

CHAPTER IX

TRANSITIONS

*“More than any other person he achieved the intellectual’s ideal of a man in action. His death leaves us unprepared and in darkness.”*¹

In November 1963, the President was scheduled to speak in Dallas, a city where Adlai Stevenson had recently been spat on. The President had given Schlesinger the message, “Call Adlai and give him my sympathy, and tell him we thought he was great.” Stevenson asked Schlesinger to warn Kennedy not to go to Dallas. Fearing that the President would interpret Stevenson’s warning as one more sign of indecisiveness, Schlesinger held his counsel. The next day, Stevenson called Schlesinger, and, relieved that the message had not been conveyed, withdrew the comment.²

On a Friday morning in November, Arthur Schlesinger and Ken Galbraith had joined the recently widowed Katherine Graham for a lunch with her *Newsweek* editors:

We were still sipping drinks before luncheon in an amiable mood when a young man in shirt-sleeves entered the room and said, a little tentatively, “I am sorry to break in, but I think you should know that the President has been shot in the head in Texas. For a flash one thought this was some ghastly office joke. Then we knew it could not be and huddled desperately around the nearest television. Everything was confusing and appalling. The minutes dragged along. Incomprehensible bulletins came from the hospital. Suddenly an insane surge of conviction flowed through me: I felt that the man who had survived the Solomon Islands and so much illness and agony, who so loved life, embodied it, enhanced it, could not possibly die now. He would escape the shadow as he had before. Almost immediately we received the irrevocable word.

In a few moments Galbraith and I were on Katherine Graham’s plane bound for Washington. It was the saddest journey of one’s life.³

Galbraith remarked to Schlesinger, “We let the Radical Right inject this poison into the American bloodstream and this is the result.”⁴ Almost all of the White House family assumed that the assassination had been the work of the Radical Right.⁵ Later that day, Schlesinger echoed the thought, “You know, the Radical Right has never been taken seriously in this country.”⁶

¹ *Transition* magazine, quoted in Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 939.

² *ibid.*, 930-931

³ *ibid.*, 935-936.

⁴ William Manchester, *The Death of a President* (New York, 1967), 403.

⁵ Galbraith, *Ambassador’s Journal*, 589.

⁶ William Manchester, *The Death of a President*, 440.

Galbraith and Schlesinger landed in Washington, went to the White House, and followed a motor escort to Andrews Air Force base to see John Kennedy's body unloaded from a plane.⁷ Stunned, Arthur Schlesinger wrote Jacqueline Kennedy a note:

Dearest Jackie:

Nothing can mitigate the shame and horror of this day. Your husband was the most brilliant, able, and inspiring member of my generation. He was the one man in whom the country could confide its destiny with confidence and hope. He animated everything he did with passion and gaiety and wit. To have known him and worked with and for him is the most fulfilling experience I have ever had or could imagine

Dearest Jackie, the love and grief of a nation may do something to suggest the feeling of terrible vacancy and despair we all feel. Marian and my weeping children join me in sending you our profoundest love and sympathy. I know that you will let me know when I can do anything for you.

With abiding love, Arthur⁸

Arthur wrote her another note, later, "I feel in such a state of total and terrible emptiness-I know that what any of us feel here can only be a fraction of the vacancy and horror which you feel."⁹

The "appalling reality," as Schlesinger's journal called it, could not be avoided.¹⁰ Funeral arrangements had to be made. That night, many of the President's staff met at the Harrimans'.¹¹ Robert Kennedy had taken charge of funeral of arrangements, with assistance from his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver. Shriver gave Richard Goodwin responsibility for preparing the lying-in-state. Goodwin telephoned Schlesinger at the Harrimans, and asked him to find out how previous Presidents had lain-in-state. Schlesinger called the Library of Congress and said that he was, "relaying an urgent personal request from Mrs. Kennedy" and asked the staff to begin research.¹² Schlesinger left the party. A while later, Galbraith received a phone call at the Harrimans', from Schlesinger asking Galbraith to come down to the White House to help work on arrangements for stationing of the coffin, and preparation of a list of people allowed to visit the coffin the next day.¹³

The next day, Arthur and Marian met the Seymour Harrises, the Paul Samuelsons, the Kenneth Galbraiths and some others for lunch. The men chatted in Schlesinger's office before going out to eat. Schlesinger asked them if Robert Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey

⁷ Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal*, 589.

⁸ Manchester, *Death of a President*, 476.

⁹ *ibid*, 540.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 484.

¹¹ *ibid*, 540.

¹² *ibid*, 481.

¹³ Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal*, 590.

could head the Democratic ticket in 1964.¹⁴ At lunch, Schlesinger was in a dour mood. Galbraith wrote in his diary that “like most people interested in politics, (Schlesinger) was reacting too much to the chemistry of the situation.”¹⁵

Back at the White House that afternoon, Schlesinger helped put up decorations in the East Room. His journal noted, “It is now twenty minutes to two. The cabinet will arrive at the White House around 3:30. He heard “forlorn scraps of conversation” in “the room in which we had such happy times filled with such memory and such melancholy.”¹⁶

The prospect of Lyndon Johnson as President was not a pleasant one to Schlesinger. Hubert Humphrey believed that Schlesinger was part of a “Dump Johnson” movement in the White House that formed in 1963.¹⁷ The day after the assassination, Schlesinger asked Democratic party chairman John Bailey if Johnson could be replaced with Robert Kennedy in 1964. Even if splitting the party cost the election, Schlesinger reasoned, the election was lost anyway, for the Southern conservative Johnson would lose the big northeast industrial states to Nixon or Rockefeller. Schlesinger added, “But I suppose he is astute enough to recognize this too, which means that he may be driven to an aggressive liberal program.”¹⁸ Later Schlesinger claimed he did not remember mentioning Robert Kennedy, and the question about Johnson was just a “hypothetical inquiry.”¹⁹

Schlesinger had no intention of working for Lyndon Johnson. He handed in his resignation that day, and expected to devote himself to President Kennedy’s papers.²⁰ Some of the Kennedy staffers, such as O’Donnell and Schlesinger, could not bear the thought of working for anyone other than John Kennedy. Others, such as Ken Galbraith and Walt Rostow, preferred Kennedy, but were willing to carry on with the new leader. Arthur Schlesinger, the champion of pragmatism, found himself sentimentally falling into the camp of the loyalists, instead of the realists.²¹ His diary the next spring contained the passage, “To be charitable, the government would have been paralyzed if everyone behaved like me and Ken O’Donnell...for some people, personal emotion is very difficult...Bundy has everything under control. I do not think that this means that they felt things less than the rest of us.”²² When McGeorge Bundy brought Schlesinger’s letter of resignation in to President Johnson, Johnson replied, “Tell him to take it back. I don’t want any such letters. And tell everyone I mean that.”²³

¹⁴ Anderson, *President’s Men*, 228.

¹⁵ Galbraith, *Ambassador’s Journal*, 592.

¹⁶ Manchester, *Death of a President*, 501.

¹⁷ Merle Miller, *Lyndon* (New York, 1980), 377-378. *A Thousand Days* and *Robert Kennedy* dismiss the idea that Kennedy had any intention of replacing Johnson.

¹⁸ Manchester, *Death of a President*, 516-517.

¹⁹ “Swinging Soothsayer,” *Time* (Mar. 3, 1967), 27

²⁰ Manchester, *Death of a President*, 540.

²¹ *ibid*, 188.

²² *ibid*, 541. Schlesinger was right. Bundy cried at night too.

²³ *ibid*, 544.

The new President asked Galbraith to help prepare an address to Congress. Galbraith had gotten along well with Johnson and thought that Lyndon was, “genuinely intelligent and wants to do things.”²⁴ “I always got along very well with Lyndon Johnson up until the Vietnam war. We came from similar rural backgrounds, and we both came to Washington at the same time in the Roosevelt administration, and were both about the same age,” explained Galbraith.²⁵ Moreover Galbraith, much more than Schlesinger, “took the Democratic party in earnest.”²⁶

Galbraith and Schlesinger saw each other again at the Harrimans in the evening. Schlesinger had no patience for phrases in Galbraith’s speech for Johnson saying that America’s future “was greater than the life of any one man.” Galbraith’s diary for the day noted, “Arthur was in an appalling mood and spent a considerable part of the evening attacking me.”²⁷ In retrospect, Galbraith did realize that Schlesinger was correct in feeling that passages calling for a liberal program were inappropriate for moment.²⁸

The funeral was Monday. Finding Averell Harriman had been left off the invitation list, Schlesinger and Galbraith had made sure he was included.²⁹ While Marian Schlesinger and Galbraith’s wife Catherine went ahead to the cathedral, Schlesinger and Galbraith joined the procession behind the caisson.³⁰

In his journal, Schlesinger later wrote, “I had never understood the function of a funeral before. Now I realized that it is to keep people from going to pieces.”³¹

Although John Kennedy’s death shocked Robert Kennedy into a deep reexamination of his Catholicism, the agnostic Schlesinger interpreted “the murder of John Kennedy (as) one more expression of the ultimate fortuity of things.”³²

The next day, wrote Galbraith, “I had lunch with Arthur who was much more composed and, I think, partly reconciled to the thought of coming back to Cambridge. But not completely reconciled.”³³ But Schlesinger would not be going back to Cambridge as quickly as he had thought. Lyndon Johnson needed to keep the Kennedy staff, to give the appearance that he was carrying on for Kennedy. That afternoon, Johnson called Schlesinger into the oval office. The President began,

“I just want to say that I need you far more than John Kennedy ever needed you.³⁴ He had the knowledge, the skills, the understanding himself. I need you to provide these things for me ... You have a knowledge of the program, the measures, the purposes, the history of the country and of progressive policies, you know writers and all sorts of people I have your letter of resignation, and this is fine as a gesture, but I reject it as a fact.”

²⁴ Galbraith, *Ambassador’s Journal*, 249-250.

²⁵ Interview 12/8/81.

²⁶ Galbraith, *Ambassador’s Journal*, 593.

²⁷ Manchester, *Death of a President*, 583.

²⁸ Galbraith, *Ambassador’s Journal*, 593.

²⁹ *ibid*, 596.

³⁰ *ibid*, 596.

³¹ Manchester, *Death of a President*, 641.

³² Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 665.

³³ Galbraith, *Ambassador’s Journal*, 599.

³⁴ A favorite line of Johnson’s in the next several days.

He continued, only half-jokingly, “If you act on it, I’ll have you arrested.”³⁵

Schlesinger interjected that the President should have his own staff. Johnson answered, “The men who have been working with me are good men, but they aren’t in a class with you men here in the White House. I shall blend three or four of them into the staff, but I am counting on all the present members of the staff to stay.” Johnson would ask all staff members a year; after a year, he said, he knew he would retain their loyalty.

Thinking over the day’s events, Schlesinger wrote, “He said this all with simplicity, dignity, and apparent conviction. I am little perplexed as to what to do. I am sure that I must leave, but I can see the problem of disengagement is going to be considerable.”³⁶ Even Schlesinger had been impressed by the Texan’s genuine anguish over the past several days.³⁷ Arthur Schlesinger tentatively agreed to stay.

As Kenneth Galbraith explained,

Johnson needed liberal support, so beginning that winter, the President took steps to cultivate us to some degree. He would have various people, myself included, down to the Ranch. It’s a wonderful place to go, I may say.

In the case of Arthur Schlesinger, he got Arthur down to his office---spent a whole day with him--from half-past nine in the morning till half-past one. Johnson went over every member of the Senate- his drinking habits, his sex habits, his intellectual capacity, reliability, how you manage him. Arthur said, “Most informative morning I ever spent. Never got a word in edgewise.”

Not very long afterwards, Johnson and I spent a weekend together down at the Ranch. Johnson said, “I’ve been meeting with your friend, Arthur Schlesinger. Really had a very good meeting. We had a long talk. He’s a right smart fellow. But, damn fellow talks too much.”

I was never so pleased in my life as coming back to tell Arthur that.³⁸

But over the next six weeks, Johnson gave Schlesinger no assignments.

Trust in Johnson and those around him was short-lived, for Schlesinger worried that his phone was being tapped.³⁹ Schlesinger resigned again on January fourth, but Johnson apparently cajoled Schlesinger into announcing that he would stay on through March.⁴⁰ A few weeks later though, Schlesinger announced his resignation for good.⁴¹

In a cordial exchange of letters, Schlesinger told Johnson that he was in the tradition of Roosevelt and Kennedy, and praised the new President’s “wise and strong leadership.”⁴² One is reminded of a portion of Henry Adams’ diary that Schlesinger had quoted in a book review many years before: “There are few of my political friends left in

³⁵ Jim F. Heath, *Decade of Disillusionment, the Kennedy-Johnson Years* (Bloomington, 1975).

³⁶ Manchester, *Death of a President*, 740.

³⁷ *ibid*, 543.

³⁸ Miller, *Lyndon*, 202.

³⁹ Lasky, *The Myth and the Man*, 306.

⁴⁰ *New York Times* (Jan. 4, 1963), 8:8; and (Jan. 7, 1963), 12:5.

⁴¹ *New York Times* (Jan. 29, 1963), 16:2.

⁴² In 1968, Johnson would recall, “I kept on eleven cowhands (the cabinet). Some of the tenderfeet left me.” Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 934.

power now, and these few will soon go out. This reconciles me to going away, though I hate Boston and am very fond of Washington.”⁴³

After leaving the White House, Schlesinger journeyed to Cannes, to judge the annual film festival for two weeks, but was soon hard at work writing a history of the Kennedy administration and helping Robert Kennedy’s political career.⁴⁴

While maintaining an appearance of harmony, the Johnson and Kennedy camps were maneuvering against each other. Schlesinger thought that as long as Johnson remained publicly liberal, the Kennedy followers would not be able to make a break without seeming selfish.⁴⁵

Relations between Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson had always been strained, and grew worse because each coveted the leadership of the Democratic party. For political reasons, neither one wanted to be perceived publicly as the instigator of a breach. In March, New York Liberal Party boss Alex Rose conveyed a message to Schlesinger from Johnson for Bobby. In Schlesinger’s words, the message was, “that President Johnson loves you, wants to be friends with you, that the door at the White House is always open to you.” But when he asked McGeorge Bundy about a Johnson-Kennedy meeting, Kennedy found the White House uninterested. Schlesinger advised Kennedy to try again, if only to make sure the record would be on his side. But Kennedy did not want to seem to be begging for the Vice-Presidency, and dropped the matter.⁴⁶

Much of the political speculation of the summer of 1964 centered on who Lyndon Johnson’s Vice-President would be. Kennedy asked Schlesinger for advice about whether to seek the job. Schlesinger felt that Kennedy should not, because “first, that it seems to me a little too artificial and calculated; second, that Bobby should develop his own independent political base; and third, that LBJ might well prefer Shriver.” Retrospectively, Schlesinger regretted not emphasizing enough “the singular stupidity of the job itself.” Kennedy never concretely stated whether he wanted the job or not, and in any case, Johnson did not want Kennedy.⁴⁷

After the Democratic convention, Schlesinger met in late July with Robert Kennedy, Averell Harriman, and David Hackett in Hyannis Port to discuss the New York Senate seat held by Republican Kenneth Keating. For once, Robert Kennedy was certain that he wanted to run.⁴⁸ Schlesinger’s first mission was to sound out Liberal Party leader Alex Rose. Although Rose posed numerous objections, he gave hints that the Liberals might be convinced to support Kennedy.⁴⁹ Many voters felt that Kennedy’s carpet-bagging was just another manifestation of his well-known “ruthless opportunism.”

⁴³ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The Other Henry Adams,” *The Nation* (Dec. 25, 1948), 727.

⁴⁴ *Time*, “Combative Chronicler,” 60. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Annual Rites at Cannes,” *Harper’s* (Feb. 1965).

⁴⁵ Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 681-682.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 699-700.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 702-705.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 715.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 719.

The New York ADA refused to endorse Kennedy.⁵⁰ Even Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. agreed, and joined Democrats for Keating.⁵¹

In a letter to *The New Republic*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote,

I despair of persuading those who have hopelessly committed themselves to the devil theory of Robert Kennedy. I can only remind them that many of them were saying exactly the same things about his brother in 1959-60. Events, I believe, convinced them that they were wrong, and I am sure that events will convince them again; but how many times do we all have to go through this experience?"⁵²

The carpet-bagging charge would not go away. At one of William Vanden Heuval's parties, Schlesinger attempted to refute Gore Vidal's comments about Bobby. Victor Lasky writes, "Schlesinger made one of his shorter addresses, and the audience seemed to love every hour of it."⁵³ Throughout the campaign, Schlesinger would keep pointing out that New York's first Senator, Rufus King, had been from Massachusetts, but no one seemed to care.⁵⁴

Repeating the journeys of four years ago, Schlesinger, Galbraith, and other Kennedy intellectuals traveled around New York state, trying to convince intellectuals that Kennedy was a liberal.⁵⁵ This time the tours were much more extensive, and much more crucial to the campaign's success. As Galbraith explained, Jewish audiences especially needed reassuring, and would not trust a fellow Jew, for "he would too easily be thought in the great tradition of assimilation." Intellectuals like Schlesinger and Galbraith had the needed credibility. Robert Kennedy jokingly referred to the trips as the greatest mission to the Jews since the New Testament.⁵⁶

Running two million votes behind Lyndon Johnson and 10% behind the 1958 Democratic Senate candidate in Jewish areas, Robert Kennedy became the junior Senator from New York, and moved his office from the White House to the Capitol.⁵⁷ Arthur Schlesinger went back to rented office space in the capital to continue work on his memoirs of the Kennedy administration.

⁵⁰ Jack Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir* (New York, 1969), 60.

⁵¹ Lasky, *The Myth and the Man*, 216.

⁵² Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Keating Campaign," *The New Republic* (Oct. 10, 1965), 29.

⁵³ Lasky, *The Myth and the Man*, 217.

⁵⁴ Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 720.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 726. Republican Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, feeling deserted by right-wing intellectuals, remarked, "At least you got to say this for a liberal s.o.b. like Schlesinger- when his candidates go into action, he's there writing speeches for them. White, *The Making of the President 1964*, 381.

⁵⁶ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 386.

⁵⁷ Newfield, *A Memoir*, 155.

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