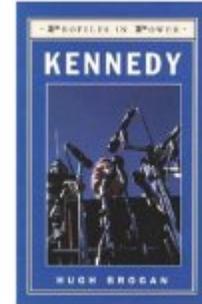


Hugh Brogan. *Kennedy*. London: Longman, 1996. ix + 249 pp. \$127.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-582-02889-0.



Reviewed by Kostadin Grozev

Published on H-USA (July, 1997)

The most natural place for a John F. Kennedy's portrait to appear is in a book-series quite intentionally called "Profiles in Power." The allusion to JFK's *Profiles in Courage* brings the reader to look for a capacity for leadership in historical and national contexts--no matter whether the profile is that of Oliver Cromwell, Peter the Great or General De Gaulle. In this instance Longman Publishers has made quite a good choice in assigning this task to Hugh Brogan. He presents to the readers with a thought-provoking narrative, giving a contemporary, balanced perspective to the personality of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and the most important aspects of his Presidency. That perspective is far away from the eulogies or partisan views of the "Kennedy Myth," and its critics and thus comes quite close to the final judgement associated with an established historical truth.

Hugh Brogan's book is not at all a high-sounding dry academic biography of JFK. As the author admits in his first page, those "wanting a full account should look elsewhere." It is both an emotionally uninvolved and scholarly objective view, aimed to "provide enough information to justify

the contention that Kennedy's was indeed a highly significant presidency in which decisions were taken and choices made that, for good and ill, changed the course of history and still make themselves felt, that it was a lens through which the United States and the US presidency can effectively be studied" (p. 2). The author rightly admits that Kennedy is no longer part of our present--with the end of the Cold War a real Cold War President can be more easily evaluated. Thus Prof. Brogan presents the clear theme of his profile--that of leadership in a democracy.

Chapter Two, "A Candidate for Office" (pp. 6-56), is the longest one in the narrative. This is explainable by the author's desire to follow-up the most important aspects of the personality and the political career of Kennedy leading to his famous Inauguration speech. Without excessive details, the careful reader will find out all of the well-known and frequently discussed biographical facts about JFK: the Boston family and the New England political background, the intellectual impact of Harvard and the challenges of interventionism in European politics surrounding the out-

break of the Second World War (challenges answered by the twenty-three year old, future U.S. leader on the pages of his 1940 book *Why England Slept*), the wartime experience and the PT 109 accident that made him a war hero, the beginning of his active political involvement with the House race of 1946 and the Senate race of 1952. Especially informative to the not-so-knowledgeable readers are the pages concerning Jack's health problems and Brogan's comments (pp. 36-38) on *Profiles in Courage* (the book for which JFK was solely awarded the Pulitzer Prize for biography despite the fact that Theodore Sorensen contributed much to writing it). The chapter gives a balanced account with thought-provoking comments on the 1960 presidential campaign both at the Democratic Party and the national level--how much JFK combined sound political calculations with skills for manoeuvring and charming both the electorate and the experienced party-brokers.

The capacity for leadership that Kennedy possessed was demonstrated clearly during his White House years. According to Brogan Kennedy's was a typical Cold War Presidency which coincided or even caused a significant transformation in world politics--the transition from the so-called Acheson phase (first phase) to the Kissinger phase. That transition was marked by the trend towards a more static change in the East-West military and political balance and was symbolized best by the building of the Berlin Wall. For Brogan, Kennedy's real weakness was that "the difficult area grand designs have to be turned into real politics" (p. 60). That was expressed well during the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev and the events that followed.

The building of the Wall, in Kennedy's mind, showed that both the Warsaw Pact and NATO were permanent features of the landscape and major changes would not be made in the near future. Thus it was not a worth cause for a Third World War and some co-operation between the superpowers might be reached--a trend Kennedy

initiated and Kissinger implicated at its best. The reader will follow step by step that logic in the major foreign policy crisis of 1961--the Bay of Pigs incident, the challenges of stronger U.S. commitment to Laos in terms of the "domino theory," and finally the rising emigration of East Germans to the West that brought about the Wall. In fact the narrative about that last event coincides with an interpretation, depicted in more detail in a recent book by Frank Mayer.[1] Mayer supports Brogan's arguments with his statement that the Kennedy administration was determined to protect the integrity of West Berlin but committed to the preservation of a divided Germany and thus privately heaved a sigh of relief when the Wall stopped the tension over the emigration.

In the fourth chapter "The View from the White House" (pp. 86-120) Brogan explores very well the leadership potential in Kennedy's domestic policy record. The legislative achievements of the administration are portrayed through the delicate liberals vs. conservatives balance both in the House of Representatives and the Senate and the key role played there by such veteran Capitol Hill figures like Sam Rayburn, Howard Smith, Lyndon Johnson and the eventual newcomer Larry O'Brien. The main success of the administration came with the overcoming of the anti-liberal resistance coming from the coalition between Republicans and Southern conservative Democrats, so vigorous in the preceding decades. The conclusion is that especially the House of Representatives "was never a liberal body in Kennedy's years, but it became a manageable one" (p. 97). Brogan argues that Kennedy was lucky in many of his endeavours due to the exact timing of certain initiatives and gives as examples two typical New Frontiers ventures--the Peace Corps initiative and the Moon-landing program. That was true also in the economic policy arena where Keynesian style policy proved effective in the relations with big business (e.g., with tax investment credits). The overall domestic record of JFK is evaluated as a

"respectable one; it showed him as competent yet idealistic, prudent yet courageous" (p. 118).

Brogan's efforts to discover the crusades and crisis that made Kennedy's presidency passionately memorable turn his attention to three historical facts--the Cuban missiles confrontation of October 1962, the civil rights movement, and the conflict that later evolved into the Vietnam War. All those cases still bring passions and disputes among historians and the general public so the author has walked over thin ice in presenting a balanced picture of what really happened and how that affected presidential leadership.

The treatment of the Missile Crisis (pp. 121-150) follows the mainstream account of the events made by leading actors on the scene (e.g. Robert Kennedy, Dean Rusk and Theodore Sorensen) complemented by recent scholarship on that problem (mainly the study of Michael Beschloss).[2] The events of October 1962 are portrayed on the background of Cold War controversies in the Latin American region and the Alliance for Progress designs. The reader will find the major stages of the confrontation and the steps that brought its resolution. Kennedy's motives for his Cuban policy throughout 1962 are sought in the outcome of the Bay of Pigs operation, the Mon-goose plan (a CIA design for the physical elimination of Fidel Castro) and the President's desire to match the idealistic romantic approach with the pragmatic needs of superpower geopolitics. Khrushchev's motives are shown as playing around the same mistake--each side not considering seriously enough what the reaction of the other one might be. Those misconceptions escalated rapidly in mid-October and thus came the threat of nuclear annihilation. Brogan states that Kennedy believed that the U.S.S.R. was an aggressive state which should be vigorously resisted and that the missile affair confirmed his perception; at the same time however, he also believed that if he tried hard enough the Soviet leaders would one day see sense (p. 137). In such a frame of mind all

options (immediate intervention in Cuba, the blockade etc.) that the Executive Committee of the National Security Council put before the President's eyes depended on his will and personal decision. JFK stood firm and at the same time tried the negotiations path which eventually ended the conflict and lead to the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963. That was a clear sign of leadership on the side of the President who as a result of the nuclear war threat replaced the crusade for freedom with a crusade for peace.

One of Kennedy's greatest challenges during his administration was the political nightmare of combining the New Frontier idealism with the racial segregation realities, especially in the South. Brogan deals with that in his sixth chapter, adequately named "Revolution" (pp. 151-178). The end of white supremacy in the 1960's is in Brogan's words "one of the brightest moments in American history and Kennedy's in bringing it is the brightest part in his record" (p. 151). The narrative gives the main facts and the background to the policy decisions in that area--how politically sensitive it was to keep the balance between the civil rights leaders and the important Democratic votes and power-brokers in the South, the North-eastern element in Kennedy's thinking, his moderate approach in 1960-1961 and the change to faster actions brought by the incoming confrontations (the Freedom Riders of 1961, the James Meredith case in Ole Miss, Mississippi in 1962 and the Birmingham campaign and the March to Washington next year). A due respect is given to the role of Bobby Kennedy who managed to complement his brother's effort at a time of crisis. As Brogan states, "it was in the North that the civil rights movement would eventually meet defeat, but before then it met victory in the South" (p. 153). The lessons of those hard decisions modified the President's attitude and consolidated his desire to pass a strong Civil Rights Bill. The fatal shots in Dallas prevented JFK from seeing that bill passed but its time had already come and Lyndon

Johnson realized it through his own conviction, energy and cunning.

No story about the 1960's would go without a reference to Vietnam, and neither does this one. Brogan's chapter about Vietnam (pp. 179-203) plunges into that theme through the looking glasses of the domino theory and the Cold War paradigm. After presenting briefly the pre-history of the Vietnam conflict the author tries to follow the turns in Kennedy's Vietnam policy. The answer he is searching for is whether there are any inherent intentions within the Administration for withdrawal from Vietnam. Historians usually are tempted to place the blame of a certain event on a single person or group of men who participated in certain historical trends. In this instance we see how Brogan analyzes the alternatives before Kennedy and asserts that the Diem crises in the fall of 1963 was a turning point after which JFK began thinking about disengagement and political alternatives to America's presence in Vietnam. That was against the tide of strong forces working for the fatal Vietnam commitment and the political considerations for votes which prevented Kennedy from changing course.

The most logical conclusion for a book like this is its final chapter (pp. 204-225) dealing with Kennedy's death in Dallas and its effect on the Presidency. Brogan, whose perhaps slightly overconfident work is based on sound scholarship,[3] rejects all conspiracy theories and mysteries revolving around the November 1963 tragedy, and searches for the psychological motives that drove Lee Harvey Oswald to shoot. The ritual of the funeral inspired the American public to develop the young dead hero myth which nicely fitted to the general atmosphere of the 1960's. Here the reader will find interesting insights on the attacks on the Warren Report from both the Left and the Right. According to Brogan the real meaning of the assassination is seldom touched upon and it stands as follows: "The meaning is the fact the United States is a country in which a Lee Harvey Oswald

desired to kill a John F. Kennedy, and was able to do so" (p. 211). On that historical plane the author develops his final conclusions on Kennedy's record at a time when "Americans were looking for leadership, guidance, counsel and liberation." His achievements abroad were not so many, but the mistakes he made were few and he caused little harm in the sphere of foreign policy and international relations--and he had the lucky chance to overcome the Missile crisis. His short term makes even difficultier the evaluation of his domestic record where the start of the economic growth of the 1960's and the civil rights changes loom on the horizon. Thus JFK is remembered best by his successful oratory for which Brogan says: "Had he done nothing, he would at least, in his speeches, have consolidated the American world view into something apparently rational, solid and noble" (p. 222). By his leadership potential he gave to the Americans a renewed belief in themselves and in their President that the author concludes is the strongest part of his legacy.

Hugh Brogan's portrait of John Kennedy with its nice, eloquent and easy style will make a nice companion for the classrooms at colleges and universities and will probably easily make its way to the reading lists of tutors, especially in countries where English is a second language. In this regard a note should be made of the short but excellent bibliographical essay which shows the most important books and sources for the period and the theme of the narrative. Without being pompous and superfluous it gavels enough information to the interested readers where and how to enlarge their knowledge on the subject.

NOTES:

[1]. Frank A. Mayer *Adenauer and Kennedy: A Study in German American Relations, 1961-1963*, New York, St. Martin's, 1996.

[2]. Michael R. Beschloss *Kennedy v Khrushchev: the Crisis Years 1960-1963*, London, Faber, 1991.

[3]. Gerald Posner *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK*, London, Warner, 1994.

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Citation: Kostadin Grozev. Review of Brogan, Hugh. *Kennedy*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.

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