

Liberal Without a Cause: Understandings of Kennedy's Historic Purpose

by Kasie Moffett

In his 1960 presidential nomination acceptance address, John F. Kennedy offered the following assessment regarding the mental state of the country: "Too many Americans have lost their way, their will and their sense of historic purpose."¹ More than fifty years since the traumatic end of his three-year presidential term, historians continue to fixate on the question of "historic purpose" in the Kennedy administration. Largely working with the same set of source materials—presidential records, campaign speeches, television appearances, letters, newspaper articles—interpretations of Kennedy's leadership vary greatly when seen through the lens of different historical approaches. The following historical studies do more than chronicle the events of this presidency, they examine these events from different angles to see what they can reveal about how Kennedy and the rest of America in the 1960s understood his presidency—on both conscious and subconscious levels—and how those understandings have influenced his perception today. Each study attempts to deconstruct the factors motivating Kennedy's favored causes, revealing gaps between his expressed intentions and his subsequent actions. The authors apply unique arguments to explain these gaps, sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementing, yet all raising important questions about the concrete and symbolic meaning behind Kennedy's historic purpose.

With *The Kennedy Neurosis*, written in 1973, author Nancy Gager Clinch was in the vanguard of historians ready to challenge the Kennedy myth. However, where other frontrunners chose to take timid, measured forays into critical analysis of a man who still garnered martyrlike devotion, Clinch dove in with an unapologetic and wholly negative psychoanalysis of the entire Kennedy family.

Working under a form of psychohistory she calls "psychohumanism," which she describes as a method to determine how "character is shaped by a person's relationship to himself, to other people, and to things (nature, culture, ideas)," Clinch analyzed virtually every aspect of Kennedy's life from his childhood to his political career to discover psychological explanations for what she considered serious faults in his temperament and conduct.² Though she makes an explicit distinction between her methods and "Freud's pessimistic view of human nature," her analysis draws heavily from Freud's psychoanalytic theory, attributing most of Kennedy's adult behavior to

¹ John F. Kennedy, "Acceptance Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy" (address, Democratic National Convention, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960), acc. Dec 5, 2018, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/193148>.

² Nancy Gager Clinch, *The Kennedy Neurosis* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1973) 7.

experiences from his infancy and childhood.³ Largely neglecting cultural and societal factors that influenced the construction of his character, she limits the determinants specifically to his upbringing within the context of his immediate family.⁴

Through her investigation, based almost entirely on secondary source material (in fact, she seems to have read every biography ever written about the Kennedys up to that time), Clinch charts a chronological narrative starting three generations in the past. She establishes the Kennedy neurosis as a “drive to power and dominance of others, rather than a drive for equality, love, and, sharing” and argues that this neurosis stems from three negative dynamics that were fundamental in their upbringing: “patriarchy, competition, and sexism.”⁵

Early on, she articulates what she hopes to achieve with her book; to find an explanation for why the promises made by the Kennedy administration went “largely unfilled and unfulfillable” in order to facilitate our ability to discern within “our leaders the neurotic conflicts that could mean the difference between national survival and national extinction”⁶ However, her densely structured book attributes significance to practically any recorded detail about Kennedy’s life, such as his tendency to keep a messy dorm room while attending Choate preparatory boarding school. When attempting to illustrate signs of neuropathy or indications of poor leadership potential, it is difficult to argue that a teenage boy’s unkempt room should be considered relevant evidence—what could be more universal?—yet Clinch devotes five lengthy paragraphs to this issue, ultimately citing it as evidence of underlying emotional conflict and a *strong* indication of his “disturbed relationship” with himself and others.⁷ Examples like these (and there are dozens) contradict Clinch’s stated motive. Rather than seeking to understand Kennedy as a case study that will shed light on deficiencies in American leadership with the goal of preventing the annihilation of the country—she *was* writing during a time of heightened Cold War anxieties, after all—her overblown diagnoses based on trivial details like a messy room suggests there was something more personal in her motivations.

Although Clinch includes a brief statement clarifying her personal opinion of Kennedy, making extensive use of descriptors like “opportunistic,” “narrowly-motivated,” “self-centered,” and “arrogant,” this demonstration of candor does not shield her from doubts that may reasonably arise concerning her methodology or

³ Clinch, 5.

⁴ Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History a Critical Reader in History and Theory*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 74.

⁵ Clinch, *The Kennedy Neurosis*, 5-13.

⁶ Clinch, 19.

⁷ Clinch, 101.

authority as an objective historian (or psychoanalyst, for that matter) as she may have hoped it would.⁸

Indeed, this psychohistory of the Kennedys may do more to illuminate the inner recesses of the author's mind than that of her historical patients'. This can be illustrated in the way her line of inquiry and cynical conclusions reveal her feminist perspective; It is significant to note that she was one of the first, if not *the* first to openly discuss the sexual promiscuity of the Kennedy men.⁹ By the end of her lengthy psychoanalysis, Clinch's opinion on Kennedy and his historic purpose is clear: due to his leadership failures and character flaws he is to serve as an example of who not to elect as president in the future.

Like Clinch, K. A. Cuordileone approaches Kennedy with an emphasis on gender as well, though she centers her analysis on the idea of masculinity. Her book *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* surveys political and cultural discourses in the years leading up to the 1960 presidential election and during Kennedy's term as president to explore American society's increasing focus on gender, especially as it related to the perception of liberalism. Cuordileone blends cultural, political, and gender history to identify the connection between a long-prevalent fear over the "feminization" of American males with the concept of being "tough on communism" during the Cold War years. This societal framework, she argues, compelled liberal Democrats to fashion a new, more manly identity in order to survive as a political party. This new-and-improved image manifested in the person of John F. Kennedy.¹⁰

Drawing on works from a broad selection of prominent social influencers including journalists, politicians, historians, sociologists, political commentators, literary critics, and filmmakers (among many others), Cuordileone takes a wide view of America during the Cold War, going as far back as the late nineteenth century when women's increasing participation in public life produced a backlash in men who feared "reforming women" were determined to "force a feminine ethos onto the nation."¹¹

Cuordileone extracts numerous passages from Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s 1949 book, *The Vital Center* to illustrate the "crisis in masculinity" that was widely denounced by male writers of the time.¹² This book also provided the defining characteristics that constituted a remedy to the crisis as expressed by Schlesinger. Relying on one source so heavily makes sense in this case, considering the intimate and long-term relationship Schlesinger had with Kennedy as his campaign advisor, speech writer, and main architect of his liberal identity.¹³ Cuordileone describes him as "the leading liberal

⁸ Clinch, 11.

⁹ Bruce Mazlish, foreword to *The Kennedy Neurosis*, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1973), xiii.

¹⁰ K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, (London: Routledge, 2005), ix-xii.

¹¹ Cuordileone, 10.

¹² Cuordileone, 238.

¹³ Cuordileone, 170.

ideologue of his generation.”¹⁴ Based on the familiar characteristics that are cited time and again by Kennedy admirers, “tough-minded,” “pragmatic,” “virile” — all traits voiced by Schlesinger as necessary in a new liberal style—her argument concerning the degree of his influence is convincing.

As far as Kennedy is concerned, Cuordileone mostly views him from an outside perspective. Her book emphasizes how the American public, especially liberal Democrats, viewed his brand of masculinity as a solution after finding themselves on the wrong side of the masculine/feminine-Republican/Democrat dichotomy. From this angle, Kennedy was identified as a “manly cold warrior” with “tough minded pragmatism...guarded against [the] facile, utopian thinking” that leads to the fantasy world of communist ideals.¹⁵ In the context of the Cold War, liberalism had become too closely associated with the left-wing Popular Fronts of the 1930s. Negative associations in gender discourse are a pattern described in *What is Masculinity: Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World*. These overtones created a new “cultural code” that became a determinant in a man’s perceived masculinity.¹⁶ Here, Clinch’s 1970s-style feminist critique of Kennedy as a “prime example of the virility-success cult so prevalent in America” fits well with Cuordileone’s argument.¹⁷

Cuordileone’s analysis of Kennedy’s accomplishments is lacking in the more personal aspects of his life that may hint at the author’s motives. She provides some information about Kennedy as he saw himself and his purpose as president, but mainly, she reveals one aspect of the subconscious purpose he served as the model Cold War liberal. This model of the liberal embodying “masculine toughness” lost its legitimacy, according to Cuordileone, by the mid-1970s with the “crises of authority” resulting from and exacerbated by Nixon’s resignation and the deteriorating condition in Vietnam that gave rise to doubts concerning the morality of America’s involvement in Southeast Asia. Being “tough on Communism” gradually lost its function as a positive indication of masculinity for much of the population.¹⁸

Evaluating Kennedy’s purpose based on his function as a masculine concept is perhaps a chiefly academic pursuit. A more general audience may designate his record on civil rights as the historic purpose of his presidency. Most popular images from his term are related to his interactions with civil rights leaders or his addresses to the nation discussing the topic. In the years since his untimely death, historians have become increasingly more willing to challenge the sympathetic view, citing his initial reticence and moderate results as proof that his expressed support for the civil rights movement

¹⁴ Cuordileone, 33.

¹⁵ Cuordileone, xxii, 2.

¹⁶ John Arnold and Sean Brady, *What Is Masculinity?: Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

¹⁷ Clinch, *The Kennedy Neurosis*, 217.

¹⁸ Cuordileone, *Manhood*, 237.

was nothing more than political expediency. However, in mainstream America, the favorable interpretation largely endures.

Writing in 1976, Carl M. Brauer takes an unusual position that rests somewhere between these two extremes in his book *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction*. Using records from the Kennedy presidential library, letters, speeches, secondary sources, and personal interviews, Brauer builds his political narrative within the framework of Kennedy's changing attitude regarding the Reconstruction era in the wake of the Civil War. Brauer contends that certain incidents during the civil rights movement challenged Kennedy's earlier negative perspective, broadening it enough to finally allow his full support. He acknowledges Kennedy's early reluctance to take effective action for civil rights, yet conveys this indifference in the relatively generous phrase, "racial moderation."¹⁹ Kennedy underwent a change of heart as racial conflict intensified and his experience with white southern intransigence forced him to question his former stance on Reconstruction. This, Brauer argues, led to the "initiatives of the Kennedy administration [that] constituted the critical first stage of a Second Reconstruction."²⁰

An assertion of this nature can reasonably elicit doubt and possibly alarm from some southern readers who may have grown up internalizing a "lost cause" narrative in which *Reconstruction* is a dirty word. Brauer devotes space to defining the term as "ambitious efforts by the federal government to remove racial barriers and create equal opportunities for all..."²¹ Stripped of its negative connotations, his premise becomes more plausible, yet his definition is so vague, the qualifications required for the period in question to be designated *Reconstruction* hardly seem to warrant the use of such a hot potato of a word.

One of the more interesting themes of the book is the focus on the power that studying history had on Kennedy's attitude and actions. Brauer returns to this subject several times throughout the narrative to highlight significant points that influenced the evolution of Kennedy's mindset regarding post-Civil War Reconstruction. Originally cultivated from the history books he read in his youth, he made his disapproval public in his book *Profiles in Courage*, emphasizing the perceived injustices to southern whites at the militant hands of free slaves, radical Republicans, and carpetbaggers. Brauer remarks on the probability that Kennedy failed to read any dissenting studies that would challenge his view of Reconstruction until shortly before his death.²²

Brauer highlights a visit from American historian David Donald to the White House in February 1962 to illuminate one of the decisive moments that occasioned Kennedy's evolving perspective. Donald led a discussion on Reconstruction in which

¹⁹ Carl M. Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 11.

²⁰ Brauer, ix.

²¹ Brauer, viii.

²² Brauer, 17.

Kennedy is said to have actively participated. Brauer attempts to link this event to Kennedy's changing view on Reconstruction, at least as a possibility, though no record indicates that this is the case. In fact, in a letter describing the visit to his wife, Donald remarked on the limited extent of Kennedy's historical knowledge with no suggestion of a possible enrichment from the meeting. However, the attention given to Kennedy's passion for studying American history is an intriguing example of personality development that is lacking from other sections of Brauer's book.²³

Despite the book's title, the origination of the promised "Second Reconstruction" does not make its appearance until page 260 of the 320-page book. Here, Brauer delineates the factors that led Kennedy to set his program into motion—an emotional change of heart after seeing the disturbing events from recent demonstrations, a rejection of his former "historical assumption" on Reconstruction, a sense that events were quickly entering a crisis mode, fear that international news coverage would damage America's reputation, and his aversion to appearing weak or being placed in a defensive position. Thus, with Kennedy's television address announcing his plan to introduce civil rights legislation on June 11, 1963, Brauer argues that the Second Reconstruction as a "coherent effort by all three branches of the government to secure blacks their full rights" commenced.²⁴

Although the concept of this period as a Second Reconstruction is questionable, Brauer's exploration of Kennedy as he grew increasingly disillusioned of his former beliefs as a factor in supporting the civil rights movement is valuable. It is perhaps unfortunate that he places so much of the credit for changes on Kennedy, both due to his actions and the symbolic purpose he represented. He concludes the book discussing this symbolic role, suggesting that "the spirit Kennedy conveyed may well have made possible the eruption of social protest to which he in turn responded." This interpretation gives more credit to Kennedy than many historians are willing to confer and undermines the determination and visionary influence of civil rights activists.²⁵

In *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Mary Dudziak follows a different narrative for the civil rights movement by linking it with international aspects of the Cold War. She also provides a contradictory interpretation of Kennedy's role in the movements' successes. Rejecting Brauer's theory that Kennedy finally felt impelled to act due to a change of heart after witnessing disturbing events and images of civil rights demonstrations, Dudziak identifies his preoccupation with America's global reputation as a key motivating factor for his actions. In addition, she accords a higher degree of agency to the civil rights activists, emphasizing moments when they deliberately sought out an international audience who—concerned about the

²³ Brauer, 153.

²⁴ Brauer, 247-260.

²⁵ Brauer, 318.

injustice they observed — would put pressure on the Kennedy administration for civil rights reform.²⁶

Within the context of the Cold War, reputation on the world stage became more consequential in the minds of U.S. leaders. International broadcasts demonstrating rising discontent over racial discrimination in America damaged its image as the self-proclaimed paragon of capitalist democracy which, in turn, compromised the effort to contain communism. Dudziak references several occasions when the Soviet Union embraced the opportunity to denigrate the race problem in America. Kennedy was particularly sensitive to this threat, in one instance admonishing the Freedom Riders persistence right before his meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna as “exactly the kind of thing Communists used to make the United States look bad around the world.”²⁷

Dudziak’s civil rights study is unusual in its deviation from the domestic politics of the movement to a focus on international issues. She recognizes the significance of 1960 as both the year of Kennedy’s election and the year that seventeen African countries achieved their independence. She argues that, because Africans were exceptionally attuned to the racial problems in the United States, State Department officials became concerned with how awareness of race discrimination in America would affect potential Cold War alliances. Fearing that allowing race discrimination to perpetuate made it less likely African nations would ally with the United States and that it might even affect the utility of the UN as a forum to further U.S. interests in the global community gave them the incentive to promote the civil rights agenda.²⁸

Remarkably, Dudziak’s choice to concentrate primarily on events that captured an international audience and discuss the actions of prominent leaders does not result in a “great man” style of history and does not diminish the importance of individual actions. Rather, her approach magnifies the role of the individual to show how it came to function on a global sphere. To offset potential criticisms of her choice of focus, she states her intentions explicitly and advises readers not to see her study “as an effort to privilege a top-down focus as ‘the’ story of civil rights history” as the “international perspective is not a substitute for the rich body of civil rights scholarship but another dimension that sheds additional light on those important and well told stories.”²⁹

Considering Kennedy’s role in these events, Dudziak often contrasts his reluctance to address civil rights with the obvious enthusiasm for his foreign affairs agenda. Familiar with the symbolic image commonly used to brand his administration, Kennedy’s apparent disinclination is clear by the chapter entitled “Losing Control in Camelot,” in which he finally decides to take effective steps against race discrimination.

²⁶ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011), 184.

²⁷ Dudziak, 158-159.

²⁸ Dudziak, 153.

²⁹ Dudziak, 14.

While she does not illustrate him as accepting or endorsing racism, she rejects Brauer's description of Kennedy as an enthusiastic supporter spurred on by his moral convictions. Instead, Dudziak attributes the increasing global interest on race in America that "harmed U.S. prestige abroad" and had a negative impact on "his image as a national leader" with eliciting Kennedy's determination to become more involved in civil rights.³⁰

Dudziak questions the conventional perception of Kennedy's service to the civil rights movement. She does not portray him as antagonistic or entirely disinterested, but she also does not seem to think he would have taken the same actions if not for the pressure from an international audience. Therefore, according to Dudziak's interpretation, if this served as his historic purpose, it is a purpose that was forced on him when he would rather be focused on his foreign affairs agenda.

Foreign affairs, such as the United States' engagement in Vietnam, conflicts and negotiations with the Soviet Union, and interventions in Latin America, defined much of what people today recall about Kennedy's term as president. Allowing that his presidency encountered a great deal of memorable international incidents in only three years, foreign affairs took on an unusually dominant role in his administration. This may be explained by the fact that foreign affairs seemed to play a dominant role in Kennedy's sense of his own historic purpose.

According to Michael Latham in his book *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era*, the prevailing conviction that the United States had a responsibility to intervene in matters all over the world derived from theories of modernization that were gaining recognition in the 1960s. Going further, he argues that for many Americans, the concept of modernization became an ideology, which he defines as "a conceptual framework" that expressed a shared "collection of assumptions" about American society and its capacity to give material support and serve as a model to help transform developing countries into functioning capitalist democracies.³¹

Latham approaches the Kennedy administration through a combination of cultural, political, and intellectual history. Intellectual history, an approach closely related to the *history of ideas*, examines major ideas within the social and cultural context of their development and dissemination.³² For America in the 1960s, Latham argues that modernization was "an element of American culture, an ideology shared by many different officials, theorists, and media sources" about their national identity, their

³⁰ Dudziak, 162.

³¹ Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006), 5.

³² "Intellectual history." In *Leadership Glossary: Essential Terms for the 21st Century*, edited by Jeni Mcray, (Mission Bell Media, 2015), (Credo Reference).

conception of national history and their beliefs about their international role in the world.³³

In his investigation of modernization as an ideology, Latham explains how a community of American social scientists developed the modernization theory and how the theory came to shape certain foreign policy initiatives during the Kennedy administration. Throughout the book, Latham carefully lays out the parallels between the Cold War version of this theory—that conveying American resources to “economically and culturally impoverished areas” would aid them in modernization—to earlier American ideologies like Manifest Destiny and imperialism.³⁴

The Kennedy administration, Latham argues, served as the ideal arena for implementing the modernization model in foreign policy matters. Kennedy consistently decried America’s perceived “lost ground” to the Soviets with emerging nations, convinced that providing assistance in education and technology would help the U.S. to gain international prestige that could translate to potential alliances or, more importantly, prevent additional communist revolutions. As a firm believer in the domino theory, Kennedy intended to use his team of the “best and brightest” to do more than simply respond to conflict or instability after it occurred. Instead, they would take an assertive stance by providing foreign aid and trained personnel who could advise countries in agricultural and industrial planning to avoid these threatening scenarios altogether.³⁵

Analyzing the connection between modernization theories developed by social scientists and the foreign policy-making process, Latham focuses on three initiatives started under the Kennedy administration: the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam. Unlike many other historians and critics, Latham does not dismiss these programs as exclusively self-interested strategies to reinforce the containment of communism or expand America’s market dominance. Rather, he expresses his mission as an effort to expand our understanding of the motivations behind these types of programs, calling out the question of whether Kennedy and his team were motivated by genuine altruism or the pursuit of national interest as a “false dichotomy.”³⁶ Granting that, at times, modernization became a strategic tool “for preserving an international capitalist order,” he believes it also stemmed from a larger belief system, “a constellation of mutually reinforcing ideas” about “the nation’s ideals, history, and mission.”³⁷ In a word, an ideology.

However, Latham recognizes the prejudiced undertones of the modernizations theories historically practiced in African, Asian, and Latin American nations. Similar to

³³ Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 13.

³⁴ Latham, 6.

³⁵ Latham, 28-29.

³⁶ Latham, 67.

³⁷ Latham, 12.

the arguments made by Postcolonial historian Edward Said in *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, modernization theorists established a “binary opposition”³⁸ between the United States and less-developed countries in which Americans were characterized in terms like “rational,” “activist,” and “achievement-oriented” while citizens of third world countries were “passive,” “deficient,” and “stagnant.”³⁹ Thus, modernization during the Cold War “was a means for the continued assertion of the privileges and rights of a dominant power”⁴⁰

In Latham’s interpretation, the operations performed within the foreign affairs agenda become the focus of the Kennedy administration. With containment as the main objective, the programs created to stabilize and modernize developing countries played a major role in carrying out this purpose. Although Latham gives Kennedy credit for acting in sincerity, he draws attention to the way these projects reflected the imperial ideology of policies often condemned in modern times, such as Manifest Destiny. Finally, he discusses how the disastrous Vietnam War and social unrest at home resulted in serious doubts about the efficacy of the modernization model.⁴¹ This conclusion serves to demoralize the ideological underpinnings of Kennedy’s foreign affairs agenda, his foremost pursuit as president.

These five books focus on the question of Kennedy’s historic purpose from different angles, though there are some parallels. These are found in the emphasis on Kennedy’s image and gender roles during his administration by Clinch and Cuordileone, or in the prominence of foreign affairs as illustrated by Dudziak and Latham. Shared by all however, is the question about how the Kennedy administration is understood now, and how it was understood by Americans in the 1960s. From the initial phase of favorable accounts following Kennedy’s death, to the backlash of revisionist histories — Clinch’s *The Kennedy Neurosis*, for example — to the current period that rests somewhere between and often produces more questions than answers, the true meaning of Kennedy’s historic purpose remains uncertain and probably always will. Nevertheless, we can be sure that historians will continue to explore the short life of John F. Kennedy to answer this question, perpetually contributing to our collective pool of knowledge.

³⁸ Green and Troup, *Houses of History*, 323.

³⁹ Latham, 95.

⁴⁰ Latham, 16.

⁴¹ Latham, 215.