz that they had already committed themselves to assisting biographer Doris Kearns, who (lo and behold) is married to Richard Goodwin, a former Kennedy aide and acolyte.

In its revelations, Collier and Horowitz's book does not compare with the Blairs' *Search*, which detailed John Kennedy's womanizing (including his wartime affair with a suspected Nazi agent), his history of Addison's disease (which nearly killed him twice) and the real, considerably less heroic story of PT-109, Kennedy's PT boat that was rammed by a Japanese destroyer. Collier and Horowitz's most important new sources are JFK friend LeMoyne Bilings, whose revelations deepen but do not alter the existing record, and the current Kennedy children, in whose testimony Collier and Horowitz appear to place too much faith.

But no one has grasped the relation between the Kennedy generations—particularly between Joe and Rose Kennedy and their children—as vividly as Collier and Horowitz. From Collier and Horowitz's perspective, there are two sides to the relationship between Joe Kennedy and his four sons, Joe Jr., John, Robert and Edward. One side is consummately American. The Kennedys epitomize ethnic upward mobility. The grandson of a penniless immigrant, Joe Kennedy, nurtured on Horatio Alger and Irish resentments toward the haughty Boston Brahmin class, graduated from Harvard and by the early '30s became one of the richest men in America (estimated worth, \$400 million). But frustrated by Franklin Roosevelt in his quest for the final achievement, the presidency, Joe Kennedy raised his sons to achieve what he had failed to.

He imbued them with his own obsessive ambitions, which brooked no obstacles, a fierce competitiveness not only with outsiders but among themselves, and a clannish loyalty to family in general and the first-born male in particular. When Joe Jr. died in 1945 trying to outdo his brother Jack's war record, Joe Sr. turned to Jack as the instrument of his ambition. Jack rewarded him, defeating Henry Cabot Lodge in the 1952 Senate race and

becoming president in 1960.

Following the Blairs, Collier and Horowitz document the degree to which Joe Kennedy made Jack's future, from his promotion of Jack's senior thesis, *While England Slept* (rewritten by Joe's friend Arthur Krock) to Jack's first congressional race in 1946, in which a wan, sickly young man, buoyed by largely fictitious tales of his wartime heroism, became the projection of his father's political machine.

But Collier and Horowitz also bring out the degree to which both Jack and Robert became more than puppets on their father's stage. Joe Jr. was like Sonny in *The Godfather*—brash, brave, impetuous, headstrong, a gang leader. Jack grew up in his shadow, trying to emulate his success at athletics and his popularity but invariably hampered by his germinating illness. As they reached college age, the competition between them became unrestrained, with Joe Jr. even stealing Jack's dates to prove his superior attractiveness to women.

But, as Collier and Horowitz note, Jack adopted a posture of self-conscious irony and playfulness in the face of his brother's brutal challenge. They write of Jack, "In a sense he became a secret agent in the family, one who paid lip service to the bruising activism that organized the rest of them but saw things from a more self-aware and ironic point of view."

A reluctant convert to a political career (he had thought of becoming a journalist or academic), he soon made his political differences with his father clear. He became an ardent Cold War internationalist and interventionist, although his father had been and was still a diehard isolationist.

He abandoned his father's style of Irish machine politics and became the first "cool" politician of the television age. He chose a Kansas Protestant, Theodore Sorenson, as his closest advisor and speechwriter. Although he followed his father's lead in philandering, Collier and Horowitz suggest that by the time of his death he was becoming reconciled to the responsibilities of father and husband.

Even more than Jack, Robert departed from Joe Kennedy's example. Where Jack displayed an ironic detachment, the younger Bobby, often given short shrift in family plans, was fiercely moral. As Jack's right-hand man (Collier and Horowitz make a case that Jack's presidency was in fact a "co-presidency"), he could be utterly ruthless in trying to defeat political enemies. But left to his own devices, before Jack's presidency and then after his assassination, Robert's quest for justice surfaced, whether in his relentless pursuit of Jimmy Hoffa or in his admiration of Cesar Chavez.

While Bobby's intensity recalled his father's, his values were antithetical to Joe's. He was a devoted family man. (He could never admire Martin Luther King because of what he knew of King's womanizing from FBI wiretaps.) His obsession with Hoffa, a man whose rise to the top recalled his father's, seemed oedipal. And his political legacy was as different from his brother's as his brother's had been different from his father's.

If Jack was the apotheosis of Cold War liberalism, Robert was the first and best candidate of the '60s New

Left of Vietnam war protesters, civil rights marchers and striking farm workers. When they went to the grave, both Jack and Robert seemed to take these political tendencies—in Robert's case, movements—with them.

But according to Collier and Horowitz, the Kennedy family history is Sophoclean as well as Alger-like: Joe Kennedy's sins against the gods were finally visited upon his children and their children. This theme lends drama and pathos to the early deaths of Joe Jr., who would never have risked his life had he not felt the need of the Kennedy first-born to best his brothers, and the oldest Kennedy sister, Kathleen ("Kick"), who insisted upon flying in hazardous weather to meet her father, whom she hoped to reconcile to her marriage to a divorced Protestant. But to the extent that Collier and Horowitz's Sophoclean motif becomes analysis rather than literary embellishments, it greatly oversimplifies the Kennedy history.

After Robert's death, the Kennedy clan, which had been headquartered in Hyannis and in Robert and Ethel's Hickory Hill, began to come apart. Jacqueline Kennedy married Aristotle Onassis and took her children to live in Europe.

Several of the Lawford, Shriver and Kennedy children became drug addicts. Both the Lawford and Ted Kennedy marriages fell apart. And Ted, returning from an annual party with his brother's campaign workers (a ritual that he participated in out of loyalty and good nature rather than libertinism) abandoned Mary Jo Kopechne near Dike Bridge.

Besides the shock of assassination, Collier and Horowitz attribute the family decline to the Sophoclean legacy of Joe Kennedy and, in the case of Robert and David Kennedy, to Ethel Kennedy's indifference toward her children. Collier and Horowitz quote with approval Chris Shriver's reaction to Robert Jr.'s 1983 arrest for heroin possession: "If you think of it as one movement from grandfather's early days to what has happened to Bobby right now, you realize that the Kennedy story is really about karma, about people who broke the rules and were ultimately broken by them."

But Joe hardly seems a primary cause of David and Robert's downfall. While his legacy did create unrealistic expectations in the children (both Robert Jr. and Joseph III were raised to believe that they might be president), many children can reconcile themselves to achieving less than their parents or grandparents hoped—indeed, most of the Kennedy siblings, including Joe III, seem to have succeeded in doing so. What marked Robert Jr. and David was their vulnerability to their father's assassination, which occurred when they were in their mid and early teens, and the prevailing counter-culture that encouraged experimentation with drugs.

Ethel Kennedy's indifference to her children's plight may have also precipitated their decline, but Collier and Horowitz fail to demonstrate this point conclusively. Their portrait of Ethel is particularly biased. They don't explore her own complex grief but only its effects, as interpreted by her resentful and troubled sons. Particularly damaging statements made by Ethel are credited to the Kennedy sons or their friends.



d high politics:



For instance, Collier and Horowitz report that after Robert's death, "Ethel kept saying to Bobby Junior and David, 'Get out of here!' as if the house itself, with all the pictures of family triumphs, were a sanctuary they defiled by their presence." They attribute this quotation to a friend of David and Robert Jr. who presumably heard it from them.

But when a mother says "Get out of here!" to her children, it can mean many things, depending on the exact circumstances and the way parents and children normally talk to each other. Children, including teenagers, are capable of the most astonishing misinterpretations and literalisms. Collier and Horowitz may be correct in blaming Ethel for her sons' misfortunes, but not simply on the basis of her sons' interpretations of her words and actions.

With their portraits of the Kennedy children, Collier and Horowitz seem to have suffered from the novelty of firsthand Kennedy reports and from writing their closing section in the shadow of David's suicide.

Character has always played an unusually important role in understanding American politics. Without programmatic parties and a parliamentary system, American voters elect their officials—and especially their presidents—on the basis of their assumed character as much as on their political principles and promises. Both the late Nelson Rockefeller, whose presidential chances were destroyed by divorce, and Ted Kennedy have had to learn this lesson the hard way.

Actual rather than merely perceived character is important in determining the actions of the presidency—a position that in its independence and secure tenure allows a chief executive much greater latitude than parliamentary leaders enjoy. The presidency tests whether a politician can transcend the parochial assumptions by which he had functioned as a governor or senator, and whether he can shoulder the immense responsibility suddenly thrust upon him.

But biographers can overdo the role of character in determining an official's choices. Seymour Hersh's brilliant but methodologically one-sided portrait of Henry Kissinger largely ignores the well-developed world view, acquired primarily in the '50s, with which Kissinger entered office and which played as important a role in his actions as his opportunism or his wish to appear tougher than his rivals. Robert Caro seems destined to make the same mistake in his portrait of Lyndon Johnson.

Collier and Horowitz's approach to the Kennedys is more flexible, but in their portraits of Joe Sr., Jack and Robert, they tend to slight the importance of underlying religious and political principles. For instance, they say of Jack's intentions as president that "his psychological agenda was always clear: to put a thumbprint on history, and, as he frankly (if somewhat ironically) admitted to Lem and others, to achieve 'greatness.'"

Collier and Horowitz argue that this agenda shaped his approach to presidential decisions:

*His approach was not so much to be equal to the problems he inherited—an inchoate mix ranging from economic stagnation to a growing civil rights movement—as it was to locate crises equal to the historical self he*

*wanted to acquire. His intention to enlarge the stakes facing the country and his presidency was apparent in the State of the Union message he delivered a week after taking office: "Before my term has ended we shall have to test whether a nation organized as our own can endure.... Each day the crises multiply. Each day the solution becomes more difficult. Each day we draw nearer to the hour of maximum danger..."*

This is an impressive analysis of Kennedy's presidency, but it attributes too much importance to his psychological quest for greatness, even to the extent of insinuating that Kennedy exaggerated the problems he inherited in order to put his thumbprint on history. One could also argue, citing Kennedy's awakening to the fires of Third World nationalism in his 1951 trip around the world, that he understood far better than his predecessor that what appeared to be a "problem"—the growth of anti-American and anti-imperialist liberation movements—was in fact a "crisis."

Kennedy's principal contribution as president, for better or worse, was the way he dramatized choices that the U.S. faced at the beginning of its imperial decline. And he did so not merely out of an urge for greatness, but out of a conviction derived from travel and from consultation with academics like Walter Rostow, whom Kennedy called his "Marx." Rostow gave Kennedy a rationale for trying to fashion a democratic "third force" in Southeast Asia and Latin America that could contend with both the dictatorial right and the Communist left.

Without clearly intending to, Collier and Horowitz reinforce the liberal revisionists who have contended that *hubris*, vain masculinity and a deluded search for greatness led the Kennedys to make a stand in the rice paddies of Vietnam. To their credit, Collier and Horowitz detail Kennedy's long involvement with Vietnam and the Catholic Diem (which extended back to the early '50s) and his commitment to remain in Vietnam until a victory against the Communists could be secured.

The most important remaining Kennedy is Ted, the head of the family and the hoped-for head of state. Of all the Kennedys, Ted is the most haunted by ghosts. But Collier and Horowitz give him little credit for learning to live with them. The authors' portrait of him is curiously callous and negative. They even call him by the diminutive "Teddy"—a name that he heartily dislikes and that no one says to his face.

Collier and Horowitz seem to want to show Ted's career in the worst light. They show only the effects on him of his brothers' deaths—culminating in Chappaquiddick—without probing the depth of his grief. Even their sketchy portrayal of Chappaquiddick omits details—the party Kennedy was attending was not a gang-bang but an annual event given to thank secretaries who had worked *gratis* for his brother Robert's 1968 campaign—that might have cast Ted in a better light.

Collier and Horowitz also show Kennedy's subsequent political career in a dim light. They say that unlike Robert, Ted was moved by a "legislative agenda" rather than a "moral imperative." But Kennedy's legislative agenda has been "moral"—the defense of the poor and

of human rights—rather than procedural or programmatic. His most important efforts, like his campaign for national health insurance, have never stood a chance of passage.

Kennedy's later career recalls that of Ohio Senator Robert Taft, whom Jack included in his *Profiles in Courage*. Taft held high the banner of Midwest conservatism and isolationism during their heyday of New Deal liberalism and globalism in the same way that Ted Kennedy has held high the tattered ensign of '60s-era liberalism during the storms of Reaganite conservatism. His career also recalls that of his father after his break with Roosevelt.

Ted's 1980 campaign for the presidency flopped in part because of the memory of Chappaquiddick and his initial failure to define the purpose of his campaign, but also in part because Kennedy was caught between the moral and political legacy he and Robert had created and the more conservative temper of the late '70s and early '80s. It should now be obvious that even if Kennedy had defeated Carter in the primaries, he would have fared worse than Carter in the general election.

Collier and Horowitz's portrait of Ted, like their portrait of Ethel and her sons, suffers from their Sophoclean pretensions. Because they are so intent on showing the family's decline, they understate Ted's achievements.

With the exception of their portraits of Ethel and Ted, Collier and Horowitz are remarkably judicious in their appraisal of the Kennedys. At times, they even go overboard in their effort not to vilify Jack. For instance, against a fairly strong case in Herbert Parmet's *Jack*, among other places, they give Jack the benefit of the doubt on the question of whether he or Ted Sorenson wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profiles in Courage*.

The authors' strategy of steering between expose and panegyric is the correct one. Most of us have already had many of our illusions about the Kennedys punctured. What we need to understand is why we held those illusions in the first place and why, to some extent, we still do. By describing the drama of the Kennedy family's rise and decline, Collier and Horowitz have located the place they occupy in our fantasy lives. If Abraham Lincoln's log cabin saga embodied the American dream of the late 19th and early 20th century, the Kennedys' rise from East Boston's Paddyville to the White House has provided the stuff of dreams for post-World War II Americans.

But while the authors explain the basis of the dream, they also insist that it is over. They see in the fall of Ethel's children (the most successful of them, Joe III, appears unlikely to match his forebearer's rise to power) and in Ted Kennedy's unsuccessful presidential bid in 1980 the proof that the Kennedys have become *passe*.

Why do some people hang onto the hope of a Kennedy presidency? Probably because the miracle of a Kennedy revival would be the only way in this dark period that their political views, represented by Robert and now Ted, could return to favor. It is a hope based not on any presumed identification of Americans with Ted Kennedy's liberalism, but on the resurrection of the old Kennedy magic.

Collier and Horowitz put these hopes in perspective and, therefore, to rest. It is about time.



# LETTERS

*In These Times* is an independent newspaper committed to democratic pluralism and to helping build a popular movement for socialism in the United States. Our pages are open to a wide range of views on the left, both socialist and non-socialist. Except for editorial statements appearing on the editorial page, opinions expressed in columns and in feature or news stories are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the editors. We welcome comments and opinion pieces from our readers.

## SQUEALS OF INDIGNATION

EVIDENTLY TO TOM JOHNSON (*ITT*, June 27) the injustice and hideousness in the meat-packing industry consists exclusively in the workers' inadequate pay and miserable working conditions that proceed from the growing concentration of ownership. Nothing else.

Certainly the squeals of indignation these evils elicit from him are commendable, but missing from his report is any acknowledgement, not even an implicit one (as far as I could tell), that the hundreds of thousands of "food" animals slaughtered every day in this country experience physical and emotional pain that is not ethically insignificant, and that indeed may even bear comparison to the hardships their killers try to endure. (It is worth mentioning that pigs have an intelligence similar to that of dogs, and probably much higher than that of many human beings, including our president. But this is not really relevant; suffering is relevant.)

Johnson does give a circumstantial account of the grisly events on the killing floor, the killing rack and the line—and even concedes that on the rack "the lucky ones are out cold." But it is all too plain that to him the catarracts of blood, bucketloads of viscera and cries of pain and terror constitute not a daily exhibition of humankind's needless and self-debasing maltreatment of "lower" animals—institutionalized savagery that doubtless is intimately related to the human species' wanton butcherings of its own kind—but simply uncomfortable working conditions. Cute phrases like "bacon-to-be" and "the brute figures" (a subhead) enhance the article's crass anthropocentrism.

Many bleeding-heart types have been daring to suggest that animals have, or should have, rights, including the right not to be tortured and chopped to pieces so that the uninformed or uncaring masses can devour steaks and hot

dogs from which they may very possibly contract, perhaps as a form of divine retribution, cancer and heart disease, to say nothing of the social disgrace of being fat slob. If the decent society that socialists envision retains the meat-packing plants in the present one, the conclusion that human callousness and cruelty have little to do with the social system in which they occur would be difficult to avoid.

—Robert Becker  
Baltimore, Md.

## GULP!

AS I READ THE ARTICLE "CONTINENTAL: Just tip of the iceberg" by David Moberg (*ITT*, May 30), I envisioned a group of vampires sucking the blood out of a living body. Between gulps they cried out "The body is dying! Somebody do something about it!"

—Al Cohen  
Amherst, Mass.

## MISLEADING

BARBARA EHRENREICH'S ARTICLE on American feminism and the gender gap (*ITT*, June 13) is somewhat misleading in its comparison between the U.S. and Europe. She argues that "nowhere except in the U.S., as far as I can discover, have women actually moved to the left of men." As a result, she sees the American gender gap as "historically unique" and in contrast with the "reverse gender gap" of some European countries where women have traditionally voted more conservatively.

There are two reasons for this relative left position of American women's vote. One is that, given the very conservative nature of current American politics, any liberal stand appears to be left by comparison. The more progressive or liberal nature of European politics generates less of a need for the gender gap to appear.

On the other hand, what is really unique in the American case is the extent to which the feminist message has

penetrated grassroots organizations and all aspects of American life. This has not yet happened in most European countries. Yet European feminism, as feminism in the Third World, tends to be more left and clearly socialist than its more liberal American counterpart. It is likely that, as the feminist message also penetrates European societies, the reverse gender gap will disappear.

—Lourdes Benaria  
New York City

## MISREPRESENTATION

IN JO FREEMAN'S OTHERWISE FINE ARTICLE about my campaign (*ITT*, June 13), I was quoted as saying that "socialist feminism is a contradiction in terms." Regardless of where this statement came from, it is a serious misrepresentation of my point of view.

Clearly, many of the goals of feminism and socialism are harmonious. There are certainly feminists who are socialists and socialists who are feminists. The Socialist Party now even calls itself the Socialist Feminist Party.

The terms that are contradictory are not feminism and socialism but radical feminism and classical socialism. Radical feminism posits that the oppression of women—patriarchy—is at the root of the inequities and pathologies of global society. Classical socialism posits that inequity in resource distribution and control—class discrimination—is at the root of the world's major problems. Obviously, not all feminists subscribe to patriarchal theory any more than all socialists subscribe rigidly to class analysis.

Though these terms are essentially contradictory, those adhering to them can, and do, work together toward common goals on other levels. As a radical feminist, I do not feel compromised by working in appropriate ways with socialists. I stress that I am not a socialist, not because I undervalue socialist contribution, but because I want to be very clear about who I am and the viewpoint I most fundamentally represent.

—Sonia Johnson  
Citizens Party presidential candidate

## EARLY AND FERVENT

SONIA JOHNSON IS QUOTED AS SAYING that "socialist feminism is a contradiction in terms" (*ITT*, June 13). On the contrary, socialism is the highest expression of the ideas of liberation and equality of all peoples—women and men; black, brown, red, yellow and white.

This pronouncement shows an unfortunate deep ignorance of history and politics. Socialists were among the earliest and most fervent supporters of women's rights. The democratic socialist nations are years ahead of the U.S. in the areas of affirmative action for women and basic institutional support services for reproductive rights. The Communist nations, particularly China, have liberated women from centuries of bondage and servitude. Obviously much more needs to be done to achieve full equality and liberation. But to state that socialism has not been on the side of feminism is ludicrous.

If it was only an uninformed opinion it would be forgivable—but it is much more than that. It is another indication that Johnson belongs to that school of "feminism" that I call "sexist feminism." This seems an oxymoron—but politics is filled with such contradictions in terms. Johnson has stated that the problem of war is "males' conquistador mentality." This is false! War is caused by exploitative social systems such as capitalism, and by the racist and sexist ideas present in all peoples. She holds that women are naturally superior to men by virtue of their gender—that women are inherently "good" and peace-loving, and that men are inherently "bad" and warmongering.

This simple-minded approach is inherently sexist and right-wing. It often happens that progressive causes attract

people and ideas which are, in reality, quite opposite of the goals of equality. Sexist feminism has nothing in common with genuine feminism and democratic socialism, which call for the freedom and equality of all people.

—Donald F. Busky  
Local chairperson, Socialist Party  
of Greater Philadelphia

## NO OBLIGATION

THE ARTICLE BY ADAM HOCHSCHILD (*ITT*, May 23) on the merits of criticizing Third World revolutionaries avoids some relevant facts. It doesn't say which North American leftists are guilty of romanticizing the revolutions. We do not see any "rosy-glowism" in *In These Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Nation* or *NACLA*. Our experience is that one is often challenged to demonstrate objectivity by criticizing the Nicaraguan revolution even when discussing the altogether separate issue of U.S. intervention in the region. It is Hochschild who lays down his idea of what others should say, despite the insinuation that he is reacting to an attitude comparable to Stalinism.

Of course it is legitimate to discuss the faults and failures of revolutionaries. But for what are the North Americans responsible? Obviously for the actions of the U.S. government and its clients. North Americans have an obligation to criticize their own government. They have no such obligation with respect to its designated enemies.

What are the likely results of our public criticism? Hochschild believes that it will increase the credibility of the anti-intervention movement. With whom? At this time the U.S. government is launching terror attacks against Nicaragua and preparing for war throughout Central America. These actions and the suffering of the Central American people are the credible issues for the anti-intervention movement.

—Deborah L. Sisson  
—Dale P. Barkey  
Berkeley, Calif.

## JUVENILE DISORDER

ONCE AGAIN, LENNI BRENNER HAS demonstrated his love affair with stupidity (*Letters*, *ITT*, June 13). Maybe someday, one of his articles will address a relevant issue!

In my letter to *ITT*, I discussed the fact that Brenner's term "democratic secular Palestine" was so vague that it lacked meaning to intelligent individuals. In response, he listed certain atrocities committed by the Israeli government. Granted, the facts cited and that the situation in Israel needs much improvement, what has any of this to do with explaining his definition of a "democratic secular Palestine"?

Once again, Brenner resorts to the juvenile use of racism to illustrate his point. But, instead of attacking orthodox rabbis with racial slurs, he has the audacity to attack me, and call me, of all things, a racist!

In my letter, I called for a democratic secular Israel and Palestine cooperating and at peace.

I am a Jew and proud of it. Jews have a right to cultural self-determination as much as Palestinians or any other people, if they choose.

Let's try a two-state solution to the problem to start, and see where it leads. But, I can assure you of this: if these two states ever evolve into one democratic secular state, monsters like Lenni Brenner will be unwelcome. Their stupidity breeds too much hostility.

—Steven Karpp  
Flushing, N.Y.

**Editor's note:** Please try to keep letters under 250 words in length. Otherwise we may have to make drastic cuts, which may change what you want to say. Also, if possible, please type and double-space letters—or at least write clearly and with wide margins.

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