

CHAPTER X

MAKING HISTORY

*“To take part in public affairs, to smell the dust and sweat of battle, is surely to stimulate and amplify the historical imagination.”*¹

After returning from France, Schlesinger began writing his memoir of the Kennedy administration. As he explained, “I compose on the typewriter, aim at 1,000 words a day, rewrite as I go along and smoke cigars.”² The speedy work pace produced *A Thousand Days* by late 1965.

Life magazine serialized the book in the summer before its publication. As soon as installments appeared, controversy began. In one week’s issue, Schlesinger detailed the President’s thoughts about the prisoners captured during Bay of Pigs:

The vision haunted him of the men on the beaches, who had gone off with such splendid hopes, had fought so bravely and now would be shot like dogs or carried off to Castro’s prisons. The only times Jackie had seen him weep were in the hospital at moments of sheer discouragement over his back; tears would fill his eyes and would roll down his cheeks. Now, in the bedroom, he put his head into his hands and almost sobbed, and then took her into his arms.³

Many readers found the inclusion of such a personal detail tasteless, and Schlesinger, thinking twice about the passage, deleted it from the book. He recalls, “I couldn’t write it. I found it too sob-sisterish as I wrote it.”⁴

But one major controversy far outshone other criticism of the book. Schlesinger stated that President Kennedy had been planning to fire Secretary of State Rusk after the 1964 elections.⁵ Critics were outraged. Most felt it completely improper for Schlesinger to use a confidential statement by a dead man to undermine a current office-holder.

Among those criticizing Schlesinger was old-time ADA friend Vice-President Humphrey. Schlesinger considered Humphrey’s criticism a tasteless attempt to curry favor with Lyndon Johnson.⁶ To critics in general Schlesinger replied that Johnson obviously had confidence in Rusk, and Rusk’s position could not therefore be undermined.

“The people who attack me never ask the first question a historian would ask,” continued Schlesinger, “Is it true?”⁷ Schlesinger’s position was somewhat weakened by the fact that he applied different standards in deciding not include passages suggesting

¹ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The Historian and History” *Foreign Affairs* (April 1963), 492.

² “Schlesinger and John F. Kennedy,” *Life* (July 16, 1965), 5.

³ *Life*, July 23, 1965, 75. One assumes Jacqueline told Schlesinger the story.

⁴ Interview 3/29/82.

⁵ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 927. If Rusk were as incompetent a secretary of State as Schlesinger portrays him, Kennedy was grossly derelict in not removing Rusk earlier. Ross, *Literary Politicians*, 97.

⁶ *New York Times*, “Controversial Historian,” 132.

⁷ *New York Times*, “Controversial Historian,” 30-31.

that J. Edgar Hoover would have been retired from the F.B.I. in 1965 by President Kennedy.⁸

That Schlesinger's decision betrayed personal animosity for Rusk was beyond doubt. A few years before Ambassador Galbraith and Special Assistant Schlesinger had agreed that Rusk was the "indiscriminate exponent of all the Establishment clichés. But he is in, which is the basic position of all Establishmentarians."⁹ Rusk, for his part, had never thought much of Schlesinger. As David Halberstam put it, Rusk hated the "quick, glib men dancing around Georgetown cocktail parties, Schlesingers, Galbraiths, Goodwin, Kaysens, people of that ilk. Making their direct phone calls to the President, breaking regular channels with their phone calls and shortcuts."¹⁰ Having lived in Britain before the Second World War, Rusk distrusted intellectuals as pacifists.¹¹ Washington insiders told the press that Rusk had considered Schlesinger a gossip, and never said anything important around him.¹² Other Washington insiders did not consider him as bright as the rest of the Kennedy crowd, but instead thought him the cautious product of the State Department's bureaucracy.¹³

Answering the first question a historian would ask, some of Rusk's friends stated that Schlesinger's assertion was not even true. Pierre Salinger wrote that Kennedy never planned to dump Rusk.¹⁴ *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye* includes the passage

I was with President Kennedy in his office one day when Schlesinger urged him to replace Rusk. Kennedy looked up from the paper at his desk that he was studying, glanced at Schlesinger, and said to him, "That's a great idea, Arthur." After Schlesinger left the office, no doubt certain that Rusk's days as Secretary of State were numbered, the President looked at me, shook his head, laughed, and said, "Arthur has a lot of good ideas."¹⁵

On the other hand, Robert Kennedy had read *A Thousand Days* before publication, and had not asked Arthur to remove the passage.¹⁶ Ted Sorenson had also included a passage in *Kennedy* stating that Kennedy would remove Rusk, but removed it at the last minute. Schlesinger took everything in stride, and proclaimed, "I couldn't care less...I do not comment on impetuous reaction."¹⁷

"It probably isn't worthy of the subject or the period," Schlesinger had modestly commented at the publication of *A Thousand Days*.¹⁸ Like the vast majority of the book-reading public, the Pulitzer Prize Committee disagreed, and awarded Schlesinger his second Pulitzer Prize, this time for biography. Schlesinger was also honored at the

⁸ *Time*, "Combative Chronicler," 55.

⁹ Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal*, 304.

¹⁰ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 377.

¹¹ *ibid*, 387.

¹² *Time*, "Combative Chronicler," 55.

¹³ Halberstam, *The Best and Brightest*, 393, 419-420.

¹⁴ quoted in Gore Vidal, "The Holy Family," *Esquire* (April 1967), 201.

¹⁵ O'Donnell, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye*, 282.

¹⁶ Interview, 3/29/82.

¹⁷ "Current History- Trials of the Instant Author," *Time* (Aug. 27, 1965), 30.

¹⁸ "The Kennedy Administration- Shimmering Essence," *Newsweek* (Dec. 6, 1965), 38.

National Book Awards. His citation read, “The reader is in the presence of two masters, one in the seat of power, the other one seated at his typewriter.” *Newsweek*’s coverage of the awards ceremony explained “In honoring Schlesinger, the judges chose expressly to honor his subject as well: and for a brief moment in that great gilt hall, the witty ironist (as Schlesinger called him) who once led the nation presided.”¹⁹

Regardless of the book’s literary merits, many people suspected that *A Thousand Days* was just another product of the “ruthless” Kennedy machine. Did the Kennedys censor the book before publication? According to Schlesinger, Bobby Kennedy read the book before publication and requested only a few minor changes.

Robert Kennedy had suggested that I had constructed a rather labored argument as to whether in those circumstances would we have traded out missiles in Turkey for removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba. Robert Kennedy advised me to take that out on the ground that of course we would have done that rather than get into a war... (I had written) that some of the Kennedys didn’t like Sargent Shriver all that much. He asked me to take that out.²⁰

Eliot Fremont-Smith wrote in the *New York Times* that Schlesinger had sought truth over objectivity.²¹ Whether he even obtained factual truth has been a subject of controversy ever since the book came out. At times the book understated the ugly side of the administration--incidents such as the power play squeezing out idealistic liberal Richard Goodwin.²²

And sometimes Schlesinger was just plain ridiculous. James Michael Curley was a bitter political opponent of John Kennedy’s grandfather John Fitzgerald. When Curley opened his campaign to unseat Boston Mayor Fitzgerald, Curley promised that subjects of campaign speeches would be “Graft in Ancient Times vs. Graft in Modern Times” and “Great Lovers from Cleopatra to Toodles.” The next day, Fitzgerald announced that he would not seek re-election.²³ Yet Schlesinger labeled John Kennedy ‘courageous, for refusing to join the rest of the Massachusetts Congressional delegation in petitioning President Truman for a pardon for Curley’s mail-fraud conviction.²⁴

But the example cited above is one of the few in either *A Thousand Days* and *Robert Kennedy and His Times* that does not stand up under examination. Schlesinger’s books on the Kennedys are scrupulously free of factual error; their problem is what they omit. Can one get a complete understand of Joe Kennedy’s family by reading an account that leaves out the fact that Joe never told his wife Rose that Jack’s PT boat had been reported missing?²⁵

¹⁹ “National Book Awards,” *Newsweek* (Mar. 28, 1966), 106.

²⁰ Interview 3/29/82.

²¹ *New York Times* (Nov. 24, 1965), 37:1.

²² *Newsweek*, “Shimmering Essence,” 37.

²³ Gail Cameron, *Rose*, (New York, 1971), 78. “Toodles” was a cigarette girl linked to Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald had created the post of “City Dermatologist” for his brother.

²⁴ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 90.

²⁵ Cameron, *Rose*, 151

President Kennedy's father Joseph Kennedy served for a time as Ambassador to Britain. Schlesinger's books do not include the following quote from the diary of Hitler's Ambassador to Britain, following a conversation with Kennedy: "He himself understood our Jewish policy completely; he was from Boston and there, in one golf club and in other clubs, no Jews had been admitted for the past 50 years.... such pronounced attitudes were quite common, but people avoided making a big fuss about it."²⁶ It is of course possible that the German Ambassador misconstrued Kennedy's remarks. Still, Schlesinger does not let the reader make his own decision.

From *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, one would never learn that two of Robert Kennedy's closest advisors, Ted Sorenson and Richard Goodwin were barely speaking to two other close advisors, Larry O'Brien and Kenneth O'Donnell in 1968.²⁷ Missing from Schlesinger's books is the fact that Palm Beach, one of President Kennedy's favorite vacation spots, was one of the most segregated cities of the nation.²⁸

On the subject of the Kennedys' personal lives, Schlesinger was especially gentle. Rumors of John Kennedy's sexual activities were quickly dismissed. Even *Robert Kennedy and His Times* ignored the research done by authors such as Joan and Clay Blair in *The Search for the Real JFK* about Joseph Kennedy Senior's extramarital affairs, the Kennedys' attitude towards women, young Jack Kennedy's liaison with a suspected Nazi spy named Inga Arvard, the extent to which *Why England Slept* was influenced by Ambassador Kennedy's changing political views, the competence of Jack Kennedy's decisions during the PT 109 incident, new evidence that Jack Kennedy had Addison's Disease, and a host of other issues.²⁹

When asked, Schlesinger replied that most of the material in the Blair book dealt with John Kennedy, and would not therefore fit in to an already long book on Robert Kennedy.³⁰ Schlesinger's point is well-taken, but, considering how many people will base their judgment of the Kennedys solely on the Schlesinger books, the omissions are unfortunate. Asked if parts of a subject's personal life are unfit for biography, Schlesinger replied, "I think it's a question of time. I think that one would write things about Lincoln's marriage, a century later, that one wouldn't write at a time when his wife or children or so on were still around."³¹

Perhaps the fairest assessment of Schlesinger's point of view is contained in Richard Walton's *Cold War and Counterrevolution*:

Probably (Kennedy) will live most vividly through history in the pages of Arthur Schlesinger's book. It is an appealing picture, vital, intelligent, humorous, and heroic...Arthur Schlesinger wrote these words not as the gifted historian he is but as a grieving friend and colleague. That is proper, for

²⁶ David Koskoff, *Joseph P. Kennedy: A Life and Times* (Englewood Cliffs, 1974), 136-137.

²⁷ Anderson, *President's Men*, 200.

²⁸ Zinn, *People's History*.

²⁹ Joan and Clay Blair, *The Search for J.F.K.* (New York, 1976) Of course not every allegation mentioned above is necessarily true. The point is that the issues, all of which have some evidence, are not dealt with at all.

³⁰ Interview 4/23/82.

³¹ Interview 3/29/82.

seldom should anything be put before friendship and loyalty, but as Schlesinger knows better than most of us, one man's truth, no matter how deeply and genuinely felt, is not another's.³²

While talking to a *Time* interviewer, one of Schlesinger's White House colleagues asked himself, "Did (Schlesinger) leave a mark? No, other than the book."³³ But in writing the book, Schlesinger had done more for Kennedy and for liberalism than he ever could have done working at the White House. Patrick Anderson, who found Schlesinger a peripheral figure, cut of step with the Kennedy administration's pragmatism wrote:

To Kennedy, even more so to his political heirs, Schlesinger the speechwriter-troubleshooter was expendable, but Schlesinger the historian was not. His *A Thousand Days* is one of those rare books with the power to create its own reality. Kennedy's undertakings were not all so successful as Schlesinger pictures them, nor his motives so noble, nor his appointees so able and idealistic, nor their wives so gay and lovely....if future generations choose to remember Kennedy's too-brief era as a golden interlude, a spiritual renaissance, a historic turning point in the American development, Schlesinger's writing will have done much to shape their judgment. No President could ask for more.³⁴

To be fair, one should remember Schlesinger's point that a historian can only write impartial history about subjects he does not care about.³⁵ Moreover, whatever their biases, Schlesinger's books on the Kennedys will be invaluable tools for future historians.

Was Schlesinger's primary function to be White House historian? Schlesinger said that he never expected to write a history of the Kennedy administration; he thought Kennedy would instead.³⁶ As the administration took power, the President told his staff he did not want them keeping detailed notes; joking remarks might be taken out of context. Schlesinger recalled:

Accordingly, my White House notes for the first few weeks were fragmentary. Then after the Bay of Pigs he said, "I hope you kept a full account of that." I said that I had understood he did not want us to keep full accounts of anything. He said, "No. Go ahead. You can be damn sure that the CIA has its record and the Joint Chiefs theirs. We'd better make sure we have a record over here. So you go ahead." I did.³⁷

When Ken O'Donnell asked if Schlesinger would be the administration's historian, Kennedy explained, "I'll probably write my own official history of the Kennedy administration, but Arthur will probably write one of his own, and it will be better for us

³² Walton, *Cold War and Counter-revolution*, 231.

³³ *Time*, "Combative Chronicler," 60.

³⁴ Anderson, *President's Men*, 215.

³⁵ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "On the Writing of Contemporary History," *Atlantic* (Mar. 1967), 69-74

³⁶ "Schlesinger at the White House," *Harper's* (July 1965).

³⁷ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, x.

if he's here in the White House seeing what goes on, instead of reading about us in the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine up in his office in Widner Library at Harvard.”³⁸

After the assassination, Robert Kennedy encouraged both Schlesinger and Sorenson to write a history of the administration.³⁹

Schlesinger explained, “After Dallas, I came to realize that I had the good fortune to have been the only professional historian for a long time to see history from the vantage point of the White House. I felt I owed it both to the memory of the President and the profession to put it all down.”⁴⁰

Reasoning that because Schlesinger wrote a favorable account of the administration Kennedy planned all along for him to be official historian is a post hoc argument. After all, if Kennedy had always aimed to make Schlesinger White House chronicler, Schlesinger never would have been offered the State Department positions.

[This is a chapter from David B. Kopel, *The Highbrow in American Politics: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and the Role of the Intellectual in Politics*. Honors Thesis in History, Brown University, May 1982. Awarded Highest Honors, and the National Geographic Society Prize for best History thesis. Other chapters are available on-line at <http://www.davekopel.org/schlesinger/main.htm>.](http://www.davekopel.org/schlesinger/main.htm)

³⁸ O'Donnell, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye*, 243.

³⁹ Lasky, *The Myth and the Man*, 193.

⁴⁰ *Life*, “Schlesinger and John Kennedy,” 5.