# “Our Memory Shall be a Blessing”:

# Constructing and Philanthropizing the Legacy of Robert F. Kennedy

Nia Langdon

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: **Nia Langdon**

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Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Chair
*Dr. Matthew Penney*

_____ Examiner
*Dr. Andrew Ivaska*

_____ Examiner
*Dr. Theresa Ventura*

_____ Thesis Supervisor
*Dr. Elena Razlogova*

Approved by

_____
*Dr. Matthew Penney, Graduate Program Director*

_____
*Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science*

## Abstract

**"Our Memory Shall be a Blessing": Constructing and Philanthropizing the Legacy of Robert F. Kennedy**

**Nia Langdon**

Since his death in 1968, popular works and recollections about Senator Robert F. Kennedy have all told a similar story: that Kennedy was a singular politician with a special connection to underdogs, and that when he died, the nation collectively mourned, for there was something redeeming about America's future that died with him. The context and production of this narrative has thus far remained largely unchallenged, which has allowed the proliferation of an incomplete story. I argue here that this popular conception of Kennedy's legacy was heavily informed and mediated by his friends and family in the public mourning practices they organized following Kennedy's death. This resulted in the formation of a legacy that was flattering to Kennedy's memory. This constructed legacy was lucrative: it was used to create the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, which both structured itself around and reinforced Kennedy's legacy in order to engage in philanthropic endeavours. The RFK Memorial ensured the continuance of its namesake's legacy – but it also directly contradicted this legacy's central principles by enacting programs which were funded by architects of the ongoing War on Crime. Studying this process is crucial to understanding how liberalism and liberal institutions also contributed to the War on Crime, and how the memory of liberal figures can be co-opted to enact programs that are directly antithetical to their works in life.

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## Introduction: "Maybe the Poison Drips Through"

On December 10, 2023, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. posted a video on X (formerly Twitter) of a conversation between him and his Bedford-Stuyvesant-born Uber driver, Jawhar Jordan. The meeting of the two men was serendipitous for Kennedy, Jr., now a presidential candidate in his own right – as Senator for New York in 1966, his father, the elder Robert F. Kennedy, had helped to create the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC), a group designed to jumpstart economic growth in the impoverished Brooklyn neighbourhood. Jordan had grown up surrounded by the work of the BSRC, and in the video, he recounted his memories of it to Kennedy, Jr. The two discussed some of the revitalization projects spearheaded by the BSRC, some of which included the rebuilding of the Billie Holiday Theatre as well as the Christmas skating parties held by the BSRC – parties at which the Kennedy family was sometimes in attendance to hand out gifts. Kennedy, Jr. used Jordan's experiences as a jumping off point for self-promotion, too: he made sure to mention that he had personally held a board position with the BSRC for thirty years. In the body of the post, he stated that the BSRC was important because rather than handing out welfare cheques, it instead created jobs and fostered community – values that he would bring to his own hypothetical presidency.[1]

Replies to the post were largely supportive of Kennedy, Jr., but some were not. One user replied, "Stop taking credit for your father's achievements. You are nothing like your father. Nothing."[2] Another said "Just keep trading on your father. He'd be horrified."[3] However, at least

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[1] Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. (@RobertKennedyJr), "I recently took an Uber in Scottsdale, AZ. Coincidentally, my driver, Jawhar Jordan, grew up in Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy – a neighbourhood that used to be one of the poorest in New York, but which my…", X, December 10, 2023, 8:17 AM. https://x.com/robertkennedyjr/status/1733838457879888127?s=46.

[2] [2] The Artist Formerly Known As Angry Elf (@unbelievable), "@RobertKennedyJr Stop taking credit for your father's achievements. You are nothing like your father. Nothing", X, December 10, 2023, 8:39 AM. https://x.com/unbelievable/status/1733843862777393421?s=46.

[3] [3] Showbiz 411 (@showbiz411), "@RobertKennedyJr Just keep trading on your father. He'd be horrified," X, December 10, 2023, 8:53 AM. https://x.com/showbiz411/status/1733847336038613319?s=46.

one person connected RFK Jr. to his father's politics in a positive way: "I watched the Netflix documentary[4] about your father. I didn't know much about him but I feel it was very well done. Makes me angry for him because it looked like he really cared for the people. You seem to have those traits. I'm interested in learning more."[5]

The responses to Kennedy, Jr.'s tweet betray the contradictions inherent to his recollections of his father. As a Democratic senator, the elder Robert Kennedy operated within the context of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society – a time of enthusiasm for and newfound awareness of the importance of social services and tackling the problem of poverty. In founding the BSRC, he complemented preexisting social services by stimulating economic development in a neighbourhood that had benefitted less from government programs. However, this is not the interpretation of the BSRC that Kennedy, Jr. offers in the tweet. He instead offers a more Republican, neoliberal view of the BSRC – that its importance was that it resisted distributing welfare in the form of so-called "handouts" and instead inspired Bedford-Stuyvesant residents to pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps to help themselves. Despite his right-leaning interpretation, he still makes sure to centre his father's connection to the poor and to Black Americans – two groups that his father has long been said to have championed throughout his career.

The version of Robert Kennedy's life as told by his son is, more often than not, the backbone for the majority of writings about his father, even if the facts of his career get interpreted differently here. One example of an expanded telling of the elder Robert Kennedy's

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[4] This user is referring to *Bobby Kennedy for President*, a four-episode docuseries that incidentally also inspired me to write this thesis.

[5] [5] 4cats&2dogs (@2dogs_4cat45175), "@RobertKennedyJr I watched the Netflix documentary about your father. I didn't know much about him but I feel it was very well done. Makes me angry for him because it looked like he really cared..." X, December 10, 2023, 11:35 AM. https://x.com/2dogs_4cat45175/status/1733888091952431444?s=10.

life that follows this skeleton is the biography of him given by the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights advocacy organization on their website. The foundation, formed in 1968 by the friends and family of Robert Kennedy to fulfill his sociopolitical aspirations, uses the same bullet points of Kennedy, Jr's post as an outline for a much longer, yet equally complimentary, account. This version smooths over any conflict in his life and omits anything that could not be refuted with carefully chosen adjectives – consequently, borderline-violent confrontations in hearing rooms become passion, ruthless campaign managing gets described as "tireless and effective," and carpetbaggery gets whisked away with tell of how Kennedy used humour to dispel these accusations in real life. Very real criticism he faced throughout his career is not mentioned – instead, the foundation eulogizes how Kennedy was a builder of bridges whose 1968 campaign for the Democratic nomination "brought hope to an American people troubled by discontent and violence at home and the overseas conflict in Vietnam."[6] To a reader who is informed about some of the less savoury moments in Kennedy's career, the webpage reads more like a highlights reel than as a proper biography.

Robert Kennedy was a beloved man, but controversy followed his moves just as much as adulation did. It is a fact that he worked for anti-communist demagogue Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, and it is also true that he ruthlessly hounded labour leader Jimmy Hoffa for years as a prosecutor over charges of corruption. Both of these roles earned him a reputation for being a difficult coworker and a ruthless political operator. He made important moves to protect civil rights activists throughout the early 1960s as his brother's Attorney General, but also took precious time to actually make these moves – and even requested wiretaps on its most prominent leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. After being elected a senator in 1964, Robert Kennedy

[6] "Biography," *Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights,* 2024, https://rfkhumanrights.org/about-us/rfk-life-legacy/biography/.

garnered a reputation as a champion for the underdog. As the Democratic party fractured into factions through 1967 and 1968, Kennedy took advantage of the chaos to challenge incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson in the Democratic primary, but his entry into the race just days after Senator Eugene McCarthy's spiritual victory in the 1968 New Hampshire primary made him seem opportunistic and ambitious to a fault. Kennedy fought for support throughout the primaries, but before he could win the party's nomination, he was assassinated. Throughout his career, he touched different political extremes; he was a keen self-reinventor and continually resisted fitting into a single political box.

There is room for variance within remembrances of Robert Kennedy, as demonstrated by the disparate interpretations of his career offered by both his son and the institution that bears his name. These two accounts specifically show how it is possible to take the same moments in Kennedy's career and interpret them as belonging to different political traditions. As will be shown, the story of Robert Kennedy changes from person to person, and from group to group: he can be a ruthless prosecutor, or a revolutionary messiah; a charlatan carpetbagger, or America's last great hope. He was loved and hated, often for the same actions. Nevertheless, the presence of these disharmonious accounts has not stopped a dominant narrative from emerging in wider culture that paints Robert Kennedy as a hero of the dispossessed. This narrative seems to always follow a familiar structure: he was deeply impacted by his brother's assassination, he became a champion for the underprivileged, he was especially beloved by the poor and racialized peoples, he ran for president to champion their needs, he was assassinated, and then he was universally mourned.

This is usually how the story of Robert Kennedy is told – it is often presented as this kind of consistent, unchanging narrative in which the American people, a homogenous collective,

wept together for a leader they all loved. It is a narrative suspended in Walter Benjamin's homogenous, empty time – stripped from the context of its creation and unaltered by the person who tells it or the time in which it is told.[7] This narrative does not tell us *who* thought these things or held these opinions, or *why* they did so, or indeed, *if* they did so – it is supposed to be self-evident that Robert Kennedy should be so beloved and revered. The narrative also does not allow the category of the "American people" to be broken down into its constituent parts, because when this is done, the idea that Robert Kennedy is universally adored for the same reasons no matter who is asked begins to become problematized. So if it doesn't make sense for all of America to believe the same things about Kennedy, how did it come to seem like this was the case?

In this thesis, I argue that the popular conception of Robert Kennedy's life and legacy was heavily mediated by his friends and family in the symbolic pageantry that surrounded his death and funeral. I call the version of Kennedy's legacy constructed by his family and friends the "Bobby" version, after the nickname by which he was regularly affectionately called. I also argue that once the outline of this legacy was somewhat entrenched in the public mind, it was used by the newly founded Robert F. Kennedy Memorial in order to solicit donations for their programming. To do this, the Memorial engaged in a reflexive process of both structuring itself around Kennedy's legacy and reinforcing the terms of that legacy through its advertising and fundraising. This ensured the endurance of his legacy, but also directly contradicted this legacy's central principles through programs which were funded by architects of the ongoing War on Crime.

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[7] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt (Glasgow: Fontana / Collins, 1973): 255-266.

Wider Literature: Legacies of Public Figures

There is a profound collection of existing literature that supports this thesis through examinations of other public figures. Though Robert Kennedy specifically does not often feature in these works, works on Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. contain nuanced methods of analysis that are easily applied to Robert Kennedy. These works resist the claim that politicians and public figures are "universally mourned" in death by breaking down how specific groups both mourned (or resisted mourning) these figures. These works also demonstrate ways to study memory of and memorials to public figures by both emphasizing the importance of discursive actors in commemoration, as well as how these discursive actors can distort memory for political gain.

Studies of political deaths and funerals have, understandably, focused on assassinated presidents, particularly those of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. The stories of these two assassinations are often connected in scholarly works, especially since the pageantry surrounding Lincoln's funeral was purposefully emulated in the planning of JFK's funeral.[8] They are also often connected because of their reported impacts on Black Americans. For example, Sharron Wilkins Conrad explains that since Lincoln was known as the Great Emancipator and JFK was popularly understood to have advanced the field of civil rights, their portraits were often seen hanging on walls together in Black households.[9] Since both of these assassinations provoked

[8] Aaron Lee Schuman, "Farewell to the Chief: The American Presidential Funeral" (MA diss., University of Arkansas, 2021): 3-4.

[9] Sharron Wilkins Conrad, "'He Gave His Life for Us': The Civil Rights Martyrdom of John F. Kennedy," in *Mourning the Presidents: Loss and Legacy in American Culture,* ed. Lindsay M. Chervinsky and Matthew R. Costello (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023): 223. Wilkins Conrad observes, interestingly, that describing JFK as a civil rights president is often at odds with scholarly interpretations of his presidency. All the same, Black Americans still continued to think of JFK in this way. Noting this discrepancy between scholarly evaluations of a president and popular collective memory importantly highlights how both kinds of evaluations/legacies can exist alongside and in tension with one another. This phenomenon also occurs when looking at Robert Kennedy's memory.

significant outpourings of public emotions, scholarly works about the deaths usually focus on how they were experienced and mourned by the general public.[10] Robert Kennedy does sometimes get mentioned in these works, especially in anecdotal remarks in works focused on his brother (Wilkins Conrad, for example, mentions Kennedy as an example of what she calls a "secular saint" along with JFK, Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr.) but, interestingly, the wave of public emotion following his death has largely evaded any serious scholarly study beyond shorter discussions in Robert Kennedy biographies.[11]

These studies of Lincoln and JFK also do not always inquire after how the pageantry surrounding their deaths could have contributed to how they are remembered today – but, importantly, they do resist the popular conceptions that these two men were "universally mourned." I discuss this idea later on as an interpretive issue in studies of Robert Kennedy, but for now, it is sufficient to note that there is precedent in scholarship about Lincoln and JFK for actively questioning the veracity of established narratives of universal mourning.

Exceptions to this presidential focus within American collective memory studies are usually focused on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Kevin Bruyneel's "The King's Body: The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Politics of Collective Memory" structurally bears many similarities to my own work and thus merits further examination.[12] Bruyneel's focus is not on a

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[10] See, for example, Sharron Wilkins Conrad, "'He Gave His Life For Us': The Civil Rights Martyrdom of John F. Kennedy," in *Mourning the Presidents: Loss and Legacy in American Culture,* ed. Lindsay M. Chervinsky and Matthew A. Costello (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023), as well as Martha Hodes, "Unimaginable Catastrophe: The Nation's First Presidential Assassination," in *Mourning the Presidents: Loss and Legacy in American Culture,* ed. Lindsay M. Chervinsky and Matthew A. Costello (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023) and Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[11] Wilkins Conrad, "He Gave His Life for Us," 226.

[12] It is by far not the only work discussing King's memory – in reviewing existing literature regarding this topic, Bruyneel specifically cites Gary Daynes, *Making Villains, Making Heroes: Joseph R. McCarthy, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Politics of American Memory* (New York: Garland Science, 1997); Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero,* rev. ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 2008); Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007); and Thomas Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

charitable foundation, but rather on the process of conceptualizing and designing a physical monument dedicated to King's memory at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. In discussing the process of designing the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, Bruyneel tracks how differing interpretations of what King stood for informed debate surrounding the final form of the Memorial. In tension, he says, were those who supported King's more radical and confrontational politics and those who supported a depiction of him with more universal and sanitized appeal.[13] This somewhat mirrors the process of determining how the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial should reflect its namesake, but there is a key difference between the two cases: since the RFK Memorial's creators were mostly Kennedy's friends and family, there was less conflict surrounding the form of the Memorial's conception of Robert Kennedy, since those who were involved in its creation were already predisposed to hold similar views of their mutual peer.

Bruyneel's article contains several ideas about King's legacy that are equally as applicable to the legacy of Robert Kennedy. He notes, for instance, the importance of discursive actors when it comes to determining the narrative of the past and accounts of historical figures – in other words, by discussing or portraying the past in certain ways, these actors shape collective understandings of historical figures in ways that may not be wholly representative of their lives.[14] Bruyneel argues that recognizing the presence of these contested narratives is crucial, as determining the relationship between a people and its past (and its past people) "[defines] the political imperatives of the present and the future."[15]

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[13] Kevin Bruyneel, "The King's Body: The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Politics of Collective Memory" (*History and Memory* 26:1, 2014): 84-89.
[14] Ibid, 76.
[15] Ibid.

Others have discussed specific examples of the distortion of King's memory for political gain. Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven Goldzwig examine the issue of warped interpretations of King within Ronald Reagan's civil rights rhetoric during his presidency. They argue that Reagan deliberately constructed a misrepresentative version of King in his speeches about civil rights by taking King's words out of context in order to support his own neoliberal conception of managing civil rights. This happened in ways that were directly antithetical to King's politics.[16] Bostdorff and Goldzwig emphasize that the formation of collective memory has an inherently rhetorical component to it – in their study, this means that a person in a position of authority, such as Ronald Reagan, could use their words to alter how King is remembered for strategic gain. In the case of Robert Kennedy, this position of authority is held by his friends and family, who share their own ideas about Kennedy's character through media appearances and at his funeral. A crucial component of this idea's application to my own work is that the friends and family of Kennedy were people with their own cultural clout, meaning that they were in a unique position to both disseminate their ideas about Kennedy and have these beliefs enter American collective memory. This idea, combined with the power of discourse that Bostdorff and Goldzwig describe, means that things these people say about Robert Kennedy have a heightened probability of becoming part of an established, authoritative collective memory.

This thesis adds to this literature by continuing to question active narratives of universal mourning. Importantly, this work adds to the smaller breadth of literature that examines these narratives outside of a presidential context. It also adds to this literature by showing how institutions dedicated to memorializing a person continue to alter and reinvent the legacy of the person to which the foundation is dedicated. Broadly, it continues to support the argument

[16] Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven Goldzwig, "History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr: Reagan's Rhetorical Memory" (*Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35:4, 2005): 662.

foundational to all these works: that the shape of historical memory is ever-changing, constructed, and context dependent.

Contending With Existing Kennedy Literature

It is fair to ask why another treatise on a Kennedy is necessary. After all, it seems that every detail of their extremely public lives has been dragged into public light and wrung out for every piece of trivial knowledge. This is certainly true in many ways, but there are still blind spots in Kennedy literature that are worth examining. For one, most of the literature about the Kennedys is focused on JFK in one way or another – his politics, his personal life, and his health have all been favourite topics throughout the years. As a president, his legacy has been evaluated and debated time and time again – never set in stone, always left as a question open to interpretation. This type of scrutiny has not always been afforded to other members of the Kennedy family – particularly Robert Kennedy.

Robert Kennedy as a historical subject has both been over-done and under-done. The list of books about Robert Kennedy and his politics is extensive and unlikely to ever be exhaustive. However, the fact that there is extensive writing about Kennedy is the very reason why it is appropriate to keep talking about him: while there is much already written, there is next to nothing written about *how* we keep talking about him. There is a structure to his story that gets repeated time and time again – there are certain bullet points that must be included, keywords that must be mentioned, and an argument to make whose thesis was written in stone long ago; and yet, the production of this narrative has gone largely unexamined.

Biographies of Robert Kennedy first began to emerge within a couple years of his death, written mostly by his former friends or journalists.[17] The most notable of these early works on Kennedy was by far Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *Robert Kennedy and His Times,* published in 1978, which became a national bestseller. While Schlesinger's book covers the entirety of Kennedy's life, most of these early books focus on his career following his brother's death. The only one to focus specifically on his earlier career as a prosecutor was Victor Navasky's *Kennedy Justice.*

There was a bit of a lull in publications about Kennedy through the eighties and nineties, but biographies began to be published again in the late nineties and early aughts, which roughly coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of his death.[18] Many of these books were driven by nostalgia and popular culture more than genuine scholarly interest in Robert Kennedy's place in history and historical practice.[19] Others were more edifying and engaged with, rather than ignored, their place in a long legacy of hagiographic Robert Kennedy treatises. Evan Thomas' *Robert Kennedy: His Life* is a good example of the latter. Commenting on the debate over the true nature of Kennedy's personality – is he Good Bobby or Bad Bobby? – Thomas rejected either as the answer, opining that neither of these options is wholly right or wrong, and that categorizing Kennedy is an exercise in futility.[20]

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[17] See, for example, David Halberstam, *The Unfinished Odyssey of Robert Kennedy* (New York: Random House, 1968); Jack Newfield, *RFK: A Memoir* (New York: Bold Type Books, 1968); Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1969); Jean Stein, *American Journey: The times of Robert Kennedy* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1970); William vanden Heuvel and Milton Gwirtzman, *On His Own: Robert F. Kennedy, 1964-1968* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); and Victor Lasky, *Robert F. Kennedy: The Myth and the Man* (New York: Pocket Books, 1971).

[18] One exception in this eighties lull is Lester David and Irene David's *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Folk Hero* (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1986), a prototypical hagiographic exploration of RFK's life as told by his family members to the authors.

[19] See, for example, Chris Matthews, *Bobby Kennedy: A Raging Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), or Larry Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon* (New York: Random House, 2016).

[20] Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster, 2000): 31.

In *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector,* James W. Hilty makes a similar assessment. "It is difficult," he says, "to thoroughly chart and assay either the mystique of the legacy [of the Kennedys], for at the bottom they are crafted images and scandalous realities, high expectations and unfulfilled promise."[21] Hilty's comments bring to attention an important piece of Robert Kennedy's mystique that often goes unexamined, if not unacknowledged altogether: that crafted images are an important – and partially *intentional* – part of what we know and remember about the Kennedys. Robert Kennedy's legacy did not fall into place naturally, nor was it entirely fabricated; it was a messy combination of memory and embellishment, manipulation and wishful thinking on the part of their admirers. The Kennedys, after all, were innovators when it came to public image – to say that their actions in life were partially determined by what would play politically is not a controversial statement.

Hilty also comments upon attitudes towards Kennedy legacies which impact how their careers and mythology get studied. He points out that years of unsavory revelations about the Kennedy family have led many to become overly cynical in talking about their lives to the point that they dismiss any positive assessment of the family to be an overly biased and dismissible account.[22] Hilty also acknowledges that much of the literature about the Kennedys has been written by so-called court historians whose works resemble folklore more than they resemble scholarly research or genuine historical practice.[23] He therefore calls for balanced accounts and room for both truths in studies of the Kennedys. This is an evaluation of Kennedy literature that was kept in mind when writing this thesis: extreme care, more so than when evaluating other types of secondary sources, must be put into understanding the context of the production of

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[21] James W. Hilty, *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997): 3.
[22] Ibid, x.
[23] Ibid.

works on the Kennedys. It is important to understand that, like many public figures, the Kennedys will have both good and bad in their record – a fair and balanced historical work need not be entirely critical of the Kennedys, nor should it accept at face value the words of family friends whose words are tainted by their personal sentiments. Court histories can have their place – when studying the legacy of Robert Kennedy in particular, court historians become important because their words have coloured this legacy in ways that can misrepresent the truth.

Literature about the Kennedys and Robert Kennedy does, therefore, acknowledge the presence of hagiographic elements and court history in its historiography. However, for the most part, there has not been extensive inquiry into why this hagiography exists, or how it came to be established in the first place. This questioning of historical narrative has happened for JFK to a degree, but Robert Kennedy has thus far largely avoided any serious scholarly deconstruction when it comes to his legacy.[24] His legacy often stands as fact; he is stated, not argued, to be great. In works where the hagiography gets mentioned, it is to inform the methodological basis of the author's biographical works on Kennedy; it is almost never the object of study in and of itself.

There are two notable exceptions to this rule. Anne Mørk resists hagiography by examining how Robert Kennedy has been used as an icon for both liberal and conservative politicians. In her work, Mørk underscores how personal Kennedy's legacy can become when those who remember him graft some aspects of their own values onto his legacy. This means that both political conservatives and liberals have been able to use pieces of Kennedy's long and varied career to promote their own politics.[25] Mørk notes that this is a consequence of the

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[24] For an account of the building of John F. Kennedy's legacy, see, for example, John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
[25] Anne Mørk, "The Once and Future King: Robert F. Kennedy as a Liberal Icon" (*American Studies in Scandinavia* 44:2, 2013): 30.

difficulty of categorizing Kennedy's real-life politics – since he touched so many extremes at various points in his career, it became easy for anybody to make him into whatever they wanted after his death.[26] To this end, she observes that following Kennedy's death, much of the media coverage about him focused on his later career, leaving the impression that his work with minorities and the poor represented the totality of his career.[27]

This thesis builds upon Mørk's arguments, but it also pushes back against her assertion that news media largely focused on remembering Kennedy's later career following his death. As will be shown later, many articles indeed discussed his later career by virtue of its recency. However, these articles were usually balanced with discussion of the more so-called ruthless parts of his earlier career in order to provide a more complete picture of Kennedy's life. These media tributes counterbalanced depictions of Kennedy which were authored or planned by his friends and family, whose pieces almost exclusively covered the more favourable later parts of his career.

Ronald Steel's *In Love with Night* picks up on Mørk's points and extends them into the only full-length study of Robert Kennedy's legacy. In the book, he recognizes and rightly calls for a deconstruction of the heroic legend of Kennedy which has entered American collective memory. Steel identifies three central pillars within Kennedy hagiography: the myth of JFK's Camelot, a utopian America which would have been recreated by Kennedy; the liberal myth – that Kennedy was both a crusader for and defender of liberal values that would have guided his time in the White House; and the rainbow myth – the idea that Kennedy was somehow able to bring together a diverse coalition of diametrically opposed political factions when nobody else

[26] Ibid, 40.
[27] Ibid, 35.

was able to do so.[28] Superseding these myths, Steel says, is what he calls the "Bobby myth" – the belief that when "Bobby" Kennedy died, all hope for the future of the United States died with him.[29] Steel elects to argue that the true "Bobby" was not the man encapsulated in legend – he was merely a keen political operator who cared more about cultivating a White House-worthy image than for any of the causes with which he was identified. Speaking about Kennedy's campaign for the Democratic nomination in Indiana, where he battled to balance the votes of both inner-city Blacks and alienated working-class whites, Steel states that "some whites told pollsters that despite his words of compassion for Blacks, he was a tough guy who would keep them in check. Black voters, by contrast, believed that despite his 'old Bobby' law-and-order pitch to blue-collar whites, he would protect their interests. Through carefully crafted rhetoric he was able to persuade each camp to believe the message it wanted to hear."[30] Steel thus illustrates Kennedy's differing appeal to different racial groups – how he was able to play in diametrically opposing arenas by convincing voters that he could cater to all their interests at the same time, even when these interests were inherently contradictory.

Steel continues this argument in examining Kennedy's incorporation of the Latinx community into his politics and his work with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. Steel portrays Kennedy's decision to appeal to the Latinx community as nothing more than a calculated political move, since Latinx people were "as needy as Blacks" but overlooked by other politicians.[31] With this move, Steel says, Kennedy won the community's "undying loyalty," something which proved instrumental to his primary win in California.[32] Steel also

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[28] Ronald Steel, *In Love with Night: The American Romance with Robert Kennedy* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster, 2000): 23.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid, 174.
[31] Ibid, 182.
[32] Ibid.

portrays Kennedy's appearances with Cesar Chavez and his support for the United Farm Workers as a move which was meant to dispel the image that he was anti-labour, an idea that had been attached to him since his feud with labour leader Jimmy Hoffa and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. [33]

Many of Steel's arguments take this kind of pessimistic stance on Robert Kennedy's politics. He is entirely skeptical that Kennedy ever underwent a change following his brother's assassination beyond changing the rhetoric of his speeches and depicts Kennedy as a calculated political player with no genuine allegiance to his causes. He says, too, that we should be careful not to conflate the turn in Kennedy's rhetoric with any real change in his emotions or actions.[34] But if Kennedy's politics were only rhetorical prowess and not genuine action, why does he continue to be beloved and mythologized? Steel's answer: people need heroes. "To escape situations they deem to be intolerable," Steel says, "they are willing to suspend disbelief and even surrender their will. The yearning for heroes is deeply embedded in our culture, and perhaps in our consciousness… Like many legendary figures, the Bobby of legend has been created by us."[35]

Steel ends his book by stating that "the Bobby myth is our creation, not [Robert Kennedy's]."[36] I do not wholly disagree with this statement – in a way, it is the foundation of this thesis – but it is important to note that Steel never qualifies who exactly he means by "us." "Us" is a big tent word to say the least, and in the context of the late sixties, it groups together political actors and factions who would not have made sense to group together. Was "us" the general American populace, so fractured by 1968 that it could only loosely be considered a

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid, 193.
[35] Ibid, 194-197.
[36] Ibid, 199.

united country? Was it the Democratic Party, so debilitated and fractured that it needed to employ police brutality in the streets of Chicago to conduct its convention? What was the motivation of this nebulous "us" in creating the legend of Robert Kennedy? How exactly did it create this mythology? Steel may have meant this last sentence as a rhetorical flourish, but it opens doors to questions that are far more interesting than a simple observation that the mythology surrounding Robert Kennedy cannot be considered fact by any means.

Another problem with the statement that a nebulous "us" created Robert Kennedy's mythology is the implied statement that there is but a single legacy possessed by Kennedy. Though the "Bobby" mythology Steel examines in his first chapter is by far the most dominant legacy of his life, other versions of this legacy exist. In fact, Steel espouses one of them throughout his book – that is, the idea that Kennedy was always so-called Bad Bobby, that he did what he did solely out of hereditary ambition, and that he was always the ruthless prosecutor of the late fifties and early sixties. Like the Good Bobby mythology, this one also emphasizes particular parts of Kennedy's career over others and ignores certain episodes in his career that seem to refute the truthfulness of such a strong stance on the character of his actions. Both are nothing more than interpretations of Kennedy's life; arguments about *why* based off his career's *what.*

This is why the question of the creation of the Bobby legacy is so fruitful to pursue. It is one of many kinds of assessments one could make about Kennedy's career, and yet, it remains the most dominant. How did this come to be when it all could have turned out so differently? Why is Good Bobby what many remember over Bad Bobby?

The Nebulous "Us" and the Problem of "Collective" Memory

Deconstructing Steel's nebulous "us" and interrogating the circumstances of the production of Robert Kennedy's legacy brings us closer to critically evaluating how he is remembered without rejecting those who truly believed in him or falling into an opposing, yet equally interpretive, evaluation of his legacy. In doing this, my work evades what Rogers Brubaker calls "groupism" – the tendency to mistakenly assume that groups like "Americans" and their experiences of the same events are internally homogenous.[37] One could say that Steel commits groupism by assuming that American collective memory was homogenous in its interpretation of Kennedy's legacy – that everybody believed in the "Good Bobby" interpretation. Alon Confino also notes this sort of mistake in studies of collective memory. He argues that works which study these topics often neglect to situate a "collective" memory within the context of its emergence and do not explore debates within a so-called group over what the correct form of the memory should be.[38] Despite these omissions in studies of collective memories, Confino says, collective memories emerge – making the study of the conditions for the possibility of these memories all the more interesting.[39] By assuming that the Good Bobby legacy was the only real version of Kennedy's legacy to exist, Steel closed himself off to a more dynamic examination of how a single version of a collective memory could win out against other interpretations. Steel's work is thus important – it is not worthless to study how Kennedy's mythology diverges from the path of his career – but it is merely a beginning, not an end, to the study of Kennedy's legacy.

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[37] Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity Without Groups" (*European Journal for Sociology* 43:2, 2002): 164.
[38] Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method" (*The American Historical Review* 102:5, 1997): 1400-1402.
[39] Ibid.

On the other hand, studies of collective memory which focus too much on individual experiences can diminish the impact of outside forces on its creation. Barry Schwartz, in his work studying the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, advocates that a balanced view which incorporates an understanding of both individual and broader cultural hegemonic forces provides the most well-rounded understanding of a collective memory. "Collective memory," he says, "works by subsuming individual experiences under cultural schemes that make them comprehensible and, therefore, meaningful."[40] The individual, for Schwartz, is important but not all-encompassing – the cultural context within which a person learns about an experience helps to mediate how they interpret an experience's meaning and importance. This helps to explain why the same legacy can mean different things when examined in different time periods; when the cultural context is changed, the meaning of a legacy can take on different relevance and meanings.

Evading groupism and incorporating cultural context in the study of so-called collective memory in the context of political legacies is, in fact, an interesting line of inquiry that has been successfully followed by others. In *Mourning Lincoln,* Martha Hodes attempts to do this by deconstructing the oft-heard statement that America universally mourned Abraham Lincoln following his assassination. Hodes argues that this feeling of universal mourning was created by regular Americans, who performed visible mourning rituals (examples Hodes cites include attending church or tacking black drapery to windows) that gave a visual impression of universality.[41] She resists accepting this universality, and instead elects to study how individual Americans reacted to Lincoln's death and what meaning it held for them. By doing this, Hodes is able to link the reactions of these Americans to the context of their emergence within the

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[40] Barry Schwartz, *Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): x-xi.
[41] Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015): 9-10.

aftermath of the Civil War and the fractious atmosphere it bestowed upon the country.[42] This type of analysis would not have been possible if Hodes, like Steel, accepted that these universal statements in American collective memory did not have competing versions of themselves, or that the American people had thought in different ways. Sharron Wilkins Conrad also briefly does this in her account of John F. Kennedy's death. While she spends much of her article explaining just how deeply mourned JFK was in Black households, she also makes sure to explain how prominent Civil Rights and Black Power leaders, among them James Farmer of CORE and Malcolm X, pushed back against the supposedly uncritical embrace of JFK as a hero for the Black community.[43] Schwartz, too, incorporates this kind of thinking by considering how the Progressive Era in American history heavily altered the interpretation of Lincoln's memory based on the political imperatives of that time.[44]

In my own work, I have taken into consideration Hodes' methodology, as well as the writings of Confino, Brubaker, and Schwartz, by continually emphasizing and considering the impact of single people and their individual experiences of Robert Kennedy. I have tried to approach Kennedy's legacy as a complicated, composite entity that exists as a mosaic of similarly-themed – but ultimately unique – experiences. I have also made sure to accept opposing accounts of Kennedy and consider how these very different interpretations can both inform each other and exist in tension alongside each other. I have, finally, attempted to place the production of this collective memory within the historical context of its emergence in order to explain why it formed in the way it did. I believe that this approach helps to repel some of the

[42] Ibid, 11-12.
[43] Wilkins Conrad, "He Gave His Life for Us,'" 236-237.
[44] Schwartz, *Lincoln,* 295.

groupism inherent to previous evaluations of Kennedy's legacy and explains how so many similar, but ultimately different, assessments of Kennedy's legacy exist.

Accessing and Navigating Primary Sources

Consulting primary sources for this thesis was often a difficult task. One problem was the sheer vastness of archival sources that could have possibly been consulted and their disparate locations across the United States and around the world. For reasons of practicality, any sources which were not available online were consulted at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum and at the New York Public Library, where a manageable number of relevant sources were centralized. While the research for this project was conducted in the waning years of COVID-19 precautions, it was delayed by about a year while I awaited the reopening of the JFK Library to in-person researchers.

Centralizing my work at the JFK Library was not the end to my troubles. The late sixties and early seventies were not so long ago as they might feel, and as such, many people involved in Robert Kennedy's life and career are still alive. This meant that the papers of significant actors in this story (such as Ethel Kennedy, who died after my archival research was completed) were (and still are) not yet available to peruse. Other potentially valuable collections were closed to researchers for other reasons – the Robert Kennedy Condolence Mail collection, for example, was inaccessible because it had not yet been processed by archival staff. Many files, boxes, and collections were unavailable due to the wishes of the Kennedy family or collection donors, for their inclusion of sensitive information, or for national security reasons.

It was therefore necessary to find workarounds to some of these problems. I was able to access the thoughts of sections of the public about Robert Kennedy's death through condolence

mail sent directly to some of his friends. Some of Kennedy's more publicly known associates, particularly Theodore Sorensen, received many letters of mourning and condolence from the public due to his known associations with the Kennedys. The papers of Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall and Press Secretary Frank Mankiewicz were also valuable in catching a glimpse of how Kennedy was mourned by those in more privileged circles in America. I was also able to explore the outpouring of public emotion coming from Kennedy's death through the Robert F. Kennedy Tributes collection, which was made up of artistic tributes to Kennedy received by the Kennedy family and the JFK Library following his death. I must thank archival staff for access to this collection, as they processed it specifically to allow me access following my reference inquiry.

While records kept by Ethel Kennedy were not yet accessible to researchers, I was able to catch glimpses of her thoughts and feelings surrounding the death of her husband, as well as her involvement in the establishment of the RFK Memorial, through her correspondence with some Kennedy associates. I found the Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Papers at the New York Public Library particularly valuable in this respect, as Ethel kept in particularly close contact with Schlesinger. The papers of Frank Mankiewicz also held significant amounts of correspondence with Ethel, which added to my understanding of her role in this story.

Many of the sources I have used throughout this thesis, especially those used to understand the planning of Kennedy's funeral, come from oral history interviews conducted both by the JFK Library and by author Jean Stein and her assistants. In many cases, the interviewee lists for these two projects overlap. I have often elected to use the interviews conducted by Jean Stein rather than those conducted by the library because Stein was a member of Kennedy's inner circle and was therefore usually known to her interviewees. This has resulted in a different

character to her interviews when compared with those conducted by JFK Library staff – in many cases, Stein is able to elicit interviews that are more candid and relaxed. Since Stein's focus was specifically on Kennedy's death and not just his life as a whole, her interviews also contain more information about preparations for Kennedy's funeral. They were, finally, conducted closer to Kennedy's death temporally than those done by the library. The result is that Stein's interviews are often more forthcoming, emotional, and rich in detail.

Another factor that was important to consider when interpreting my primary sources was the influence of grief on how Kennedy's friends and family thought, wrote, and talked about him following his death. No amount of cynicism regarding Kennedy's legacy or career should forget the fact that he left behind friends and family who deeply grieved his death, and whose outlet for their grief was often to share the Kennedy they knew with the world in any way they could, even if their experiences with him were different from the experiences others had. This constitutes a normal part of grieving rituals, and it is normal that authors of eulogies must make choices regarding what specific moments in a person's life should be mentioned. And yet, for a figure so entrenched in public life as Robert Kennedy, it matters greatly what kinds of ideas make their way into these commemorations, especially, as in Kennedy's case, when these choices omit important parts of their lives and careers. This isn't to say that narratives of grief should not be used in a historical study, but, like participant histories, it is important to always bear in mind the intentionality behind their production and their consequent role in helping to create Kennedy's legacy.

Two caveats should also be made when considering the involvement of Kennedy's associates in mythmaking practices. The first is that these associates, often belonging to the upper echelons of American society and thus possessing incredible power and wealth, had more

opportunity than most to broadcast the version of Kennedy they knew to the American public. Kennedy's legacy might not have become so hegemonic if the might of their privilege and power was not behind it. The second caveat is that the Kennedy his associates knew was not necessarily the Kennedy that would have been encountered by others. The way that Kennedy interacted with and treated his closest friends and family was not necessarily the way he interacted with the general public, and thus one cannot dismiss a specific impression of him because those close to him say he did not exhibit those traits. Other narratives of Kennedy's legacy do exist dialectically and in tension with the more favourable evaluation of his career; however, because these are not the versions of Kennedy's life that the family wishes to amplify, they can sometimes seem to be hidden or less popular. This version of the legacy should thus not be privileged above any other versions of Kennedy's legacy, but rather, these different narratives should be studied alongside each other – and within the context of their creation – if one is to understand why Robert Kennedy is remembered the way he is today.

A final difficulty navigated throughout the writing of this thesis was the problem of secondary sources that sometimes behaved as primary sources. Reading works about Robert Kennedy sometimes feels like reading memoirs, because authors are often (but not always) keen to describe their own thoughts about Robert Kennedy stemming from their own experiences of the sixties. It seems that some of the more hagiographic works on Kennedy are connected to an inability of some authors to override their memories and experiences of Kennedy in favour of a more balanced approach. It is likely that this is connected to general scholarship about the sixties, which sometimes suffers from the same kind of emotional subjectivity since many of its

authors were either old enough to have first-hand recollections of the events of the sixties or were direct participants in its many sociopolitical movements.[45]

On the one hand, participant histories are valuable – like oral histories, they are able to provide rich depictions of what it was like to actually be there for the history about which one is writing. These types of histories are able to explore emotional depth and the causes of certain events on a microhistorical level because the author is able to draw on their own experience. It is also unfair to outright reject any history of the sixties written by people who experienced it or participated in its movements – these works should be judged on the merit of their content just like other works. On the other hand, this kind of subjectivity – particularly about a decade which was often emotionally polarizing – can omit and emphasize different details according to how a historian-participant likes to remember the decade. Participant histories are integral to this thesis, but I have done my best to situate these histories within the context of the field or the context of their creation. By doing this, I hope to provide a richly detailed – yet still well-balanced – account of the subject matter about which I write.

Organization

Temporally, this thesis is fairly limited – since it is focused on early efforts to build Robert Kennedy's legacy, it focuses on a roughly ten-year period spanning the time between the death of Robert Kennedy and the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the RFK Memorial. Within this timeline, most of the focus is on the Memorial's earlier years.

[45] See, for example, Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987); Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2011); or David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965).

This thesis is split up into three chapters. The first chapter explores the historical context within which Robert Kennedy's legacy emerged, along with his biography and the basic tenets of his legacy. It juxtaposes this legacy with a more factually based account of his career. This comparison seeks to demonstrate the specific ways in which Kennedy's legacy deviates from the facts of his life. By doing this, Kennedy's legacy is demonstrated to be a separate entity from the version of Robert Kennedy that was a historical actor.

The second chapter explores the days and months following Robert Kennedy's death and the early actions taken by his family and friends to commence establishing his legacy. This chapter makes extensive use of oral histories conducted by both Jean Stein and by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library to understand the thought and planning behind his funeral, as well as to provide insight into how Kennedy's death impacted people around him. It examines the idea that the legacy of Kennedy which would eventually become dominant – what I call the "Bobby" version, after the diminutive nickname used by many of these accounts to address Kennedy – exists in a dialectic tension with the media's version of Kennedy, which readily engages with the more controversial and less flattering moments in his career. It explores how those around Kennedy, particularly Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., all had a hand in developing this legacy and promulgating it through the media. The chapter also examines interpretive issues in studying the creation of his legacy.

The third chapter examines the question of what purpose the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy served once it had become somewhat entrenched in popular memory. To this end, it explores the planning and fundraising efforts that went into the establishment of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial. In particular, it looks at the development of the mission statement for the Memorial and its fundraising material to argue that both of these relied upon the now-established

Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy to guide and fund their programs. The end result of this was that, because of the permanence of the RFK Memorial, Kennedy's legacy continued to be associated with the activities of the organization bearing his name – even if these activities were not entirely representative of what Kennedy actually did throughout his career.

**"My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life": Robert F. Kennedy in History and Memory**

On March 25, 1969, Jean Stein sat down for an interview with writer Gore Vidal. Stein, a writer and pioneering oral historian, was married at the time to William vanden Heuvel, a former assistant and advisor to Robert F. Kennedy in his time as Attorney General. Both Stein and vanden Heuvel were friends of the Kennedys and, like many others in their orbit, Stein decided to write a book that memorialized who she remembered to be a great man following Kennedy's death. For her commemoration, Stein chose to produce an oral history of Robert Kennedy's funeral train, which carried his body from his funeral in New York City to his burial in Washington, D.C. Vidal served as one of these interviewees.

Stein's interviewees ran the gamut from everyday Americans to some of the most prominent politicians in America at the time, each carrying their own involvement with and perspectives on the journey of the train. While her line of questioning primarily revolved around thoughts on the train journey, interviewees frequently speculated and offered their thoughts on both Robert Kennedy as a man and how he should be remembered.

Vidal stands out from the other interviewees – amongst a sea of idolators, Vidal expresses cool contempt towards the idea of Kennedy's supposed radicalism and political exceptionality. He is a curious character to include on the interviewee list, as by 1969, the liberal author was well-known for his outspoken dislike of Kennedy. Vidal on more than one occasion made the news with disparaging remarks about Kennedy, but his most famous jabs came in an *Esquire* article from 1963, where he speculated on who the presidential candidates would be in the 1968 election. In the article, Vidal concluded that Kennedy was the most likely choice for the Democratic nomination, but was not contented by this thought, for he believed Kennedy to be unlovable, vindictive, and simpleminded. He particularly criticized what he saw as an

authoritarian tendency in his politics. "It's not as if Bobby were against civil liberties," he said, quoting an anonymous government source, "it's just that he doesn't know what they are."[46] In the interview with Stein, he continued to be candid in his feelings.

> He would never take a position which would in any way compromise the Big Game. And the Big Game was putting it together [fulfilling his political ambitions of becoming President]. So we saw him dancing around the Vietnam issue for three years, which was hardly bold, or good, or radical politics. And ultimately, it was [Eugene] McCarthy, not he, who challenged Johnson and who brought down Johnson…. I just instinctively disliked him, and disliked first of all his connection with Joe McCarthy. Everybody thinks now Bobby and his last phase as the Establishment Radical; but he certainly wasn't *that* [emphasis in original] earlier on. Those of us who remember the McCarthy years, and his hectoring of [Jimmy] Hoffa and so forth and so on; he wasn't exactly a liberal figure in anyone's eyes.[47]

Here, Vidal is referring to two of Robert Kennedy's more infamous governmental positions. Kennedy's association with Joseph McCarthy was one of these stains on his record. McCarthy, a Republican senator from Wisconsin, achieved infamy throughout the 1950s for his ruthless pursuance of anybody purported to be associated with communism. Even when these connections were tenuous or doubtful, McCarthy's witch hunts created a permissive atmosphere in which these connections lost people family members, friends, and careers, even if doing so meant disregarding civil liberties or fabricating evidence.[48] When Robert Kennedy served as counsel for McCarthy's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, he associated himself with this movement – something which earned him criticism in later years when McCarthyism lost its grip on America and McCarthy lost his pervasive influence.

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[46] Gore Vidal, "The Best Man 1968," *Esquire,* March 1963: 60-61; 136.
[47] Gore Vidal, interview by Jean Stein, March 25, 1969, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 2, 5.
[48] Christopher M. Elias, *Gossip Men: J. Edgar Hoover, Joe McCarthy, Roy Cohn, and the Politics of Insinuation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021): 2.

Vidal's other reference is to Kennedy's drawn-out conflict with Jimmy Hoffa, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Successive government committees throughout the 1950s brought attention to the presence of organized crime syndicates within the United States, and in time, these committees linked organized crime to the leadership of certain labour unions. As a local Teamsters leader within the Detroit area, Hoffa had established links with various figures from the world of organized crime, and eventually, these associations brought both the Teamsters and Hoffa to the attention of the McClellan Committee – whose chief counsel was Robert Kennedy. Kennedy, who had made the pursuit of organized crime and labour racketeering a *cause célèbre* in the early 1950s, became obsessed with bringing Hoffa down. The two men sparred in televised committee hearings between 1957 and 1959, with Hoffa eluding scores of criminal charges over several successive trials. Kennedy's pursuit of Hoffa continued through his years as Attorney General, where he formed a "Get Hoffa" squad consisting of sixteen attorneys and thirty FBI agents whose sole purpose was to find a way – any way – to arrest Hoffa.[49] Hoffa was finally found guilty of both jury tampering and mail and wire fraud in 1964.[50] After his conviction and removal from Teamsters leadership, many from inside and outside the Teamsters began to see Hoffa as a martyr whose corruption paled in comparison to his contributions to his union. Robert Kennedy, on the other hand, began to be perceived as a ruthless government prosecutor who had persecuted a popular leader.[51]

In citing Kennedy's associations with both McCarthy and Hoffa, Vidal thus alluded to a version of Kennedy not recalled in his legacy following his death. He described a Kennedy that could be stubborn and ruthless, who earned resentment – not praise – from the everyday

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[49] Thaddeus Russell, *Out of the Jungle: Jimmy Hoffa and the Remaking of the American Working Class* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003): 213.
[50] Ibid, 222.
[51] Ibid, 223-224.

American for taking down an admired figure. It was a far cry from the empathetic, compassionate, and demure figure who would emerge in the later 1960s – and it was a version of Kennedy that Vidal could not reconcile with his own negative recollections.

Another critic of Robert Kennedy is Roy Cohn. Cohn, Joseph McCarthy's loyal chief counsel on the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations, was a well-known detractor of Kennedy – accounts of Kennedy's time as Cohn's assistant counsel on the committee describe their acrid personal relationship as a feud.[52] In an interview for a separate oral history project conducted by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Cohn shared his thoughts regarding Kennedy's supposed political about-face following his brother's death.

> It's hard to apply a sincerity test because everything, every position he took was always in the context of his driving ambition to be president. And maybe he really did change, maybe he really did believe in some of these new things…. I don't want to indulge in the hypocrisy of saying because of the tragic circumstances of his passing that all of a sudden I'm going to say I always thought he was a wonderful, kind-hearted man who loved everybody and was the quintessence of fairness or anything like that when I know very well he wasn't.[53]

Cohn, a right-wing idealogue who counted both William F. Buckley, Jr. and Donald Trump amongst his associates, frequently clashed with so-called "establishment" figures. After being disbarred for corruption in the 1980s, Cohn stated that he had only been disbarred because "the establishment bar hates my guts."[54] He especially hated Kennedy; not outwardly for his differing politics or his firm foothold in the American establishment, but rather for Cohn's

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[52] See, for example, Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000): 85-87, and Gore Vidal, "The Best Man 1968" (*Esquire,* March 1963): 60.
[53] Roy Cohn, interview by James A. Oesterle, March 24, 1971, Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Project, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 13.
[54] Richard Pearson, "Roy Cohn, Controversial Lawyer and McCarthy Aide, Dies at 59," *Washington Post,* August 3, 1986: G9.

perception that Kennedy had spent his career as Attorney General trying to find ways to take down Cohn's career.[55] Cohn's perception of Kennedy came through the lens of their personal relationship, which he saw as being defined by Kennedy's lust for vengeance above all. He could, therefore, never believe that there was ever a Robert Kennedy not guided by ambition and bitter resentment – a rebuke to the popular conception of Kennedy, which argued that this did not constitute Kennedy's true nature.

Vidal and Cohn come from different ends of the political spectrum in their critiques of Kennedy. Vidal, a staunch liberal speaking after Kennedy's death, takes issue with the idea that he was a radical left-wing figure when most of his career saw him taking positions that distanced him from left radicalism. Cohn, also speaking following Kennedy's assassination but from a right-wing perspective, sees him as a flip-flopper who took political positions when it was opportune to do so, abandoning them once they fell out of fashion. What is important to note, despite the disparity in where these critiques come from, is that both men take issue with certain aspects of how Kennedy is remembered. Vidal resents that Kennedy's memory has made him out to be a left-wing radical who supposedly did more than he actually did in real life. Cohn resents that Kennedy's memory has portrayed his changes in politics as sincere – that they label it a sincere change of heart and not an expression of bare-faced political opportunism. Both also settle on critiquing his perceived ruthless ambition, which they both claim drove his politics in his later years.

Vidal and Cohn were not alone in their critiques of Robert Kennedy – the contradictions in his character to which they allude has been a feature of assessments of Kennedy since his death. For example, an obituary program aired by CBS the morning following Kennedy's death

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[55] Ibid.

discussed at length the various phases of Kennedy's political career, giving special attention to his early positions and the origins of his "ruthless" label via an examination of his roles as assistant counsel to McCarthy and his dogged pursuit of Jimmy Hoffa. It extends this "ruthless" behaviour to his work as John F. Kennedy's campaign manager, stating that Robert Kennedy specifically handled the rough jobs and took the brunt of all criticism so his brother could keep his hands and his image clean.[56]

Walter Cronkite summarized the program's depiction of Robert Kennedy succinctly. "Robert Francis Kennedy," Cronkite said, "was like a prism. The colour he gave off depended on how you held him to the light. He gave everyone a choice. There was a Robert Kennedy to love and a Robert Kennedy to hate…. His idolators were matched in the intensity of their affection for him only by the fury of those he angered."[57] This CBS program emerged within the period where the reputation Vidal and Cohn take issue with was still fomenting. To address these controversies in Kennedy's career was thus a move that threatened the emergence of the narrative the Kennedy family endorsed. This is a perspective on Kennedy's career that had long followed him, and it was a perspective to which the Bobby version responded. It made sure to find explanations for ruthlessness, and when no explanation could be found, it obfuscated these roles entirely within its narrative. It is these kinds of critical narratives to which the Bobby version of Robert Kennedy's legacy has been forced to respond throughout its existence.

A radically different narrative of Robert Kennedy's life won out against the critiques cited by Vidal, Cohn, and Cronkite – one where Kennedy played the role of a hero of the dispossessed. This was the Bobby version. Those who believe in this version of his life are less skeptical of Kennedy's political motivations and more celebratory of the policies he championed.

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[56] Walter Cronkite, "Robert F. Kennedy, 1925-1968," CBS News, New York, June 6, 1968.
[57] Ibid.

Such views focus on Kennedy's career as a senator and his campaign for the Democratic nomination, while deemphasizing the importance (or, indeed, the existence) of his turns on the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations, as his brother's campaign manager, or as Attorney General. This narrative was moulded within the context of the turbulent times from which it emerged: it was informed variously by civil rights and the fight for Black self-determination, New Left ideology, the War on Poverty, the War on Crime, anti-Vietnam War activism, and the fractured state of the Democratic Party in the late sixties. This chapter will examine the narrative of this legacy, as well as the context of its production within the sociopolitical landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

## Robert F. Kennedy: The Myth and the Man

There is a familiar narrative to the Bobby version of Robert Kennedy's life story and legacy. It is the one that most often makes it into mainstream media; the one heard in many documentaries and biographies. A succinct summary can be found in the song "Sir Robert, The Lost Knight" by the Carolyn Hester Coalition, a song written by a presumably aggrieved former campaign aide to Kennedy.

> The word came one morning from across the land
> A young knight revolted to take a new stand
> The couriers told that he cursed the court
> Saying, 'bring home the soldiers and flower the fort'
>
> The strong only whispered what he dared to shout,
> Freedom for those both with and without
> A chance for all people to see a new day,
> Some help for a man to make his own way
>
> On a quick silver bird he journeyed the land

Wherever he travelled he held out his hand
In village and hamlet he asked for their aid
Come with me my brothers and join my crusade

Impatience was growing all over the land
Come follow Sir Robert and give him your hand
He was joined by a Black King and a grape picker too[58]
His victories mounted, his legions they grew

Then just as he seemed to be winning the fight
A faceless assassin extinguished the light
At Arlington hillside he ended his quest
With his dream still a dream – do you think he's at rest?[59]

When this version of Robert Kennedy's life story is invoked, it begins with the death of his brother, John F. Kennedy: it is as if the younger Kennedy did not exist in any sort of relevance before this moment. When his early career – the period where he was most liable to criticism – gets mentioned in this version, it is only in order to have it exonerated by the dramatic changes Kennedy was said to have undergone after his brother's death. But Robert Kennedy *did* exist before 1963, and this early career, considered in conjunction with his later career, is an important key to understanding why the story of his legacy is so muddled.

Robert Francis Kennedy was born on November 20, 1925, and was the seventh of nine children in his large Irish Catholic family. His position in the birth order left him, in many cases, as an afterthought in his household.[60] This changed with the death of his oldest brother, Joseph, Jr., in WWII: with John Kennedy now being groomed for greatness as the eldest surviving Kennedy son, Robert Kennedy stepped into the role of his brother's second-in-command.[61] By

[58] These are references to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and labour leader Cesar Chavez.
[59] Letter from Carmine Parisi to Gerald "Jerry" Bruno, December 8, 1969. Robert F. Kennedy Tributes. Gerald "Jerry" Bruno Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.
[60] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy,* 28.
[61] Ibid, 43.

1952, Kennedy was helping to manage his brother's Senate campaign, taking on the role of enforcer to ensure work got done and every last voter was reached.[62] This role won him few friends, and it helped to ensure that the spectre of the adjective "ruthless" would follow him for the rest of his life.

Robert Kennedy's activities throughout the fifties further cemented his reputation for ruthlessness. His first job following the 1952 campaign was as a lawyer for Senator Joseph McCarthy's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations – a job his father was said to have procured for him with a single phone call to the senator.[63]

The activities of the Subcommittee on Investigations were an important part of McCarthy's hunts for communists in America. As chairman of the committee, McCarthy possessed singular powers to investigate any suspected communists as he saw fit: these investigations were often conducted on the basis of little evidence and were designed to be sensationalist headline-makers.[64] While McCarthy was by then a familiar face to the American public for his Red Scare grandstanding, his position as chairman of the Subcommittee on Investigations allowed him actual power to investigate those with suspected communist sympathies, making it a particularly dangerous enforcement wing for his demagoguery.[65] The position would come back to haunt Kennedy as McCarthy's grip on the American public loosened, but at the time, Kennedy stated that he took the position because he believed he was helping McCarthy fight a serious internal security threat within the United States – a position he would later state was wrong.[66]

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[62] Ibid, 63-65.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph McCarthy and the Senate* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987): 215.
[65] Elias, *Gossip Men*, 1-3.
[66] Ibid, 66.

Those who defend the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy do often mention his turn on McCarthy's staff. A 1970 television documentary with a favourable interpretation of Kennedy's life, entitled *The Journey of Robert Kennedy,* contended with this part of his career by pointing to a Q&A Kennedy held at Columbia University during his 1964 senate campaign. In this Q&A, an attendee asks Kennedy to respond to critiques of his time working for McCarthy. Kennedy's response is that he left McCarthy's committee as a matter of principle because he disagreed with the committee's activities.[67] This is, however, likely not a completely truthful account of his departure. Kennedy was known to frequently clash – on at least one occasion, violently – with Roy Cohn, the committee's chief counsel. This enmity, according to Evan Thomas, supposedly grew from Kennedy's jealousy of Cohn's seniority on the committee. It may also have been rooted in homophobia and antisemitism directed towards Cohn from Kennedy.[68] For whatever reasons, Kennedy departed the committee in July 1953 after serving just six months.

Kennedy would later return to the committee as counsel for the Democrats against McCarthy during the Army-McCarthy hearings. These hearings sought to both investigate allegations that McCarthy and Cohn had sought preferential treatment for Private G. David Schine, as well as to investigate McCarthy's counterclaim that the army had attempted to blackmail him into relaxing his ongoing investigations of communism in the army by using Schine as a victim.[69] Kennedy would later claim that his work for the hearings was out of moral opposition to McCarthy's activities on the Subcommittee on Investigations, but Cohn alleges that Kennedy's return was motivated more by a desire for vengeance against Cohn rather than for McCarthy.[70] When it discusses Kennedy's work for McCarthy, the Bobby version also often

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[67] "Q&A with Robert Kennedy" presented by Robert F. Kennedy, Columbia University, New York, NY, 1964.
[68] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy,* 67.
[69] Griffith, *Politics of Fear,* 249.
[70] Q&A with Robert Kennedy; Thomas, *Robert Kennedy,* 67-68.

uses his work as counsel for the Democrats as a so-called "gotcha" to absolve him of his McCarthy association. *The Journey of Robert Kennedy* does this by continuing to cite quotes from Kennedy's Columbia Q&A, where Kennedy uses the same fact to defend himself from the McCarthy question. The documentary takes the position that Kennedy's work for the hearings was entirely moralistic and motivated by his opposition to McCarthy's work – it does not mention the possibility that Kennedy was seeking personal vengeance against Cohn.[71]

Following his work on the Army-McCarthy hearings, Kennedy pivoted his focus to investigating labour racketeering within unions. In 1957, the Senate Rackets Committee was formed out of members of both the Senate Investigations Committee and the Labour Committee, and Kennedy joined as its chief counsel. Much of his work for the committee involved obsessive targeting of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, along with its leader, Jimmy Hoffa.[72] Hoffa found his way onto Kennedy's radar due to the relationship his union held with organized crime, his wiretapping of union offices, and for jury tampering.[73] Kennedy pursued Hoffa long past his tenure as the committee's chief counsel, and when he became Attorney General in 1961, he formed a "Get Hoffa" squad designed to prosecute Hoffa by any means necessary.[74] Hoffa was tried numerous times, but it took until 1964 to finally convict him on charges of mail and wire fraud and jury tampering.[75] The Bobby version of his legacy doesn't always mention Hoffa – evidently, his hounding of one of America's most beloved union leaders made him look rather authoritarian. Some friends, however, do defend him by saying that he was forced to be ruthless in his work against Hoffa because Hoffa was a ruthless man himself.[76]

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[71] Q&A with Robert Kennedy.
[72] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 82.
[73] Chris Wright, "The Life and Times of Jimmy Hoffa," (*Class, Race, and Corporate Power* 7:2, 2019).
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Burt Glinn, interview by Jean Stein, July 17, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 7-8.

Between Kennedy's successive runs at Hoffa, he took another turn as his brother's campaign manager – this time in his presidential campaign. Once again, his job was to act the part of the tough political manager while his brother focused on maintaining a pristine public image. This sometimes left his brother as a conciliatory figure who was left to apologize when Kennedy took things too far, like when JFK instructed NBC's Sander Vanocur to "ignore [Bobby]" after he had become incensed about Vanocur's belief that JFK would carry the Catholic vote.[77] Some of Kennedy's former associates lightly push back on this allegation. For example, David Hackett, a longtime Kennedy operator and friend, does not deny that Kennedy could be abrasive during his brother's campaign, but counters by saying that it's a fact of politics that somebody in a campaign has to be the proverbial "bad guy" who makes sure that tasks are being accomplished. Hackett also says that conflict was inevitable in the 1960 campaign because the Kennedys purposefully brought in figures who were likely to disagree with each other – by keeping dissenters on board the campaign, he says, the Kennedys were able to collect a wider range of opinions to ensure they were conducting their campaign with all angles considered.[78]

Robert Kennedy was appointed Attorney General following his brother's victory in the 1960 election – a move that was criticized by many as nepotistic.[79] His time in the role provoked both celebration and ire. On one hand, he earned praise for helping to force desegregation in the south and was credited with helping to bring the Cuban Missile Crisis to a peaceful end.[80] On the other hand, he was responsible for authorizing wiretaps on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).[81] He was also involved in

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[77] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy,* 162.
[78] David Hackett, interview by John W. Douglas, July 22, 1970, transcript, Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 17-22.
[79] W.H. Lawrence, "Dillon Appointed Secretary of Treasury; Kennedy's Brother is Attorney General" (*The New York Times,* December 17, 1960): 1, 14.
[80] Thomas, *Robert Kennedy,* 324-325.
[81] Ibid, 390-391.

the planning of the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, as well as in the planning of numerous assassination plots targeting Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro – some of which were alleged to have mafia involvement. This was not consistent with his continued crusade against organized crime and labour racketeering, which also continued to draw critique.[82] While some give him credit for his involvement in promoting civil rights, others point out that he dragged his feet on providing protections for civil rights protests in the south, particularly in the case of the Freedom Rides – though it must be acknowledged that he did eventually order protection for the rides and was responsible for sending the National Guard to the University of Alabama to force Alabama Governor George Wallace to allow the enrolment of Black students. These moves, however, only came after significant pressure on the Kennedy administration for action.

A particularly embarrassing moment in Robert Kennedy's time as Attorney General came during a meeting he organized with author James Baldwin and other civil rights activists. Baldwin's meeting with Kennedy came in the aftermath of the 1963 Birmingham campaign, where Martin Luther King's push to desegregate the city ended in horrific police violence that many felt the Kennedys had not done enough to remediate. At the meeting was Jerome Smith, a Black man who had been badly beaten as part of this campaign. Much of Baldwin's frustration derived from the fact that Kennedy was not empathetic to the anger and frustration Smith expressed with the state of the nonviolent movement and his assertion that he was not sure how much longer he could remain peaceful. In his interview with Jean Stein, Baldwin described Kennedy's failure to empathize with the group's skepticism of the government's dedication to civil rights: "Bobby didn't understand what we were trying to tell him, and didn't understand our urgency… If we couldn't make the Attorney General of the United States, who was a young and

[82] Ibid, 234-244.

intelligent man, understand the urgency of the Black situation, there wasn't any hope at all!"[83] While this meeting happened in Kennedy's so-called ruthless years, Baldwin in 1970 still believed that Kennedy always harboured a resentment of him because of the acrimonious 1963 meeting long after his supposed transformation, and the two never worked together again.[84]

As Attorney General, Kennedy also chaired the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency (PCJD), which anticipated Johnson's War on Poverty. This committee coordinated the efforts of several departments in the Kennedy administration in their bid to quell the effects of juvenile delinquency, which had garnered public concern in recent years.[85] Between 1961 and 1963, members of the committee, which was coordinated by Kennedy family friend David Hackett under Robert Kennedy's supervision, conducted research into the problem of delinquency; to this end, members of the committee worked with social scientists such as Lloyd Ohlin and met with youth gangs in New York City to attempt to diagnose what drove youth to delinquency.[86] In the course of this research, the committee came to believe that delinquency was a consequence of growing up impoverished. This link was vocalized by Kennedy upon the establishment of 1961's Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act, which sought to combat youth crime by "addressing the problems of youth unemployment, poor housing, poor health, inadequate education, and the alienation of lower-class communities and neighbourhoods."[87] The committee's work led to numerous social welfare initiatives and created a precedent for involving local communities in community uplift programs.[88]

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[83] James Baldwin, interview by Jean Stein, February 7, 1970, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 3.
[84] Ibid, 13.
[85] Edward Schmitt, *President of the Other America: Robert Kennedy and the Politics of Poverty* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010): 67-68.
[86] Ibid, 70-72.
[87] Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017): 33.
[88] Ibid, 30.

Forebodingly, though, the connections the committee made between poverty and delinquency, especially in racialized urban areas, led to a reification of the idea that Black youth were more likely to commit crimes, and by introducing community programs and police into these neighbourhoods, the programs started by the PCJD also began to introduce forms of soft surveillance into the lives of urban youth.[89] This shows that the divide within Kennedy's career, delineated by his brother's assassination, is not so clear. His work on the PCJD shows that he was concerned with the problem of poverty long before his supposed political reawakening as a senator. However, it also complicates the story of his later career, particularly in terms of his alignment with civil rights: the problems that he would rail against within cities, especially when it came to urban uprisings in the later sixties, partially resulted from policies that were guided by the research of a committee he chaired.

Kennedy's time as Attorney General would end abruptly with the assassination of his brother in November 1963, and it is here that the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy begins in earnest. In his grief for his brother's death, Kennedy's demeanour supposedly changed – the purported ruthlessness turned to determination, the abrasiveness to compassion, and the obstinance to understanding. While Kennedy would *de facto* stay on as Attorney General until September 1964, he greatly scaled back his involvement in the Johnson administration and instead spent time travelling with his family.

Once returning from his sabbatical, Kennedy ran for a senate seat in New York. His decision to run in New York stoked accusations of unchecked ambition and carpetbaggery, and his campaign was accused of exhibiting the entitlement some believed the Kennedys felt towards

[89] Ibid, 48.

governmental positions.[90] Others accused him of using the position as a jumping-off point for his own future presidential run.[91] To these accusations, the 2018 docuseries *Bobby Kennedy for President* defers yet again to Kennedy's appearance at Columbia University, where he states that rather than retire and live off his already-established reputation and familial largesse, he would rather serve the people of New York and the United States.[92] Despite this opposition, Kennedy was able to defeat the incumbent Republican candidate, Kenneth Keating, in the 1964 election.

It is during his career in the senate that Kennedy would begin to embrace the politics that would later inform his legacy. His focus on providing assistance to racialized and underprivileged communities throughout this period helped to bestow upon him a reputation as an uncommonly compassionate politician who helped those others ignored. This reputation is often divorced from the context of governmental responses to poverty in this period: by considering this reputation within its wider context, Robert Kennedy's politics appear less messianic and more grounded in political pragmatism and the personage of a man who emphasized ideas and not their practicalities.

The problem of poverty loomed large throughout the sixties, beginning in earnest during the years of the Kennedy administration with the PCJD. From the start, however, governmental responses to poverty focused more on addressing symptoms of poverty – especially a perceived crime crisis – than poverty's institutional roots.[93] This direction amongst politicians was steeped in racist notions of social pathology that regarded Black people as pathologically more likely to both be impoverished and commit crimes.[94] Thus, poverty response was largely targeted at Black

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[90] Edward T. Folliard, "Politics: Kennedy and the Carpetbagger Issue," *The Washington Post,* August 20, 1964: A16.
[91] Robert J. Donovan, "Resentment of Kennedy Figures in N.Y. Race," *The Washington Post,* September 8, 1964: A2.
[92] "Q&A with Robert Kennedy" presented by Robert F. Kennedy, Columbia University, New York, NY, 1964.
[93] Hinton, *War on Poverty,* 30.
[94] Ibid, 31.

people and Black neighbourhoods, and as the decade progressed, these responses evolved from social welfare initiatives to law enforcement programs and forms of surveillance.[95]

The Johnson administration expanded upon both the celebratory and damaging activities of the PJCD. As urban uprisings began to dominate the news cycle in 1965, its programs began to defund War on Poverty programs in favour of fighting the War on Crime – funding diverted from poverty programs thus found its way to law enforcement bodies across the country, who then used the money to militarize their police forces and increase patrols in underprivileged and racialized neighbourhoods. Though the Watts uprisings were symptomatic of and revelatory about the impact of poverty, its occurrence was instead used to demonstrate the need for greater law and order and crackdowns in urban centres.[96] The uprisings also gave legitimacy to the idea of pathologized poverty and criminality, which infamously manifested in the Moynihan report. Targeting of Black communities, especially Black male youth, increased.

Robert Kennedy, in his capacity as a senator during the Johnson administration, dedicated much of his time to the problem of poverty, especially within racialized communities. His perspective on the problem of poverty followed the Johnson administration in some respects, though he broke with it in other ways. Like Johnson, Kennedy was a proponent of allowing the poor to be involved in the construction of community action programs and believed that these programs should not be solely run by outsiders to the community; Johnson's community action programs, had, in fact, been anticipated by similar projects piloted by the PCJD.[97] Kennedy also followed Johnson in blaming the problems of inner cities on joblessness and a loss of community, and advocated for programs which would ameliorate those issues. However, he

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[95] Ibid, 32.
[96] Ibid, 65.
[97] Schmitt, *President of the Other America,* 125; Edward Schmitt, "The War on Poverty," in *A Companion to Lyndon B. Johnson,* ed. Mitchell B. Lerner (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): 96.

broke with the administration as a vocal opponent to welfare, stating that it had "destroyed self-respect and encouraged family disintegration."[98] He was close friends with Los Angeles police chief William Parker, who had indirectly blamed the Watts uprisings on the civil rights movement and had compared policing during the uprising to fighting the Viet Cong.[99] Kennedy was publicly hesitant to lay blame for the problems of the cities at the government's feet; instead, he called on all elements of society, including prominent Black public figures and the residents of inner cities themselves, to demonstrate a greater commitment to solving urban problems that were being perpetuated by his own government.[100] Kennedy's outlook on the problem of poverty thus largely followed Johnson in its core beliefs, but tended towards a rightward perspective in its opposition to welfare and was reluctant to address problems like police brutality given Kennedy's relationship with William Parker. At every turn, Kennedy remained disappointingly removed from speaking about the problem of police brutality and always made sure to keep his anti-poverty rhetoric remained politically acceptable.

Throughout his time as a senator, Kennedy appeared in various underprivileged communities across the country to draw attention to their disparate struggles with poverty. In 1967, he was convinced by the testimony of NAACP lawyer Marian Wright to tour the Mississippi Delta, where he witnessed desperate hunger and poverty amongst those who had fallen through the cracks of Johnson's Great Society. Kennedy's visit drew both adulation and ire – in a display of the polarity of public opinion that would become part of his legacy, he was frequently confronted by the Ku Klux Klan throughout his trip but was also cheered in colleges

[98] Schmitt, *President of the Other America,* 124.
[99] Hinton, *War on Poverty,* 68-69.
[100] Ibid, 123.

and welcomed into homes throughout the Mississippi Delta.[101] In February 1968, with a caravan of reporters in tow, Kennedy toured eastern Kentucky to assess the impact of Johnson's War on Poverty. Through hearings and walking tours, Kennedy explored how cracks in Great Society programs had left Kentuckians behind: job training programs were not leading to permanent employment, food stamps did not provide families enough food to make it to the end of the month, and low-protein diets caused an assortment of serious illnesses. The trip also allowed Kennedy to test his appeal to working-class whites while he pondered a possible run for the presidency.[102] His reception in Kentucky was mixed: many citizens came away from his visit believing that he had genuine care for their issues and intended to do something about them; others accused him of being a know-it-all who was appearing in their state as a "gimmick."[103]

Kennedy's work within the Brooklyn neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant throughout his Senate term would become the most important part of his legacy and the most cited part of his career. In the 1960s, Bedford-Stuyvesant was consistently overlooked as a recipient of federal assistance – since Johnson's Demonstration Cities program only allowed federal funds to be directed to one community per city, Bedford-Stuyvesant was consistently overlooked in favour of providing aid to Harlem.[104] Conditions in the community were therefore desperate, and had already led to one notable instance of violence in 1964.

Kennedy saw these conditions firsthand during a walking tour he took in the neighbourhood in 1966. Following the tour, he held a meeting at Bedford-Stuyvesant's YMCA, where the frustration and anger of the overlooked community was directed at him.[105] The

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[101] Ellen B. Meacham, *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018): 90-152.
[102] Schmitt, *President of the Other America,* 197-198.
[103] Ibid, 198.
[104] Patricia Sullivan, *Justice Rising: Robert Kennedy's America in Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021): 286.
[105] Ibid, 287.

experience angered Kennedy, but it also seemed to make an impact on him, because months later, he and his staff, in collaboration with local community members, established both the Bedford-Stuyvesant Renewal and Rehabilitation Corporation (R&R), as well as its sister organization, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Development and Services Corporation (D&S).[106]

While later work on the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial would laud Kennedy's actions in Bedford-Stuyvesant as his greatest and most concrete achievement, the project encountered a host of problems. Black women on the R&R who had done a majority of the community organizing on the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council (CBCC) before Kennedy's arrival were gradually pushed out of leadership and had their influence diminished by Kennedy's hand-chosen leader, Judge Thomas Russell Jones, who accused the women of taking away leadership opportunities from Black men and caring more for middle-class concerns in the community than working-class ones.[107] This internal conflict in the R&R led to its replacement in March 1967 by the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC).[108]

The BSRC proved more functional than its predecessors and achieved measurable success in the community. It built new homes, improved the structures of existing ones, and created mortgage pools designed to help impoverished Bedford-Stuyvesant residents work towards owning their homes.[109] The wealth and power of white business owners and philanthropists on the D&S board helped to attract large businesses to the area, helping to stimulate employment, and partnerships with banks were created to help promote and fund

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[106] Tom Adam Davies, "Black Power in Action: The Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, Robert F. Kennedy, and the Politics of the Urban Crisis" (*Journal of American History* 100:3, 2013): 746.
[107] Ibid, 747.
[108] Ibid, 746.
[109] Ibid, 752-753.

Black-owned businesses.[110] Its success, while limited in many ways, should not be understated.[111]

Still, its insistence on male-dominant leadership, its co-opting of the legacy of Black women-led community organizing in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and debate surrounding the amount of involvement Kennedy had in the actual operations of the organization should also be acknowledged as part of this story. Kennedy deserves credit for the idea, blueprint, and commencement of the BSRC's operations, but the actual work done on the ground should be credited to its operational leadership and members, as well as the community members who piloted this kind of work in Bedford-Stuyvesant before Kennedy and his ideas arrived. The story of the BSRC also challenges Kennedy's statements about his belief in community-led action against poverty – while initially he sought a large amount of input from the Bedford-Stuyvesant community, this community pushed back against his wishes, which then prompted Kennedy to seek out voices friendlier to his vision, often from wealthy white politicians. This will be important to recall when considering how much credit Kennedy later receives for the work of the BSRC, and how much this work underpins his later legacy.

At this time, Kennedy was also engaged with supporting the United Farm Workers in labour disputes against grape growers. At the recommendation of United Automobile Workers president Walter Reuther and in his capacity as a member of the Migratory Labour Subcommittee, Kennedy travelled to Delano, California for hearings regarding the working conditions of grape pickers, who at the time were in the process of organizing a union under the leadership of Cesar Chavez. Kennedy again visited Chavez in 1968, where Chavez broke a 25-

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[110] Ibid, 753-754.
[111] Tom Adam Davies' article, cited frequently in this section, includes a more in-depth examination of BSRC's works and legacy than is possible in this short section.

day fast by breaking bread with Kennedy.[112] The visits worked in both men's favour: Kennedy's visit bestowed political legitimacy unto Chavez and the United Farm Workers, and Chavez endorsed Kennedy's presidential campaign and campaigned aggressively for him in California's Mexican American community.[113] In an interview after Kennedy's death with Bonnie Lefkowitz, an interviewer working for Jean Stein, Chavez continued to speak highly of Kennedy. When asked if he thought Kennedy was a revolutionary, Chavez says he thinks he was much more of a revolutionary than either of his brothers or any other politicians: "I think the best way to describe it is he could see things through the eyes of the poor. And when you have a man with that kind of insight, you can't help but be a great revolutionary because it isn't a question of, for instance, half measures."[114] Evidence of Chavez's opinion of Kennedy were littered through his office, as noted by Lefkowitz: on the walls, there were photographs of Robert Kennedy posted next to photos of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi; in his cubicle were photos of Kennedy in Delano with the United Farm Workers, and on his desk there was a bust of John F. Kennedy.[115]

Against his promises in 1964 that he would not use his senate seat to pursue his presidential ambitions, Kennedy announced his candidacy for the presidency on March 15, 1968. The move proved to be wildly controversial, as Kennedy entered the race just days after Eugene McCarthy nearly defeated Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire Democratic primary, thereby demonstrating that it was no longer politically insolvent to run against an incumbent president in

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[112] Lauren Araiza, *To March for Others: The Black Freedom Struggle and the United Farm Workers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014): 64.
[113] Ibid, 111; Ibid, 151. Chavez's endorsement of RFK went against the endorsements of the AFL-CIO, who had placed their support behind Lyndon B. Johnson (and, after his withdrawal, would support Hubert Humphrey).
[114] Cesar Chavez, interview by Bonnie Lefkowitz, August 24, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 3-4.
[115] Ibid, 26.

such a contentious year. Once again, accusations of entitlement and driving ambition marred Kennedy's announcement.

It has been debated whether Kennedy truly had a chance to clinch the Democratic nomination. He certainly had his work cut out for him: Eugene McCarthy had entered the race in December 1967 and had had enough time to take a large proportion of the youth vote with him. Machine Democrats who disliked change were almost certain to throw their weight behind Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who entered the race as a substitute for Johnson after the president removed himself from contention at the end of March. Kennedy thus created his political coalition out of who he had always courted as senator – in his words, "anyone with a problem" – this largely meant racialized peoples and the impoverished.

The Bobby version often talks about Kennedy's presidential campaign with a certain air of magic, and as Kennedy establishes his political base, the stories sometimes seem to blur the lines between political history and religious iconography. At times he seems to become Jesus; he walks amongst the poorest of the poor in places other politicians had never dared to venture. He is crushed by throngs of people in the street, reaching for him as if he were a messiah.[116] His hands bleed from shaking thousands of hands a day – stigmata-like testimony of his universal adoration.[117] The crowds are so enamoured with him that he often walks away without his cufflinks, or his shoes, after a day of campaigning.[118] He brings hope wherever he goes; hope to people who, until he came along, had never believed a rich white politician would ever care about their lives. He went on to win every primary he entered, with the exception of Oregon.

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[116] Jules Witcover, *85 Days: The Last Campaign of Robert Kennedy* (New York: William Morrow, 1988): 192-193.
[117] Ibid, 92.
[118] "Kennedy Loses Shoe to an Admirer," *New York Times,* April 13, 1968: 19; Witcover, *85 Days,* 192.

An important part of his legacy is his so-called special relationship with Black Americans, and it is undoubtedly true that many Black Americans embraced Robert Kennedy as their candidate in the 1968 election. Larry Tye, for example, hails Kennedy as the only white man in America who was trusted by Black Americans.[119] Hosea Williams, a civil rights activist, compared Kennedy to both Moses and Martin Luther King, Jr. in his interview with Jean Stein.

> You keep saying that God has someone that's come along and that's going to lead us out of Egypt, so to speak… and after Dr. King was killed, there was just about nobody else left but Bobby Kennedy, you see. So you get the idea… you start thinking that maybe this guy's the prophet. Maybe he's the one that will have the answers to save this nation.[120]

Other civil rights activists agreed to some degree with Williams. Bayard Rustin, an elder member of the movement responsible in part for organizing the March on Washington, told Stein that he felt Robert Kennedy's death left a tremendous vacuum in American politics because his campaign had provided a much-needed moral atmosphere to the elections.[121] Julian Bond, a younger civil rights activist and founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), also spoke of the country's political atmosphere, stating that if Robert Kennedy had lived, his presence in the elections would have provided the country a sense of possibility and hope that ended up dying with him.[122]

The Black community was not unanimous in its support of Robert Kennedy – some were skeptical, and others entirely hostile, to his campaign and politics. For instance, SNCC leader and advocate for Black Power, Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Ture), accused Kennedy of moving politically, not morally, along with other members of the Democratic Party: "Any time

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[119] Larry Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon* (New York: Random House, 2017): 502.
[120] Hosea Williams, interview by Jean Stein, September 9, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 7.
[121] Bayard Rustin, interview by Jean Stein, undated, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Museum and Library, Boston, MA: 3.
[122] Julian Bond, interview by Jean Stein, September 16, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 7.

Lyndon Baines Johnson can head a party which has in it Bobby Kennedy, Wayne Morse, Eastland, Wallace, and all those supposed-to-be-liberal cats, there's something wrong with that party… one cannot begin to talk morality to people like that."[123]

An excerpt from the newspaper of the Black Panther Party from September 1968 demonstrates active hostility to Kennedy. In a review of a forthcoming book about Kennedy's assassination and his assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, the paper calls Kennedy a "pig" and denounces his support of Israel on the campaign trail, especially in the wake of the Six-Day War a year earlier.[124] A pig, according to the paper, was "a low natured beast that has no regard to law, justice, or the rights of the people; a creature that bites the hand that feeds it; a foul depraved traducer, usually found masquerading as the victim of an unprovoked attack."[125] Applying this description to Kennedy shows the depth of animosity some felt towards him at this time, even in the aftermath of his presidential campaign and the early months of the fomentation of his legacy. Thus, while Hosea Williams, Bayard Rustin, and Julian Bond believed in the ability of Robert Kennedy to create change in American society, others in the Black community working towards similar goals were both skeptical or actively hostile to him and his political motivations.

The splits in assessments of Robert Kennedy within the civil rights movement and the Black community strike at the heart of why it is impossible to say definitively that Robert Kennedy was a hero for Black people. While broadly each of these people were working towards the same goal of civil rights and liberation, they each came from different backgrounds and traditions, some of which were open to collaborating with a white establishment politician and some who saw such a man as an enemy. Others were not interested in his help, nor did they think

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[123] Stokely Carmichael, "Black Power," speech at University of California, Berkeley, October 29, 1966.
[124] "Black Panther Book Review," *The Black Panther Community News Service,* September 28, 1968: 11, 15.
[125] "What is a Pig?" *The Black Panther Community News Service,* September 28, 1968: 4.

his involvement in the movement was positive in any way. To say Robert Kennedy was a hero to the Black community is overly simplistic and implies that all Black Americans thought in tandem. The examples above demonstrate that this is not the case.

Soundbites of Kennedy's speeches often serve as "proof" of his unique compassion and ability to reach those who had long since been alienated from mainstream politics. One of the most commonly cited ones is the speech he gave in Indianapolis the day of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. The power of this speech is important and usually cited in Kennedy's legacy: Congressman and former SNCC leader John Lewis stated in an interview for *Bobby Kennedy for President* that Indianapolis was the only major US city not to riot that night because of the power of Robert Kennedy's words.[126] This claim is, of course, apocryphal and impossible to verify.

"My favourite poet was Aeschylus," Kennedy said during his speech, a display of his bookishness. "He wrote: 'even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.' "What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country whether they be white or whether they be black."[127] Equally as often, Kennedy adulators pull quotes from his speech on the Day of Affirmation in South Africa, most often using the following quote: "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

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[126] *Bobby Kennedy for President,* episode three, "You Only Get One Time Around," directed by Dawn Porter, Netflix, https://www.netflix.com/title/80174282.

[127] Robert F. Kennedy, "Statement on the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr." (speech, Indianapolis, IN, April 4, 1968), John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/statement-on-assassination-of-martin-luther-king-jr-indianapolis-indiana-april-4-1968.

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."[128] Supporters of Robert Kennedy quote these speeches often,[129] usually because they are supposed to demonstrate Kennedy's uncommon empathy and ability to connect with audiences in ways that other politicians could not. However, their generality and their lack of any particular positionality also makes them easy to quote in materials that are designed to make Robert Kennedy look good. They do not say much beyond call for the development of attributes that are uncontroversially good: love, compassion, and the ability to stand up to unspecified injustices. These speeches can be quoted anywhere because they say nothing; they are difficult to find offensive, and by extension make Robert Kennedy seem inoffensive.

On the night of June 4, Kennedy would win his biggest contest: the California Democratic primary. Success in this campaign was necessary, for it would have provided his campaign needed momentum going into the August Democratic National Convention. But just after midnight on June 5, he was shot following his victory speech by Sirhan Bishara Sirhan. If one believes the account of the assassination given by the Carolyn Hester Coalition, Kennedy was struck down in his prime by a "faceless assassin," leading to the complete unraveling of the whole of America. But Robert Kennedy wasn't killed by a faceless assassin – pretending the assassination was motiveless removes Robert Kennedy from the political world in which he existed. In reality, Robert Kennedy was killed by a Palestinian who was angered by his support of Israel throughout his career, on the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the Six-Day War.

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[128] Robert F. Kennedy, "Day of Affirmation Address at the University of Cape Town," (speech, Cape Town, SA, June 6, 1966), John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/day-of-affirmation-address-university-of-capetown-capetown-south-africa-june-6-1966.

[129] Larry Tye, for example, cites this speech in the very first paragraph of the preface to his biography of Robert Kennedy. See Larry Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon* (New York: Random House, 2017): 5.

Acknowledging that Robert Kennedy was killed for his support of Israel problematizes the idea that he was a beacon for the dispossessed, and thus, it is more convenient to pretend that he was killed by a ghost. After just over 24 hours of surgery, Robert F. Kennedy succumbed to his wounds on June 6. He was 42 years old.

The political consequences of Kennedy's death have been hotly debated. Many Kennedy loyalists insist that not only would he have gone on to win the Democratic nomination, but he would have certainly clinched the presidency and steered America from the doomed course it traversed under Nixon.[130] Peter Edelman, one of Kennedy's former legal aides, believes that Kennedy would have clinched the presidency because party Democrats like Chicago mayor Richard Daley were moving towards supporting him, and that Richard Nixon was not a particularly difficult person to beat, as evidenced by the eventual closeness of the 1968 election.[131] Journalist Jack Newfield agrees with Edelman that Kennedy would have been elected, and because of his election, the country would have avoided Watergate, the corruption of Spiro Agnew, and the continuance of the Vietnam War.[132]

There are many who both agree and disagree with these assessments for various reasons. Some books and articles about Robert Kennedy published in recent years have also spread the idea that he would have secured both the Democratic nomination and the presidency. Larry Tye, author of *Robert Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon,* wrote in a USA Today article that Kennedy would have clinched the nomination because of his ability to reach across political divides and his knowledge of how to campaign against Richard Nixon.[133] Joseph Palermo

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[130] See, for example, Jules Witcover, *85 Days: The Last Campaign of Robert Kennedy* (New York: William Morrow, 1988): 6, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Journal Entry: July 15, 1968" (Journal, New York Public Library, *Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers*): 1657-1658.
[131] Peter Edelman, "What if?", *American Experience,* PBS.
[132] Jack Newfield, "What if?", *American Experience,* PBS.
[133] Larry Tye, "Robert Kennedy was a raw idealist cut down just when the Presidency seemed within reach," *USA Today,* June 5, 2018.

concurs with Tye's assessment – he further claims that party leaders like Richard Daley were close to declaring their support for Kennedy, and that that support would be enough to give him the delegates needed to win at the Democratic National Convention. He also believes him to be the only candidate capable of communicating and drawing support from both traditional machine Democrats and New Left representatives.[134] These views, while not counterfactual, draw upon an acceptance of the idea that Robert Kennedy was an exceptional candidate; the only one, in fact, who was capable of bringing together different political coalitions. It relies on an assumption that Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey were incapable of this practice, and that this preternatural ability would be enough for Kennedy to edge ahead of Hubert Humphrey in delegate counts.

Historians often have a more pessimistic view of Kennedy's presidential prospects, and they reject some arguments that Tye and Palermo use. Luke A. Nichter doubts that Kennedy had enough concrete advantages over his opponents to pull a victory at the DNC – though Kennedy claimed his victory in California was what he needed to clinch victory, he had not had any real landslides in the primaries. Humphrey also controlled more delegates, and McCarthy had won more primaries.[135] Kennedy may have had a frenzy of support behind him, but when that support was translated into the numbers he needed to take the nomination, it did not convey any real hope of success.

Joshua Zeitz also takes issue with the idea that Kennedy possessed any special ability to pull a winning political coalition together. Zeitz does not challenge the idea of Kennedy's appeal to people of colour; instead, he argues that Kennedy's appeal to white voters has been

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[134] Joseph Palermo, *In His Own Right: The Political Odyssey of Senator Robert F. Kennedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): 254-255.
[135] Luke A. Nichter, *The Year That Broke Politics: Collusion and Chaos in the Presidential Election of 1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023): 23.

overpromised and that several issues prevented him from gaining any sustainable footholds amongst whites. Zeitz first turns to Kennedy's performance in the Indiana Democratic primary, where his ability to pull both 90% of the Black vote and two thirds of the Polish vote in certain precincts has become legend. However, Zeitz also recalls that Kennedy ultimately lost 59 out of 70 predominantly white districts in Gary, weakening the idea that he had any special ability to cross racial divides.[136]

Robert Kennedy, in fact, faced opposition from a few different groups of whites. He was first opposed by Southern Democrats, who declined to support him because of his support of civil rights. He was also unpopular amongst union leadership, which remembered and resented his longtime harassment of Jimmy Hoffa. By virtue of his late entry into the presidential race, he had also already lost a large portion of the student vote, which had already pledged allegiance to Eugene McCarthy.[137] A harbinger of bad times to come in Robert Kennedy's campaign was his defeat in the Oregon primary. Oregon, primarily made up of middle-class Protestants, gave Kennedy no issues to run on; the state thus instead voted for the more professorial McCarthy.

At issue as well was Robert Kennedy's feud with Lyndon B. Johnson. Enmity between the two men had existed since the Kennedy Administration and had peaked when Johnson refused to give Kennedy the vice-presidential nomination in 1964. Johnson, though he had recused himself from the election, was still the leader of the party, especially amongst machine Democrats. Even if Richard Daley was preparing to throw his weight behind Kennedy, it would be difficult to get support from the rest of the party brass if the leader of the party was unwilling to provide him any support or backdoor politicking, especially when another candidate, Humphrey, was running to represent Johnson's wing of the party.

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[136] Joshua Zeitz, "The Bobby Kennedy Myth," *Politico,* June 5, 2018.
[137] Ibid.

There was, finally, the issue of winning delegates. Palermo argues that with Daley's coming endorsement, the delegate count would swing in Kennedy's favour. This assessment fails to consider the actual structure of the primaries in 1968. Zeitz highlights just how unfavourable this environment was: "in 1968 only 15 states chose their delegates by primary. Almost three-fifths of conventional delegates were selected by county committeemen, state party officers and elected officials, and those officials were squarely behind Humphrey."[138] Kennedy's entry into the presidential race meant he had missed many early primaries. He needed landslides in the ones that remained to make him a viable presidential candidate, and this was thus far not happening by his death.

Knowing what would have happened is impossible. What we can know is that, at the time, Robert Kennedy's death felt like a death knell for American society and its future. In a statement following the assassination, Johnson connected Kennedy's assassination to the epidemic of violence that the country had been battling in recent years.[139] In a piece for *The Spectator,* Murray Kempton concurs: "when a nation's history has been so repetitively made by gunshot… it produces the mass aberration that violence is the only effective instrument of change. The worst grow worse; the best withdraw."[140] In a letter to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., James M. Daly, a reader of Schlesinger's *Robert Kennedy and His Times,* shared the emotional impact Kennedy's death had on him: "his death was one more blow to the collective psyche of young people who probably were not able to come to terms with what happened in that period of

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[138] Ibid.
[139] Lyndon B. Johnson, "Statement by the President Following the Shooting of Senator Robert F. Kennedy" (statement, Washington, D.C., June 5, 1968), *The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-president-following-the-shooting-senator-robert-f-kennedy.*
[140] Murray Kempton, "Without Robert Kennedy," *The Spectator,* London, UK: 804.

time, for many years to come." [141]Robert Kennedy's death was evidently a deeply felt wound, no matter what its real political impact was; while there is sufficient doubt as to whether his campaign had enough momentum to get him to the White House, there is no doubt that his death made many Americans feel like nothing that happened afterwards could result in any good. The coincidental perceived downward trajectory of the country after his death only seemed to confirm these impulses, but as with many things, this was likely another case of correlation, not causation.

Robert Kennedy touched many extremes in his career. As such, the way he is remembered is supremely varied and complex. More than anything, he should be remembered as an idealogue and a skilled rhetorician: much of what is remembered about him is the things he said, not always the things he did. He was uncommonly skilled at talking to regular people, who remembered meetings with him fondly. But the few real programs he got off the ground had mixed results, and his big ideas for the country sometimes left his staff scrambling to match his promises. He was an outspoken advocate of loving thy neighbour and having compassion for others, but in the face of egregious racism and institutional violence against Black people from his own government, he was all but silent. Robert Kennedy had good ideas, but he was no messiah: he could talk like Jesus, but he was no miracle worker.

Kennedy's image was opportune for a new era in American politics, and his image's narrative should be understood within the context of the time period from which it emerged. A politician seeking prominence and popularity in the fifties might have emphasized a war hero status or being tough on communism; however, in a decade where more attention was paid to gaps in American society, it was more politically solvent to align one's image with a sympathy

[141] James M. Daly to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., June 7, 1979, *Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Papers,* New York Public Library.

towards underprivileged communities. Along with this new emphasis on social issues came a growing hostility to government and policing: deemphasizing Robert Kennedy's connections to law enforcement through his past as Attorney General was important if he was to extend his political popularity into a new era. In death, this image transformed into the basis for his historical legacy: with encouragement from friends and family, it would permeate the entirety of his funeral proceedings and would become the driving ethos behind the future Robert F. Kennedy Memorial.

## "Not for him a monolithic monument": Constructing Robert F. Kennedy's Legacy

*Even in death he needed explaining*: this was the headline of an article in the *Oakland Tribune* following Robert Kennedy's funeral. Robert Kennedy was conscious of his controversy in life, it says. He often told friends that people frequently suspected something duplicitous about him; that he was, according to some, prone to doing the opposite of what he said no matter what he was doing.

Mary McGrory, the article's author, saw this attitude towards Kennedy continue at his funeral. "So," she argued, "in St. Patrick's Cathedral, [Kennedy's] younger brother Edward stood before the coffin, and with unsteady voice, gave not so much a eulogy as a defense of Bobby."

McGrory also recognized Edward Kennedy's attempt in his eulogy to ward off brewing idolatry of his brother's memory. She assessed this to be too late; that idolatry was already setting in. Despite this, she wondered at the end of the article if Robert Kennedy *could* simply be remembered as a "magnificent boy, who always did his best."[142] Was the Good Bobby / Bad Bobby argument moot upon his death?

As shown in the first chapter, Robert Kennedy's death was but the beginning of a lengthy mythmaking process that would continue this argument in earnest for decades to come. Chapter one explored the contours of one particular version of Kennedy's legacy: the "Bobby" version, which portrayed Kennedy as a liberal crusader and hero for the dispossessed. This version of the legacy dominated discourse and appeared to be the authoritative narrative of the significance of Kennedy's life. In this chapter, I explore how this version of Kennedy's legacy came to exist in the first place.

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[142] Mary McGrory, "Even in Death he Needed Explaining," *Oakland Tribune,* June 9, 1968: 3.

The emergence of the Bobby version first came at Robert Kennedy's funeral. As McGrory notes, the various commemorations and tributes to Kennedy's life at the funeral served the same purpose as Edward Kennedy's eulogy: to present an argument which demonstrated that the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy was the one that should be written into American collective memory. It did this with intentional rhetorical flourishes, callbacks to his most flattering moments, and symbolic references to the civil rights movement he was supposed to have championed so fiercely in life.

McGrory's article juxtaposes the odes to Robert Kennedy at his funeral with the skepticism and critique he faced in life. This was visually represented at the funeral, she says: "there were hundreds of people in the church who thought Robert Kennedy was, at a minimum, the finest man they ever met… But there were others, and the chief mourner, President Johnson, was conspicuous among them, who could never recognize the Robert Kennedy of his friends' regard."[143] The question of Robert Kennedy's legacy, in contrast to McGrory's final musing, was clearly not settled by the time of his funeral; neither his death nor its violent nature could settle the questions of character that had haunted Kennedy throughout his life. It therefore remained that those who wanted Kennedy to be remembered in a certain way would have to create the terms of that legacy themselves. This process began at his funeral – but it continued for decades to come. This constant effort to publicize the Bobby version while quashing other versions of his legacy, especially the Bad Bobby version which sees Kennedy described as a calculated and inauthentic former prosecutor, demonstrates the dialectic relationship in which the Bobby version sits – it was constantly made, and remade, in response to both the politics of the times in

[143] Ibid.

which it existed and competing versions of Kennedy's legacy which highlighted moments in his career that the Bobby version hides.

There were many interested parties who made their mark on the public discourse which produced Robert Kennedy's legacy. However, no party was more interested or influential than his family and friends. The wealth and cultural ubiquity of the Kennedy family made them particularly adept at both selling and promoting an image of Kennedy that explained away or ignored aspects of his life and career that might negatively impact his reputation. They also made sure to highlight aspects of Kennedy's career which did not involve his brother, John, since they wished to underscore that Robert Kennedy had had a career independent of his involvement with his brother. These accounts would form the foundation of the Bobby version.

Another interested party was the media, particularly those in print and television. These groups readily engaged with the contradiction and controversies in Kennedy's career, and their eulogies to him actively questioned the narrative that would later be pushed by family and friends by often directly comparing the different phases of Kennedy's career. This stood in stark contrast to the politically friendly, sanitized image endorsed by family and friends, and was often actively resisted by this group, who in turn published their own books and op-eds which countered the ideas explored in print news and television. This is not to say that the news media was overly critical of Robert Kennedy – at their core, media eulogies were still largely celebratory - however, they were also willing to explore the parts of Kennedy's career that might complicate the underlying theses of the Bobby version.

When discussing the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy, it is important to understand the complex problem of intentionality. The testimony provided by Kennedy's friends and family in their various oral history interviews demonstrate that some of them were often dissatisfied

with the public perception of him and hoped that their testimony would help the American public understand who the "real" Kennedy was. For example, Burt Glinn, in an interview with Jean Stein, claims that the "ruthless" reputation Kennedy had was a myth, and that his later activism came from his true self; he also applauded the funeral train for demonstrating how loved Kennedy truly was.[144] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in his own interview with Stein, stated that the public perception of Kennedy being ruthless or calculating was unequivocally wrong.[145] However, the fact that the plurality of Kennedy's friends and family seemed to endorse and reproduce a similarly favourable legacy does not mean that this was the result of some premeditated, coordinated agenda to alter Kennedy's reputation in history and collective memory. This also does not mean that this end product was entirely an accident, either. It is the result of a pastiche of motivations, only some of which can be demonstrated in a historical record.[146]

It would be difficult to discuss the creation of Robert Kennedy's legacy without also discussing the role played by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. in its creation. By the time of Robert Kennedy's death, Schlesinger, a historian by trade, had served as a Special Assistant to John F. Kennedy and had won a Pulitzer Prize for penning *A Thousand Days,* his account of the supposed magic of Camelot and the Kennedy administration. Through this work, he had also become a close family friend to the Kennedys and was often invited to spend parts of his summers at the Kennedy compound in Hyannisport. Schlesinger was also highly active in Democratic politics outside of his association with the Kennedys; he was both a co-founder and

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[144] Burt Glinn, interview by Jean Stein, July 17, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 7-8.
[145] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., interview by Jean Stein, July 11, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 15-16.
[146] See my discussion of grief as an interpretive problem in the introduction as well.

chairman of Americans for Democratic Action and was heavily involved in Adlai Stevenson's 1956 campaign for president. His approach to politics was a left-leaning centrist one – he famously stated in a 1948 article that "the problem of United States policy is to make sure that the Center does hold."[147] His association with the Kennedys and his social prominence amongst the liberal elite made him well-known across the country.

Schlesinger was particularly aggrieved by Robert Kennedy's death. About a month following the assassination, Schlesinger wrote in his diary that while he initially did not want to write Kennedy's biography, he changed his mind after discussing it with Ethel Kennedy, as he came to feel that "it is owed to Bobby, whom I loved so much, and it is owed to the country, which ought to learn so much from his life and death."[148] For Schlesinger, the motivation to write Kennedy's biography evidently did not just come from grief; it also came from a sort of paternalistic desire to tell the country what it ought to understand about Kennedy's life and career. In this excerpt, he seemed to say that Kennedy's legacy should be told to the American public, not interpreted by them. To this end, as will later be shown, Schlesinger did his best to promote this version of the legacy in whatever way he could; particularly via involvement in television programming and penning newspaper op-eds. He outlined his desired narrative of Kennedy's legacy, which was in line with the Bobby version, in a diary entry on June 9, 1968, where he stated that there was a wide gap between how American society thought about Kennedy and who he truly was. He specifically took issue with how the public believed him to

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[147] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Not Right, Not Left, But a Vital Center," *New York Times Magazine,* April 4, 1948.
[148] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Journal Entry: July 15, 1968" (Journal, New York Public Library, *Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers*): 1657-1658.

be ruthless and unfeeling; Schlesinger countered that he was actually an extremely considerate and idealistic man.[149]

Schlesinger, furthermore, had no professional qualms about writing historical treatises on people he knew and events he experienced personally. In "The Historian as Participant," Schlesinger considers at length the pros and cons of being a "participant-historian" – a historian connected personally to their work – or a "technical historian"; that is, a historian removed entirely from their object of study. Unsurprisingly, Schlesinger concluded that a participant-historian can often write about an event with greater detail and richness than a technical historian can.[150] Schlesinger appears numerous times throughout both this chapter and the rest of this work, testament to both the magnitude of his involvement in creating the myth of Robert Kennedy and his faith in his ability to be a good-faith participant-historian. His involvement in this story is an important demonstration of the value of historical objectivity and the impacts that come when subjectivity and intellectual authority coalesce.

The Funeral

The promotion of the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy began in earnest at his funeral. The suddenness of Kennedy's death meant no funeral plans were already in place – Frank Mankiewicz, press secretary to Kennedy, recalled to Jean Stein that the funeral planning began at the hospital in Los Angeles, where it was decided (with soon-to-be widow Ethel Kennedy's final approval) that the funeral would be held in New York City, with the burial taking place at

[149] Arthur M. Schlesinger,Jr., "Journal Entry: June 9, 1968" (Journal, New York Public Library, *Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers):* 1640-1641.
[150] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Historian as Participant" (*Daedalus* 100:2, 1971): 339-358.

Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.[151] Here, too, the decision was made – Mankiewicz couldn't recall whose idea it was – that Kennedy's body would be transported between the two cities by train.[152]

Robert Kennedy succumbed to his wounds early in the morning on Thursday, June 6, 1968; his funeral was held on Saturday, June 8. The two days in between were filled with a bicoastal round-the-clock effort by nearly every person Kennedy ever knew to iron out the details of the funeral. Countless decisions and responsibilities were delegated amongst Kennedy's associates, and many who had held positions in his campaign took on similar responsibilities in planning the funeral – for example, political advance man Jerry Bruno took on the responsibility of arranging transportation for funeral attendees, and two of Kennedy's speechwriters, Adam Walinsky and Milton Gwirtzman, held joint responsibility with Peter Edelman for writing the content of the mass program.[153] More prominent members of the family used their celebrity to add panache to the services, as in the case of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who was responsible for securing Leonard Bernstein's performance of Mahler's Fifth Symphony at the funeral.[154] A veritable army of friends, family, former campaign aides, and both present and past colleagues, among others, took on other responsibilities. Once Kennedy's body and his

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[151] Frank Mankiewicz, interview by Jean Stein, September 21, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 35.
[152] Ibid. Jean Stein asked most of her interviewees about the origins of the train idea, but nobody seemed to remember who first came up with the idea. The closest she gets is in her interview with Pierre Salinger, who uncertainly tells her that somebody named "John" might have had the idea for the train, but the typist who created the interview transcript did not record "John's" last name. Alternatively, Burt Glinn tells Stein that he's fairly certain it was a "natural" decision arrived at between the Kennedys who were present at the Los Angeles hospital.
[153] "List of Funeral Responsibilities," Gerard "Jerry" Bruno Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA; "Evening Meeting Agenda," Theodore "Ted" Sorensen Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 1. Peter Edelman was a legal aide to RFK during his years as Senator.
[154] Ibid. She was also responsible for the flowers.

entourage arrived in New York City the night of June 6, further meetings were held to finish the delegation of other tasks and establish the content of the services.[155]

Plans for the funeral were made with guiding principles in place. One of the most important was that the look and feel of Kennedy's funeral and burial was expressly designed to be different from those of JFK. Nicholas Katzenbach, one of Kennedy's former Assistant Attorney Generals who was tasked with overseeing funeral preparations as a whole, told Jean Stein that the Kennedy family felt it was important to convey the idea that Robert Kennedy and John Kennedy were two different people with distinct personalities, careers, and achievements.[156] He also recalled that the planning was intended to "reflect the things that Bobby believed in; the things that he had accomplished; the things that he wanted to accomplish – in his own right."[157] Katzenbach's account of funeral planning makes it abundantly clear that Kennedy's funeral was meant to evoke Robert Kennedy and him only; anything that could have tied him to his brother or recalled John F. Kennedy in any way was to be avoided as best as possible in order to underscore the significance to Robert Kennedy's life alone. Since Robert Kennedy's earlier career was inextricably tied to his elder brother's administration, the implementation of Katzenbach's ideas in practice meant symbolically gesturing to the section of Robert Kennedy's career which followed his brother's assassination. This thus meant avoiding references as much as possible to his time as Attorney General, on the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations, or as his brother's campaign manager – all facets of his career which helped him to earn the moniker of "ruthless." When Robert Kennedy's career association with his brother is

[155] "Evening Meeting Agenda," Theodore "Ted" Sorensen Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 1.
[156] Nicholas Katzenbach, interview by Jean Stein, August 7, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 3.
[157] Ibid.

omitted, the idea of his ruthlessness all but disappears from record – all that is left is his later career, leaving the impression that the totality of Kennedy's career was as a champion for social justice. This was important within the context of the later sixties as a whole; by deemphasizing the importance of Kennedy's early career, one also deemphasizes his career as a prosecutor. This would help his legacy play better amongst those who possessed any sort of distrust for law enforcement as a whole.

Within the funeral mass itself, Kennedy was tied to his later politics through eulogies. The first eulogy was delivered by his younger brother, Senator Edward Kennedy, who used quotations from Robert Kennedy throughout his eulogy to gesture to his brother's later politics. In the first quotation Edward Kennedy shared, Kennedy was talking about his father – he said that his father impressed upon his children a moral conscience and a sense of responsibility to help others who were poor and who needed help.[158] Edward Kennedy then said that just as this was the way his brother thought about his father, it was the way the rest of the family thought about "Bobby" – that he impressed these ideas on his family and on the United States as well.[159] Next, Edward Kennedy read a lengthy excerpt of his brother's speech from the Day of Affirmation in South Africa, stating that this speech summed up best what his brother gave to the world. In the speech, given on a day meant for protest against South African Apartheid, Robert Kennedy argued that to oppose discrimination and injustice in the world, it was important to remember that those around us were our brethren, and that, while it takes moral courage to try and make change in the world, it is possible to change the world as a single person. It is here that Edward Kennedy shared one of his brother's most famous quotes: "Each time a man stands up

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[158] "The Mass on the Day of Burial for Robert Francis Kennedy," mass program, David F. Powers Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.
[159] Ibid.

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 that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."[160] Constructing the eulogy mostly out of Robert Kennedy quotations was a clever strategy with a particular effect – it made it seem like these quotes constituted an unfiltered glimpse at the kind of person Kennedy was without the interpretation of a third party. These quotations, however, were not the kind of unfiltered account of Robert Kennedy that they seemed to be, for these quotations still had to be chosen from amongst all his public appearances and cropped to a favourable soundbite that could market a specific picture of him – one that happened to fall in line with the Bobby legacy. For example, the idealism expressed in the above quote could be belied by a different quote in the same speech, where Kennedy asserted that he was "unalterably opposed to communism because it exalts the state over the individual and over the family, and because its system contains a lack of freedom of speech, of protest, of religion, and of the press, which is characteristic of a totalitarian regime."[161] By shifting what quote is taken from the speech, Kennedy could be portrayed as a fervent anti-communist just as easily as he was portrayed as an idealist.

Upon finishing the speech, Edward Kennedy stated that "this is the way [Robert Kennedy] lived. My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life, to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it."[162] This quotation was both incredibly simple and powerful. In a single sentence, Kennedy both appealed for a stop to

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[160] Ibid.
[161] Robert Kennedy, "Day of Affirmation Address," speech, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, June 6, 1966.
[162] Ibid.

mythmaking and engaged in it; he lionized his brother while suggesting he was not worthy of such odes. While his mention of the Vietnam War meant that he did not entirely divorce his brother's memory from his politics, Kennedy nonetheless suggests that the only key to understanding his brother is by always interpreting his actions through a presupposition that he always moved with the best of intentions. The quote is deceptive in its power: it is no wonder that this quote would become prominent in later advertising for the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, as will be shown in chapter three.

The remarks of Archbishop Terence J. Cooke during the funeral also connected Robert Kennedy to his later politics. He spoke of the callings various biblical figures experienced to serving God and likens Kennedy's call to public service to these religious callings. He stated that Kennedy loved all Americans, but especially the poor and disadvantaged; that he dreamed of an America "purged of prejudice."[163] Both of these eulogies served to strengthen the connection between Kennedy and his later politics – they each suggested that the significance of Kennedy's career and life lay in his connection and service to the poor and underprivileged, not in any other part of his career. Indirectly, it also rhetorically canonized him; in being compared to biblical saints, it became easier for outside observers to associate the path of his life with theirs.

Kennedy's funeral ended with an acapella rendition of "Battle Hymn of the Republic," sung by Andy Williams. "Battle Hymn of the Republic" had been a political hymn since its inception as an abolitionist anthem – indeed, in a notable deviation from the separation-from-JFK rule, the song had been played at the president's funeral - but in 1968, its most prominent usage in recent memory would have been in its quotations in the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King had structured several speeches around the lyrics of the hymn in sermons at

[163] Ibid.

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where he was a minister, but he had used them in more memorable speeches following the March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 and on the last night of his life in Memphis, Tennessee.[164] The choice of this song to punctuate the ending of Kennedy's funeral helped to recall his connection to civil rights and Martin Luther King, helping to bolster his supposed "special" relationship with the Black community in the United States – and to its most prominent leader. The context of the song's emergence during the Lincoln presidency as an abolitionist anthem also served to connect Kennedy to the mythos of another white man labelled a hero for Black Americans. This, too, constituted another deviation from the no-JFK rule at the funeral, as JFK's funeral famously made gestures to Lincoln's funeral in its structure and aesthetics.[165]

It is also important to note that when Kennedy's funeral made connections to the civil rights movement, it always gestured to its less radical representatives. Kennedy's funeral was not making allusions to Malcolm X or Stokely Carmichael; it was gesturing to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. While the design of his funeral was insistent on emphasizing his connection to the civil rights movement, it was always doing so within an Overton window that ensured its insinuations would be acceptable to the broader public. This of course follows Robert Kennedy's interactions with the civil rights movement in life: despite advocating for Black Americans as a feature of his presidential campaign, he avoided association with Black Power groups and on one occasion indirectly accused such groups of reverse racism.[166] Nevertheless, this observation is important because it rebuts the assertion that Robert Kennedy was a hero and advocate for the

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[164] Richard M. Gamble, *A Fiery Gospel: The Battle Hymn of the Republic and the Road to Righteous War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019): 233-235.
[165] Aaron Lee Schuman, "Farewell to the Chief: The American Presidential Funeral" (MA diss., University of Arkansas, 2021): 3-4.
[166] Warren Weaver, Jr., "Kennedy Deplores Racism of a 'Few' Negro Leaders," *The New York Times,* October 24, 1966: 1.

entire Black community. It instead uplifts what was true in life: Robert Kennedy championed Black liberation so long as it fit into a liberal, capitalist worldview.

Another connection to Abraham Lincoln came in the form of Kennedy's funeral train – often the first thing people remember about the funeral.[167] The train trip was a logistical and executional disaster; it took hours longer than expected to make the journey from New York to Washington D.C., forcing Kennedy's burial to take place at night under the illumination of TV lights and hastily-bought candles.[168] The air conditioning on the train was broken, leaving its passengers to sweat profusely in the thick heat of June.[169] It was the cause of a rail accident in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where two spectators were hit and killed by a train travelling in the opposite direction.[170] Despite this, the journey of Kennedy's funeral train possesses the most enduring and prominent imagery connected to the funeral and Kennedy's legacy (figures 2.1 to 2.5).

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[167] See, for example, the prologue in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1978), as well as Jean Stein, *An American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).
[168] Frank Mankiewicz, interview by Jean Stein, September 21, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 46.
[169] Pete Hamill, interview by Jean Stein, November 16, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 11.
[170] Richard Drayne, interview by Jean Stein, September 27, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 19.

Figure 2.1: Funeral train observers at North Philadelphia Station in Pennsylvania.[171]


Figure 2.2: Funeral train observers in Charlestown, MD.[172]

[171] Paul Fusco, *Untitled,* June 8, 1968, photography, Look Magazine Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
[172] Paul Fusco, *Untitled,* June 8, 1968, photography, Look Magazine Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Figure 2.3: Funeral observers greet the train in an unknown city.[173]

Figure 2.4: Funeral train observers at Princeton Junction in New Jersey.[174]

[173] Paul Fusco, *Untitled,* June 8, 1968, photography, Look Magazine Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
[174] Paul Fusco, *Untitled,* June 8, 1968, photography, Look Magazine Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Figure 2.5: Members of the Elizabeth Firing Squad saluting the train in Elizabeth, NJ.[175]

[175] Paul Fusco, *Untitled,* June 8, 1968, photography, Look Magazine Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Looking at photos, it is easy to understand why the train is so prolific in memory. Crowds cover every inch of each train platform between the two cities. People – including a large number of children – stood in fields with makeshift signs, saluted on boats, and hung off power lines hoping to catch a glimpse of the train as it passed by. It is easy to see why Jean Stein would want to try and immortalize this journey – it was a physical manifestation of the deep emotions stirred by Kennedy's death.

Stein included various recollections of the funeral train crowd in the interviews she conducted for her book. Many recalled that the crowd was overwhelmingly made up of poor and Black people – an appropriate send-off, they said, for someone like Robert Kennedy, whose career was spent fighting for these people.[176] In his interview with Stein, John Kenneth Galbraith noted that it was stroke of genius to transport Kennedy's body by train, because the train tracks ran through the neighbourhoods of his voters. "If you were burying Ronald Reagan, you would obviously want to do it with an airplane," he said. "But if you were burying Robert Kennedy, his people live along the railway tracks."[177] The images of the funeral train, then, did not just derive their power from their magnitude, but also from their composition. Having crowds made up of Black Americans and the poor seemed to suggest that everything the family was saying about Kennedy was true – not only was he a good man who dedicated his life to the underprivileged, but members of these groups loved him back. The media circus surrounding the journey of the train then helped to disseminate this image throughout America.

When the train finally arrived in Washington, D.C., its passengers joined an invite-only motorcade coordinated by the Kennedy family from Union Station to Arlington National

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[176] Many interviews conducted by Jean Stein allude to this; for examples, see her interviews with Pete Hamill, Burt Glinn, Arthur Schlesinger, and Ted Sorensen.

[177] John Kenneth Galbraith, interview by Jean Stein, July 30, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 2.

Cemetery. The route between the station and Arlington was constructed deliberately and designed to add symbolic weight to the funeral rites. The motorcade first passed by the building which held Kennedy's Senate office to symbolize his career as a senator – it was a conscious choice to pause the motorcade by his office rather than the Capitol, since JFK had lain in state in the Capitol rotunda.[178] In a noted exception to the rule of focusing on Kennedy's later career, the motorcade then paused in front of the Justice Department in order to symbolize his career as Attorney General. It then finally paused by the Lincoln Memorial.

The significance of the Lincoln Memorial stop was twofold. it was first a gesture to the ongoing presence of Resurrection City, a makeshift campsite constructed at the Lincoln Memorial as part of Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign. It was also meant to use the figure of Lincoln himself to gesture to Kennedy's sympathy for Black Americans.[179] This idea was also reinforced by another notable appearance of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" in Kennedy's funeral rites, which was sang at Resurrection City by a 150-person choir. "When we had the procession [follow this path]," said Bill Walton, a friend of the Kennedys who was tasked with managing the aesthetics of the motorcade, "we felt that we had symbolically touched three great phases of his own personal career… and that was the purpose."[180]

The long day concluded at Arlington National Cemetery. Arlington, a military cemetery, was not at first glance a natural pick for Robert Kennedy's final resting place. Though he had served in the Navy, he had not seen real battle like his elder brothers; unlike them, he was not known for heroic wartime deeds. Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had both fought to convince Ethel Kennedy to bury her deceased husband at Arlington, and had fought for

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[178] William Walton, interview with Jean Stein, September 22, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 8-9.
[179] Ibid, 3.
[180] Ibid, 8-9.

an exemption for Robert Kennedy to be buried there since he was not a member of any category of person who would normally be allowed to be buried in Arlington.[181] The reason for McNamara's insistence went unacknowledged in his interview with Stein, and given the family's desire to separate Robert Kennedy's life from his brother's, it is certainly a curious choice to place their final resting places so close to each other. Perhaps this was a sentimental moment where creating a collective Kennedy shrine meant more to the family than keeping Robert Kennedy's works separate from his brother's. Maybe it was a decision of convenience – having the gravesites so close to one another meant only having to trek to one gravesite on days of remembrance instead of two. Perhaps it was a consideration of optics – burying Kennedy in Arlington amongst heroes helped to convey the impression that he was a hero, too. Ultimately, though, the reasons for this choice are known only to those who made them. With the burial, the cars carried mourners into the night, and Robert Kennedy was laid to rest.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

While funeral preparations began in Los Angeles, Arthur Schlesinger went to work on his own attempts at mythmaking. His involvement in the production of Robert Kennedy's legacy began before the latter had died, in a commencement speech given at the City University of New York on June 5. As Kennedy lay in hospital, Schlesinger argued that America was a sick society rampant with violence. He argued that Americans were a frightening people who had already murdered two emblems of what he labelled "American idealism" – John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. – and that it had tried to murder a third by shooting Robert Kennedy.[182] In the

[181] Robert McNamara, interview with Jean Stein, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Museum and Library, Boston, MA, October 21, 1970: 7-8.
[182] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Commencement Remarks, City University of New York, June 5, 1968: Existential Politics" (speech transcript, New York, NY, June 5, 1968): 1.

conclusion of his speech, Schlesinger called on Americans to resist their "inbred impulse to violence," and then read an excerpt from Robert Kennedy's Indianapolis speech; specifically the part in which Kennedy stated that love is needed in the United States more than violence or lawlessness.[183] Thus, before Kennedy had even succumbed to his wounds, Schlesinger had voiced a link between Kennedy and the legacies of two Americans already recognized at the time to be worthy of admiration. Equating Robert Kennedy with Martin Luther King in particular began to establish a narrative that argued Kennedy made contributions to the Black community which were equivalent in significance to King's. The reading of part of Kennedy's Indianapolis speech helped to reinforce this, because, as Schlesinger makes sure to point out, the speech was given on the occasion of the death of Martin Luther King to a largely Black audience. While not as forceful as some later writings by Schlesinger about Kennedy, this commencement speech is the beginning of the formation of the argument which would underpin the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy.

After Kennedy's death, Schlesinger broadcasted a summarized version of his CUNY commencement speech in a press release. He called Kennedy a "brilliant and devoted man… a man of exceptional gentleness and generosity – the best of husbands and fathers, the dearest of friends."[184] He once again linked Robert to his brother John and to Martin Luther King, calling the trio the "three great embodiments of our national idealism in this generation."[185] Though this version of Schlesinger's thoughts does not include the buttress of the Indianapolis speech, it nevertheless continues to imply the connection of Kennedy to the Black community by mentioning his name alongside his brother's and King's. King, of course, was already known as

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[183] Ibid, 17.
[184] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Statement by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. on the Death of Robert Kennedy," June 6, 1968.
[185] Ibid.

an icon for Black Americans, but the process of mythmaking which followed John F. Kennedy's death had also entrenched the idea that he had separately been a champion for civil rights.[186] Both, too, were already known to be heroes to idealism and liberalism – thus, in grouping Robert Kennedy alongside his brother and Martin Luther King, Schlesinger implies that the younger Kennedy deserves similar recognition and applause, especially for his connection to Black Americans.

On June 9, three days after Kennedy's death, Schlesinger published a piece in the *Washington Post,* titled "Kennedy's Stature More Than Legacy." His purpose in the article, though never made explicit, was to fend off critique of Kennedy which had surfaced following his death. He began to do this by refuting some of the more common critiques of Kennedy's career, beginning with the accusation that Kennedy was running for president on his brother's name, without which his career had no distinction or merit. Schlesinger responded to this by examining Kennedy's record as Attorney General, skipping almost entirely over his earlier career. Schlesinger argued that, as Attorney General, Kennedy had demonstrated a deep commitment to civil rights – after all, he said, this was the man who sent the federal marshals to escort James Meredith to the University of Mississippi; the man who "managed" the passage of sweeping civil rights legislation. He was even involved in the War on Poverty at this early stage in his career through the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, years before the Great Society made its debut.[187] Schlesinger's allusions to these moments in Kennedy's career do two things: they continue to emphasize Kennedy's connection to Black Americans, and they rehabilitate the idea that Kennedy had been ruthless in his years as Attorney General. This is,

[186] Wilkins Conrad, "He Gave His Life for Us," 230-232.
[187] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Kennedy's Stature More Than Legacy" (*Washington Post,* June 9, 1968): 33.

once again, a preemptive strike towards Kennedy's detractors, meant to defang their accusations of ruthlessness against Kennedy's pre-1963 career.

In 1970, Schlesinger extended his advertisement of Kennedy's legacy to the realm of television by writing the script for David Wolper's documentary special *The Unfinished Journey of Robert Kennedy.* Airing on NBC, the 90-minute documentary largely followed the narrative put forth by Schlesinger in his *Washington Post* article. To its credit, the program spent an appreciable amount of time discussing the more controversial aspects of Kennedy's career, particularly the charges of opportunism and ruthlessness against him and his work for Joseph McCarthy. This demonstrates a marked departure from Schlesinger's article. However, it is apparent that these parts of Kennedy's career are not brought up in order to present a balanced assessment of it; they are presented so that the program can refute their accuracy. To do this, the program included a clip of a Columbia University town hall, where a student asked Kennedy to comment on his time working for Joseph McCarthy. The documentary's narrator answers the question for Kennedy, stating that after working for the committee for six months "at the suggestion of his father," he became alienated by McCarthy's tactics and left; it then mentions that Kennedy later wrote the minority report for the Democrats in the Army-McCarthy hearings.[188] There are other interpretations of Kennedy's departure from the Subcommittee on Investigations – McCarthy's lead counsel, Roy Cohn,[189] doubted the reasoning that Kennedy resigned on principle since he maintained a cordial relationship with McCarthy after his

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[188] *The Unfinished Journey of Robert Kennedy,* directed by Mel Stuart (New York, NY: ABC, 1970).

[189] Using Roy Cohn as a source presents a fickle and interesting interpretive issue. On the one hand, Roy Cohn is well-known to have despised Robert Kennedy – it is therefore plausible that Cohn embellishes or fabricates stories in his oral history interview in order to smear Kennedy's name. However, Cohn is also the only person interviewed in both Jean Stein and the JFK Library's oral history collections who worked with Kennedy on the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations. This could thus mean that Cohn is the only one making these allegations because he is the only one who was asked to participate from the committee. I have chosen to quote Cohn because this section is simply presenting differing viewpoints on Robert Kennedy's reason for leaving the committee, not actually trying to determine the fact of the matter (which would, of course, be impossible).

departure.[190] Schlesinger himself later corroborated this accusation despite presenting a different perspective of the issue in the documentary.[191] This is just one example of how this documentary presents murky, unsettled historical issues as fact.

Schlesinger's speech, writings, and documentary were important early moves towards establishing Robert Kennedy's legacy, but his most important contribution came nearly ten years later in the form of the biography *Robert Kennedy and His Times.* It is an incredibly lengthy book rich with detail and is often regarded as the most authoritative biography on Robert Kennedy. The book, to Schlesinger's credit, is not entirely worshipful – he explores his less flattering moments and does not refrain from critiquing him when he sees fit. However, when exploring Kennedy's more controversial actions, Schlesinger often finds ways to defend him. For example, when discussing the wiretaps that Kennedy authorized targeting Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he claims that Kennedy had been backed into a corner by J. Edgar Hoover, and that he was forced to authorize the taps to "protect King, protect the civil rights bill, to protect themselves."[192] He also claims that King did not hold the wiretapping against Kennedy because he recognized that Hoover had placed him in an impossible position.[193] In describing Kennedy's resignation from Joseph McCarthy's committee, Schlesinger explains how Kennedy was well-known to defend McCarthy's character, even while rejecting his politics – though he made sure to impress that this defence was because of Kennedy's compassion towards underdogs, not because he agreed with McCarthy's extreme anti-communism.[194] For every lapse in judgement or reprehensible action for which Kennedy

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[190]Roy Cohn, interview by James A. Oesterle, March 24, 1971, Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Project, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 3.
[191] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Mariner Books, 1978): 106.
[192] Ibid, 360.
[193] Ibid, 361.
[194] Ibid, 106-107.

was responsible, Schlesinger had an explanation for how Kennedy could have behaved in this way while still being a morally upstanding man.

*Robert Kennedy and His Times* did not receive as warm a reception as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Thousand Days.* While winning a National Book Award for Nonfiction in 1979, some critics alternately lamented the book's exorbitant length (more than one thousand pages) and its thematic organization.[195] However, what was most often critiqued in reviews of the book was its clear goal of defending Kennedy's honour throughout his life. Robert A. Davine, for example, expressed distrust for Schlesinger's analysis: "What makes the book suspect is Schlesinger's relentless defense of Kennedy… The cumulative effect is to arouse the reader's suspicions – Schlesinger's defense would have been more persuasive if he had not sought total redemption for his hero."[196] James T. Patterson agreed with Davine's sentiments: "Many readers may feel that Schlesinger works too hard to praise Kennedy's friends and especially to diminish almost everyone else… This is essentially Manichean history: Kennedys as heroes, others as villains or fools."[197] Reviewers therefore were not convinced that Schlesinger provided sufficient evidence of the truth in the Bobby version: they were conscious that Schlesinger sought redemption, not illumination, of his friend's character, and were thus skeptical of the arguments he lay out in the pursuit of said redemption.

Nevertheless, the book made a lasting impression on many of its readers, some of whom wrote to Schlesinger to share their thoughts on the book. It is clear from these letters that the book at least partially impacted how these readers thought about Robert Kennedy and how he

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[195] See, for example, Stephen B. Oates, "Tribune of the Underclass," review of *Robert Kennedy and His Times,* by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Reviews in American History* 7:2 (June 1979): 286-292.
[196] Robert A. Davine, review of *Robert Kennedy and His Times,* by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Journal of American History* 66:2 (September 1979): 466-467.
[197] James T. Patterson, review of *Robert Kennedy and His Times,* by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The American Historical Review* 84:2 (April 1979): 595.

should be remembered. Gara LaMarche, an Assistant for Policy Development with the ACLU, confessed as much in a letter she wrote to Schlesinger in August 1978. While she said she supported Eugene McCarthy in 1968, she explained that her admiration for Robert Kennedy had grown in the decade following his death. Interestingly, she attributes this to what she calls "the myths we build around our dead heroes," and credits Schlesinger's book with helping to confirm her belief that America had lost something great when it lost Robert Kennedy.[198] LaMarche's letter revealed that she was aware there was a constructed component to his legacy, but it also revealed that she accepted the basic premise of the legacy. This suggests that the version of the legacy perpetuated by Schlesinger had perhaps become hegemonic enough by 1978 that, while some people recognized it was partially a product of mythmaking, they still believed in it nonetheless.

Another reader, Dorsey M. De Raismes from Delaware, thanked Schlesinger for confirming his belief that Kennedy's death also led to a death of America's national conscience.[199] Still another, Steve Horchler, thanked Schlesinger for creating a vivid picture of a man who was "the rare combination of both toughness and tenderness, who was intensely loved and hated, who was shy and yet bold, the figure who could spur controversy and yet unify, and a man who could be both very serious and very funny."[200] Horchler's letter demonstrates Schlesinger's care in making sure that Kennedy's morally upstanding traits and moments always win out against the negative in narratives of his legacy. Horchler's mentions of controversy, toughness, and hatred in his letter show that Schlesinger had not shied away entirely from

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[198] Gara LaMarche to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY, August 7, 1978.
[199] Dorsey M. de Raismes to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY, March 7, 1979.
[200] Letter from Steve Horschler to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY, September 26, 1978.

engaging with his subject's less flattering moments. However, like in the Wolper documentary, he countered these with greater tales of Kennedy's best moments. The result is that readers like Horchler perceive a dichotomy between the two sides of Robert Kennedy, but ultimately walk away believing that the good he did was more important. Schlesinger thus clearly had a demonstrable impact on his readers and helped to shape what they remembered about Kennedy.

Countering the "Bobby" Legacy: Media Eulogies

Countless other assessments of Kennedy's life appeared in the immediate aftermath of his death besides the ones constructed by family and friends. A notable contrast to this version is the one in the media, which more readily engaged with the whole of Kennedy's career – especially its controversies. These accounts also ignored the family's concern for linking Robert Kennedy to John Kennedy, and indeed, they did so liberally throughout their eulogies.

Eulogies appeared in newspapers of record alongside articles covering details of the funeral proceedings. *The New York Times'* eulogy to Kennedy acknowledged the complexities of categorizing his career: "for those who found him charming, brilliant, and sincerely devoted to the welfare of his country there were others who vehemently asserted that he was calculating, overly ambitious and ruthless."[201] In the *Washington Post's* eulogy, Kennedy was described as the "controversial" Kennedy – it also recounted allegations that Kennedy was ruthless and self-righteous, though it countered this version of Kennedy's personality with mention that his friends would instead describe these traits as a deep compassion and romanticism.[202] These articles readily engaged with the enigma of categorizing Robert Kennedy: while they were happy to

[201] Alden Whitman, "Robert Francis Kennedy: Attorney General, Senator, and Heir to the New Frontier" (*The New York Times,* June 7, 1968): 18.
[202] Ward Just, "For Another Kennedy, Triumph and Tragedy" (*Washington Post,* June 7, 1968): A12.

discuss the positive points of his career that the Bobby version also championed, these articles also made sure to show how Kennedy flirted with controversy throughout his career. They showed that the question of his life was not settled; that Bad Bobby did not die with the corporeal Bobby.

Newspapers also controverted the funeral's deemphasis on the links between John and Robert Kennedy by frequently comparing the two brothers. In the same *New York Times* article mentioned earlier, the link was identified in the article's title: "Robert Francis Kennedy: Attorney General, Senator and Heir to the New Frontier."[203] Identifying Kennedy with his brother's "New Frontier" political program suggested that he had no politics of his own; that he was an heir to the political ideas he championed, and not their originator. The article went on further to suggest that Kennedy's connection to his brother allowed him to win his Senate seat, since he otherwise had little real connection to the state of New York and thus needed to profit off his brother's reputation.[204] This, too, diminished Kennedy's one and only electoral victory; it insinuated that Kennedy was not a winner on his own and had to rely on his family name to gain power. This left him with almost nothing: his politics were inherited from his brother, and his electoral victory was thanks to his brother's legacy and his famous name. The *Chicago Tribune* also connected Kennedy to his elder brother: "Robert Kennedy was President Kennedy's political heir. It was a foregone conclusion after the President's death in Dallas that Bobby would someday try for the White House."[205] Again, the assertion of this link divorced Robert Kennedy from any idea of individuality or exceptionality. Far from being a political leader without comparison in his time, continually linking him to his brother does just what the Kennedy family

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[203] Whitman, "Robert Francis Kennedy," 18.
[204] Ibid.
[205] Russell Freeburg, "Bullet Upsets Kennedy Political Team," *Chicago Tribune,* Chicago, IL, June 7, 1968: 6.

feared in their funeral planning: it transfers any achievements Robert ever had to John, making Robert's career an extension of his brother's doing and not anything that he worked for in his own right.

Magazines, too, engaged directly with less savoury parts of Robert Kennedy's career. *Time's* eulogy to him began by observing that "there were two Robert Kennedys – the one who was loved and the one who was hated."[206] *Newsweek* applauded his dedication in recent years to the poor, Black and white alike – but also acknowledged that Kennedy's enemies saw this as political opportunism and not genuine concern.[207] These themes continued into televised eulogies to Kennedy. In CBS's morning coverage of Kennedy's death on June 6, Walter Cronkite took an extended look at the moments in Kennedy's career that gained him the reputation for ruthlessness, stating that "no politician in modern times engendered such extremes of devotion and distrust."[208] All in all, media eulogies to Robert Kennedy in the days following his death did exactly what the family was hoping to avoid in its structuring of the funeral: they diminished his achievements by demoting him to his brother's political keeper, and called into question his worthiness of praise by putting under a microscope the parts of his career that made him look ruthless and abrasive.

It is important, however, to acknowledge the complexity of media accounts of Robert Kennedy's life. It is true that the eulogies to Kennedy produced by staff writers and reporters tended to be more balanced, engaging directly in moments of Kennedy's career that his friends and family would sooner leave behind. However, the power and prestige of Kennedy's peers often meant that parallel articles and programs endorsing the Bobby version still crept into the

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[206] "When the Height is Won, Then There is Ease" (*Time,* June 14, 1968): 19.
[207] "…Once Again," *Newsweek,* June 17, 1968: 21.
[208] Walter Cronkite, "Robert F. Kennedy, 1925-1968" (CBS News, New York, New York, June 6, 1968).

media. This has already been shown in Arthur Schlesinger's *Washington Post* article, which counters the points made by Ward Just in his own eulogy to Kennedy. Television programs also aired several talk shows which provided a platform for the Bobby version to be broadcast through interviews with Kennedy's friends and family.

One of these talk shows was the *David Susskind Show,* which invited peers of Robert Kennedy onto the show on February 1, 1969. The discussion panel included Arthur Schlesinger, William vanden Heuvel, writer David Halberstam, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, and speechwriter Richard Goodwin – all people who had been associated with and close to either the Kennedy family or Robert Kennedy himself. Much of their discussion revolves around Kennedy's legacy. What is interesting to note about this discussion is that the members of the panel do not agree on the finer points of the legacy, specifically the notion that Kennedy experienced a great turnaround in his politics and personality following the assassination of his elder brother.

David Halberstam begins the discussion by acknowledging that Kennedy's reputation as a ramrod for his brother during his 1960 campaign was disjointed from his politics and image in his own campaign for the Democratic nomination.[209] Arthur Schlesinger disagreed, stating that Kennedy held the same values over his entire political career – it was simply his reputation and the way that he was perceived by the American public that changed.[210] These statements split the group and opened up a lengthy discussion of if Kennedy's politics truly changed at all between his early and later career.

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[209] *The David Susskind Show,* featuring Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., William vanden Heuvel, David Halberstam, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Richard Goodwin, aired February 1, 1969, transcript: 2.
[210] Ibid, 3-4.

Vanden Heuvel attempted to compromise between the positions of Halberstam and Schlesinger, stating that Kennedy behaved differently depending on which groups he was working with at any given time: "among the politicians for example, he was never any softer than he was in 1960. When he was called upon to make political judgments that a manager was compelled to make… he was still the tough political manager… but then whenever you ask anyone, what was it that made him ruthless in your eyes. I rarely found anyone who could come up with a tangible example that held water as to this so-called ruthlessness."[211] Halberstam then again asserted his opinion that Kennedy experienced a dramatic change throughout the sixties. "I think there really was a constant expansion to him… while I always think he had basic good instincts, I think he became increasingly sophisticated about the country and the world over these years. The more he saw it, the more he touched it, particularly in those Attorney General years. And as he did, he expanded, and the depth and sensitivity expanded."[212] Vanden Heuvel and Galbraith eventually agreed with Halberstam, but Schlesinger continued to disagree with his argument, stating that he thought "the basic qualities of the man who sent [Assistant Attorney General Nicholas] Katzenbach to the universities in the south, for example, are the same basic qualities of the man who went into the ghettoes in San Francisco."[213]

This episode of the *David Susskind Show* is, therefore, a complex instance of the media's relationship to the Robert Kennedy legacy. It represents an exception to the rule that media accounts were generally more reluctant to broadcast the Bobby version *ipso facto* by inviting progenitors of the Bobby version to discuss their beliefs on air. However, it also presents the Bobby version as an unsettled argument rather than as a fact; by arguing about the finer points of

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[211] Ibid, 6-7.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid, 6-8.

the legacy, the discussion panel makes it seem like pieces of the legacy could still be up for debate. Therefore, while it is apparent that the media largely presented balanced assessments of Kennedy's career, it cannot be said that every single account followed this trend.

## Conclusion

The twentieth anniversary of Kennedy's death in 1988 sparked a new wave of commemorations and remembrance. In March, *The Village Voice* published "Thinking About the 60s: RFK and the Frontier of the Possible." It marked the twentieth anniversary of the assassination and was written by Jack Newfield, a journalist who was one of many who penned Robert Kennedy biographies following his death. Newfield was also part of the brigade of journalists who followed Kennedy's journey through his campaign for the Democratic nomination. He had been a great Robert Kennedy admirer, stating once that he was the one person who never disappointed or disillusioned him.[214] He had also been a troublemaking leftist who once allegedly threw a typewriter out a window at police during the confrontations at the 1968 Democratic National Convention.[215]

In the article, Newfield contended with the facts of Kennedy's career which had come to light in the two decades since his assassination. He acknowledged Kennedy's involvement in the wiretapping of Martin Luther King, Jr., the recruitment of mobsters to assassinate Fidel Castro in Cuba, and his rumoured affair with Marilyn Monroe.[216] Despite these facts, Newfield still defended the image of Kennedy pushed by his funeral twenty years prior. He commended

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[214] Matt Schudel, "Muckraking N.Y. Reporter Jack Newfield Dies at 66" (*Washington Post,* December 23, 2004): B08.
[215] Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago: An Informal History of the American Political Conventions of 1968* (New York: Penguin, 1969): 170-171.
[216] Jack Newfield, "Thinking About the '60s: RFK and the Frontier of the Possible" (*The Village Voice,* March 8, 1988): 35.

Kennedy's seemingly singular capacity for authentic change, comparing him favourably to politicians like Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon who he claimed underwent less genuine reinventions.[217] He attributed this to Kennedy's ability to admit that he was wrong about many things, especially positions he held in his earlier career – among those that Newfield mentioned were his earlier support for the Vietnam War, his support of Joseph McCarthy, and his slowness to act on the nascent Civil Rights Movement as Attorney General.[218] Newfield claimed that Kennedy was an "open, contemporary, passionate person" who was only tough (read: ruthless) with those with whom he needed to be, particularly Jimmy Hoffa and Alabama Governor George Wallace. Newfield then closed his article with quotations from the Day of Affirmation speech and his own reminiscences from the window of the funeral train, lamenting his fruitless search for a leader who could once again unite America in the way Kennedy did.[219] In the face of damaging new information about Kennedy, Newfield still elected to valorize the Robert Kennedy seen in the Bobby version – to do otherwise would be to admit that the political left's greatest heroes were just as fallible and morally dubious as Reagan and Nixon.

In the same year, friends of Kennedy organized a conference dedicated to his memory at Loyola Marymount University's Centre for Politics, Ethics, and Public Policy. Most of the organizers, speakers, and panelists were those who worked on Robert Kennedy's campaign, and the panel titles alluded to the kinds of themes that the Bobby version wished to promote.[220] Its keynote speech, organized around the theme of Kennedy's legacy, had a most appropriate speaker: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.[221] The mythmaking and promotion of the legacy was evidently

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[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid, 36.
[219] Ibid, 37-38.
[220] Some of these titles included "Social Justice: Race, Class, and Equality," "Community Organization and Development," and "How to Seek a Newer World."
[221] Loyola Marymount University Center for Politics, Ethics, and Public Policy, "RFK Remembered," Robert F. Kennedy Tributes, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

still going strong twenty years after Kennedy's death, and was still following the broad strokes of the original blueprint while attempting to integrate new facts learned about Kennedy in the years between.

These later pieces of mythmaking were dependent on the symbolism inherent to Kennedy's funeral and countless tributes which debuted immediately following his death. While there was no one way that Kennedy was remembered in these kinds of tributes, they can broadly be grouped by the perspective they took on how the events in Kennedy's life should be interpreted.

The first broad interpretation of Kennedy's life was the Bobby version – this was the stance that Kennedy's friends and family took in the commemorations of his life orchestrated by them. The most important commemoration falling under this umbrella was Kennedy's funeral; but eulogy speeches, appearances on talk shows, journalistic tributes, and biographies also helped to push this interpretation of Kennedy's life. A particularly important actor for this view was Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., whose weight as a respected public intellectual and historian helped to provide legitimacy to his numerous works promoting the Bobby legacy. This was despite his personal involvement with Kennedy and the Kennedy family, which should have called into question his ability to provide fair and balanced accounts of Kennedy.

The Bobby legacy provides a charitable interpretation of Kennedy's life and career. It argues that the true version of Kennedy is found in his later career as senator and presidential candidate; that he only came into his own following a significant internal change sparked by the assassination of his brother. It rarely discusses or looks at the earlier, more controversial aspects of Kennedy's career, and if it does mention them, it is only to compare these earlier days to the maturity he achieved later on. This version argues that Kennedy was a crusader for poor whites

and Black people; that he was a builder of political coalitions that had never before been seen and would likely never be seen again. This version is also careful to establish that Kennedy had a political career in his own right; that the summation of his career should not come down to "brother inheritor."

The Bobby version exists in tension with the legacy presented by media eulogies. Again, there are differences between different tributes, but broadly, tributes to Kennedy on television, in newspapers, and in magazines provided a much more complete account of Kennedy's life. They acknowledged directly the contradictions inherent in Kennedy's career, especially between his early career as a "ruthless" prosecutor and his later career as a compassionate, populist politician. They also made explicit that Kennedy's early career owed much to familial connections and his connection to his brother's administration.

Other versions of the Robert Kennedy legacy exist. Some take a diametrically opposed position to the Bobby version to assert that his entire career was one of reckless ambition and political opportunism; that there was no sincerity to his career at all.[222] A more tabloid-centred appraisal of Kennedy's life nitpicks his personal life and alleges numerous salacious affairs, most famously with Marilyn Monroe.[223] Of course, as with any Kennedy death, there are also countless conspiracy theories which make various fantastical claims.[224]

All of these separate interpretations of what matters in Kennedy's life exist in tandem – they inform each other, borrow from each other, respond to each other, and contradict each other. In their own ways, they contribute to our understanding of who Robert Kennedy was and what

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[222] See Ronald Steel, *In Love with Night: The American Romance with Robert Kennedy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
[223] See, for example, Tierney McAfee, "PEOPLE Explains: All About Marilyn Monroe's Alleged Affairs with JFK and Brother Bobby," *PEOPLE Magazine,* July 7, 2024.
[224] One book, authored by Lisa Pease, alleges that Sirhan Sirhan did not kill Kennedy on his own volition, but was instead hypnotized to carry out the assassination on behalf of figures in the CIA. See Lisa Pease, *A Lie Too Big to Fail: The Real History of the Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2018).

mattered about his life. It is to these separate interpretations that the Bobby version is created in opposition – it exists as an argument intended to dilute the power of other versions. For this reason, it matters greatly which interpretations of Kennedy's life get promoted, and for what reasons.

**"… For Such a Man a Living Memorial": Robert Kennedy's Legacy as Philanthropy**

On June 14, 1968 – just eight days after Robert Kennedy's death and four days after his funeral – Edward Kennedy sent a letter to several of his late brother's close colleagues and associates.

"I would greatly appreciate it," he wrote, "if you could give some thought to the nature of a permanent living memorial that can be established for Bob. It should be neither a shrine nor museum, but rather a memorial that would both preserve and bring action to those matters he was so interested in."[225] He requested memos be put together by recipients of the letter detailing the structure and logistics of their proposed memorials, to be perused by himself and his brother's widow, Ethel.[226] Over the next two weeks, the Kennedys received no less than 32 proposals and held at least three meetings to discuss them.

The speed with which the Kennedy family began their efforts to create a memorial to Robert Kennedy suggests the importance of such an act. Organizing charities and foundations was not new to the Kennedy family – the Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr. Foundation had been running for 23 years by 1968, and the Special Olympics were founded by Eunice Kennedy later that year – but organizing a charity dedicated to the memory of a family member certainly was new.[227] Within the context of the construction of Kennedy's legacy, the move makes sense: since his legacy was constructed to be predicated upon his passion for public service and helping the underprivileged, it was a logical move to develop a philanthropic institution in his memory following his death.

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[225] Letter from Edward M. Kennedy to Burke Marshall, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA, June 14, 1968.
[226] Ibid.
[227] It is true that the family was actively working at this time to iron out the establishment of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum; however, this did not constitute a charity or foundation in the same way that the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial would.

Creating an institution designed to address inequity across the United States was a commendable deed. But it is also important to understand the impact of establishing a charity whose actions were predicated on the constructed Bobby legacy. While Kennedy's funeral heavily contributed to the construction of this legacy, the establishment of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial continued its construction and helped to ensure that the Bobby version would persist into the future for at least as long as the Memorial did.

These links between the works of the RFK Memorial and the central tenets of Kennedy's legacy happened in many ways and were deliberately incorporated into the operations of the Memorial from the days of its conception. Once the mission statement of the Memorial was created to ensure the possibility of this link to the legacy, fundraising efforts began to use this legacy to solicit donations. This happened in various fundraising drives, including initial mailing campaigns and in promotional material for the Memorial's largest fundraising event: the annual RFK Pro-Celebrity Tennis Tournament. The act of building Kennedy's legacy also became financially profitable for the Memorial when Kennedy's friends began to write books about him. These books helped to reinforce the narrative of the legacy, and when these authors donated the proceeds from their book sales to the RFK Memorial, they helped to ensure the institution that made this legacy visible would continue to do so long into the future. The funds raised by the Memorial were crucial in allowing several sorely needed programs to function, but they also helped to ensure that the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy would remain the "official" narrative for years to come. These programs also took funding from bodies that actively participated in the architecture of the War on Crime, which undermined the mission statement of the RFK Memorial.

Philanthropy, Civil Rights, and Black Power

While the Memorial helped to ensure Robert Kennedy's legacy would be sustained into the future, it also fit neatly into a developing dynamic between some philanthropic foundations and activists fighting for Black self-determination.

Throughout the sixties, many left-leaning and liberal charitable foundations began to structure their programming around ending segregation across the United States.[228] These institutions saw opportunities for action in the uneven application of desegregation spurred by *Brown v. Board of Education* in the early sixties: they consequently funded voter drives, registration campaigns, and voter education programs throughout the south.[229] Southern segregationist politicians, who both resented the power of the wealthy families behind these organizations and their anti-segregationist activism, began to accuse these foundations of tax fraud and other financial improprieties.[230] Led by segregationist Texas Representative Wright Patman, these politicians attempted to stymie the activities of these foundations by introducing a forty-year limit on their lifespans.[231] This attack did not work, but general opposition to these charitable foundations resulted in the 1969 Tax Reform Act, which carefully guided what activities a foundation could undertake if it wanted to maintain its tax exempt status: one of the most important stipulations made by the act was that charities now had to maintain a clear separation from politics.[232]

This wider context would have greatly informed the shape and activities of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, which was in the process of establishing itself as these conflicts surged in

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[228] Olivier Zunz, *Philanthropy in America: A History* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2011): 201.
[229] Ibid, 208.
[230] Ibid, 203.
[231] Ibid, 225-226.
[232] Ibid, 229.

congress. Using Robert Kennedy's memory as the Memorial's guiding philosophy would have thus made sense strategically in the context of the Tax Reform Act's non-partisanship stipulation – by structuring its mission statement around memorializing Kennedy's life works and not his political positions, the Memorial could maintain tax exempt status while still working to enact broadly left-wing social programs with the pretense of non-partisanship.

The Memorial also followed the Ford Foundation in attempting to fold Black separatism into their desired conception of liberalism. The Ford Foundation, headed by former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, had been a keystone bastion of postwar liberalism, but in recent years had been brow-beaten by right-wing backlash following the foundation's attempts to encourage desegregation throughout the fifties and sixties. Under Bundy's leadership, the Ford Foundation pivoted to a paradoxical embrace of racially separatist causes. This impulse stemmed from a developmentalist belief that Black Americans needed time separate from whites to develop a strong cultural identity, so that they might eventually fully assimilate to mainstream American society.[233] While this meant that the Foundation ended up advocating for programs which were structured around achieving Black self-determination, it also ensured that it only supported such programs that were acceptable to the Foundation's liberal ethos, effectively neutralizing more radical programming by cutting it off from funding.[234]

Robert Kennedy's Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation was partially funded by the Ford Foundation. The form of the program fit neatly into the Foundation's ethos: it sponsored Black leadership and encouraged community-led development, but only made these works possible on the condition that this work be palatable to the wealthy white businessmen who

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[233] Karen Ferguson, *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013): 7-9.
[234] Ibid.

funded its programs. By bringing business to Bedford-Stuyvesant itself, the BSRC also in its own way continued to ensure separatism for the neighbourhood's Black residents, who found it easier to stay in a community with improved housing prospects and new opportunities for local employment. Since the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial emulated so much of the BSRC's structure, it can be argued that the Memorial indirectly contributed to the same liberal separatist ethos that was spearheaded by the Ford Foundation and the BSRC.

## Conceptualizing the Memorial

The process of selecting an appropriate memorial to Robert Kennedy was a long and difficult one. It took months, and it depended upon input from a wide variety of people with significantly different ideas about the best way to memorialize Kennedy. While the proposals sent to Edward and Ethel Kennedy varied greatly in their content, most of them engaged directly with the Bobby version of the legacy that had been constructed after Kennedy's death.

Much of the prevalence of the Bobby version can be attributed to the conditions set by Edward Kennedy in his initial call for proposals. Besides the stipulation that the family was not looking to build shrines or museums, he asked that proposals 1) aim to create opportunities for the poor and disadvantaged, 2) allow for the possibility that people can dedicate time and effort to its work along with their money, 3) create opportunities for youth involvement, and 4) should ensure that the funding and administration of planned projects secure the memorial's permanence.[235] These principles reflected the family's desire to see the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy enshrined in perpetuity: by asking that the memorial be structured around the

[235] Letter from Edward M. Kennedy to Burke Marshall, June 14, 1968.

creation of opportunities for the underprivileged, the Kennedy family ensured that Robert's name would forever be associated with the kind of politics for which they wanted him to be known.

The stipulation that the Memorial should be a permanent institution and not a shrine or museum is particularly revealing. Shrines and museums evoke ideas of stasis; if Robert Kennedy were to be memorialized in these ways, it would be necessary to surrender his legacy to an unchanging structure. Insisting on proposals for dynamic and permanent institutions left room for accommodation in the telling of Robert Kennedy's life. While the version of his legacy told by the Memorial at its inception in 1968 would be palatable for 1968 politics, it would be impossible to predict how Kennedy would be received in the future. The existence of a permanent institution ensured that there would be a gatekeeping institution in power long after the Memorial's founders were dead; it also ensured that this institution would be able to tweak the details of the Bobby version to fit Kennedy positively into whatever sociopolitical paradigms would develop down the line. Such shifts would not be possible in a shrine or museum, especially since it would be difficult to keep leadership of such institutions under the thumb of the Kennedy family.

With these ideas in place, proposals began to roll in. Lee C. White, a former background advisor to John F. Kennedy on civil rights, structured his proposal around aiding the poor and disadvantaged, as per Edward Kennedy's letter – the purpose of this, he said, was to "carry on the special role that Bob had carved out for himself in being the most effective link between those who make policy decisions… and the millions of people who are unaware of the fact that decisions affecting them are being made."[236] He also stated the importance of making sure

[236] Letter from Lee C. White to Burke Marshall, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA, July 31, 1968.

Robert Kennedy's name was perpetuated in a way that also perpetuated the cause of the poor and disadvantaged.[237]

Within the body of his proposal, White again stated the importance of using Kennedy's memory to affect policymaking surrounding poverty. He suggested that the RFK Memorial take up Kennedy's role as a "modern tribune for the people" and represent the poor in courts and on governmental committees.[238] Since Kennedy spoke for the poor within his government, the RFK Memorial should take care to extend those works into the future. White's focus on the poor in his proposal, along with his suggestion that the RFK Memorial work to *extend* the works of Kennedy as advocate for the poor, show both the continued relevancy of the Bobby version of Kennedy's legacy, as well as the intentions of his associates to continue its production long after he died through the Memorial's works. While Edward Kennedy requested that certain tenets of the Bobby version be followed in proposals, he did not explicitly state that the purpose of these tenets was to perpetuate his brother's name: White's implicit understanding of what the Memorial was to actually represent lends strength to the idea that to perpetuation of the Bobby version was on everyone's minds.

Thomas J. Watson, Jr. of IBM suggested the Memorial take the form of a series of academic scholarships. Watson, a lifelong Democrat and friend to the Kennedy family, was heavily linked to Robert Kennedy through the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, with which he partnered to open an IBM plant in the neighbourhood. In conversations with oral historian Roberta Greene at the JFK Library, Watson expressed his admiration for Kennedy and agreement with his politics, especially in regard to civil rights and the Vietnam War.[239] In his

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[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Thomas J. Watson, Jr., interview by Roberta Greene, January 6, 1970, transcript, Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 16-17.

proposal, Watson suggested that the scholarships could either be given at the University of Virginia Law School – Kennedy's alma mater – or that they could be used at any school in the style of Fulbright scholarships. Importantly, Watson stipulated that these awards should be given to students who study in areas "in keeping with RFK concerns."[240] Watson, in making this stipulation, makes the implicit statement that tying Robert Kennedy's name to a series of scholarships is not enough for a memorial to do – it must also tie itself to some sort of substance related to his politics in order for the scholarship to have any significance. Sustaining Kennedy's name was thus not enough; substance had to be tied to the proposed memorial to ensure Kennedy was not only remembered, but also remembered for the right actions.

A proposal from BJ Stiles built further upon the concept of "RFK concerns." Stiles was an outspoken supporter of Robert Kennedy: in a February 1968 article for *motive* magazine (of which he was editor-in-chief), Stiles implored Kennedy to run for president, and claimed that his entrance into the race would imbue much-needed hope and participation into that year's elections.[241] His belief in Kennedy's ability to stimulate enthusiasm for politics extended to his proposed "Kennedy Institute for Social Change," whose purpose was to be a place where issues of poverty, peace, and racism could be studied in order to create community leaders. The ultimate goal of the institute and these leaders would then be to "create or enhance programs which will change the economic, social, [and] political circumstances of minorities."[242] Proposing a program with this sort of mission statement again served to tie Robert Kennedy to the Bobby legacy. While structuring his proposal around Edward Kennedy's stipulation of servicing the underprivileged, Stiles went further to incorporate other tenets of the Bobby legacy

[240] "Suggestions for Robert F. Kennedy Living Memorial," 1968, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 2.
[241] BJ Stiles, "Wanted: Some Hope for the Future," *motive,* February 1968: 4-5.
[242] "Suggestions for Robert F. Kennedy Living Memorial," 2.

by adding in that his proposed institute would focus on addressing issues faced by people of colour. This is a link to the Bobby legacy that was not specifically cited in Edward Kennedy's letter, showing that the Bobby legacy was influencing the content of Stiles' proposal.

Most proposals for a living memorial to Robert Kennedy attempted to tie him to the Bobby legacy through his work with the impoverished, people of colour, or both. Of the 32 proposals received by the Kennedy family, all but one sought to tie Kennedy to these thematic issues. This suggests the dominance of the Bobby legacy in the weeks following Kennedy's death. While many of those who submitted proposals had had a hand in the funeral planning, and thus contributed at least somewhat to the creation of this legacy, many others who submitted were not involved with this process. Nevertheless, they still bought into its tenets and drew up proposals which spread its particular conception of Kennedy's legacy. It is true that by doing this, proposal writers were building upon Edward Kennedy's specific request to aim proposals at improving the basic opportunities of the poor and disadvantaged - but this is a broad request, and proposal writers used the narrative of the Bobby legacy to fill in the gaps and create fully fleshed out prospective Memorial plans. They also did not question Edward Kennedy's stipulations, suggesting the influence the Bobby legacy held over those who were asked to write proposals.

Once the various proposals had been collected by Edward and Ethel Kennedy, they were summarized by secretaries and discussed a series of meetings which sought to finalize the form of the Memorial. These meetings were attended by those closest to the Kennedy family, most of whom had also had a hand in planning Kennedy's funeral and thus had participated in giving birth to the Bobby legacy that memorial proposals had tried to emulate. In discussing the proposals they received, these meetings often turned to the topic of what legacy of Kennedy

should be enshrined by a memorial in his name. They also often discussed other tribute material, along with the righteousness and value of these tributes.

The first of these meetings was held on June 17, 1968. The turnaround for this meeting following the assassination was quite quick – Kennedy had died just over a week before – and, predictably, its discussions of commemorations were preliminary. The attendee list at this meeting was also more limited than it would be in future meetings.[243] The discussions held revolved almost entirely around memorial proposals and prospective biographies.[244]

Two things are of note in this meeting. The first is that the idea of commissioning a "definitive" biography of Robert Kennedy was something considered by those in attendance.[245] This suggests the level of control desired by the Kennedy family and their friends over how people remembered Robert Kennedy. An "official" biography would allow the family to have a relationship with its author, and ostensibly would allow some degree of control over the information that the biography would contain. This would mean that the Bobby legacy could reach further audiences under the guise of being the only "authoritative" account of Kennedy's life. Curiously, this idea did not come to fruition officially: the biography closest to being "authoritative" would be Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *Robert Kennedy and His Times.*

The second thing to note is that even at this early stage, most of the proposals they discussed involved a connection to the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. This conversation originated with a discussion of Peter Edelman's proposal of situating a university in

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[243] Present were: Ethel Kennedy; Edward Kennedy, Fred Dutton, one of Robert Kennedy's campaign managers; Pierre Salinger, another campaign manager; Milton Gwirtzman, a speechwriter for Robert Kennedy; John Glenn, astronaut, future senator, and family friend; William vanden Heuvel, advisor to Robert Kennedy; Adam Walinsky, another speechwriter; Peter Edelman, legislative assistant to Kennedy; David Burke, administrative assistant to Edward Kennedy; and Tom Johnston, executive assistant to Robert Kennedy and his representative for the BSRC.
[244] "Notes of Meeting," June 17, 1968, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 1-2.
[245] Ibid, 2.

Bedford-Stuyvesant; the group felt this idea to be too unwieldy and expensive, but they nevertheless continued to discuss the idea of situating *something* in Bedford-Stuyvesant without objection.[246] The idea of using Bedford-Stuyvesant as the locus for the memorial's activities was both politically expedient and complementary to the Bobby legacy. The neighbourhood's reputation for being both racialized and impoverished represented an overlap of the two groups that the Bobby version tells us Kennedy most represented. Establishing a memorial here would help to remind the public of this supposed connection, and would also force a recollection of the BSRC, Kennedy's crowning achievement: thus, not only does the location recall his constituency, but also his most celebrated achievements.

The continued insistence on tying the memorial's works to the BSRC also followed the Ford Foundation's lead on the liberal response to the problems of the inner city. As mentioned above, the BSRC received funding from the Ford Foundation because it fell into line with the Foundation's desire to perpetuate separation between races to promote further development within the Black community. In her own examination of the relationship between the BSRC and the Ford Foundation, Karen Ferguson argues that community development corporations like the BSRC helped "[retain] the Foundation's ongoing focus on race and ghetto-based solutions, rejecting any whiff of integrationism sure to arouse controversy among blacks and whites alike in the post-civil rights 1960s and 1970s."[247] Modelling the Memorial off of the works of the BSRC was thus a way for the liberal Memorial planning committee to structure programming in a way that was politically palatable and fundable in the eyes of institutions like the Ford Foundation. It provided a path for the Memorial that was neither radical nor conservative, but still appeared to respond to the issues of the day.

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[246] Ibid, 3-4.
[247] Ferguson, *Top Down,* 211.

Nothing of consequence was decided at this first meeting, but its discussions continued at a larger meeting held on July 2. Here, the discussion over the idea of an authoritative Robert Kennedy biography continued in greater detail. Many authors, including some meeting attendees, were suggested. Among them was Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who would, of course, come closest to being Kennedy's official biographer; Theodore Sorensen, a family friend and colleague who had written to great acclaim about JFK; journalist and author Anthony Lewis, well-known for his books on the impact of the Supreme Court under Earl Warren; Michael Harrington, at the time famous for drawing attention to the problem of poverty through his book *The Other America;* Richard Wade, a historian and close friend of Arthur Schlesinger; and John Rosenberg.[248] Though it is mentioned that many books about Kennedy, including one by Jack Newfield, were in the process of being written, Ethel Kennedy made it clear that she would not accept Newfield's book as a definitive biography about her late husband, and instead named Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. as her preferred biographer.[249] This was not a position with unanimous support – at least one person, Robert Kennedy's campaign manager Fred Dutton, pushed back on the idea of Schlesinger writing the biography, as he considered Schlesinger too much of a "family biographer."[250] In response, Ethel and Edward Kennedy argued that their preferred biographer was somebody who knew Robert Kennedy well and was not an outsider – a role into which Schlesinger fit well.[251] Though Schlesinger's biography was never publicly christened as an authoritative or family-approved book, it may as well have been: Ethel Kennedy would officially ask Schlesinger to write the biography two weeks after this meeting during one

[248] "Minutes of Meeting, Hyannis Port, MA," July 2, 1968, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 1.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Ibid, 2.
[251] Ibid.

of his summer visits to the Kennedy compound; he would also receive privileged access to archival materials due to his personal relationships with both the Kennedy family and those in their orbit.[252]

After this conversation, the meeting turned to the matter of the nascent Robert F. Kennedy Memorial. Adam Walinsky began by summarizing the proposals received, reporting that the vast majority of proposals suggested institutions which addressed poverty in some way; this was in keeping with Edward Kennedy's instructions in his initial letter. These proposals variously suggested doing this through fellowships, summer camps, day-care programs, international exchanges, and naming existing organizations after Robert Kennedy.[253]

A memo prepared by Burke Marshall, former Assistant Attorney General to Robert Kennedy, was sent out to meeting attendees summarizing the conclusions reached in regard to the form of the Memorial. The group rejected the idea of it being a traditional institution, such as a library or thinktank; they instead decided that the Memorial should be structured around working programs that gave grants to individuals working in areas related to Kennedy's interests. They decided, too, that the Memorial should be structured in such a way that its activities could be assured to exist in perpetuity and without any oversight from larger institutions like Harvard University or the JFK Institute. The memo finally states that recipients of RFK Memorial grants should be given titles which tied them in some way to Robert Kennedy – "Robert F. Kennedy Scholars," for example – and that the Memorial should leave itself open to change and be able to

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[252] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Journal Entry: July 15, 1968" (Journal, New York Public Library, *Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers*): 1657-1658. On Schlesinger's access: see, for example, box 189 of the Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers at the New York Public Library, which contains several chains of correspondence between Schlesinger and various public figures, who all personally grant him access to their then-private oral history transcripts.

[253] "Minutes of Meeting, Hyannis Port, MA," 2.

adapt to the future in any way it deemed necessary.[254] Deciding to structure the Memorial in this way loaned itself neatly to the maintenance and promulgation of the Bobby legacy. Ensuring that the Memorial could exist long after the deaths of its founders confirmed that an institution bearing Robert Kennedy's name would live on after first-hand memories of his career had faded, meaning his name would not slip into obscurity. Creating a name for those who received Memorial grants also ensured this continuance of Robert Kennedy's name – it also meant that his name would become attached to the work that the RFK Scholars did with their grant money. The stipulation to avoid institutional oversight finally gave the Memorial's leadership free rein to structure the Memorial's work around whatever activity they saw fit, meaning that the activities that perpetuated Robert Kennedy's name could be whatever the Memorial wanted them to be – and ideally, the activities would continue to connect Kennedy's name to the Bobby legacy.

With these precepts in mind, the group met again on July 22. While many matters were discussed at this meeting, the most interesting of these was the problem of ensuring that the memorial represented what former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara called "RFK interests."[255]

A snag hit by those present at the meeting was the problem of figuring out what exactly Robert Kennedy represented, even though the broad answer to this question had already been answered in the Bobby version of his legacy. Robert McNamara, while advocating for the memorial to be a "living force for change," rejected centering the Memorial around a Bedford-Stuyvesant model or poverty focus.[256] These themes had been at the centre of most proposals received by the family, but McNamara argued that young people interested in Kennedy weren't

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[254] Burke Marshall, "Memorandum," July 21, 1968, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 1-2.
[255] "Minutes of meeting, Hyannis Port, MA," 2.
[256] Ibid.

interested in those projects *per se*, but were instead more focused on helping the poor *in spirit* and changing society for the better. He therefore argued that the Memorial should focus itself not around a particular social theme, but around the ethos of creating change in society, which then could be aimed at whatever issues cropped up as time moved forward.[257] McNamara's suggestion seems out of place and devoid of substance when read in the context of creating a memorial to a specific man, but it also makes some sense when considered in the context of creating a continuing institution: by divorcing the memorial from specific guidelines for its programming, it can ensure it is able to pivot its programming continually to addressing issues that are relevant and prominent in any given era.

John Seigenthaler, Robert Kennedy's administrative assistant and close friend, agreed with McNamara. "Five years ago," he said, "RFK's interests were organized crime. To wit: we should not restrict attention to the ghetto and poor people. If we had set up a memorial five years ago, it would have been in the field of criminal justice."[258] Seigenthaler's observation is an important one. It directly opposes the assertion of the Bobby legacy that the latter years of Kennedy's career represented his true (and only) political interests. This throwaway comment represents Kennedy as he truly is – a changeable person whose political interests lay across the political spectrum. It also demonstrates just how myopic the Memorial was: it claimed to represent the interests that Kennedy held throughout his career, but carefully chose which interests to represent based on what was politically palatable in the times that his legacy was examined. The issue of organized crime had taken a back seat to issues of social justice by the late sixties, so it was important to ensure Kennedy's works in the latter field were emphasized. This finally shows why giving the Memorial leadership executive control over itself was

[257] Ibid, 3.
[258] Ibid.

important: once hot button political topics shifted in the future, the Memorial would be able to shift its works to match with those issues. This kept Robert Kennedy's name both politically palatable and historically relevant.

In response to Seigenthaler and McNamara's resistance to Bedford-Stuyvesant and poverty, Edward Kennedy asked what would guide the Memorial's activities if it decided to become a "force for change" without any actual "RFK interest" to guide its work. Though the meeting minutes suggest this question was never directly answered, it gestures to the matter of why a clear definition of Kennedy's legacy and "interests" was important to the foundation of the Memorial: without these guiding principles in place, the Memorial would not be able to identify a scope to its activities. This is a reasonable practical need for a memorial to have, but in turn, it relies on the formation of a legacy that is concrete and settled to guide its activities. It was important, too, that these guiding principles allowed for some malleability so that the Memorial could stay relevant over time, yet still not make room for radical or negative reinterpretations about Kennedy's legacy. Thomas Watson, Jr., then-president of IBM, also pointed out that clearly defining guiding principles would allow businesses to justify the donation of corporate funds to Memorial programming.[259] This, too, is why it mattered to keep the Memorial continually relevant and politically palatable: donors, particularly large donors, were not apt to give money to an organization that could make them look bad. The ability to thread the Bobby legacy into the guiding principles of the RFK Memorial was thus also important for fundraising.

Above all, the meeting minutes reflect just how involved and contentious the process of creating Robert Kennedy's legacy was. Besides the squabbling over which version of Kennedy and which "RFK interests" should be enshrined in the Memorial, these meetings also played host

[259] Ibid, 5.

to debates about the material being put out into the world about Kennedy. Throughout the minutes, there is an unacknowledged, and yet ever-present, implication that Kennedy's legacy must constantly be built and protected in a particular way; that every project which involves his name must uphold the Bobby legacy that was created in the days following his death. His legacy is shown to be perpetually built; never finished, always required to respond to the sociopolitical context in which it exists. In the context of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, it was particularly required to respond to the needs of fundraising and courting wealthy donors.

Other closed meetings were undoubtedly held to discuss the Memorial, though their meeting minutes are unavailable. What is known is that Robert Kennedy's family and friends felt confident enough in their efforts by October 30, 1968 to announce the foundation of the memorial to the public. In the *New York Times*, the headline read "New Fund Honors Robert Kennedy" with the by-line "Family Plans Foundation to Advance His Ideals" – making it clear that any causes the Memorial undertook should be understood as extensions of the work of Robert Kennedy. In the announcement, Edward Kennedy stated that the purpose of the Memorial, beyond championing causes linked to his brother's ideals, would be to try and act as a "catalyst" in solving some of the nation's most pressing issues.[260] Later in the announcement, Edward Kennedy stated that the Memorial would most concern itself with helping the impoverished, Black Americans, the alienated young at home, and the hungry abroad.[261] His specificity in identifying the groups with which the Memorial would be involved suggests Seigenthaler and McNamara's points failed to win out against the Memorial's need for a clear mission statement.

The public readily engaged with the idea of the Memorial. In January 1969, an article

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[260] Nan Robertson, "New Fund Honors Robert Kennedy," *The New York Times,* October 30, 1968: 1.
[261] Ibid, 21.

written by Richard Cardinal Cushing, Archbishop of Boston and Kennedy family friend, was published in papers across the United States appealing for further ideas of causes in which the Memorial could involve itself. In the article, Cushing shared Ethel Kennedy's vision for the Memorial – that it be an institution that would keep the memory of her late husband alive through initiatives that carried on his ideals.[262] Cushing also explained that the Memorial's committee was hoping that the institution would emulate the model of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation to touch on areas about which Robert Kennedy was passionate – he specifically named young people and the underprivileged as some of these areas.[263] Cushing's final appeal for proposals also demonstrated just how closely linked the idea of the Memorial was with perpetuating Kennedy's memory. Rather than asking for proposals that would change America or challenge its manifold issues, Cushing asked for submissions from those who "have an idea for perpetuating Robert Kennedy's aims and ideals."[264]

The public answered Cushing's call with ideas of their own – most of which fell in line with the "RFK interests" identified by the Memorial committee meetings. Mrs. F. J. O'Neil from Covina, CA, for example, suggested that the Memorial start with helping Indigenous peoples, since they had waited the longest for help.[265] Mary Layton from Syosset, NY suggested building industrial plants in poor neighbourhoods in order to encourage employment.[266] Edward F. Zampella from Jersey City, NJ suggested, finally, that the Memorial fund the building of Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Youth Centers, which could keep youth out of trouble by providing them with guidance and advice regarding jobs, education, narcotics, and sexual education.[267] These

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[262] Richard Cardinal Cushing, "Kennedy – What Should It Be?", *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* Richmond, VA, January 26, 1969: 147.
[263] Ibid.
[264] Ibid.
[265] "'Stop the rioting and join together,'" *The Buffalo News,* Buffalo, NY, March 22, 1969: 116.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid.

answers suggest the foothold that the Bobby legacy already possessed amongst the wider public, and how its ideas were being interpreted within the context of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial. The suggestions shared in the article show that many people no longer associated Kennedy with his more controversial early career. They do not suggest that the Memorial root out organized crime or labour corruption; they nearly always point to the interests Kennedy had cultivated towards the end of his career.

Still, not all believed in the Memorial's claim that it aimed to serve as a force for change in American society. In an article published by various Scripps-Howard-owned newspapers, Scripps-Howard staff writer Robert Dietsch accused the Memorial of being a clandestine vehicle from which Edward Kennedy intended to launch a presidential campaign.[268] Dietsch observed that the staff of the Memorial greatly resembled the potential staff of a president, and a Memorial dedicated to his late brother's name would provide an opportune place in which Edward Kennedy might build a Democratic platform for the 1972 election.[269] With the 1968 election looming, Dietsch also notes that the Memorial would provide a place for Johnson Administration staff to work in the event that Richard Nixon were elected.[270] Dietsch's article shows that not everybody was supportive of the work of the Memorial, and not all saw its motivations as straightforward.

Fundraising for the Memorial

Early fundraising plans relied upon the status and connections of those involved in its establishment. In a letter to Arthur Schlesinger, dated March 31, 1969, fundraising coordinator

[268] Robert Dietsch, "Robert Kennedy Memorial Could Give Ted Ladder to White House," *Evansville Press,* Evansville, IN, October 31, 1968: 28.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid.

James V. Lavin outlined the steps the Memorial planned to take to solicit further donations. They first intended to hold small luncheons, cocktail parties, and dinners across the United States with the purpose of courting potential large donors. He added that they hoped members of the Kennedy family would attend these dinners to help advertise the worthiness of donating to the Memorial. Following these, the Memorial planned to conduct a mailing campaign targeted at both larger donors who could not attend the small gatherings and at the general public who could contribute smaller donations. For these purposes, pamphlets (see below) were written to advertise the Memorial's work. The Memorial finally planned to advertise the opportunity to donate in special feature stories in the media and planned to reach out to youth and college students for any help they could offer.[271]

Fundraising materials for the memorial relied heavily on the pre-established image of Robert Kennedy coming from the Bobby legacy. This is clearly evident in the design of fundraising pamphlets. These pamphlets were part of earlier fundraising efforts by the Memorial, and first began to circulate by March 31, 1969. The first pamphlet discussed is quite short – just 8 pages long, including front and back covers – and was intended to be mailed out more generally to solicit smaller donations. The second pamphlet discussed below is longer – 13 pages including covers – and was intended to be distributed to prospective donors who had the potential to contribute donations of at least $1000.[272]

The first pamphlet began with an accusatory title page (figure 3.1), emblazoned with the words "do you care?"[273] The next page, entitled "Robert F. Kennedy cared," explained the

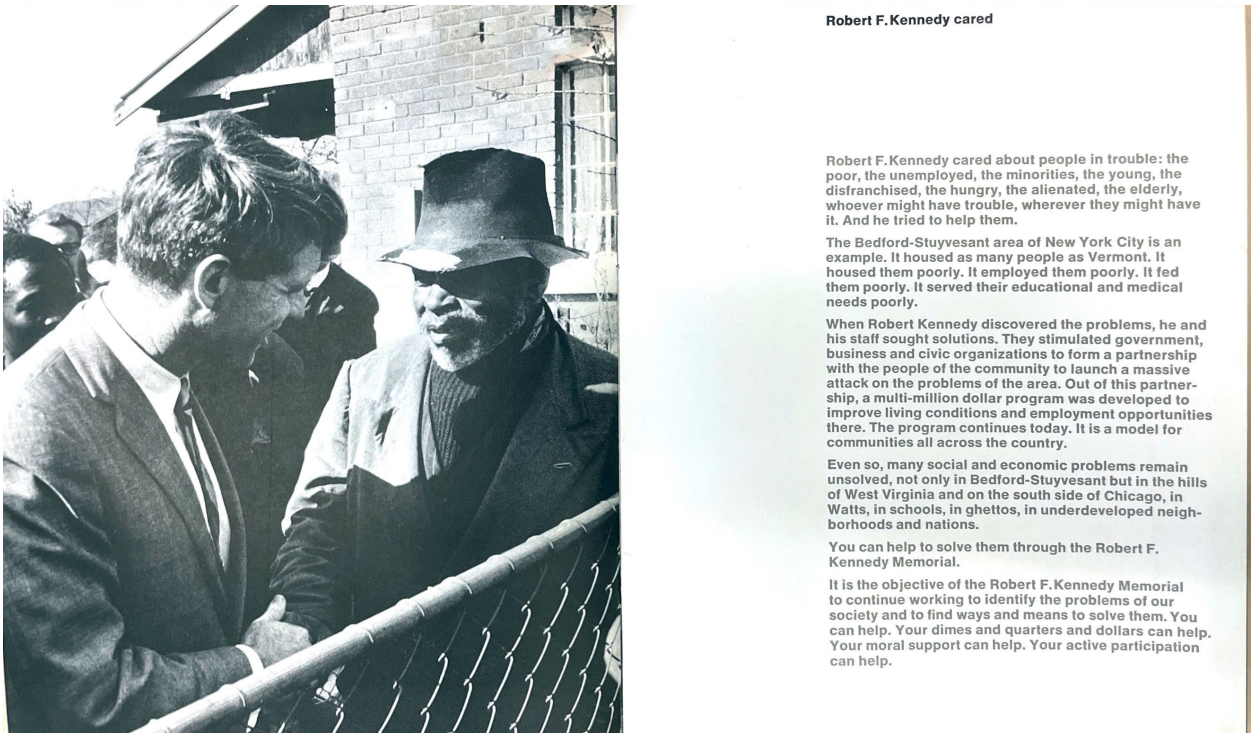
[271] Letter from James V. Lavin to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., March 31, 1969, Arthur Schlesinger Personal Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY.
[272] Ibid.
[273] "Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Pamphlet," 1969, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 1.

history behind the formation of the Memorial. Staying true to the numerous proposals which attempted to build a Memorial out of the blueprint of the BSRC, the pamphlet detailed the work of Kennedy and his staff to produce an institution that addressed the needs of the community.[274] To punctuate the implicit assertion that Kennedy did a lot of work for the Black community through his work in Bedford-Stuyvesant, there was a photo of Kennedy shaking hands with a Black man at the side of the page (figure 3.2). The pamphlet went on to state that there are problems on the scale of Bedford-Stuyvesant's that still need to be addressed – problems "in the hills of West Virginia and on the south side of Chicago, in Watts, in schools, in ghettos, in underdeveloped neighbourhoods and nations."[275] These were projects which would be created and funded by the Memorial. Conveniently, these were also places that Kennedy was well-publicized as visiting in his lifetime, underscoring the connection between him and the Memorial's work.

The third page of the pamphlet further explained the purpose of the Memorial. Similar to the Memorial's announcement, the language of the pamphlet was vague when it came to explaining the exact causes for which the Memorial would do work: it promised that the Memorial would "act as a catalyst" to identify solutions to "public problems," in the spirit of what Kennedy did in Bedford-Stuyvesant. It promised to develop strategies to tackle such problems, and to assemble teams of qualified people in order to carry out solutions.[276]

[274] Ibid, 2.
[275] Ibid.
[276] Ibid, 3.


Figure 3.1: Title page from the first pamphlet. Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.



**Robert F. Kennedy cared**

Robert F. Kennedy cared about people in trouble: the poor, the unemployed, the minorities, the young, the disfranchised, the hungry, the alienated, the elderly, whoever might have trouble, wherever they might have it. And he tried to help them.

The Bedford-Stuyvesant area of New York City is an example. It housed as many people as Vermont. It housed them poorly. It employed them poorly. It fed them poorly. It served their educational and medical needs poorly.

When Robert Kennedy discovered the problems, he and his staff sought solutions. They stimulated government, business and civic organizations to form a partnership with the people of the community to launch a massive attack on the problems of the area. Out of this partnership, a multi-million dollar program was developed to improve living conditions and employment opportunities there. The program continues today. It is a model for communities all across the country.

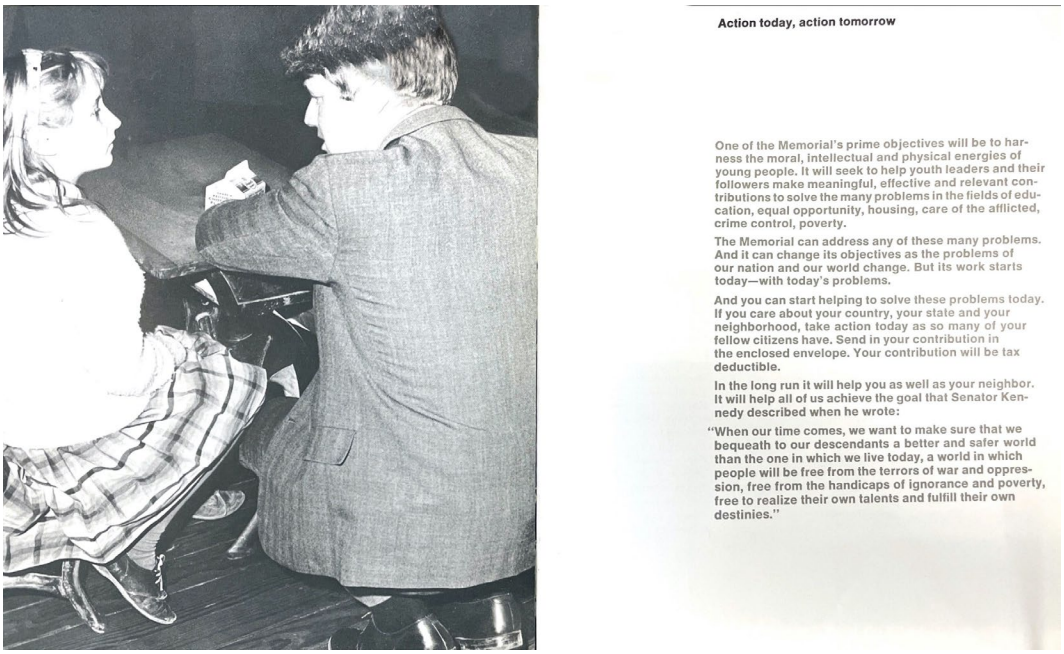
Even so, many social and economic problems remain unsolved, not only in Bedford-Stuyvesant but in the hills of West Virginia and on the south side of Chicago, in Watts, in schools, in ghettos, in underdeveloped neighborhoods and nations.

You can help to solve them through the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial.

It is the objective of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial to continue working to identify the problems of our society and to find ways and means to solve them. You can help. Your dimes and quarters and dollars can help. Your moral support can help. Your active participation can help.

Figure 3.2. Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

The next page of the pamphlet emphasized the importance of "harnessing the moral, intellectual, and physical energies of young people."[277] Here, the pamphlet did mention the fields in which it anticipated working: these were education, equal opportunity, housing, "care of the afflicted," crime control, and poverty.[278] It then implored the reader to make a donation to the Memorial in order to play a part in combatting issues within these fields. At the side of this page was a photograph of Robert Kennedy crouched at a school desk, talking to a young girl (figure 3.3). On the back cover of the pamphlet, the executive committee and board of trustees for the Memorial were listed in their entirety.



**Action today, action tomorrow**

One of the Memorial's prime objectives will be to harness the moral, intellectual and physical energies of young people. It will seek to help youth leaders and their followers make meaningful, effective and relevant contributions to solve the many problems in the fields of education, equal opportunity, housing, care of the afflicted, crime control, poverty.

The Memorial can address any of these many problems. And it can change its objectives as the problems of our nation and our world change. But its work starts today—with today's problems.

And you can start helping to solve these problems today. If you care about your country, your state and your neighborhood, take action today as so many of your fellow citizens have. Send in your contribution in the enclosed envelope. Your contribution will be tax deductible.

In the long run it will help you as well as your neighbor. It will help all of us achieve the goal that Senator Kennedy described when he wrote:

"When our time comes, we want to make sure that we bequeath to our descendants a better and safer world than the one in which we live today, a world in which people will be free from the terrors of war and oppression, free from the handicaps of ignorance and poverty, free to realize their own talents and fulfill their own destinies."

Figure 3.3. Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

[277] Ibid, 4.
[278] Ibid.

The second pamphlet, released at the same time as the first and aimed at larger donors, used the same photographs and was largely the same in its contents. There were, however, key differences. This pamphlet, for example, began by listing the areas in which Robert Kennedy was active: "People were his concern. Old people. Young people. Poor people. Minorities. Majorities. Anyone with a problem."[279] This statement immediately tied Kennedy to the Bobby legacy – since this was a pamphlet soliciting fundraising for the Memorial, it also immediately tied Kennedy and his legacy to the works of the Memorial.

The first pamphlet included a couple of quotations from Kennedy's life; this second pamphlet incorporated many more. Within the body of the pamphlet, a quote was used that was taken from Edward Kennedy's funereal eulogy – "a man who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it." This quote directly tied the Memorial's work to Kennedy's funeral. This is significant – since the funeral was perhaps the largest and most prominent action undertaken towards the construction of the Bobby legacy, including this direct tie to the funeral makes it clear that this institution is a memorial to *that* version of Kennedy. While pictures and rhetorical choices make this implicit assertion, including this direct reference to the funeral makes this connection more obvious. This connection to the funeral was strengthened by the other quotation within the body of the pamphlet, which came from Kennedy's Day of Affirmation speech. This speech was read at length by Edward Kennedy in his eulogy; the same eulogy from which the earlier quotation came from. This too, then, connected the Memorial to the project of constructing Kennedy's legacy that began at his funeral.

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[279] "Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Large Donor Pamphlet," 1969, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 1.

While the pamphlet maintained the same vague language surrounding the exact sorts of issues with which it planned to work, it did, on an earlier page, allude to the kinds of issues and people Kennedy worked with in his life: "He cared and worked for the poor… he cared and worked for civil rights and voting rights and working rights for all people. He cared about youth and their education. He cared about equal justice under law and sought to make it a reality for all."[280] The pamphlet then stated that since Kennedy left this work unfinished, it was now up to the Memorial to complete his work. This statement served two purposes: 1) it further reinforced Kennedy's constructed legacy by stating unequivocally that these were Kennedy's political positions, and 2) it identified these areas as the areas in which the Memorial will work.

As the Memorial grew, accrued money, and began its work in earnest, fundraising strategies shifted from mailed pamphlets to fundraising events. The largest by far was the RFK Pro-Celebrity Tennis Tournament, an annual occasion in which prominent politicians, celebrities, and athletes came together in order to fund the activities of the Memorial via ticket sales. Advertising for the tennis tournament helped to reinforce exactly where the money of attendees was going, and for what activities the Memorial would use the revenue.

The first tournament was held in the summer of 1972 at Forest Hills Stadium in New York City. By all accounts its first iteration was a success – celebrities such as Dustin Hoffman, Charlton Heston, Arthur Ashe, and Stan Smith participated in the tournament, and over 12,000 spectators were in attendance.[281] Inviting prominent athletes and celebrities was a stroke of genius: their presence attracted media attention, which in turn produced greater visibility for the

[280] Ibid, 4.
[281] Donnie Radcliffe, "Tennis, Anyone?" *Washington Post,* August 28, 1972: B1.

works of the Memorial.[282] It also proved to be a financial success for the Memorial; its net profits were an estimated $100,000 in its first year.[283]

Mailouts for the following year's tournament emphasized the kinds of work these proceeds allowed the Memorial to do. In alignment with the Bobby legacy, these activities included inaugurating the first bilingual and bicultural Chicano broadcasting station, investigating resistance to integration in Southern schools, and aiding in expanding the Coalition of Indian Controlled School Boards.[284] These mailouts both complement and continue the construction of Kennedy's legacy, as tying causes in these communities to Kennedy's name perpetuates the idea that these were his greatest – and only – political interests. Thanks to advertisements and mailouts such as these, attendance in the tournament's second year grew to 15,000.[285]

The continued construction and advertisement of Kennedy's legacy extended to the 1973 tournament's program. The program was chock full of playful ribbing and inside jokes between participants,[286] as well as advertisements from companies such as Pepsi and Puma. Between advertisements and jokes, the program was dedicated to memorializing Kennedy and connecting his legacy to the works of the Memorial. The very first pages of the program were dedicated to him – they included a quote from Kennedy asserting that the world must rely on its youth for hope, coupled with a photo of Kennedy crouched on a dirt road talking to a barefoot child (figure 3.4). On the next page, overlain on the photo of Kennedy and the child, was a brief explainer of

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[282] "Kennedy Tennis Lures Top Stars," *The New York Times,* August 20, 1972: S25.
[283] Ibid.
[284] Letter from Ethel Kennedy to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., June 15, 1973, Arthur Schlesinger Personal Papers, New York Public Library: 1-2.
[285] Myra MacPherson, "A Tale of Tennis Trauma: Testing Wits, Wills, and Skills and Seeking Their Lobs in the Sun," *The New York Times,* August 27, 1973: B1.
[286] One advertisement in the program reads "Stan's the man but Steve's our guy… compliments of the Steve Smith Fan Club" – Steve Smith was Robert Kennedy's brother-in-law by way of his sister, Jean. At the bottom of the page, a small footnote indicates that the advertisement was paid for by Steve Smith.

the Memorial's mission statement titled "A Living Memorial." This mission statement (figure 3.5) stated that the Kennedy Memorial "carries forward the Senator's love and concern for the young and poor, and tries to help them in ways that reflect his own passionate dedication. It went on to identify "Indian, Black, and Chicano" children as the Memorial's greatest interest, since they were often the most disadvantaged.[287] Again, these descriptions of the Memorial's work connect to Kennedy's constructed legacy through his interest in helping racialized communities.

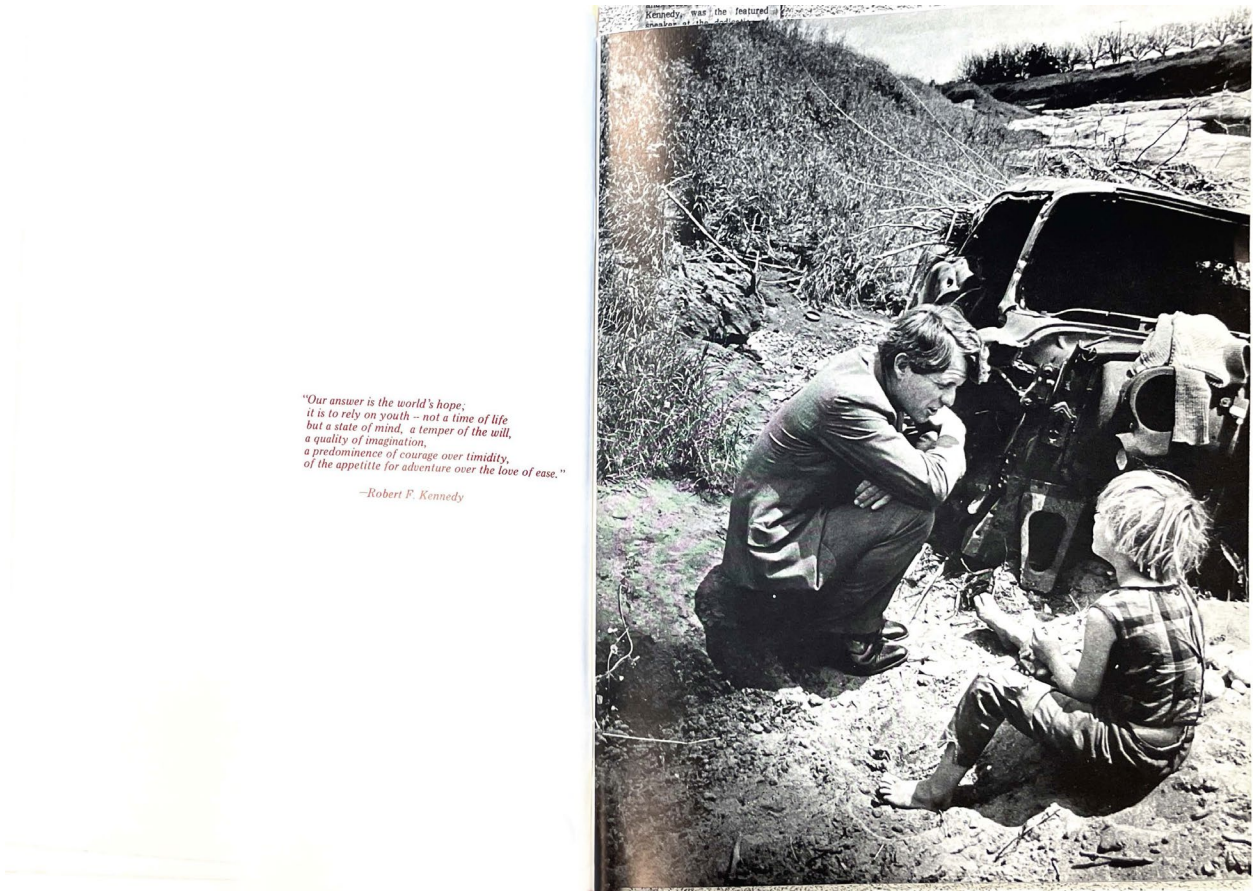



Figure 3.4. David F. Powers Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

[287] "Robert F. Kennedy Pro-Celebrity Tennis Tournament Program," 1973, David F. Powers Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Museum and Library, Boston, MA: 1-4.

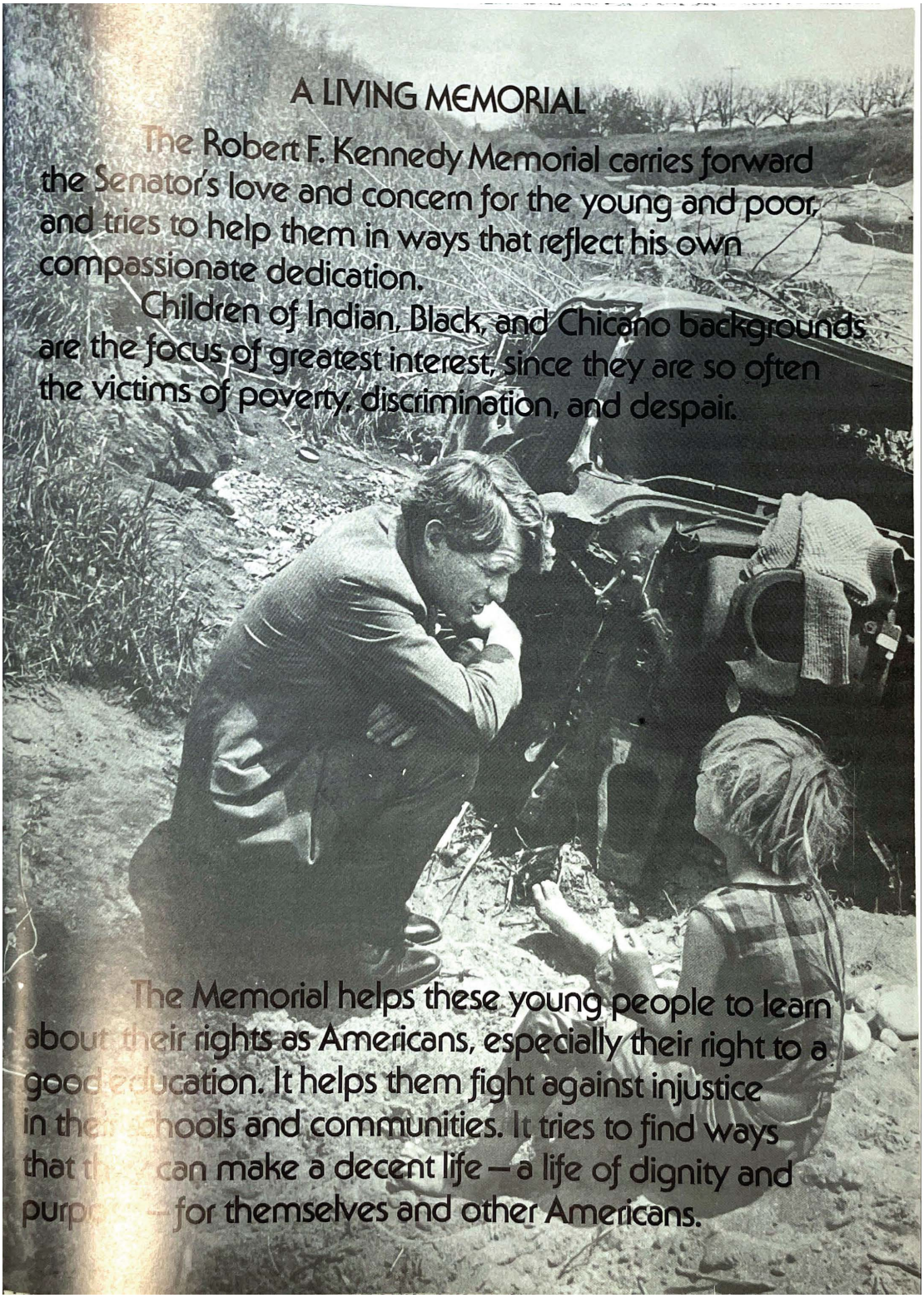


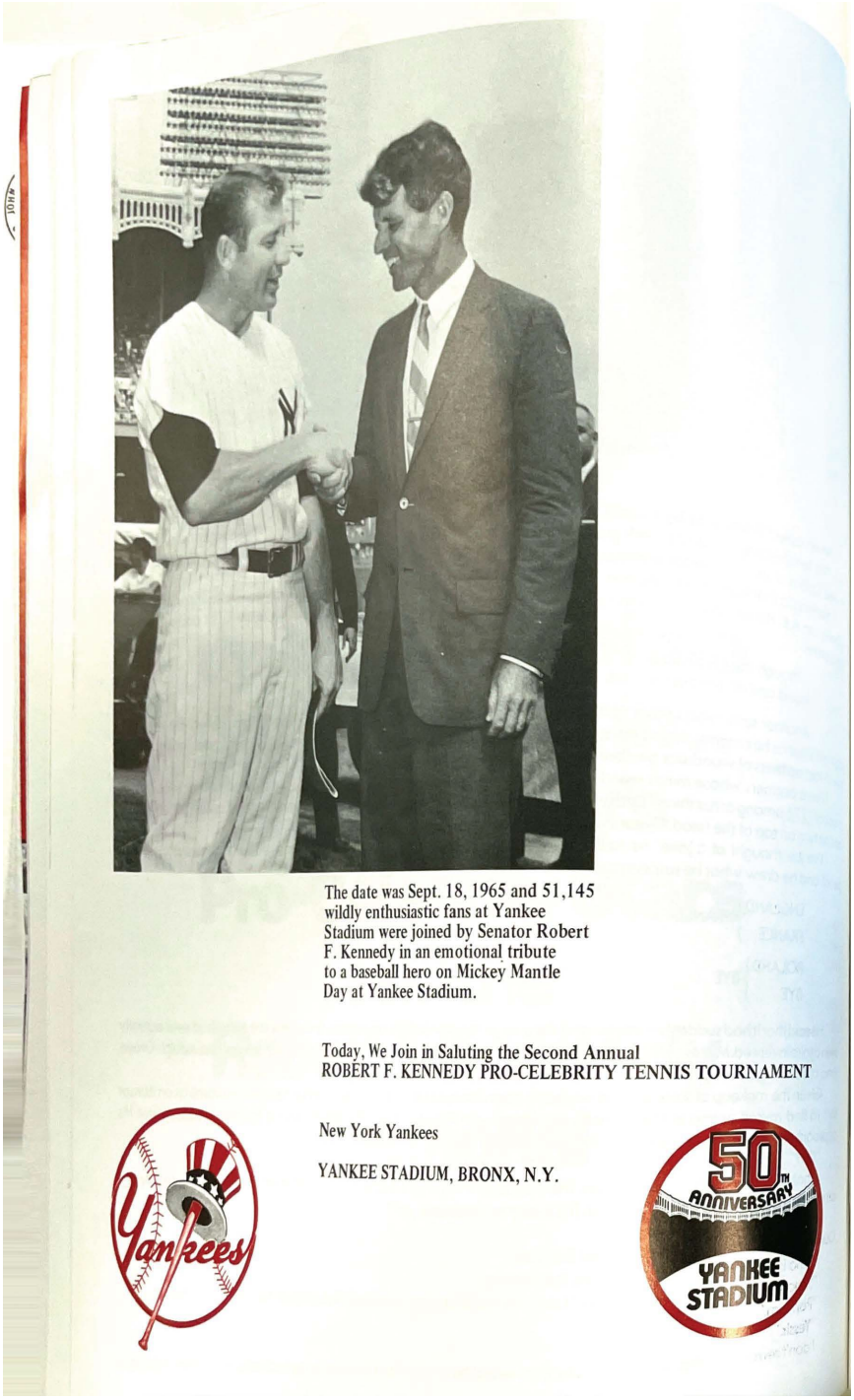

Figure 3.5. David F. Powers Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

A two-page spread later in the program, beginning with the phrase "He remains luminous in memory," expanded upon Kennedy's constructed legacy through the use of quotes from his peers describing his politics and character. A quote from Frank Mankiewicz stated that when people heard Kennedy speak of injustices, they understood that he meant to do something about these issues. Another quote from Sander Vanocur, a television journalist who covered Robert Kennedy's assassination in real time, described Kennedy as the most "outraged" man Vanocur had ever known – outraged about poverty and the great injustices he saw in the world. James Stevenson, another journalist, lauded Kennedy for his silence compared to politicians who spoke more than they listened; he remembered Kennedy as someone who listened to those in need and sought to go where others never went in order to connect with more people. The section of quotes finishes, appropriately, with the ever-present quotation from Edward Kennedy's eulogy at his brother's funeral: "my brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life, to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it."[288] Each of these quotes supports the idea of Kennedy's exceptionality when compared to other politicians. They supposedly show that he cared in a way that others didn't about the underdogs of American society, as well as that he was especially sincere in this dedication while other politicians were more facetious in their politics. The inclusion of the Edward Kennedy eulogy quote once again recalls the legacy construction which took place at his brother's funeral, while also refuting the idea that any of these gestures towards Robert Kennedy's legacy constitute any attempt at enlarging him in death beyond what he was in life.

[288] Ibid, 36-37.

Some of the advertisements in the program also made gestures to this legacy. Some, like the Yankees advertisement (figure 3.6), merely connected their organization to Kennedy through an old photo op or old quote. Others, however, included some of the quotes that had by this point become canonical in recollections of Kennedy's legacy. An advertisement for Franklin National Bank, for example, included the ripple of hope excerpt from Kennedy's Day of Affirmation speech (figure 3.7).[289] Another quotation in an advertisement from Doubleday and Company came from William vanden Heuvel and Milton Gwirtzman's biography of Kennedy, entitled *On His Own: RFK 1964-1968* (figure 3.8). Though the quotation is about Kennedy's tennis abilities, it is an interesting inclusion in the tournament program, since it advertises another project undertaken to help continue the construction of Kennedy's legacy through biographies written by two of his peers. One final advertisement linking the tournament to both Kennedy and his constructed legacy was one soliciting donations to the United Negro College Fund (figure 3.9). Though it did not make explicit mention of Kennedy's politics or any link between Kennedy the man and the United Negro College Fund, its presence in the program and the program's link to the Memorial helped to deepen Kennedy's alleged "special" connection to Black Americans.

[289] "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…"



The date was Sept. 18, 1965 and 51,145 wildly enthusiastic fans at Yankee Stadium were joined by Senator Robert F. Kennedy in an emotional tribute to a baseball hero on Mickey Mantle Day at Yankee Stadium.

Today, We Join in Saluting the Second Annual
ROBERT F. KENNEDY PRO-CELEBRITY TENNIS TOURNAMENT

New York Yankees

YANKEE STADIUM, BRONX, N.Y.

Figure 3.6. David F. Powers Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

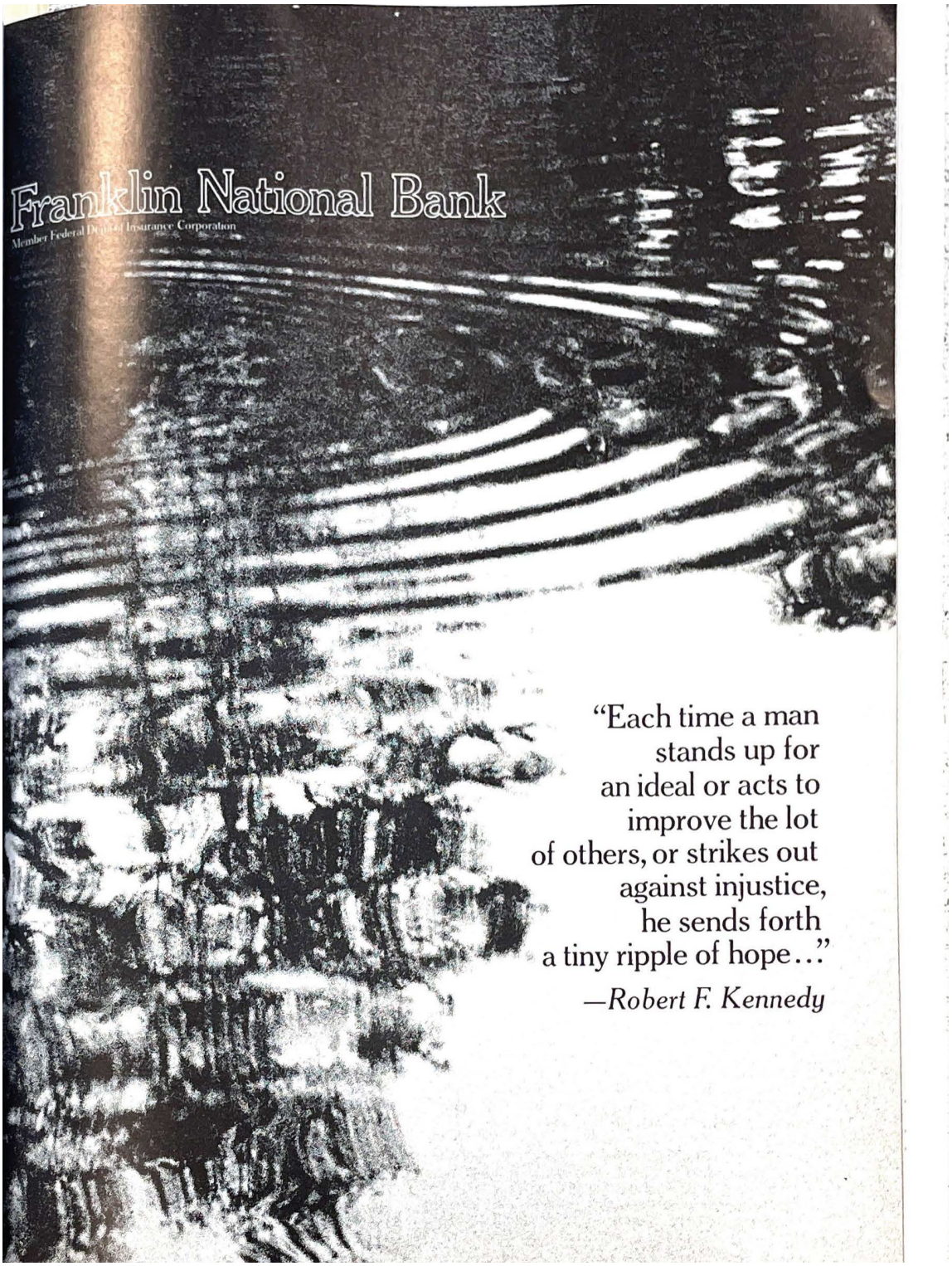



Figure 3.7. David F. Powers Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

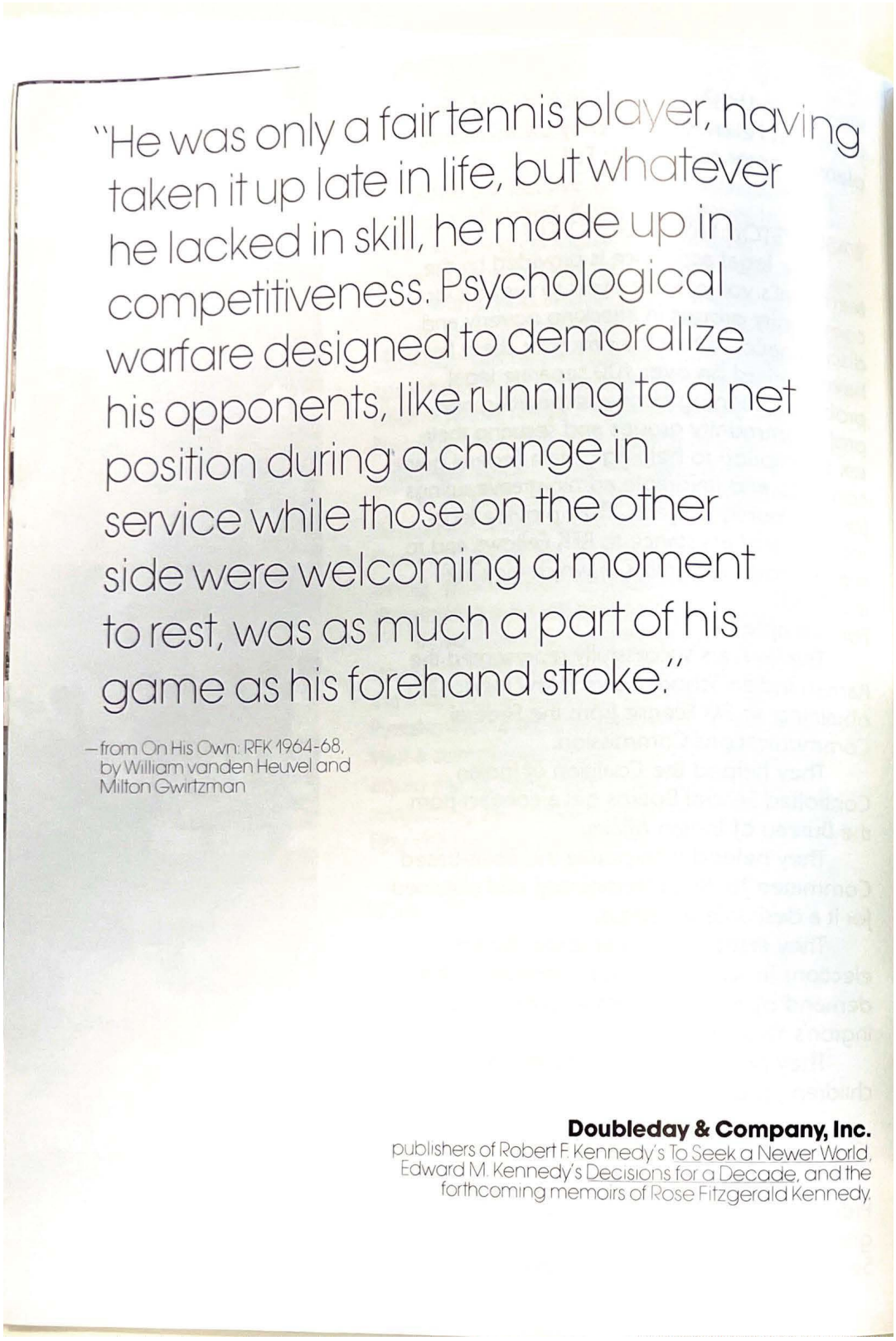



Figure 3.8. David F. Powers Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

# FRED GUIDRY'S THREE SONS WILL EARN MORE IN 1973 THAN HE HAS EARNED FOR 200 YEARS.

It's not unusual to find three college graduates in the same American family. Unless it's a family from Opelousas, Louisiana, right in the center of rural black America.

Fred Guidry has been a sawmill worker since 1933, earning at most $2400 a year. He's locked in a 200 year-old cycle of poverty, ignorance and prejudice that seems almost unbreakable.

But his sons broke out.

For openers, James, Fred, and Larry graduated from Xavier University, New Orleans in '68, '69 and '72.

Then James spent a year with IBM, transferred to the Los Alamos Scientific Lab, picked up an M.S. in Computer Sciences from the University of New Mexico and is now in the School of Urban and Public Affairs at Carnegie-Mellon Institute.

Fred took his degree in math to NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Maryland and is now in the Solar Physics lab. He tutors children in his spare time and would like to earn a Ph.D. in Earth Sciences with an eye towards geophysics research in Antarctica.

Larry will return to his Ph.D. studies in Chemistry at the University of Pittsburgh after completing his hitch with Uncle Sam.

James, Fred and Larry have an earning potential their father only dreamed of. But they might never have made it with out the United Negro College Fund.

We support Xavier and 39 other private colleges that help 45,000 students break out of the rural backwaters and urban ghettos of this country and into 20th century America.

We know there's a place for them. We know we can help them find it. All we need is money. Yours.

**A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste.**

**Give To The United Negro College Fund.**

advertising contributed for the public good

55 East 52nd Street, New York, New York 10022.

Figure 3.9. David F. Powers Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

The program for the tournament finally described the activities which the Memorial's fundraising had been able to support since its founding. These included the Action in Communities Fellowship Program, a program which funded the projects of RFK Fellows in disadvantaged areas across the United States; the Youth Fellows Program, which funded the same kinds of activities for teens aged 15-19; the Washington Lawyers Project, which provided legal counsel in cases of discrimination; and the RFK Journalism Awards, which rewarded reporting on topics "in the landscape of the Senator's concern."[290]

There was, therefore, a large amount of legacy-building at work in the programs and advertisements for the RFK Pro-Celebrity Tennis Tournament. In both mailout advertisements and the program for the tournament, the RFK Memorial's work within the Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities was continually highlighted. This work was then combined with reminiscences of Robert Kennedy and his character, with particular emphasis on how the work done by the Memorial was the very same work Kennedy would be doing if he were still alive. This also furthered the construction of his legacy by bulwarking the reputed connection Kennedy had to racialized communities, as emphasized at his funeral and in other legacy-building pieces of media.

Legacy Building to Fund the Memorial to Continue Legacy Building

Fundraising for the Memorial continued outside of the tennis tournament through books written about Robert Kennedy by his peers. These books did two things: they pledged at least a portion of their sales to the Memorial, and they continued the project of legacy construction through largely favourable depictions of Kennedy's life as seen through the lens of his friends.

[290] "Robert F. Kennedy Pro-Celebrity Tennis Program," 40-43.

One was Jean Stein's *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy.* The book, published in 1970, was a retelling of the journey of Kennedy's funeral train as told through oral history interviews with those who participated in or had some experience of the events around the train. According to Stein's introduction, 347 interviews were conducted for the book, and included both people who were aboard Kennedy's funeral train and those who lined the tracks in the various cities the train passed through.[291]

Stein's introduction was aware of the blind spots in oral history as a discipline. She admitted that her interviews with less well-known figures tended to be more detailed and forthcoming than those with more prominent figures aboard the train; she specifically mentioned wives of public figures like Ann Buchwald as those who gave better interviews.[292] She also acknowledged that oral history interviews often contradict each other with no way to know whose account is more accurate. She acknowledged, too, that interviewees often forget past events, colour their accounts with the benefit of hindsight, or outright refuse to be interviewed even if their memories would prove edifying to the narrative arc of the project.[293]

In response to these limitations, Stein argued that her intention was not to recount an accurate history of the sixties and more to recount the impact and exceptionality of Robert Kennedy – therefore, she said, the inconsistencies between interviews and idiosyncrasies of interviewees mattered less.[294] She instead intended her book to act as a sort of scrapbook of experiences surrounding Kennedy and the train - to this end, she did not knit her interviews together into a single narrative, but rather fashioned each chapter out of unlinked quotations from the interviews. She is therefore able to reduce the impact of many of the shortcomings of her

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[291] Jean Stein, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970): ix.
[292] Ibid, x.
[293] Ibid, ix-x.
[294] Ibid, x.

discipline that she identified in the introduction by letting quotations speak for themselves.

It is admirable how Stein accounted for the limitations of oral history within her project; however, she did not account for the limitation of who she interviewed for her book. She attributed the value of the book to the quality of the recollections from all of the "remarkable" interviewees who "talked as if inspired… whatever the nature of their relationship with [Robert Kennedy]."[295] Stein's remark about the nature of her interviewees' relationships with Kennedy seems to imply that she interviewed a slate of people who differed in their opinions. While a large selection of Stein's interviews are not publicly accessible in the archives, those that are accessible were largely positive in their assessment of Kennedy. Moreover, many of these interviews were not included in the final text of the book – Stein lists 143 interviewees in her acknowledgements whose interviews were not included – a necessary practicality to ensure the book does not exceed thousands of pages, but also one that limited further the assessments of Kennedy which make it into the book.[296] Stein did conduct interviews with people who were sure to give negative assessments of Kennedy – excerpts from her Gore Vidal interview, for example, are included in the first chapter of this thesis – but this interview is listed amongst those who did not make it into the text of the book.

A more critical assessment that did make it into the book came from civil rights activist Ivanhoe Donaldson. Donaldson did not excoriate Kennedy by any means – he was critical of Kennedy's law-and-order line when campaigning in Indiana, but complimentary on the whole to his politics – but a more important observation he made in his interview was how much of Robert Kennedy's reputation was made up of image-building, even before his death. "One of the problems of life is that people deify folks when they're really human beings, and that destroys

[295] Ibid.
[296] Ibid, xi.

the person," he said to Stein. "If you take a guy like Bobby Kennedy and you deify them, what you do is crucify him in the process because not only do you not communicate with him; but in a way, you cut off, you know, his ability to communicate with you."[297] Naturally, these ideas did not make it into Stein's book, because they hint at some of the artificiality in Kennedy's public image – to suggest in any way that this image was constructed took away from the argument that Kennedy was some exceptional politician who bled authenticity.

Her selection of interviewees also does not lend itself to a well-rounded depiction of Robert Kennedy. Those who were present on the train were directly invited by the Kennedy family due to some sort of closeness to Kennedy or some symbolic connection. It was full of family members, lifelong friends, and colleagues who had worked with either him or his brother; therefore, these were not people who were likely to offer any contradictory opinions to the scores of people who had nothing but praise to offer the memory of Kennedy – in fact, many of them had a direct hand in the construction of the Bobby legacy in the first place.

There is also the issue of interviewing people who lined the tracks as the funeral train passed by. While those on the train made occasional allusions to members of the crowd who were present in clear protest or opposition to Kennedy,[298] it is not incorrect to state that those who found it in themselves to create signs and travel to a train station in order to catch a passing glimpse at a train were not people who disliked Kennedy in any meaningful way. Of course, it is impossible to completely generalize the thoughts and feelings of the train crowds – each person had their own reasons for lining the tracks – but the accounts of those watching the train going

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[297] Ivanhoe Donaldson, interview by Jean Stein, September 20, 1968, transcript, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 41.

[298] For example, Frank Mankiewicz's notes from the train journey say that the train passed by an out-of-place Nazi flag. See Frank Mankiewicz, "Notepad notes," Frank Mankiewicz Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: 2.

by combined with photographs of the countless signs of support and grief seem to support the conclusion that the vast majority of attendees were there to say their goodbyes to a leader they supported, if not loved. By pulling interviewees from a train full of lifelong friends and a crowd of supporters, one cannot say that Stein's interviews provided a fair general assessment of Kennedy's life and career.

After making her contribution to Kennedy's constructed legacy, Stein then promised the proceeds from the sale of the book to the RFK Memorial. In a letter to Ethel Kennedy, Stein stated that she intended to donate the profits from the book's sale to a memorial institution of Ethel's choice, and that she intended to donate the interview tapes to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library at the suggestion of her then-husband.[299] Stein's book thus constituted a sort of ouroboros of mythmaking: she took inspiration from an existing narrative of Kennedy's legacy, wrote a book reinforcing it, collected proceeds from that book's sale, then used those proceeds to fund an institution which continued to reinforce this same legacy.

Another example of this process was, of course, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *Robert Kennedy and His Times.* The canonical Robert Kennedy biography and a national bestseller, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* was perhaps the most profitable – and most impactful – project aimed at memorializing Kennedy. Schlesinger's biography reinforced Kennedy's legacy through its profits, but through a different avenue than Stein's. Whereas Stein directly benefitted the Memorial by directly donating her book's proceeds to it, Schlesinger used the profits from his book to establish the RFK Book Awards.

The RFK Book Awards were established via endowment by Schlesinger in 1980, two years after the publication of his biography. In the press release announcing its establishment, it

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[299] Letter from Jean Stein to Ethel Kennedy, August 17, 1968, Jean Stein Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

was made clear that the $2500 prize would be given to books which most clearly aligned with Kennedy's interests. The press release left no room for creative interpretations of this purpose – it clearly states that these interests were "[Kennedy's] concern for the poor and powerless, his struggle for honest and even-handed justice,[300] his conviction that a decent society must assure all young people a fair chance, and that his faith in a free democracy can act to remedy disparities of power and opportunity.[301] There is no mistaking Schlesinger's intentions when writing this press release – it is abundantly clear that the content of Kennedy's legacy was not a matter for debate. When the Book Awards committee solicited submissions which aligned with Kennedy's purposes, it was not up to prospective submitters to assess what these might be. The Book Awards committee, as well as the Memorial to which it was linked, were instead seeking books which could help remind the public, through various types of publicity, what Kennedy was purported to have stood for in life. Books which strayed from this assessment of Kennedy were not welcome, as the winner's list indicates.

It should come as no surprise that both the judges (who changed from year to year) and the winners of the prize aligned closely with this assessment of Kennedy's purposes. In its first year, the awards were judged by Marian Wright Edelman, a Black lawyer known for working with Kennedy in responding to poverty and hunger in the Mississippi Delta; John Kenneth Galbraith, the famed economist and Kennedy insider; Rose Styron, known for her work at this time with Amnesty International; and Michael Harrington, a pioneer in publicizing the issue of

[300] It is interesting to note that this bullet point, while vague, seems to acknowledge that Kennedy did serve as a prosecutor and Attorney General, which is far more than other assessments of Kennedy, especially those closely associated with the family, talk about his earlier career. It is probably safe to assume, though, that the awards committee would not be interested in any books talking about wiretapping or the kind of anti-communist justice in which Kennedy believed in the 1950s.

[301] "RFK Book Award Press Release," November 5, 1980, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

poverty in America through his book, *The Other America.*[302] The assortment of books which received the RFK Book Award help the Memorial reinforce Kennedy's legacy because they cover issues that the family wanted to be identified with Kennedy and his politics. However, this is also an example of how the Bobby legacy could be used to recognize the works of others – many of the books that received the award through the years were significant in their fields or otherwise important to wider society. This includes the award's first recipient, William H. Chafe, for his book *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Struggle for Freedom;* it also includes the 1988 winner, Toni Morrison, for her book *Beloved.* This is one example where the Bobby legacy, constructed as it was, resulted in an initiative that rightly celebrated the work of significant and meritorious authors.

The genesis of the RFK Book Awards, like the publication of Jean Stein's book, is a strange feedback loop of both funding and building Robert Kennedy's legacy. The money that made the awards possible came from the sale of Schlesinger's biography of Kennedy, which, as examined in chapter one, was an important part of perpetuating the Bobby legacy. The annual awards ceremonies created yearly opportunities for press releases and publicity to talk about Kennedy, which gave the Bobby legacy another venue in which it could be advertised. With the book itself being an important part of constructing the Bobby legacy, it could be said that the RFK Book Awards were funded by Bobby mythmaking in order to continue the project of Bobby mythmaking.[303] It is in this way that the legacy of Robert Kennedy became self-sustaining – while books about him are now more often written by journalists than by his friends

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[302] "The Second Annual Robert F. Kennedy Book Awards Press Release," 1981, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY. Schlesinger, in fact, hand-picked these judges, as indicated in a memo from him to Dave Hackett and Stephen Smith in 1978. This memo also indicates that he himself wrote the criteria for the awards as indicated in the award's press release. See "Memorandum for David L. Hackett and Stephen E. Smith," September 28, 1978, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Personal Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY: 1.

[303] One can also look at the RFK Journalism Awards, established in 1969, in a similar fashion.

and family, the end result is the same. Nothing remains of his memory except what successive commemorative projects, funded by other commemorative projects, want us to remember.

Balancing assessments of the very real work done by the Memorial and its connection to continuing the construction of Kennedy's legacy is important. While it indeed served as a vehicle to establish and promote Kennedy's legacy, it was also responsible for productive programs that attempted to address the issues of the day.

By 1978, the RFK Memorial had four core programs: the RFK Fellows program, the RFK Intern program, the Resource Centre, and the Journalism Awards program. RFK Fellows, selected via an application process, were provided financial support in creating a program to address a problem faced by America's youth.[304] One RFK Fellow project was the Children's Advocacy Center, a legal consultancy group founded in Oakland, CA in 1974 which provided free education in legal rights to both parents and students.[305] Another program was the Migrant Farmworkers Action Program, a group which organized volunteers to monitor migrant worker camps in North Carolina to ensure their compliance with OSHA protocols. The group also enforced the Farm Labor Contractor Act, provided transportation for farmworkers who needed medical attention, and conducted research and provided testimony to governmental agencies about the conditions in these camps.[306] Another, called the Los Angeles Minority Access Program, helped to create opportunities for Chicano students to conduct internships and mentorship programs within different sectors of the media.[307] Still more programs existed – these included an Indigenous summer conference designed to promote inter-tribal connections, a

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[304] "The Robert F. Kennedy Memorial," 1978, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA: vi.
[305] Ibid, 6.
[306] Ibid, 10.
[307] Ibid, 17.

health and dental clinic situated on Indigenous reservations, and a program to raise awareness in student journalism of financial aid opportunities for college attendance.[308]

Rather than creating their own programs, RFK Interns were placed at companion institutions in order to gain experience developing projects which addressed the needs of the day. Interns were high-school or college-aged and received stipends for internships ranging in length from three months to one year.[309] To ensure Fellows and Interns could continue their work past the cut-off for their Memorial funding, the RFK Resource Center provided information on sources of funding and linked Fellows and Interns with organizations that could ensure continuity for the projects established. The Resource Center's support allowed eighteen of the twenty-six programs established in 1976 to continue without further direct assistance from the RFK Memorial itself.[310]

The RFK Journalism Awards, founded in 1969 by journalists who had covered Kennedy's presidential campaign, was the final program cited in the Memorial's 1978 summary of its activities. The package stated that "one of the major issue areas that had occupied much of [Kennedy's] attention was the plight of the disadvantaged, and the journalists wanted to make sure this problem would not be forgotten."[311] Award-winning pieces of media covered topics such as hunger in America, the Tuskegee syphilis study, the Navajo nation, and institutions for the mentally ill.[312]

It is thus important to understand that the use of a constructed legacy does not always mean deception and nefarious ends. The perspective the Memorial took on memorializing

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[308] Ibid, viii.
[309] Ibid, iv.
[310] Ibid.
[311] Ibid, v. Some of these journalists are involved in Kennedy's legacy in other ways – Jules Witcover, for example, wrote a heavily favourable book about Kennedy's presidential campaign, and Roger Mudd would interview several of Kennedy's inner circle for television.
[312] Ibid, 59-61.

Kennedy was heavily biased and selective in its choosing of what was important in his legacy, it is true – but there was a significant amount of impactful work that came from it. So while it is important to deconstruct narratives of Kennedy's legacy and understand their origins, this must also not negate the work that can be done when such a legacy is put to positive use. The Robert F. Kennedy Memorial is an example of this.

Still, the impact of the Memorial exists in tension with the work of some of its funding bodies. Among the list of institutions given by the Memorial's 1978 activities summary there are two suspect entries: these are the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) and the Police Foundation.[313] The LEAA, formed by Johnson's 1968 Safe Streets Act, was responsible for coordinating the War on Crime at the federal level and providing funding for "improvements" to local police forces across the country. In practice, this meant the militarization of local police, the proliferation of both soft and hard surveillance programs, and the obsessive targeting of so-called "future" criminals – that is, largely Black male youth.[314] Another project funded by the LEAA was High Impact, which greatly bolstered the manpower and resources of police forces in supposedly "high crime" urban centres.[315] In Baltimore, for example, High Impact funding allowed the Baltimore Police Department a fivefold increase in their number of officers; it also allowed the Department to fund nine special tactical units and the purchase of helicopters.[316] The LEAA was also responsible for funding the activities of the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement (ODALE), which targeted narcotics trafficking with "no knock" raids and surveillance through wiretapping. These methods disproportionately targeted

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[313] "The Robert F. Kennedy Memorial," 76.
[314] Hinton, *War on Poverty,* 2-3.
[315] Ibid, 159-160. In reality, the program gave the most funding to urban centres in states which Nixon needed to carry in the 1972 election.
[316] Ibid, 160.

youth in urban centres, whom ODALE identified as those most likely to sell and abuse drugs.[317] LEAA was thus responsible for funding some of the most egregious facets of the War on Crime.

The Police Foundation, founded in 1970 by the Ford Foundation, was equally responsible for funding the War on Crime. In its early years, the Police Foundation invested much of its capital in foot patrol programs, which encouraged officers to forge relationships in neighbourhoods by regularly walking the beat. In practice, the program implemented a practical panopticon and surveillance of inner-city communities via plainclothes or disguised officer patrols.[318] The first experiment employing this strategy, launched in New York City in 1972, yielded five times the number of arrests that uniformed officers made – it also resulted in fatal encounters with the public, who sometimes confused plainclothes officers with anonymous attackers.[319] The Police Foundation would go on to implement similar programs across the country based on the New York model.[320]

The fact that the Memorial was funded by the LEAA and the Police Foundation muddles the picture of its activities given by the 1978 Memorial packet. The interest of these organizations in stymieing crime by any means necessary, especially through targeting racialized people and communities, calls into question the intentions of the Memorial when they constructed their programs to serve these communities. Were the programs run by the Memorial as progressive and constructive as they seem to be on the surface, or did the Memorial have more nefarious intentions in running the programs it selected to fund? Were the Memorial's activities funded by these institutions because they broadly responded to the problems of urban communities, even if these programs didn't outwardly concern crime control or policing? The

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[317] Ibid, 203-205.
[318] Ibid, 187-190.
[319] Ibid, 189.
[320] Ibid, 191.

relationship between these institutions and the Memorial is unclear, but troubling in its implications.

The Memorial continues today as the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Foundation, through which the organization's website claims Kennedy's ideals live on. It has changed greatly since its establishment – it runs different programs, its leadership is different (though still guided by the Kennedy family through the personage of Kerry Kennedy, Robert Kennedy's daughter), and its resources have grown exponentially. Some of the causes featured on the Foundation's website include police and prison violence, civic space and activists, gender-based violence, and racial justice. While racial justice and civic activism have been part of the Foundation's focus since its inception, the inclusion of gender-based violence as a focus issue demonstrates how the Foundation has used the general spirit of Kennedy's legacy to dictate which issues it picks up in an era different from the one in which it was founded.

The Memorial's current focus on combatting police and prison violence is certainly interesting, for it indirectly contradicts Robert Kennedy's early career as a prosecutor. It also directly contradicts the origins of the Memorial in being funded by the LEAA and the Police Foundation – two institutions which were partially responsible for the proliferation in prison populations and police violence throughout the seventies and eighties. Leaving the Memorial open to shifting its priorities as hot button issues changed over time has kept it relevant in its politics, but it has also put the Memorial in the peculiar position of attempting to solve problems in which it was indirectly involved in starting.

Its programs, too, are different. Two listed programs deal with legal assistance and activism – the strategic litigation program and the criminal justice and immigration program. Another is the "Speak Truth to Power" program, which "combines storytelling and interactive

learning to provide the next generation with the concrete knowledge they will need to create change and advance human rights."[321] Though the RFK Fellows program is no longer active, it has been replaced by the John Lewis Young Leaders program, an undergraduate fellowship that helps students build experience as social justice and civic leaders. Two programs that have stayed are the RFK Journalism Awards and the RFK Book Awards, though they are now accompanied by the more prestigious Human Rights Awards and the Ripple of Hope Award, which takes its name from Kennedy's Day of Affirmation speech.

Much has thus changed for the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial since its inception, even its very name. Its interpretation of Kennedy's legacy over time, though keeping with a politically liberal tradition, has expanded its scope to issues Kennedy never touched or spoke about.[322] What hasn't changed is the use of Kennedy's name and legacy to structure the foundation's ethos: "Although his life was cut short," reads the Memorial's "RFK: Life and Legacy" section, "Robert Kennedy's ideals live on today through the work of his family, friends, and Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, which partners with the bravest people on earth to advance his vision of a more just and peaceful world." This shift in issues with which the Memorial engages demonstrates the success the Memorial had in building an institution that could morph itself to the changes of time. Above all, it demonstrates the emptiness of the Bobby legacy in the present day: in practice, it is nothing more than a broadly liberal spirit, ready to be applied and interpreted in whichever way best fits the era and complements the memory of Robert Kennedy; it is pure simulacrum.

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[321] "Our Impact: Justice," Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, 2024, https://rfkhumanrights.org/our-impact/justice/.
[322] One of these issues is LGBTQIA+ rights, which is a rather interesting inclusion for a foundation named after a man who was reputed to have occasionally made homophobic remarks. See Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: A Life* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster, 2000): 93. For an example of the Memorial's work with LGBTQIA+ rights, see "UN Petition: LGBTQ+ People Detained in Uganda," Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, May 15, 2020, https://rfkhumanrights.org/report/un-petition-lgbtq-people-arbitrarily-detained-in-uganda/.

## Conclusion: "God! Not Again!"

In this thesis, I have argued that the way that Robert F. Kennedy is often remembered in popular memory is the result of a series of carefully constructed symbolic gestures that emphasized the importance of his later career as a champion of the underprivileged while deemphasizing his earlier career as a tough prosecutor. In the months and years following his death, these mythmaking tendencies took many forms: it most importantly began in the symbolic pageantry of Kennedy's funeral and was continued by friends and family who independently produced various odes to Kennedy that gave him an overly favourable image. Once this legacy was crafted and had attained some semblance of dominance over alternate interpretations of Kennedy's life, it was woven into the fabric of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, and as the institution began to develop a funding base for its programming, it used this legacy to drive fundraising efforts and to guide the foundation's mission statement. These actions, in turn, helped to further reify the version of Kennedy's legacy they took their inspiration from in the first place – though it also betrayed this image by taking funding from institutions that actively caused harm in the communities it was attempting to help.

There are still valuable in-roads that could be made into studies of Robert Kennedy, particularly when it comes to the creation of his image and legacy – this thesis has merely scratched the surface of an incredibly complex and multifaceted process. One way could be in the commodification of Kennedy's image following his death. Sharron Wilkins Conrad discusses this in the context of John F. Kennedy's death: she examines the proliferation of JFK paraphernalia in Black communities following his assassination and argues that these tchotchkes constituted a visual reminder of the devotion that was due to JFK for his advancements in civil

rights.[323] These visible routines of mourning also helped to elevate the significance of JFK's death by representing it in tangible objects. Anecdotally, Wilkins Conrad also mentions the existence of similarly-inspired Robert Kennedy paraphernalia following his own assassination, but since her chapter is focused on his elder brother, Robert Kennedy's merchandise only gets briefly mentioned in conjunction with his brother's.[324] The similar circumstances of the deaths of the two Kennedy brothers and the cultural meaning ascribed to them make it worthwhile to investigate how a very similar process of public mourning via commodities and tangible representations of grief played out in the context of Robert Kennedy's death.

In this work, I have examined the process of creating Kennedy's legacy in the years immediately following his death, but this study could be extended to look at the years between the founding of the Memorial and its current form today. In future works, it would be interesting to track change in perception and conception of Kennedy's legacy over time in order to study how the form of his legacy changed – or didn't – according to the sociopolitical atmosphere in the decades following its founding. This could be done by tracking advertising and publicity for the Memorial over time, or studying the viewpoints of secondary sources written about Kennedy over time.

There is a wider history here to be unlocked concerning the public emotion of the sixties. Robert Kennedy's death, along with his brother's before him, provoked a staggering outpouring of grief and sadness (even if this grief wasn't as universal as it seemed). The story of this grief is well-known. But what may be more interesting to investigate is the difference between the response to these two assassinations, and their connections to how people felt about the United

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[323] Sharron Wilkins Conrad, "'He Gave His Life for Us': The Civil Rights Martyrdom of John F. Kennedy," in *Mourning the Presidents: Loss and Legacy in American Culture,* ed. Lindsay M. Chervinsky and Matthew R. Costello (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023): 230-232.
[324] Ibid, 232-233.

States at the beginning of the sixties and how they felt towards the end. As noted in the introduction, many sociopolitical histories of the United States in the sixties are often participant accounts of involvement in the various movements which came to prominence in the decade. These books provide some accounts of how some groups felt emotionally about their times, but by examining the hundreds of thousands of letters and tributes which were mailed to the Kennedy family following the assassinations of Robert and John Kennedy, we might be able to glean a more diverse understanding of the public emotions of the sixties as they happened, and how these emotions were often expressed through responses to culturally traumatic events.

The story of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial helps to greater elucidate the role that prominent figures in American society played in responding to issues they identified as pertinent in their time. There has been focus on both political and grassroots responses to the problems of the sixties, but the RFK Memorial demonstrates that rich white liberals also had a part to play through the philanthropic institutions that they ran. In the case of the Memorial, the tenets of liberalism were used to inspire genuinely impactful sociopolitical grassroots programs across the country, but it also exercised control over what kinds of programs got funded in the first place. These institutions also often funded projects that undermined their liberal mission statements, and took money from institutions that undermined the work that they did. The guise of Robert Kennedy's legacy, along with his work on the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, was essential in allowing this process to occur at the RFK Memorial.

It is thus not just fruitful, but imperative, to expand our understanding of the creation and use of political legacies. The Robert F. Kennedy Memorial is an example of how memory can be used to enact effective programs that help to improve the world in some way. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s campaign for the presidency, mentioned briefly in the introduction, is an example

of how the very same action can be done to promote politics which would create greater harm in American society. The example of Robert Kennedy is a fitting place to begin this kind of inquiry because the nature of his varied career means that his memory can be appropriated in different ways for very different purposes, as the differing examples of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial and the presidential campaign of Kennedy, Jr. indicate.

Understanding how historical memory can be warped and particularly interpreted to suit a person's desired narrative is an incredibly important thing in contemporary American politics. One might think of the way George W. Bush's image became somewhat rehabilitated during the first Trump administration, erasing the memory of what happened under his watch both domestically and abroad because it was for some reason impossible for two presidents to have done egregious deeds.[325] One could also think about the debate surrounding how we should talk about Henry Kissinger following his death – was he a shrewd diplomat or a war criminal?[326] If we are able to understand how these examples show an incomplete, biased, or contentious historical narrative, then we are also able to understand how these warped narratives can be used to advertise people and policies that one might not want to endorse.

Telling the story of a politician like Robert Kennedy always involves some level of conjecture and interpretation. If there are no sources written by a historical subject which explicitly dictate their motivations and reasonings for how and why they did something, there is no way to know for sure what these were, even if those close to the subject claim to have an answer. This is fine; history is, after all, a discipline built upon arguments for which there are no definitive right or wrong answer.

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[325] See, for example, Michael Schaffer, "The Strange Return of George W. Bush," *Politico,* October 20, 2023.
[326] Following Kissinger's death, *Reuters* published an article titled "Henry Kissinger, dominant US diplomat of the Cold War era, dies aged 100." On the same day, *Rolling Stone* published an article titled, "Henry Kissinger, War Criminal Beloved by America's Ruling Class, Finally Dies."

But historical works, if done well, explain their arguments and explicitly cite the sources they use to make these arguments. It is a discipline which invites debate and makes room for reinterpretation and contrasting viewpoints. The venues in which Kennedy's legacy was constructed and promoted do not always make explicit what they are trying to tell you about their historical subject. They shine light on certain things and obscure others; they choose their interviewees carefully, and they weave a narrative that presents arguments without making explicit that an argument is being made. They are not "doing history," per se – they are fostering hero-worship based upon heavily biased perspectives on history.

Having heroes is not necessarily harmful – in fact, it can be beneficial and impactful to emulate those who have done good in society. The upstanding things that Robert Kennedy did throughout his career inspired many Americans to take up careers in public service and to give back to their communities in whatever way they could. As the classic story goes, Robert Kennedy gave people hope that they could work together to create a better America. The Robert F. Kennedy Memorial is just one example of how Kennedy's memory inspired groups of people to emulate his memory. But the image of Kennedy that inspired these works is a manufactured image. The issue is not having heroes – it is accepting hero worship as fact.

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