

The Mission of Robert Kennedy

by Donald Phau

May 25—The assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the coverup of the British-sponsored conspiracy which accomplished it, marked a decisive downward turning point for the United States, from which our country has not yet recovered. The patriotic tradition of FDR, which dictated assertive Federal government action for the General Welfare at home, and cooperation for global economic development abroad, appeared to be all but buried.

But, could the British oligarchical enemies of the United States be sure that JFK's anti-imperialist tradition was gone for good?

One major problem for their plans was on the horizon. Less than one year after Jack's murder, Robert F. Kennedy, the President's brother and Attorney General, left his position in the Johnson administration, and announced his candidacy for the Democratic Senatorial nomination from New York. Few knowledgeable politicians doubted at that time, that he was on his way to a run for the Presidency, and in a good position to win.

As President, Robert Kennedy would have ended the United States-led Viet Nam war and taken up the Franklin Roosevelt programs of his brother, to revitalize the U.S. economy. This is the context in which to see the assassination of Robert Kennedy in June 1968, on the evening of his victory in the Democratic



NARA/Robert Knudsen

Robert Kennedy with his brother, President John Kennedy, outside the Oval Office at the White House, March 1963.

Presidential Primary in California.¹

With RFK out of the way, Richard Nixon won the 1968 Presidential race, paving the pathway for future devastation of the nation by the British and the Bushes. As President, Nixon promoted then-Congressman George H.W. Bush, to lead key committees in Congress, and in 1973 asked Bush to head the Republican National Committee. The murder of RFK could be said to have been a stepping stone to the rise of the traitorous Bushes, and their successor-in-crime Barack Obama.

Why was RFK a threat to the British Empire?

Kennedy's Fight for Civil Rights

When Jack Kennedy was elected President in 1960, Robert became his Attorney

General, and was thus thrust into the center of the intense conflicts which dominated Kennedy's short administration—including civil rights on the domestic front, and potential thermonuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union on the international scene.

While intensively involved in the Administration's attempts to calm racial tensions at home, RFK also became involved in racial politics by making a trip to South Africa in 1961. Although Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd refused to meet him, he went to Cape

1. The fact that the convicted assassin of RFK, Sirhan Sirhan, could not have been the sole killer has been raised continually, through analysis of the number of gunshots fired, the direction from which the fatal shot came, and the like. Most damning was the fact that Sirhan Sirhan stood in front of RFK with his pointed gun, but the Los Angeles coroner, Thomas Noguchi, ruled that the fatal bullet came from behind Kennedy.

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Town and was met by three thousand people when his plane landed. At the University of Cape Town he said:

Few have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation. . . . It is from numberless acts of courage and belief such as these that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Finding Solace in the Greek Classics

It is impossible to overemphasize the turning point which occurred in Robert Kennedy's life and thinking due to the assassination of his brother. After that trauma, he found his primary solace in the Greek classics. RFK's Senate staff said he knew the Greeks cold. "He would cite some play, and say, 'You know that?' We didn't at all."

Historian Arthur Schlesinger writes in *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, that a year after JFK's assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy gave Robert Edith Hamilton's book *The Greek Way*. RFK proceeded to immerse himself in the writings of the ancient Greeks. One verse he memorized and cited often was from *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus:

He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.

[This would be written on his tombstone —ed.]

At gatherings of friends he would often recite a passage from Sophocles:

The long days store up many things nearer to
grief than joy
Death at the last, the deliverer.
Not to be born is past all prizing best.

Next best by far when one has seen the light
Is to go thither swiftly whence he came.

By the summer of 1964, Robert Kennedy had determined that he himself had to take up the mantle of his brother. He quit the Attorney Generalship, and in August began his campaign for Senator from New York State, an action which drew enormous ire from the whole left liberal establishment. Such stellar liberals as Gore Vidal, I.F. Stone, Paul Newman, and Nat Hentoff, to name a few, as well as the *New York Times*, backed RFK's Republican opponent Kenneth Keating. RFK, however, won easily.

One notable step in his campaign was his speech to that year's Democratic Party Convention. According to Schlesinger's account, "When Kennedy was finally introduced to the convention, I stood on the floor in the midst of the thunderous ovation. I had never seen anything like it. He repressed his tears. Many in the audience did not. RFK spoke for 22 minutes and ended with the quotation from *Romeo and Juliet*:

When he shall die
Take him and cut him out in little stars
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

In the U.S. Senate

While in the U.S. Senate, Robert Kennedy took up the issues that were ripping America apart—poverty, especially in the Black community, and the war in Vietnam.

His deep commitment to the poor is reported in the book, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*. Author Evan Thomas writes of a trip RFK took in 1967 to Mississippi, as a member of the Senate Labor Committee's newly created sub-committee on housing. He went to rural Mississippi to hold hearings. He went out into the fields; there he was deeply moved by scenes of the abject squalor in which people lived. That same night, when he flew home to New York accompanied by his aides, one of the aides writes, "he grabbed me. He said, 'You don't know what I saw! I have done nothing in my life! Everything I have done is worthless!'"

The very evening that he returned home from his Mississippi trip, he called together his nine children, ages two to fifteen, and demanded that they must dedicate their lives to better the world. He told them what he



Dan Guravich

Senator Robert Kennedy, on a fact-finding mission to the Mississippi Delta in 1967, found many with no source of income whatsoever. Here he witnesses children listless and malnourished.

had seen. Author Thomas writes that he told his children that on the trip he had gone into one windowless shack. He sat down on a dirty floor and held a child who was covered with open sores. He rubbed the child's stomach, which was distended by starvation. He caressed and murmured and tickled, but got no response. The child was in a daze. He told his children:

In Mississippi, a whole family lives in a shack the size of this room. The children are covered with sores and their tummies stick out because they have no food. Do you know how lucky you are? Do you know how lucky you are? Do something for your country!

In the Senate, RFK, following in the path of FDR, sponsored a public works bill to create two million jobs. He wanted to create jobs that built something, though the general sentiment was just to hand out poverty funds to the ghetto. But with all the money needed for the war in Vietnam, Johnson sank the bill.

On March 2, 1967, RFK publicly broke with President Johnson on the question of Vietnam. In a Senate speech he called the war a horror, and called for a bombing pause to test Hanoi's sincerity on wanting peace. The press responded by launching a savage campaign against him. The next day RFK was accused by J. Edgar Hoover's leaker, columnist Drew Pearson, of being behind a failed attempt on the life of Castro, a story that Pearson had been sitting on for months.

RFK then went onto the university campuses speaking out against the war. He challenged those students with deferments who did nothing, while the poor did the fighting and dying, asking them, "Why should the poor have to do the fighting while they, as middle class students, get deferments?"

In the spring of 1967, Martin Luther King joined in opposing the war. That summer he began collaborating with RFK. Kennedy proposed to King that poor people all over the country come to Washington. This was the origin of the Poor Peoples Campaign. King said to a friend that, with Johnson out, "We have to get behind Bobby now that he's in."

'Tame the Savageness of Man'

Kennedy was on a plane heading for a campaign rally in Indianapolis, when he was told that King was shot dead on April 4, 1968. He was told to call off the rally as his security was at risk. The chief of police warned him not to go into the ghetto. Kennedy went anyway. His police escort abandoned him as he entered the ghetto. The crowd that gathered had not heard the news of MLK's death. Kennedy told them. Kennedy's speech that informed them ended:

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and to make gentle the life of this world.

Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.

Over the next days there were riots in 110 cities. Thirty-nine people were killed, mostly black. There were 75,000 troops in the street. But there were no riots

in Indianapolis where Kennedy was campaigning. Kennedy continued to speak out, in Cleveland and elsewhere.

Schlesinger writes:

He flew back to Washington, a city of smoke and flame, under curfew, patrolled by troops. He walked through the black districts. Burning wood and broken glass were all over the place, said Walter Fauntroy. The troops were on duty. A crowd gathered behind us, following Bobby Kennedy. The troops saw us coming at a distance, and they put on gas masks and got their guns at the ready, waiting for this horde of blacks coming up the street. When they saw it was Bobby Kennedy, they took off their gas masks and let us through. They looked awfully relieved.

During the worst of the ghetto riots in 1967, Kennedy, although advised not to, had toured the black and Hispanic areas. Many welcomed him as someone who truly cared for their condition, despite their knowing that he came from one of the wealthiest families in the U.S. On Hoover's advice, Johnson sent tanks and paratroopers into Detroit. When asked what he would do if he were President, Kennedy said he would make the media show what it was like to live in the ghettos. He said:

Let them show the sound, the feel, the hopelessness, and what it's like to think you'll never get out. Show a black teenager, told by some radio jingle to stay in school, looking at his older brother—who stayed in school who is out of a job. Show the Mafia pushing narcotics; put a candid camera team in a ghetto school and watch what a rotten system of education it really is. Film a mother staying up all night to keep the rats from her baby. . . . Then ask people to watch it. . . and experience what it was like to live in the most affluent society in history—without hope.

Arthur Schlesinger quotes further trenchant remarks by RFK on the race question. Kennedy pointed



U.S. Army

A helicopter climbs skyward after discharging infantrymen on a search and destroy mission in the Ia Drang Valley of South Vietnam, Nov. 14, 1965. In the next four days, hundreds of Americans and more than 1,000 Vietnamese were dead.

to the problem of discrimination in the North which, unlike the South, had no laws against blacks. He writes:

But the many brutalities of the North receive no attention. I have been in tenements in Harlem in the past several weeks where the smell of rats was so strong that it is difficult to stay there for five minutes, and where children slept with lights turned on their feet to discourage attacks. . . . Thousands do not flock to Harlem to protest these conditions—much less to change them. FDR Jr. said that Kennedy was the torchbearer of everything my mother stood for and fought for.

Get Out of Vietnam

Robert Kennedy, like his brother, was being advised by General Douglas MacArthur. Both were determined to end the war in Viet Nam.

On January 31, 1967, RFK met with Charles de Gaulle in Paris. De Gaulle said to him:

I am an old man, and I have lived through many battles and wear many scars, so listen to me closely. . . . Do not become embroiled in the difficulty in Vietnam.

Kennedy met with Pope Paul VI, who told him that the North Vietnamese had changed their attitude and were willing to negotiate.

President Johnson met with RFK when he returned from Europe and told him that the war would be over in a few months. RFK's response was, "These guys are out of their minds." Johnson said to him: "I'll destroy you and every one of your dove friends in six months. You'll be dead politically in six months."

In December 1967, as Johnson was escalating bombing in North Vietnam, RFK spoke at a Catholic girls college. Kennedy was appalled when a majority wanted more, not less bombing.

Schlesinger writes:

He said to them, "Do you understand what that means?" He cried, "It means you are voting to send people, Americans and Vietnamese, to die.... Don't you understand what they are doing to the Vietnamese is not very different than what Hitler did to the Jews?"

Kennedy grew more vehement against the war. He said on "Face the Nation," on Nov. 26, 1967:

Do we have the right in the United States to say we're going to kill tens of thousands of people, make millions of people, as we have... refugees, kill women and children? I very seriously question whether we have that right.... Those of us who stay in the United States, we must feel it when we use napalm, when a village is destroyed and civilians are killed. This is our responsibility.

In February 1968, he gave a speech in Chicago denouncing the war. Columnist Joseph Alsop denounced him as a traitor.

This was at a time when polls showed seventy per cent of the American people backed the bombing. Kennedy said to Arthur Schlesinger:

It's just like Hitler—not a very good comparison—but I mean the way people who think themselves good and decent, become accomplices.



CSU Archives (Everett Collection)

A brace of plow mules draws a farm wagon bearing the casket of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., followed by dignitaries and aides, processing toward Morehead College for a memorial service. Atlanta, April 9, 1968.

The Presidential Campaign

A few months before his murder in June 1968, Robert Kennedy had begun his campaign for the Presidency of the United States.

The Vietnam war issue played a major role in his decision. A commission was taking shape, with White House backing, called the Vietnam Commission. It would include members of the Supreme Court. Johnson did not appoint Kennedy. Kennedy said of this:

It was unmistakably clear to me that as long as Lyndon Johnson was President, our Vietnam policy would consist of only more war, more troops, more killing and more senseless destruction of the country we were there supposedly to save. That night I decided to run for President. (Memorandum of Clark Clifford March 14, 1968, Johnson Papers)



CC/Evan Freed

Robert Kennedy campaigns for President in Los Angeles.

threats, he continuously risked his life, wading into huge enthusiastic crowds of supporters, sometimes having parts of his clothing torn off by his fans. The press reported that Johnson hated Kennedy for his meddling, but in the middle of Kennedy's relationship with Johnson was the duplicitous FBI chief, J. Edgar Hoover. By keeping Kennedy and Johnson at each others' throats, Hoover killed two birds with one stone. Hoover unleashed a media slander campaign against RFK, accusing him of collaborating with the North Vietnamese.

RFK's friend Stewart Udall described his attitude toward the campaign as follows:

You could tell his mind was already made up.... I almost got the feeling it was like a Greek tragedy in the sense that events themselves have been determined by fates setting the stage, and that there was really no choice left. McGovern thought Kennedy was almost oblivious to what we were saying, that he was alone in his thought.

Soon afterwards, also in March, LBJ announced he was not running for President.

Less than a month later came the major shock of Martin Luther King's assassination.

In Atlanta at King's funeral, there was a march, afterwards, in which Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller, and Eugene McCarthy participated. One civil rights fighter there said, the only two people who were cheered by on-lookers were Sammy Davis Jr and RFK. Afterwards, Ralph Abernathy, King's successor at SCLC, said:

I was so despondent and frustrated at King's death, I had to seriously ask myself—Can this country be saved? I guess the thing that kept us going was that maybe Bobby Kennedy would come up with some answers for the country.... I remember telling him he had a chance to be a prophet. But prophets get shot." (Arthur Schlesinger, p. 879)

Kennedy had campaigned tirelessly and received tremendous popular support. Despite numerous death

Udall continued:

With all the turmoil in the country and what he felt was a need for definition of the issues and for the championing of the people who were unchampioned.... He was determined to follow his own convictions and to do what was true in terms of his own personality.

On June 4, 1968, Kennedy won the California primary for President. Shortly after midnight, he was shot.

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