

Thurston Clarke. *JFK's Last Hundred Days: The Transformation of a Man and the Emergence of a Great President*. New York: Penguin Press, 2013. 432pp.

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About three quarters of the way into Thurston Clarke's love letter to President Kennedy, the hero speaks candidly into a Dictaphone. It is November 1963, and South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem has just been assassinated after a coup that the U.S. government green-lighted. JFK says, "we must bear a good deal of responsibility for it" (282). About two minutes into his dictation, Kennedy's toddler son, John Jr., enters the room, making a ruckus. Clarke records the tender father-son exchange with the same amount of emphasis as Kennedy's ruminations on Diem's murder. "Why do the leaves fall?" JFK asks before John exits and he can resume capturing his thoughts on the "particularly abhorrent" death (282).

A moment like this, as with many others, tells readers a great deal about the organization of *JFK's Last Hundred Days* and the sympathies of its author. Clarke, a popular historian and journalist, has crafted highly readable narratives on Kennedy topics before, such as Bobby's 1968 presidential campaign and Jack's 1961 inaugural address. Now his study of Kennedy's days from mid-August to the fateful trip to Dallas in November is published to coincide with its fiftieth anniversary. Kennedy was becoming "more Irish than Harvard, governing from the heart

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as well as the head, harnessing poetry to the power of the presidency without checking the thickness of the political ice” (10). He had just delivered two landmark speeches of his presidency in June: his commencement address at American University and his nationally televised address on civil rights. Also, he and Jackie had just lost their prematurely-born son Patrick to respiratory distress. Clarke intertwines stories of developing political acumen and growing personal maturity after heartbreak near the end of the president’s life, certainly a more impressive selection of time than JFK’s first hundred days in office, which blew up with the Bay of Pigs disaster.

The book, however, does not always stick to this period. Each short chapter has its own Proustian moment when an inconsequential event triggers an episode from earlier. Readers should expect an author to provide deep background if the story begins near the end of a presidency. Yet, too often the deep background is more interesting and developed into longer passages. Clarke cannot resist rehashing the highlights like Kennedy’s *PT-109* drama and the Cuban Missile Crisis or the more tawdry affairs. In one scene, JFK receives a visit from the actress Marlene Dietrich, then in her sixties, in which nothing happens, but it prompts Clarke to recount their encounter from a year earlier, which turned into “a scene from an X-rated screwball comedy” (163). While this may be a tickle to read, including it feels a bit like cheating since it lies outside the narrative structure. (It also comes off as trivial even if Clarke is straining to make a point about Kennedy’s new fidelity to Jackie.) At times, the “last hundred days” seems like a device to re-package familiar information and colourful anecdotes only to entice a broader readership base.

The moment-by-moment storytelling and constant flashbacks make for messy reading. Real life *is* messy, but reading about it should not be. Personal minutiae constantly interrupt like John Jr. barging into the room. Clarke squeezes in details about the president’s grooming habits,

sense of fashion, health problems, sexual appetite, obsession with looking tan, concerns over Jackie's vacation with Aristotle Onassis, involvement in a potential scandal with a Capitol Hill fixer named Bobby Baker (a vague and poorly developed tease of a story!), leisure time at Cape Cod, likeness in Elaine de Kooning's portrait of him, preference in beer and cigars, etc. These trifles detract from more substantive topics: improving cold war relations, pending civil rights legislation, and possible escalation in Vietnam.

To highlight Kennedy's last days is to confront Kennedy's legacy and unfulfilled promise. His most concrete accomplishment in this timeframe was securing Senate ratification of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Other pursuits at détente were far off proposals, such as his call for a joint U.S.-Soviet trip to the moon. With Cuba, JFK secretly suggested an end to the American embargo if Fidel Castro agreed to stop undermining other Latin American nations by trying to export the revolution, but the administration was simultaneously attempting to overthrow him. Regarding civil rights, the president had definitely moved away from his earlier vacillation and lukewarm support by his last days, but the sweeping civil rights legislation the administration drafted remained stalled in committee. Clarke asserts that Kennedy would have succeeded in pushing the bill through Congress if he had lived, but he provides few details to make the case.

The greatest lost opportunity comes down to Vietnam. Most of JFK's advisers agreed on the merit of propping up South Vietnam. Disagreement by 1963 surfaced over whether that could be pulled off with Diem (a Pentagon faction) or with the generals plotting for his removal (a State Department faction). Clarke claims that there was "a third, less obvious faction ... which doubted that Vietnam really *was* a crucial cold war battleground. It consisted of one person, the president" (106). While JFK may not have escalated war like LBJ eventually did, Clarke argues

that an imminent withdrawal was more certain than the facts actually allow. He does not always judge evidence by the same standards. For instance, Kennedy told Walter Cronkite in a CBS interview, “I don’t agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a mistake” (137). Clarke conveniently dismisses this as a “smokescreen meant to conceal his real agenda” (137). Later on, JFK apparently told a family neighbour when visiting his father, “The first thing I do when I’m reelected, I’m going to get the Americans out of Vietnam” (241). Clarke accepts this quote without suspicion even though it came from a Kennedy confidant after the war had become a national disgrace.

Leading to the end, Clarke includes every morbid detail he can find to foreshadow Kennedy’s death. When asked about the best way to die, JFK responds to his old roommate from Harvard, “A gunshot is the perfect way” (310). Clarke captures the lunatic fringe in Dallas holding signs like “Help JFK Stamp Out Democracy” (344) and “Kennedy Go Home!” (345). Much to his credit, Clarke leaves the assassination to one brief paragraph; there is no whiff of conspiracy; there is no mention of Lee Harvey Oswald by name. Clarke wants to give his readers another story and leave them with the sadness Americans felt immediately after the assassination and the frustration that later took hold. What is left of the promise? The answer is LBJ—old “Uncle Cornpone” (140), who spent his vice presidency stuck in a rut of depression, complaining, and bad taste. The readers have their scapegoat for everything that went wrong in the sixties. For the future successes, even “Great Society” and “War on Poverty” programs that had Johnson’s fingerprints all over them, readers have Kennedy to credit, at least in Clarke’s flattering version.