

In *Profiles in Courage* John F. Kennedy made clear the rewards and difficulties of writing biography. The challenge of the biographer, Jack said, is “to answer that single question: ‘What’s he like?’” Jack understood that one can never *fully* get inside another person’s mind, and grasp the inner essence of his subject. “However detailed may have been our study of his life, each man remains something of an enigma, shadowed by a veil which cannot be torn away....Something always seems to elude us.” Jack could well have been thinking about his brother Bobby as he penned these words, for of all the Kennedys, he is perhaps the most perplexing. Depending on the day, Bobby could talk—and act—like a fierce right-wing ideologue, or a proverbial bleeding heart liberal. Again, depending on which Bobby one is examining, a biographer could reasonably argue that he cared little for Civil Rights, and that the only worthwhile goal for his family was to wield power; not to reform the ills of society. But you could also contend with much evidence that Bobby was the most liberal of the Kennedys, and that had he lived he would have worked tirelessly to usher in a golden age of egalitarianism in America. He could sound like an ultra-hawk during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and simultaneously the dove that helped diffuse the conflict. He repeatedly stated his commitment to winning in Vietnam, and yet he became the hope of many anti-war dissenters who saw him as the only realistic hope of getting out of the quagmire in 1968.

We will never really be able to capture *the* core of Bobby’s psyche, since it was in a state of constant evolution. The combative and caustic Robert F. Kennedy of the 1950s (which the nation witnessed during the McCarthy Witch Hunts when Bobby served as counsel to the Red-hunting Senator from Wisconsin) seems to bear little resemblance to the anti-war candidate of 1968. The man who once admitted that during the 1950s he didn’t lose much sleep worrying about Civil Rights for disenfranchised Americans would go on to be the most galvanizing and inspiring figure of the movement during his last years of life. The dedicated family man—and what a family man he was, with eleven children!—may have had an affair with Marilyn Monroe, just as he may have had several other extracurricular liaisons with glamorous women. (Admittedly, we will never know with absolute

certainty if the tales of Bobby's infidelity were true. But if he did not indulge in such perks of power he would have been the only Kennedy male who abstained.)

So how do we try to understand such a mercurial figure? The theory that seems most convincing is that Bobby's world-view changed radically the moment his beloved brother Jack was killed in November of 1963. The loss shattered Bobby's self-righteous certainty about most of his previously unquestioned premises about the world, and his role in it. He became much more thoughtful. With Jackie's encouragement Bobby took to reading the classics, and seemed to find consolation in the works of the Greek tragedians. This in itself was a major departure for Bobby, who in earlier years did not have much patience with philosophical theorizing. The Kennedy family credo was *action*, not reflective analysis. It seems quite likely that the assassination opened to Bobby depths in his soul that he had never been aware of before that fateful day in Dallas. If the brightest star in his firmament could be snuffed out in an instant by a mentally disturbed loser, then a sense of absolute certainty no longer seemed tenable. It was, to be sure, a horrifying wake-up call, but perhaps a necessary one to bring Bobby to full maturity.

Samuel Johnson once said, "It sobers a man's mind wonderfully to know he is to be hanged in a fortnight." Perhaps Bobby had this sobering realization, and it made him a better man.