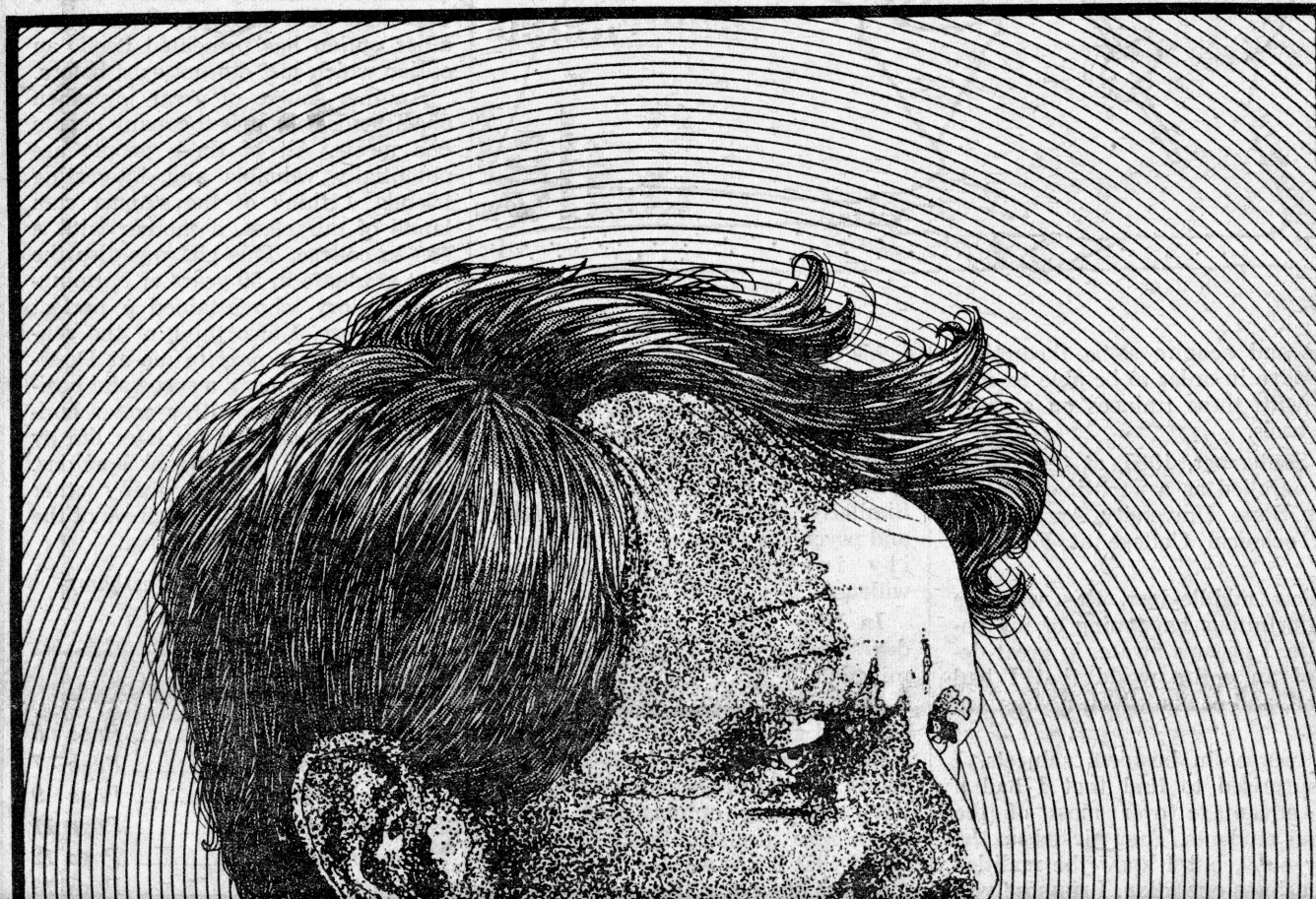


Ideas

NEWSDAY'S JOURNAL OF OPINION/JUNE 4, 1972

Robert Kennedy (1925-1968) By Jeff Greenfield



On the television they are talking about the crucial California primary, and flashing pictures of a gun spurting smoke, and a man stretched on the ground with blood staining his shirt and his wife kneeling over him, and again I am in Los Angeles in a fifth floor suite of the Ambassador Hotel a few moments after midnight on a June Tuesday in 1968, watching the newsmen blurting out half-heard details, watching the faces of the men and women who had been through it with Dallas, stunned but utterly unsurprised, muttering "oh no, oh God no," hearing the innocents who did not know it could happen again. "It can't be, it just can't be."

That June 6 night and the four following days are a blurred nightmare to me, coated with exhaustion, shock and disbelief. The hospital vigil, a flight across America in an Air Force transport, a dawn telephone call to tell me what I already knew, a walk to a Capital Hill haberdashery ("I'd like four neckties, please . . . black"), the funeral at St. Patrick's, cameras clicking like crickets gone mad when President Johnson walked in, and an incredible eight-hour train ride to Washington, with bad jokes and good laughter and the horror of death along the way, and the silence



Newsday Drawing by Mal Spooner

death along the way, and the...
within as silent rows of young black
men lined the roadbed through Balti-
more, with raised fists and signs from
their younger brothers: "Goodbye,
Bobby," "We'll Miss You."

There has been almost no day
these last four years when I have not
thought of Robert Kennedy. But I
have thought far less of when and
how he died than what he was alive.
Partly, I know, this is due to the
combination of accidents that turned
me into a 24-year-old speechwriter on
a presidential campaign. Robert
Kennedy was at the center of so
many things at once—a cult of per-
sonality, an heir to a mythic mantle,
a wave of protest against the Viet-
nam war, a spokesman for the dis-
affected and deprived, a campaign for
the presidency—that it was to me a
constant state of life at a fever pitch.
There were times, in his office in the
Senate and during the 85 days of
Robert Kennedy's presidential cam-
paign, that it seemed as if we were at
the crest of a tidal wave; currents of
love, hate, frenzy, energy, hope and
fear battering around us.

Partly that, yes. But not wholly.
Because I remember most fondly,

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most wistfully, moments outside the roar of crowds and the play of sound and light and passion that is an American presidential campaign. I remember Robert Kennedy in the way his detractors will never believe: as a vulnerable, funny man with a remarkable insight into this country's wounds.

Robert Kennedy's personality was like his Senate office the first time I saw it: overcrowded, overworked, chaotic, disorganized, yet efficient, like some college newspaper office. He was late for everything, in motion constantly, impatient, sensing that there was never enough time. You could, after a week or two, walk into Kennedy's offices and know immediately whether he was there or not: People walked more quickly; spoke more like he did, in a kind of enigmatic shorthand; a hum like a high-tension wire was almost audible among his staff.

Perhaps that suggests fear; if so, it is misleading. Kennedy did not inspire fear, not in the sense of a cringing set of subordinates waiting for the lash of Big Daddy. What Kennedy did was to make you aware of standards; to remind you that he expected what he himself reflected, a constant pursuit of excellence. To be part of that world was an experience I have not since felt. As Jack Newfield, Kennedy's most incisive biographer, has put it, "Bobby made everybody play over their heads."

This was true in matters of substance. I had come to Kennedy's staff believing that John Kennedy was the intellectual, the brilliant reader-writer, while Bobby was the ruthless tactician. Yet working for Robert Kennedy was like studying with a legendary tutor. Every time I worked on a speech, or a statement for the Senate floor, or a committee hearing, the first question he would ask was the question I had forgotten, or raised in my own mind and dismissed as just too detailed or complicated.

"Well . . . what about this point?" Kennedy would say about a speech on Vietnam. "Have you checked this out with Goodwin? Didn't the Times have a piece on the desertion rate in the South Vietnamese army? There's a fellow at M.I.T . . . Why don't you call him and see what he says." He had a

what he says. He had a commitment to getting at the core of things, an unwillingness to ignore the unanswered question, that was astonishing. More important, it explains why his legislative staff—particularly Adam Walinsky and Peter Edelman—turned out the extraordinary work they did in three short years. When Robert Kennedy told Walinsky, "Why don't you take a look at Bedford-Stuyvesant?", it led to a comprehensive program of economic development, in-

cluding job training, urban renewal, community television, and a new kind of neighborhood government. When Kennedy and Peter Edelman started looking at conditions among migrant workers, it led not just to legislation, but to a personal odyssey of discovery and solidarity almost unheard of in contemporary American politics.

The ideas, programs and suggestions that poured out of Kennedy's crowded Senate office included fights that are only now being recognized as important battles. Tax reform, and an end to special loopholes for the rich; tighter regulation of utilities and consumer frauds; community participation in big cities; the plight of the white working class, coupled with specific programs to better the lot of working Americans; these were the sources of excitement in that office, far more than any "Camelot" mystique.

There was also the sheer pleasure of discovering a very funny man. Robert Kennedy had a gift for mordant, self-deprecating humor, spontaneous and contextual rather than finely grafted gags. In 1967, with a fight over a separation-of-church-and-state provision looming in New York, Kennedy was talking to Walinsky, Edelman, Frank Mankiewicz, and myself.

"Look," he began, "the only way the new constitution could pass is if I spent a million dollars and changed my religion. First of all, I haven't got a million dollars . . . wait a minute, that's not true. Of course I have a million dollars . . . but I'm not changing my religion. Now," he continued straightface, "there are certain compensations." Looking stony-faced at four Jewish aides. "After all, I'm going to heaven and you're not."

During the 1968 campaign, reporters were constantly looking for crowd size and enthusiasm. As a chartered flight was coming into an airport for a rally, R.W. Apple of the New York Times asked Kennedy, "How big is the crowd, senator?"

The plane pulled to a stop and the door swung open.

"Fifty thousand," he said and stuck his head out and waved briefly. A cheer went up. Kennedy pulled his head back in, turned to Apple with a schoolboy grin, and said, mocking the press cliches, "They screamed with pleasure."

His self-mockery really

His self-mockery really was easy to take. At some point during the Indiana primary, an ancient two-engine plane started down the runway and abruptly screeched to a halt. Kennedy rose from his seat.

"I just want to say in all modesty," he said, "that if we don't make it, your names will be in very small print."

Others have written about Kennedy's sense of empathy: a capacity to feel the hurt, or

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rage, or discontent of people utterly unlike him. Still others insist on his ruthlessness, or vindictiveness; and I am sure he was capable of both compassion and mean spiritness. He was a human being, not a saint; he could be curt and short with his staff and friends, and could and did go against his best instincts—whether it was a hesitant opposition to the war in Vietnam, or a belated decision to challenge Lyndon Johnson.

Yet perhaps the most insistent memory I have of Robert Kennedy is of a night in Indianapolis, just after Martin Luther King was shot. Kennedy had come back from an impassioned talk to a crowd of blacks, many of whom first heard the news of King's death from Kennedy. He had quoted Aeschylus to them, and spoken of the death of his own brother. But that night, back at the hotel, he was in a quiet, detached mood. Sometime about 2 AM, he came into a room where Adam Walinsky and I, along with Ted Sorensen via telephone, were trying to work on a speech about the King death for the next day.

"You know," he said, "that fellow Lee Harvey . . . Harvey Lee . . . Oswald . . . he set something loose in this country . . . something very strong . . ." Kennedy had, I realized somehow, heard the name of his brother's murder from those first reports which got the names transposed, and he had never been able—or willing—to get them straight.

And then he said "Martin Luther King's death isn't the worst thing that ever happened."

I thought it cold and unfeeling at the time—until I realized he had been dragged back to November 22, 1963, and something that felt even worse than the death of Martin Luther King.

And two months later, in a hotel in Los Angeles, I understood fully and terribly what he had meant.

Passing Thought

Equal jobs for equal pay;

A center for kiddies every day;

Even abortions on demand;

We think the things they want are grand;