

THE KENNEDY HUSTLE

by Charles Peters



Photo: Cecil Stoughton

Doris Kearns Goodwin's recent book about the Kennedys* illuminates the family legend with new fact and fresh insight, and it is a marvelous read. I would be astounded if it fails to win the Pulitzer Prize for biography.

That being said, I have two problems—one minor, the other major.

The minor one involves the minor inaccuracies. Having been seduced by the opening pages, I was a benign reader of the remainder of the book, definitely not looking for errors. So I can't help suspecting that the four I noticed are the tip of an iceberg.

"The most celebrated architect in Palm Beach" was not Harry but Addison Mizner. The Battle of Britain began not on September 7, 1940 but a month earlier. The Homestead is in Hot Springs, Virginia, not Arkansas. FDR's victory over Willkie in 1940 was not by "a narrow margin." Roosevelt's popular vote exceeded Willkie's by five million. He led in electoral votes 449 to 82.

The book's major flaw is its failure to understand the Kennedy hustle and its significance for the country, although to Goodwin's credit I must concede she lays out much of the evidence needed to arrive at this understanding.

The Kennedys have been America's royal fam-

Charles Peters is editor-in-chief of The Washington Monthly.

*The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys. *Doris Kearns Goodwin.* Simon & Schuster, \$22.95.

ily in the second half of this century, even more than the Roosevelts had been in the first half. They have been emulated, either consciously or unconsciously, by millions of their countrymen. And their influence continues to this day.

The Kennedy hustle was the way they acquired that influence. It was a manipulative approach to the media and the public, based on exploitation of the financial and social insecurities of the rest of us.

Joseph Kennedy discovered what the press could do when he was 28 and the Hearst papers ran a feature story that billed him as "the youngest bank president." Suddenly he was known not just in Boston but all around the country. Kennedy learned the lesson of this experience well enough so that in 1923 he seized an opportunity to win the eternal gratitude of Walter Hovey, the editor of the *Boston American*, by salvaging Hovey's life savings from an investment that was threatened with disaster. For the rest of his days, Kennedy sought to manipulate the press, serving as puppeteer for, among others, Arthur Krock, a dominant figure at *The New York Times* for more than 30 years.

In 1952 Kennedy learned that John Fox, the publisher of the *Boston Post*, was preparing to endorse Henry Cabot Lodge, who was running for the Senate against John F. Kennedy. Fox happened to be in deep financial trouble at the time. Joseph Kennedy immediately loaned him \$500,000. The *Post* endorsed John F. Kennedy,

who now knew the lesson himself and proceeded to apply it with skill and subtlety the rest of his life. His main targets were the publishers and editors of the large newspapers and of the most powerful magazines of the fifties and early sixties—*Life*, *Look*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. He spent his last weekend with Benjamin C. Bradlee.

John Kennedy was attracted to Bradlee not only because of Bradlee's role in the media—he was the Washington bureau chief for *Newsweek*—but because Bradlee's social credentials were edged in gilt. A central fact about the Kennedys is that they were both the exploiters and the victims of snobbery. They could con others by inviting them to Hyannis or Hickory Hill, but they were equally connable by an invitation from Lady Astor. This may explain why the British, themselves no slouches at this sort of hustle, may have selected the elegant David Ormsby-Gore (later Lord Harlech) to be their ambassador to the New Frontier. At any rate, Ormsby-Gore quickly established himself as John Kennedy's favorite diplomat and was a frequent White House guest.

Victims of the cruel prejudice of Boston's WASPs, the Irish Catholic Kennedys had had to survive one obvious snub after another. It was bad enough to cause Joseph Kennedy to move his family from Boston to New York—and to fuel his desire to make it socially.

Kennedy became adept at climbing the ladder. He impressed Hollywood producers by getting them invited to lecture at Harvard Business School. He impressed Palm Beach society by arranging the appearance at a benefit ball of the reigning film queen, Gloria Swanson, who also happened to be his mistress. He impressed every Irishman in America by gaining social acceptance from the British elite while he was ambassador to the Court of St. James. The Irish, after all, had been spat upon by the Brits for centuries.

Most of all, he sought acceptance for his children. Goodwin observes, with a perceptiveness that shows what she might have accomplished had she pursued this theme more diligently:

"Having scrambled for his wealth, Kennedy wanted his children to start life on the heights. Freeing them from material concerns, he hoped to instill in them that natural confidence possible only to people who never had cause to doubt their social position. With three mansions and a retinue of servants and cooks, he hoped to create in his children that aristocratic ease of manner that he had first observed among the Brahmin students at Harvard when he was a freshman."

It almost worked, but not quite. The children still felt a need to rise higher. Joe Jr. wrote: "I met the daughter of the Duke of Alba, and under Spanish law I would become the Duke if I married her, so I am toying with the idea. Wouldn't you like to have a Duke in the family?"

Joe Jr. may have been half-joking, but the fact is that Kathleen did marry the Marquess of Hartington who, had he not been killed in World War II, would have become the Duke of Devonshire. "I'll have," she wrote, "a castle in Ireland; one in Scotland, one in Yorkshire, and one in Sussex."

As for John Kennedy's motivation in marrying Jacqueline Bouvier, his closest friend, Lem Billings, said:

"I knew right away that Jackie was different from all the other girls Jack had been dating. She was more intelligent, more literary, more substantial. And her mother's second marriage to Hugh Auchincloss carried the family into the social register, which gave Jackie a certain classiness that's hard to describe."

The Kennedys understood upward mobility because they were upwardly mobile themselves. The famous campaign "teas" were consciously designed to appeal to the social aspirations of the women who attended. Similar aspirations were behind the public's use of the Kennedys as behavior models. By the early sixties, men stopped wearing hats because Jack didn't wear one and women were having their hair done like Jackie's and buying clothes that imitated her designer dresses. They found out what was the right thing to do by watching the first family. As Richard J. Whalen observed, "Everyone wanted to be in high society with the Kennedys."

The family's influence began to decline after Jackie married Onassis and Teddy left Mary Jo Kopechne in that car at Chappaquidick. But by that time they had much of the country preoccupied with finding out "the right thing to do." There had been an explosion of city magazines—*New York*, *Philadelphia*, the *Washingtonian*. In the sixties, they were cropping up everywhere, full of articles and features designed to let the reader in on what was chic. At one of the more recent manifestations of this kind of journalism, *Manhattan Inc.*, the staff now is torn by a controversy over whether red suspenders are in or out.

The Kennedys had been the spiritual leaders of a nation whose tastes were moving from "I Love Lucy" and "The Honeymooners" to "Dallas," "Dynasty," and "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous"—or, at a somewhat more refined,

Jacqueline Bouvier level—to “Upstairs, Downstairs” and knowing the right paintings to hang on our walls.

The other day I saw a woman’s resume. It listed the schools her *children* were attending. Why? Because they were Harvard and Brown. We had Harry Truman when the fifties began. Now we have Nancy Reagan and Betsy Bloomingdale, not to mention Jerry Zipkin. The Kennedys hustled the entire nation. Upward mobility is now the only game in town.

What makes one weep is that there is another side to the Kennedy legacy, a side that could be our salvation.

The problem with the upwardly mobile today is that, like the Reagans, they never stop to look down or to give a helping hand to those who are still groping for the first rung of the ladder. Even at their absolute worst, this was never true of John, Robert, and Edward Kennedy, nor of Sargent and Eunice Shriver. However much they may have lusted for association with celebrities, they have been consistent in their concern for the down and out.

We need that concern now. We also could use another good quality of the Kennedys—their spirit of service. “Ask not” is the call we need to hear again, and it is a call we should answer with generous hearts, with a willingness to pay higher taxes, to surrender government benefits we don’t need, and to give a few years of our lives to service in the armed forces or in organizations like the Peace Corps.

But instead of being inspired by the best side of the Kennedys, we have imitated their worst and become, if not a nation of snobs, a country that is increasingly obsessed with money and status. We have forgotten why snobbery is so insidious. Instead of encouraging us to reach out to find common ground with our fellow man, it excludes people who don’t fit the right mold. It is an expression of concern not for real substance but for how we look to the world. It makes us nervous about the things that don’t count and thus detracts from the commitment to do the things that will make this world a better place, which is the commitment that should govern our lives. ■

ZEN AND THE ART OF CULTURAL MISAPPROPRIATION

by Jonathan Rowe

Learning
the right
lessons of the
Japanese
schools

The Japanese have not had good press with the young people of America. To those born around World War II, they were the little people who snuck through jungles and crashed warplanes into American battleships in movies like *Bataan*.

Kids today have new reason to dislike the Japanese. A school year 60 days longer than our own, for example. Classes on Saturday morning. Mountains of homework. Requirements to sweep the halls after school. As America’s Japan envy shifts from that country’s factories to its schools, these and other features of Japanese education are being touted as models for our own.

Given the staggering test scores of Japanese

students—the *lowest* fifth grade math scores there are higher than the *highest* here—the attraction is understandable, at least for those whose childhoods are safely behind. And Japanese workers are famous for their ability to do complicated math on the shop floor. As Merry White says in her new book,* “We assume the trade war begins with the Japanese kids.”

But transplanting institutions from one culture to another is tricky business. A few years ago, the Japanese minister of education visited the United States, and then-Secretary of Education Terrel Bell was playing the expansive host. Bell heaped praises on the Japanese *juku*, private cram schools that students attend in the afternoon after their regular school. These *juku*, Bell proclaimed, symbolized Japan’s commitment to learning and should be a model for America. There was a “shocked silence,” White recounts. *Juku* are part of the “examination hell” that

Jonathan Rowe is a contributing editor of The Washington Monthly.

**The Japanese Educational Challenge. Merry White. The Free Press, \$18.95.*