

D. W. Brogan

The Presidency

THE ASSASSINATION of President Kennedy has brought out, in an agonizing way, the realities of the American presidency and has again demonstrated its unique function as a political organism. The first truth to be asserted about this great office is that the President of the United States is a monarch. The Constitution, in deliberately ambiguous terms, entrusts to him the whole executive power of the Union and in addition confers on him the separate office of Commander-in-Chief with complete control of the armed forces. This, of course, does not mean the President is an absolute monarch. He has to share power with Congress (as President Kennedy painfully discovered in his three years in the White House); and both he and Congress share power with the Supreme Court.

Nevertheless, it is important again to insist on the monarchical character of the American presidency. It is monarchical in two ways: monarchical because of the concentration of power in the hands of one man, monarchical because he, more than any other institution (and every President is an institution), embodies "*We the People of the United States.*" In the President, in any President, the American people see their embodied power and see their own driving force personified.

In another sense, the President is a monarch. For he performs many of the ritual functions of an hereditary monarch. He is the universal patron of good causes, a role that the late President Kennedy took very seriously. His precedence is as automatic as

that of the Queen. He lives in the most historical building in Washington, the only one that has an aura of majesty about it. American boys are continually told that they can, when they grow up, become President of the United States (girls are not yet told that they can). Under the easy and democratic exterior, the protocol of the White House is as severe as the protocol of Buckingham Palace. The presidential inauguration is a kind of quadrennial coronation. And even the President who has made an immense number of enemies remains President and is entitled, except among the most pathologically minded, to respect and indeed, for his office if not for himself, to reverence.

THE WHITE HOUSE ITSELF symbolises the character of this great office. On the one hand, it is a princely residence; on the other, it is a power house. It is what Versailles or the Hofburg were in the days of the great monarchies of Europe. Beside, behind Buckingham Palace, there is 10 Downing Street; there is nothing beside, nothing behind the White House. True, General de Gaulle in the *Elysée* at the moment performs a double function as political leader and as the mandatory of the Sovereign People. But General de Gaulle is a phenomenon, he is not an institution. The *Elysée* has none of the magical, none of the sacred character of the White House. Nor does General de Gaulle as President of the Republic or in person impose on his enemies a reverence that the presidential office imposes on the enemies of any President of the United States.

WASHINGTON is a great pilgrimage city. To it come from all over the United States hundreds of thousands of visitors, especially parents bringing their young children to the sacred shrine of the Republic. The White House is not unique in Washington. Many children are brought by parents to see the Supreme Court in session and are suitably touched by the usher's proclamation at the beginning of each session of the Court, "*God Save the United States and this Honourable Court.*" Some children are possibly impressed by the Senate, some possibly even by the House of Representatives. But neither of these bodies has any air of the sacred about itself, and it can hardly be said that in recent years this refusal to give to Congress the reverence given to the presidency has been an act of manifest injustice. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, the leaders of the Senate may be and in the past sometimes have been great men, but they are not august; there is no charisma attached to their office.

Children and their parents pour through the White House during the visiting hours, entering a shrine far more august than that of the Supreme Court, not to speak of the Capitol. For one thing, the building is much more a part of history. It has been altered inside and out, it has been tactfully extended, but it is fundamentally the building into which John Adams moved while it was still unfinished for the last month or two of his unhappy term in office. It has known the horrors of war. It was burned by a British army, and there is a legend, not totally vindicated, that it got the name "White House" because of the paint put over it to hide the scars of burning. It was called the White House by the American people long before Theodore Roosevelt made that the official name of the Executive Mansion.

An elegant piece of Dublin architecture transplanted to the United States, it is perhaps the only important official building in Washington of intrinsic architectural merit. But it is not to admire this copy of Leinster House in Dublin (which now houses the Daíl) that the pilgrims come. They come to

what may not extravagantly be described as the Parthenon of the American Acropolis. It is a house soaked in history and soaked in blood. The great ghost that walks through the White House is that of the greatest of Presidents, Abraham Lincoln, and this gives the necessary tragic note to this national shrine. It was to the White House he returned after his visit to conquered Richmond; it was on the way to the White House upon the Potomac that he recited, "*Duncan is in his grave. After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well.*" It was here his body was brought, and the Lincoln Room is still the most sacred part of the White House.

BUT NOT ALL MEMORIES of the White House are as dark as those of the Good Friday of 1865 on which the first assassination of an American President took place. The first real tenant of the White House, and one who left his mark on it, was Thomas Jefferson, and it was characteristic of the late President Kennedy that when he gave his famous party for the American Nobel Prizemen in literature and science he should have said there was more talent and genius gathered in the White House that night than there had ever been except when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.

Other great makers of the American tradition haunt the White House. Across Lafayette Square is the absurd and endearing equestrian statue of General Andrew Jackson, one of the great makers of the presidential office. The first man to dare to tamper with the sacred structure was Theodore Roosevelt; and the President under whose direction the White House was totally reconstructed within is still alive, Harry S. Truman. To see American families going through the public rooms of the White House which are shown to them (and which are far more attractive now than they were a few years ago, thanks to the energy and good taste of Mrs. Kennedy) is to get a lesson in the intensity of American reverence for American history and the degree to which that artificial construction, the United States of America, has gained blood, flesh, and

spirit since it was launched uncertainly in the dread year, 1789. In that year there was a King of France, a King of England, a Holy Roman Emperor, a Czarina of all the Russias, a very powerful and sagacious Emperor in Peking, a powerful Shogun and an impotent Emperor in Japan. Of all these strictly monarchical offices, only one now remains, that of the Queen of England. Yet the office that Queen Elizabeth II holds is very different indeed from the office held by George III, while the office that President Lyndon Johnson now holds is basically the office to which George Washington was unanimously elected.

WE TEND TO THINK of America as having no history or having a short history when in fact it has the longest effectively continuous political history in the world, marked by only one great breakdown, the Civil War—and that ended in the triumph of the Union, a triumph won at an immense expenditure of blood and an immense expenditure of national feeling—a loss from which the United States is still suffering, and of which it is indeed possible that President Kennedy's assassination is one of the long-term consequences.

THE WHITE HOUSE is open not only to tourists, it is also open to not very important visitors to parties and receptions, and I was myself struck and moved by seeing on television the East Room where the dead President's body had been brought and where I had seen and talked with him and his wife—one full of energy, the other dazzling—only a few months before.

But there is, of course, another side to the White House which gives it its double character. There are the private rooms where the President and his wife, and his children if he has them with him, can take some refuge from the intense pressures of the publicity that beats on any American President. President and Mrs. Kennedy were especially successful in preserving something of the air of a private house in the midst of this great national monument of publicity

and power. But the real contrast is not between the public and the private quarters. It is between the White House as a residence, as the great official American home, and the White House as the centre of power of the most powerful state in the world. Its weight of power can be felt, it seems to me, oddly enough in the silence which at times pervades the administrative quarters, the two wings on each side of the White House which accommodate the closest members of the presidential staff. They of course have floods of visitors in the daytime, and the President, however hard he tries, cannot always protect himself against intrusive visitors, including some whose impudence startles a European. But I have been in the White House executive wing at night and felt its powerful silence. These corridors, half underground, are indeed "corridors of power." Kipling, in a famous passage describing how he received the Nobel Prize in Stockholm during the period of Court mourning for the death of King Oscar, remarked that the only sound in the vast palace was the click of the decorations on the chests of the Court officials. There are no decorations worn by non-military officials in the White House, but there are Court officials all the same.

The White House is a Court because the President is a monarch. I used to be asked frequently during the last war by British officials posted to Washington what was the best book to describe the strange new world they were entering on. I didn't recommend Tocqueville or Bryce or even Brogan. I recommended Saint-Simon. I used to say, "You must remember you are going to a Court. You must abandon all your regular Whitehall ideas of official priorities and hierarchies. You cannot estimate the power of some people you will meet by their official title or by the quality of their carpet. You must watch out for those who have the ear of the President, the only ear that really counts."

IN F.D.R.'s DAY, it was advisable to notice who saw the President in his bedroom before

he put on the crippling apparatus which alone allowed him to make public appearances. Sometimes the *éminence grise* took public office, as Harry Hopkins did, and as Colonel House did at the time of the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles. Sometimes some of the most powerful figures round the President have been officials of nominally secondary rank. Yet it is as certain as things can be that Mr. McGeorge Bundy was a good deal more important under President Kennedy than some members of the formal cabinet. Confidants rose and fell, grew in favour or became an intolerable political burden, as happened to the unfortunate Governor Sherman Adams under President Eisenhower. But all of their importance came from their access to the President, off the record, unofficial, or in some instances official but still off the record. The White House is very much smaller than Versailles, but the corridors round the President's private offices are like the *Galérie des Glaces* or the *Oeil-de-Boeuf* at Versailles. One could almost feel the hopes and fears, the desires as strong as sexual lust, in the breasts of some who had, and others who wished to have, access to the *arcana imperii*.

IT IS FOR THIS REASON that the President of the United States must be "a lonely man." If he has too many friends, especially friends of the wrong kind, and if he too openly abandons to them the prerogatives that the nation has conferred on him, he goes the way of Warren Gamaliel Harding. The power must finally be in his hands. As Mr. Truman put it on the little brass ornament he kept on his desk, "The buck stops here."

It is because the buck stops there, the final decision—for example the dread decision to blockade Cuba last year, made by Mr. Kennedy after long and careful consultations, but made officially and alone by him—that the presidency has in the eyes of the American people this sacred character. The President is given a charge like that given to the Roman dictator of old, "that no harm befall the Republic." As the greatest of Presidents, Lincoln, asserted more than once, he alone

took the special oath which the Constitution imposes on the President, "that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." Most Presidents have done their best in trying to live up to that oath, and some have died by violence in trying to carry out their duties, as Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy did. It is a savage thing to say, but I have no doubt that some of the sacredness of the presidency comes from the fact that it has had its martyrs.

The presidency was never a mere secular office after the murder of Lincoln. It is true that his mantle has been thrown over some rather curious successors. Harding, by universal agreement the worst President ever to hold the office, was lamented with great sincerity when he died suddenly—and not a moment too soon. William McKinley was generally regretted, with fairly good reason. But so far as most of the presidential deaths in office, by violence or by the work of nature, are concerned the change has not necessarily been great or more than merely political. But the most recent death recalls two previous deaths which were shocks to the American people because they brought into play this religious reverence for the presidential office and this sense of the immense importance of that office, never so great as to-day when the President of the United States could destroy the human race.

THE THREE DEATHS which have given this kind of shock to the American people have been the deaths of Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Contrasts are obvious enough. In age, in background, in length of service, they differ greatly. But each was, in a very visible sense, *the* leader in a time of troubles. Lincoln had a well authenticated premonition of some great event about to occur, and may indeed have had some premonition of his death in the days before Good Friday, 1865. He was struck down in the moment of victory after

uttering in the Second Inaugural the noblest speech of a victorious leader in history. His death provoked an outburst of horror and grief, especially among the Negroes, which has been equalled only in November, 1963.

The death of F.D.R. was less unexpected, although it was not expected at that time; it had come suddenly and especially shocked millions of young Americans who had never known any other President. As there were "myths after Lincoln," there were myths after the death of F.D.R. When his body was brought through New York on its way to his ancestral home in Hyde Park, a black cloud settled over Manhattan and moved the superstitious to reverie: it was an old story,

*When beggars die, there are no comets seen:
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of
princes.*

What legends will grow up around the death of John Kennedy it is too early to say.

BUT THIS SUDDEN DEATH of the youngest man ever elected to the presidency brings out another side of the great office. "*The King is dead, long live the King.*" President Lyndon Johnson is the eighth American Vice-President to succeed to the presidency by the death of the incumbent. No Vice-President is chosen because he is openly regarded as the next President. President Lyndon Johnson had far more serious claim to be considered a presidential candidate than had most Vice-Presidents in American history; but he has come to office through violent death. The point to notice is that he is as fully President as if he had been elected by the American people to that office, as much as the legitimate heir—the Prince of Wales or a Dauphin—succeeding to an ancient throne.

Mr. Truman has told us of the horror and astonishment and shock with which he received the news that he had suddenly be-

come President of the United States, an office for which he had very little preliminary training. We know with what courage and energy Mr. Truman rose to the height of his responsibilities. President Johnson has far more training for the presidential office than had Mr. Truman. It is not only that at once the new President is surrounded by the secret service and that all the vast machinery of Federal Government is under his hand, it is that the American people turn with sympathy and with trust to the new incumbent. Presidents succeeding in this way have sometimes disappointed the hopes of the American people; sometimes they have much more than fulfilled those hopes. There is a famous story which underlies this character of the presidency, the legitimacy of the succession. Chester Arthur, who succeeded the assassinated Garfield in 1881, had been a noted playboy, and the friend of some of the most dashing men about town in New York and Newport. Shortly after his accidental accession, he was in that great centre of the American rich, the Newport Yacht Club, when an old social companion walked up to him, clapped him on the back, and said, "How are you, Chet?" The new President turned, said nothing, looked at his old companion who blushed and shambled out of the room. Chet Arthur was now President of the United States; his old companions were as welcome to the new President as Falstaff was to Henry V.

President Johnson has far better training for the job than President Arthur ever had, but he has a far more difficult job to fulfil. For now he is not only President of the United States, but the leader of one of the two great coalitions into which the world is divided. Like his predecessor President Kennedy, he is and must be our leader as well as the leader of the American people. But he is above all the leader of the American people, the embodiment of the power and majesty of the American state.

C. Day Lewis

The Voyage

Translated from Baudelaire

Children, in love with maps and gravings, know
A universe the size of all they lack.
How big the world is by their lamps' clear glow!
But ah, how small to memory looking back!

One morning we set out, our heads on fire,
Our yearning hearts sulky with sour unease,
Following the waves' rhythm, nursing our desire
For the unbounded on those earth-bound seas.

Some glad to leave an infamous birthplace: some
To escape the cradle's nightmare; and a few—
Star-gazers drowned in a woman's eyes—it's from
The scent and power of Circe that they flew.

Not to be changed to beasts, they drug their minds
With space and the large light and burning sky:
The ice that bites them and the suns that bronze
Efface the scar of kisses gradually.

But the true travellers are those who go
For going's sake: hearts light as a balloon,
They never slip their fate: why it is so
They cannot tell, but the word is "Fare on!"

With longings shaped like naked girls, they dream—
As a recruit of gunfire—there impend
Huge pleasures, changeful and untried, whose fame
Is past the wit of man to comprehend.

II

God, that we should behave like top and ball
Bouncing and twirling! Even in our sleep
The Unknown we seek gives us no rest at all,
Like suns tormented by an Angel's whip.

Strange game, whose goal is always on the move
And being nowhere, may be any place;
And Man, whose hope no setbacks will disprove,
Keeps running madly just to catch repose.

The soul is a three-master, Ithaka-bound.
"Keep your eyes skinned!" a sea voice will implore;
From the maintop a keen, mad voice resound
"Love . . . glory . . . luck!" Oh hell, we've run ashore!