

RFK or LBJ?

John Wilcock

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The Vietnam War has exacerbated what is clearly every generation's occupational hazard: the desperate dissatisfaction with the ruling clique's policies by people who lack the power, and often the age, to do anything about it. The frustration has been further increased in our time by the presence of what is probably the most unpopular president in American history. A president who can hear hundreds of thousands of his own people shout in the streets that he is a murderer.

But most of the widespread disgust among young people is for a two-party system controlled by men whose responsibility appears to be to each other and so a grateful consensus-loving administration which rewards them according to their inclination and ability not to rock the gunboat.

What can be done, most young people have wondered, when the only avenues toward political change are upward through the existing structure, a rotten, filthy structure that remains fundamentally unchanged even if its cogs and wheels are oiled or replaced with new ones? The answer, it is becoming increasingly evident, is to practice the theory of what we'll call the Politics of Change.

Under the Politics of Change, Negroes in the South would have been bloc-voting as Republicans years ago. And by so doing they would have ended the seniority system through which decrepit, decaying Southern senators remain as chairman of all-powerful committees because they had for so long been Democrats from a region where to be involved in politics at all was unquestionably to be a Democrat.

Under the Politics of Change one would have voted for Reagan in California, for O'Connor in New York and, paradoxically, for Romney in Michigan (because he is the most highly-touted Republican presidential candidate and, therefore, can best focus the anti-administration forces at the present time). The Politics of Change is merely a reaffirmation of that old philosophy of pragmatically regarding each choice individually with a view to its most likely overall effects, but essentially to create a climate in which politicians can afford to be honest without the dictates of party and expediency cramping their style.

What, at present, are the overall effects we are seeking? 1) To discredit the existing two-party system and make people aware of how little choice it really offers and how unlikely it is to produce basic structural changes in our society; 2) To open the way to a multitude of splinter parties and philosophies and yes INDEPENDENT candidates running on their own records in other spheres unrelated to formal political activism; 3) To end not only the filthy Vietnam war but to change the mentality and outlook of a government, whether it be Democratic or Republican, that sees war as a solution and that continues to pursue an aggressive, competitive, dominating attitude towards the rest of the world; and 4) To upset and remove from office the present Democratic administration.

Of these four possibilities only the last is a feasible proposition within the immediate future. Within, in fact, two years.

And yet the greatest barrier to its achievement, bizarrely enough, is the bloc of so-called Liberals which automatically chooses to identify the Republican party with the party of privilege (in truth, they're not far wrong, but that's not the point). Liberal, once an honorable word, today identifies a cop-out. A Liberal is a man who earnestly

yearns for social improvements, for the strengthening of civil rights, for diminishing the economic gap between the different social strata, for society accepting its responsibilities towards the ailing and underprivileged.

But a Liberal today is the man who seeks these things only if they can be achieved without personal or financial inconveniences to himself. Hence the strength of the so-called “white backlash,” a traditional resistance to change that could be disguised as long as the change showed no sign of arriving.

New York’s Civilian Review Board was a perfect “liberal” (i.e. fake) issue. Better than nothing as it ‘might have been, the Review Board really didn’t offer much protection against true police brutality. And under the Politics of Change theory its defeat was not a real defeat because now the Board’s true proponents (and not merely those who paid it lip service) will never stop their quest for something that is stronger and better. And eventually they will get it.

Traditionally a politician has been an opportunist. He is rarely a person who offers a genuine lead but rather one who assesses carefully which way the crowd is inclined to march and then runs to the head of the column. To say that Bobby Kennedy is an opportunist is begging the question because in the political game everybody is an opportunist, i.e. only too anxious to trim his sails to the prevailing wind. But, as I.F. Stone points out, while others dodge the draft, Bobby dodges the war. *The New York Times* reported recently that Kennedy answered all questions on the propriety of the war (while speaking at Hunter College) by discussing relief for noncombatants hurt by it. But, says Stone, “it is indecent to talk of helping the refugees while keeping silent about the napalm and saturation bombings that make a hell of their lives.”

And recalling Kennedy’s coy remark, “You are aware that I have some reservations about our role in Vietnam” which drew the evening’s biggest applause, Stone adds: “It is time Kennedy stopped getting cheers for such tepid observations. The students cheered because they were hungry for a word against the war and because they had faith in Kennedy. But he betrays their faith by playing skillful politics on the issue that may mean life or death for them.”

Kennedy—popular, smiling Bobby, he of the Beatle brow (Jack Newfield’s phrase)—is a hero with feet of clay. But because he represents the best chance to unseat Johnson, and certainly Cream-puff Humphrey, he should be supported. The Politics of Change says, yes, get on the seesaw—but in the middle. With one foot planted firmly on each side ready to shift the weight adroitly enough to shake unstable people off each end. This writer shares the view of some London newspapers that rather than face the embarrassment of repudiation Johnson will not run in 1968, possibly pleading fatigue or ill-health. “(Dick Gregory says the President is suffering from cancer). In any case, Johnson will be obliged to concede some territory to Kennedy if only because he is clearly the existential hero of “the New Left” (whose dogma, if not its actions, seems as conspicuously inflexible as those of the old Left).

Bobby Kennedy knows that he’s going to be president some day—as *Life* magazine points out he’ll not reach Johnson’s present age until 1976—and he can afford to wait for the time and opportunity to find him rather than stick his neck out prematurely. But *Life*’s recent cover story also, unintentionally maybe, pointed out another route to leadership:

“...an open fight (for the presidency) would shatter the party...the delegates will hardly be prepared to smash tradition, let alone the party itself, in Kennedy’s behalf.”

Can the party be shattered? Can the century-old choice of Republican or Democrat be extended to additional alternatives? There are signs that the rift in the GOP (via the Goldwater/Buckley Conservatives) might be permanent and it is logical to predict a similar left-of-center split. Where the once-aggressive Liberals stood is a vacuum that could certainly be filled by a more independent minded coalition than the present Liberal-Democrat alliance. The “New Left” might, perhaps, give up its dreams of reforming the existing Democratic party and project onwards into some sort of third-party alternative.

Bobby Kennedy may be the only politician of national stature who could lead such a new grouping.

Whether he has the guts or gambler’s instincts to do so is, on past form, unlikely. But under the Politics of Change it is tactically advantageous to support him until he proves unable or unwilling.

Editor’s Note: John Wilcock is co-founder of *The Village Voice*, past Editor of *The East Village Other* and is currently publishing his own newsletter OTHER SCENES. The Fifth Estate is anxious to print articles or letters in response to the piece above.

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