

## The Hon. Teddy and the Camelot Buncombe

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

It is the palmy spring of a college boy's sophomore year. He is somewhat of a chucklehead, owing to the fragrances of the season and the rising beauty he spies whenever he approaches a mirror to subdue his stubble. Tonight there is an irresistible swelling within his epigastrium, and so he sits down to his desk and unbosoms himself thus:

"Euphoria reigned; we thought for a moment that the world was plastic and the future unlimited.

"Never had girls seemed so pretty, tunes so melodious, an evening so blithe and unconstrained."

Here, to be sure, is a sophomore on the make. A small ocean of beer will disappear and many wary coeds will render him absurd before the season passes. Yes? No!

The above sentimental skip comes from no college boy at all—my little joke, if you will. It is the production of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian full of years and unnumbered solemn experiences. Moreover, Arthur is not writing about adolescent amour; the screwball writes about politics! Years ago Arthur became a fool for Camelot, much as the Good Book enjoins us to become fools for Christ. When he was young, Arthur was considered the most intelligent, discerning, and readable historian of his generation; but he was chloroformed by Camelot, and for two decades this American Tacitus has been on twenty-four hour call, always ready and willing to put a gossamer of grandeur on the empty deeds of three rogues whenever the call from Hyannis Port would come in.

Since the early 1960s the Camelot buncombe has served as ritualistic liberalism's *Tafelmusik*, reliably providing a reassuring backdrop for Arthur and his fellows as they mechanically patter on about an "equitable distribution of the wealth," the urgency of "radically reforming the system" (their system I might add), injustice, cigarettes used indoors, and so on. Balanced minds dismiss the buncombe out of hand as a congeries of affecting illusions adhered to by liberals with a taste for soap opera. Yet the thing keeps coming back—usually at election time—and the claims made for whichever Kennedy is the Kennedy of moment grow increasingly nauseating and outlandish. Is the Camelot buncombe ever to be lifted? Quite possibly not. Its current living legend, the Hon. Teddy, is only in the vestibule of middle age. If he does not suffer the cruel fate of his brothers, and if he lives out his years in the manner of Papa Joe and Mama Rose, he will be inspiring dithyrambs far into the 21st century. By

then the brats will have come of age and Camelot will thus be carried on towards the 22nd century. It is enough to make one yearn for the crack of doom.

What precisely is Camelot? If, like me, you are the sort who invariably feels a flutter of alarm extending onto nausea when confronted by, say, a Seventh Day Adventist, you may not have pursued this question. Certainly you would never pursue it with one of Camelot's songsters. So allow me to intervene and bring forward one who has, the eminent James MacGregor Burns, Ph.D. It is his view that Camelot is "an imperishable memory" for generations of Americans. Admittedly that is not a pleasing thought. Yet in the course of my professional inquiries I have now been obliged to steep myself in the lore of Camelot, and I must admit that Dr. Burns might be right. If so, we can do no less than thank him for the memories, for since the late 1950s he has dedicated his life to keeping the "imperishable memory" imperishable and inaccurate. He too is a fool for Camelot, a born fool in this case, and to read his slathering glorifications of the Kennedys is to be reminded of the heights that Bathhouse John Coughlin and Hinky Dink Kenna might have scaled had there been a Dr. Burns at large in Chicago's First Ward in the 1890s. As is the Camelotian custom, Dr. Burns' flame burns most brightly during election year; he is the proud author of *John Kennedy: A Political Profile* (1960) and *Edward Kennedy and the Camelot Legacy* (1976). Two volumes of kisses and curtsies.

But for the exertions of Dr. Burns, Mr. Schlesinger, and hundreds of lesser patriots, the aforementioned generations of Americans might actually forget the memory. Even worse they might remember. For instance, they might remember the origins of Vietnam, the FBI's nocturnal knock on the door, the harassment of civil-rights leaders, the harassment of the press, the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev, the Bay of Pigs disaster, the ceaseless deception, the bellicose sonorities, the tumescent expectations, the cruel disappointments, and the ruinous decade that followed. It was a decade during which the loyal troopers of Camelot kept recasting "the memory," dropping episodes now discredited, adding episodes theretofore undreamt of, forever assuring the memory's capacity to tantalize the eternal juvenile that frolics in the soul of every idologue.

Camelot is the pornography of American politics, always promising the unattainable

and rendering those who participate inflamed, infantile, and ludicrous. At its core is a mob scene of delusions. Dr. Burns' maunderings in one book alone (*Edward Kennedy and the Camelot Legacy*) convey Camelot's idiot essence, as with vast solemnity he notifies us that Camelot's first prince "hated cant and sentimentality and blather." John Kennedy "spoke with such force and gaiety and pointedness, he quickened the best impulses and spurred the energies of his generation." But then too "there was a sense of distance, of reserve, of separation"—and yet "engagement." Camelot was "a special style": "of coolness and commitment, of involvement and detachment." Ye Gods! It was "a brief and shining moment." The room spins. Robert Kennedy was "the existential hero." Spots appear before the eyes. Ted Kennedy possessed "valiance of the highest order." The walls grow hair, and still this clown will not shut off... Kennedy I was "the rhetorical radical," also "the policy liberal," then again "the fiscal moderate," and lest we forget "the institutional conservative." Gangway! Every man for himself! There are some of us who cannot swim.

Every year a journalist or a historian turns over another rock, revealing ever more evidence of the fundamental imprudence and occasional stupidity of the Kennedy ménage. Still the fabulists will not relent. You want biographies? We have biographies. You want reminiscences? We have reminiscences. How about movies? Statuettes? Tee shirts? Naturally there is poetry, a full volume of the stuff commemorating JFK and duly introduced by the indefatigable Arthur who so loves life that he read such wonders as the following and did not leap out a window:

He sort  
of embodied  
the air he sort  
of embodied the  
air where democracy  
stood tall, Jefferson  
and Robert Frost were  
his advisers, he sort  
of clearly gave evidence of  
wit and democracy....

In all the postwar period the only idolatry comparable to Camelot in tawdriness, senselessness, and longevity is the idolatry of Elvis Presley—though on this point Arthur would grow fussy. Camelot is devoted to the plain folk, to be sure, but even Camelot has its limits.

(continued on page 37)




---

Karl O'Lessker

---

## Carter: The First Two Years

*Is Jimmy Carter the "Dumb Ford"  
or the "Smart Harding"?*

Despite the Miracle at Camp David, there seems to be general agreement that Jimmy Carter is the most incompetent President since Benjamin Harrison and possibly since James Buchanan. It is not a question of intelligence or character, for by all accounts he has plenty of the former and at least enough of the latter to qualify him for the company of most of his post-Wilson predecessors. It is a question of competence—the ability to perform the basic tasks of the office. By this measure he is an almost total, unredeemed failure. What is more, he appears incapable of learning from his mistakes; instead he compounds them. And as if unsatisfied with his own shortcomings, he has recently begun to imitate those of his fallen predecessor, Richard Nixon. How else are we to explain his newfound penchant for lugubrious self-congratulation on his own "courage," as when, in the purest Nixonian accents, he assures us that he will be taking great political risks by vetoing excessive spending bills coming out of Congress?

But it is important not to get sidetracked by questions of style. The mortal problems of Carter's presidency are those of procedure and substance rather than public relations. Unfortunately, that truth has not yet penetrated the heavy walls of the White House. It is all too clear—and all too characteristic—that Carter and his advisors have interpreted their nearly unbroken string of failures as essentially a consequence of inadequate PR. And so instead of firing Frank Moore they hire Gerald Rafshoon. The grotesqueness of it leaves one gasping for air.

Had Mr. Carter attempted, with his vaunted engineer's cool intelligence, to analyze the causes of his signal lack of success after the first year in office, he would have come upon at least one important insight. It is that in order for a contemporary President to have any hope at all for a successful administration—that is, to be able to carry out a fair proportion of his policy goals and maximize his political influence—he must be institutionally strong in two key areas outside the White House: He has to have a tough, effective Office of Management and Budget to serve as his administrative right arm, and he has to have a good working relationship with Congress. The former provides him with whatever slim hope he may have for exercising some control over the bureaucracy; the latter offers him his only hope for influencing the broad sweep of domestic policy. Lacking these two institutional strengths, no presidency has even a prayer of winding up with a favorable balance sheet.

---

*Karl O'Lessker, senior editor of The American Spectator, is professor of public and environmental affairs at Indiana University. He was a Carter supporter on the 1976 Democratic Platform Committee.*

How then did the newly-elected Jimmy Carter set about to equip himself in these two vital respects? To the directorship of the OMB he appointed a small-town, wheeler-dealer crony with a gift for gab, and when this curious appointee turned out to be morally, and perhaps even legally, unsuited to the job, Carter replaced him with still another Georgian with absolutely no pre-1977 experience in the federal government, one James T. McIntyre, Jr., an honest technician almost wholly lacking in the training and force of personality needed to dominate the tumultuous satraps in the bureaucracy. Little wonder, then, that, as David Broder recently reported on the basis of conversations with former senior officials in OMB, the "professional cadre at OMB" is in the process of "disintegration."

But Carter's mishandling of OMB is positively Paganinian compared to his approach to Congress. To start with, he chose as his chief of congressional liaison a minor Georgia bureaucrat, Frank Moore, who, to the best of anyone's knowledge, had never set foot in Washington except possibly on his high school senior class trip. All he knew about Congress was what he knew about the Georgia legislature—literally less than nothing, because he brought to his new job, not merely an absence of knowledge, but a truckful of gross misconceptions based on his Atlanta experience. Predictably, his and his boss's grotesque misunderstanding of so complex an institution produced almost at once a shambles in presidential-congressional relations. Carter well-wishers (I stubbornly among them) insisted that a bit of seasoning in the job would soon put it all aright. "Jimmy's just so darn bright," they would say. "He'll catch on to the President-Congress game in a hurry." A fast learner. A quick study. An engineer's steel-trap mind. And so it was that after 20 months in office, in the late summer of 1978, Jimmy Carter finally succeeded in alienating his staunchest supporter in—and the most powerful member of—Congress, Speaker of the House Thomas P. O'Neill. How? Simply by firing an O'Neill protégé as deputy administrator of the General Services Administration—less than a day after Frank Moore had personally assured O'Neill it wouldn't happen.

The point is not, of course, that a President must under no circumstances remove an unfit bureaucrat who happens to enjoy the support of an influential member of Congress. Rather, it is that there are well-established ways—for example, a quiet private meeting with the Speaker, explaining the situation and offering a less sensitive post to his client—of accomplishing the desired end that do not involve public humiliation of the President's most important ally in Congress. Consider, too, that this monumental blunder occurred, as I have said, not in Carter's (and Moore's)