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**SOUND BITES FOR  
HISTORY—A SAMPLER**

## **Rapporteur's Note**

*Not another memoir by another elder statesman, this is an anthology of remarks, statements, credos, assertions, declarations, pronouncements, asides and bon mots, the verbal gleanings of four score years and counting. Over a lifetime, certain comments, expressions and fragments of conversation caught my ear and stuck. Ranging from doggerel to prayer, these remarks fashioned the boundaries of one man's examined world. The best of what I have heard and overheard follows in an opening sampler and three collections that resonate distinct realms: the parochial arena of politics and politicians; the larger world of foreign affairs and diplomacy; and, closer to home, out of the limelight. All that said, here's to listening.*

—J.W.S.

## **“Yes Ma’am, But Wait ’Til You See the Judge”**

My Grandfather Symington served as chief judge on the Baltimore City Supreme Court in the 1920s and liked to top off his day with a drink—the caveats of Prohibition notwithstanding. As president of Baltimore's white-shoe Maryland Club, he would indulge this penchant in the company of the club steward, William Marshall.

On one occasion Grandpa imbibed enough to diminish his motor skills and accepted his drinking partner's offer to drive him home. On arrival the steward, himself somewhat the worse for wear, mounted the front steps and rang the bell. My Grandma opened the door, and taking in the caller's appearance, declared,



Symington's boss, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, stands between his brother the President and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in 1961.



“Why Mr. Marshall, you’re a disgrace.” “Yes Ma’am,” replied Mr. Marshall with his unfailing dignity. “But wait till you see the judge.”

These events were related to me half a century after the fact in a hearty account by Mr. Marshall’s son, Thurgood, in his chambers at the United States Supreme Court.

### **“Unfit to Preach”**

One of my early missions as administrative assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy was to pay a courtesy call on the Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover—not at Bob’s request to be sure (the two were never close) but at the insistence of my father who considered it a prudent initiative. I first checked with Hoover’s designated envoy to Bob’s office, the natty, soft-spoken and discreet Courtney Evans, who thoughtfully briefed me on protocol in the FBI’s precincts within the Justice Department. (This was before the Bureau got its own headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue, the J. Edgar Hoover Building in the “Brutish” modernist style, which took twelve years to build and cost over twice its initial budget.) Dark suits were the rule, with somber ties; no sport coats or flashy neckwear. According to Evans, should an agent be reported “out of uniform,” Hoover would attribute the lapse to a temporary absence of understanding, deriving perhaps from a form of mental illness.

Fortified with this useful information, I secured an appointment, and in my Sunday best, called on the Director. Receiving me warmly, he proceeded to relate how he had captured a certain Louis “Lepke” Buchalter who had fallen afoul of the law as

kingpin of the organization known as Murder, Inc. This charming introductory reminiscence—of an event thirty-four years earlier—was followed by a sudden and totally unexpected tirade against the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., an “immoral man” in Mr. Hoover’s lights, “unfit to preach to others” and a distinct danger to the Republic. How had Hoover arrived at his novel thesis? Apparently under his orders, a bugging of Reverend King’s Washington hotel room had produced information about a liaison with a woman other than his wife. In Mr. Hoover’s view this impropriety deprived the Reverend of credibility in matters moral and most certainly disqualified him as a national leader worthy of respect.

Upon these debatable conclusions prudence dictates a seemly silence. Judge not that ye be not judged, as one might quote the only sinless man who has walked the earth—or is ever likely to. Nevertheless, four decades after Dr. King was murdered while on a mission to support municipal workers striking for fair wages, he was honored with the dedication of a monument to his memory on the National Mall. Four decades after Mr. Hoover died, at home, a lifelong bachelor, the headquarters building that bore his name was declared obsolete, unfit for rehabilitation or retrofitting and subject for demolition.

### **“They Must Draw Their Weapons”**

This was the ominous condition that the Governor of Mississippi told the Attorney General of the United States must be imposed. In September 1962 Robert Kennedy had phoned Ross Barnett to inform him that James Meredith, an African-American having

met all the requirements for admission to the University of Mississippi, would arrive at the campus to register at a certain date and time, accompanied by U.S. marshals. Governor Barnett pointed out that only the threat of overwhelming federal force could justify the withdrawal of his state troopers from the university entrance where their purpose was to bar Meredith access because of his race. Accordingly, Barnett said the marshals “must draw their weapons” to make the point.

“Isn’t that a bit dangerous, Governor?” asked Robert Kennedy. “Guns can go off.” “Well,” said the Governor, “that’s how it’s got to be.” Hanging up the phone, Bob turned and said, “We’ll have to think of something else.” The eventual strategy centered on an earlier arrival on campus than publicly scheduled. The U.S. marshals would escort Meredith to the Lyceum and remain there with him until his safety could be ensured. Learning of this subterfuge, a crowd of thousands, including both students and outside troublemakers, surrounded the Lyceum and called for Meredith’s deliverance into their midst.

From Washington President Kennedy broadcast an appeal for order and compliance with law. To no avail. The cordon of unarmed marshals was bombarded with stones and Molotov cocktails. An ambulance dispatched to rescue a seriously injured marshal was not permitted to enter the area.

The siege was orchestrated under the leadership of retired Army General Edwin Walker. The marshals responded with tear gas in a confrontation that lasted into the night. Ordered by Bob to fly down at once, I arrived in the early morning. The air reeked of tear gas as young soldiers, sent in support of the marshals, patrolled the campus with fixed bayonets to the derisive epithets

of a furious crowd of contemporaries. I hope I may never again witness one nineteen-year-old American yell at another, “If you weren’t so stupid you wouldn’t be in the Army!”

Invited to attend the thirtieth anniversary of the event in 1992, I exchanged memories with Meredith, who had by then gone to work for North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms. Black students served on the university’s Student Council, and the student body had elected a black homecoming queen. Change was in the air and on the ground.

### **“Going Camping?”**

The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 alarmed us all. Moreover, matters were far worse than the public knew.

In the run-up to its worst day President Kennedy’s brother, the Attorney General, assigned me, his administrative assistant, to attend a briefing scheduled by General Maxwell Taylor in the Pentagon’s Situation Room. With map and pointer, the newly appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff outlined an invasion plan that called for the 82nd Airborne Division to take the island in three days at a projected cost of ten thousand American casualties. That said, such an invasion could trigger the outbreak of nuclear war. The U.S. Navy had challenged Russian ships that were nearing Cuba to deliver nuclear warheads for the Soviet-manned missiles already in place. President Kennedy had given Premier Khrushchev twenty-four hours to ponder his alternatives: either proceed and risk war, or retire and face his generals.

Providentially, Khrushchev chose the latter—at considerable political cost. When the Russian ships stopped and turned

around, an almost audible sigh of relief swept across the Potomac. Before the matter was resolved, however, I thought it prudent to devise evacuation strategies for my family from our home in Washington. To that end I paid a visit to Sunny Surplus, a downtown emporium of excess and obsolete military equipment, including knapsacks, blankets, water purifiers, canned rations and the like. There I encountered a colleague on a similar mission. “Going camping?” he asked. “Hope not,” I replied.

Meanwhile, through both front and back diplomatic channels, apocalypse was avoided by our reciprocal removal of missiles from Turkey (quietly) in exchange for Russia’s *adios* from Cuba. Credit for this escape from the brink goes to Khrushchev and to the brothers Kennedy, who chose to respond positively to his initially negotiable overture and to ignore a subsequent hard line message undoubtedly sent to appease Russia’s military. The Thanksgiving hymn was never sung with such fervor!

### **“Oh, *Those People*”**

In February 1961, as deputy director of the newly constituted White House office of Food For Peace under George McGovern, I was dispatched to survey the food needs of our neighbors to the south. At my first stop, Caracas, I was described by its newspaper, *El Comercio*, as “*El joven con poco barbe*” (the beardless youth).

It was not long before I became aware of the race and class distinctions that President Kennedy hoped to mitigate through his newly announced Alliance for Progress. A vivid example was provided by an invitation to visit the home of a Peruvian grandee in Lima. We were sitting on his veranda, which overlooked the

city as far as the horizon, when he surprised me with the question, “Why are you here?” I explained that my mission was to survey the nutritional needs of the continent. “But why here?” asked my host, “There is no hunger here.” Puzzled, I pointed to a tiny blue-painted church atop a distant hill, which I had visited earlier that day. It was the centerpiece of a barrio called Leticia. There youngsters suffering from kwashiorkor (a protein deficiency) were carrying up to their cardboard huts buckets of fetid water they had collected in puddles below. “Oh, *those* people!” he exclaimed. “They’ve lived like that for centuries!”

The disconnect between my caudillo host’s perception and the reality I had just witnessed was too startling to address politely. A conquistadorial attitude toward the Indian majority prevailed in the upper classes of a number (but not all) of the countries I visited. In others a radicalized majority of *mestizos* (people of mixed blood) had either assumed power or were shortly to do so. It was no wonder the Cuban revolution resonated throughout the continent, a condition JFK hoped to head off with his *Alianza para Progreso*.

### **“Never So Close to War”**

The year: 1983. The scene: our living room in Washington’s Wesley Heights. Our dinner guests: Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, U.S. House Speaker Tom Foley, Indiana Congressman Lee Hamilton, Senator Charles McC. Mathias of Maryland, and their wives.

The evening was prompted by President Reagan’s casual reference to Russia as the “evil empire,” and Ambassador Dobrynin’s

mournful reaction, “My work is done here; I shall be leaving.” Dobrynin’s long tenure in his post had made him Washington’s ranking ambassador, dean of the diplomatic corps. We had first met twenty years earlier during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As that drama unfolded, he engaged in a series of meetings with my then boss, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. As Bob’s administrative assistant, I would meet Dobrynin in the private elevator and escort him to the office. On one such occasion, we exchanged phonograph records. I was the lucky recipient of Shostakovich’s cello sonata featuring Mstislav Rostropovich, with piano accompaniment by the composer. In return for this remarkable keepsake, Dobrynin had to settle for *An Evening on Buford Mountain*, a collection of folk songs I had recorded in Missouri.

In the 1960s, children routinely learned to take cover under their desks during air raid drills simulating a nuclear attack. Dobrynin’s comment two decades later in our dining room was a reminder of that perilous time. I had just concluded a toast to the art of diplomacy and to the ambassador’s consummate skills in that department when he rose and said as solemnly, “Thank you, Jimmy, for your kind words, but our two countries [have been] never so close to war.”

This unsmiling observation brought Sylvia to her feet with an announcement, “Time now for some music.” Mrs. Dobrynin went right to the piano and pounded out a Russian military march, which featured her jumping up from the piano stool and pretending to shoot us. Startled, Mac Mathias fell off his chair. There were no other casualties. Sylvia then took her turn at the piano, and the evening concluded with our soothing rendition of the latter-day folksong “Moscow Nights.”

## **“A Good Question”**

In October 1966 President Johnson presided over the seven-nation Manila Summit Conference. Its purpose was to brief the heads of state of South Korea, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the Philippines on the conduct of the Vietnam War and to secure their support for its continuance. The briefing was presented by General William Westmoreland, the trim and bemedaled commander of the U.S. forces. A large backdrop map of Southeast Asia enabled him to highlight the contested areas.

With an electronic pointer he directed our attention from one sector to another, pronouncing each in turn secure, and concluding that victory was at hand. The President asked whether there were any questions. There were none. The President, unaccountably to my mind, then asked, “General, is there anything you need?” Westmoreland responded, “Yes, sir, 100,000 more men.” Turning to his array of expressionless guests, the President again asked whether there were any questions. Again there were none. The President then thanked the General, adjourned the meeting, shook hands with his colleagues, and, flanked by his security detail, headed for the door.

Attending the meeting as the president’s Chief of Protocol, I took the opportunity to approach the dais, where the General was gathering his papers and preparing to exit. Understandably apprehensive, I found my voice and introduced myself.

“Ah, yes,” he beamed. “I know your father.” “Yes, sir, and I have a question.” “What’s that?” “Well, sir, if we are doing so well in the





On a happier occasion General Westmorland congratulates Symington on his victory over Sen. Jacob Javits of New York in a charity match.

war, why would we need any more troops, never mind such a large number?”

The General regarded me with a kind of inward gaze and replied, “Son, that’s a good question.” He then turned on his heel and walked away—a response that literally buckled my knees. Had the question been put by one of the attending heads of state, I wonder to this day what the necessarily more diplomatic answer might have been.

Eight years later, as a member of Congress, I would be closeted with my Wisconsin colleague, Dave Obey, trying to devise a withdrawal policy that would not denigrate the sacrifices of so many young Americans.

### **“Find Any Holes?”**

Abe Fortas, lead partner of the Washington law firm of Arnold, Fortas & Porter, handed me to review—fresh off the press—the voluminous *Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*. I had become an associate of the firm during the 1960 presidential campaign, then took a leave of absence in 1961 to launch Food For Peace and then to work for Attorney General Robert Kennedy. I had returned to the firm in 1963 and was at my desk when word came of the unspeakable tragedy in Dallas.

Ten months later Fortas, as President Johnson’s personal lawyer, had been asked to review the report. Exercising a prerogative conferred upon senior partners with regard to their lowly associates at about the time of the Creation, he passed the book to me, asking that I review it and report back within hours. When I did so, he asked, “Find any holes?”

Detailed and businesslike as it was, from my perspective the report failed to erase reasonable doubts that the cataclysmic event was or even could be attributable to one angry and/or demented expatriate. But the troubled country needed answers fast, and, as importantly, reassuring ones. Of course, what gave the report credibility was not so much its belabored content as the impressive bipartisan composition of its signators: Senators Richard Russell and John Sherman Cooper, House Majority Leader Hale Boggs, Minority Leader Gerald Ford, former Director of the CIA Allen Dulles, and former President of the World Bank John McCloy. Second-guessing that array of giants and their sleuths was certainly over my pay scale, so I reported, “Seems okay.”