

Los Angeles Times
October 24, 2008 Friday
BOOK REVIEW

In the Thick of Things Alongside RFK and LBJ
Some of It Was Fun Working with RFK and LBJ
Nicholas deB. Katzenbach W. W. Norton: 352 pp., \$27.95

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Even if you don't recognize his name, odds are you know the prematurely balding pate of Nicholas Katzenbach, who in 1963 famously confronted Gov. George C. Wallace when the first black students desegregated the University of Alabama.

Katzenbach was Robert F. Kennedy's deputy attorney general, and when Kennedy resigned to run for the U.S. Senate after his brother's assassination, Katzenbach succeeded him as President Lyndon B. Johnson's attorney general.

Katzenbach was intimately involved in almost every civil rights crisis of the early 1960s -- the 1961 Freedom Rides, the 1962 desegregation of the University of Mississippi, the 1963-64 efforts to win congressional passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act and the 1965 voting rights crusade centered on Selma, Ala. But he rightly stresses that his often powerfully poignant memoir "Some of It Was Fun: Working with RFK and LBJ" is "not intended to be a historical work of scholarship."

Still, if we can't rely upon the book for entirely dependable accounts of events such as the battle at Ole Miss, Katzenbach's perceptive and insightful portrayals of RFK and LBJ will enrich future histories for decades to come.

Katzenbach was a 39-year-old law professor when he joined John F. Kennedy's administration in 1961. JFK's appointment of his brother as attorney general drew widespread criticism, and Katzenbach admits that "clearly Bobby was not qualified by any traditional standards. He was too young, too inexperienced, too political, too brash, too immature in every way. All of these shortcomings were obvious to everyone, including Bobby."

When the Senate confirmed Katzenbach's initial appointment within minutes of a brief committee hearing, RFK phoned to offer congratulations on the speedy approval. "I guess they thought I needed a lawyer pretty badly," he joked.

Civil rights took up a good portion of RFK's and his aides' time. As Katzenbach reflects, "[N]either Bobby nor the rest of us fully appreciated the lengths to which Southern political leaders would go to try to preserve" racial segregation and white supremacy.

The Kennedy administration's philosophy was "to try to make Southern officials obey the law, not do the job for them," but the 1962 confrontation at Ole Miss showed that sometimes federal force of arms was necessary to squelch segregationist violence.

"In the long run," Katzenbach writes, the riot there "and the willingness of the president to use significant military force to enforce the court order" desegregating the university "was an essential foundation to the successful integration that eventually took place throughout the South."

Katzenbach's haunting portrait of Bobby Kennedy is the most memorable aspect of "Some of It Was Fun," but his depiction of Lyndon Johnson -- a highly complicated and contradictory figure -- is rich and valuable as well. Even as Katzenbach writes movingly of "the energy, the excitement, the hope" that RFK generated among his Justice Department colleagues, he also addresses the intense animus that festered between RFK and LBJ from 1960 onward.

"Bobby was direct, candid, and truthful. None of those adjectives could be applied to Johnson," Katzenbach bluntly states. RFK "was to a substantial extent a moralist," while LBJ was "the consummate politician," a man for whom the truth often was slippery and elusive indeed. "Bobby's dislike of a political rather than a moral approach" led him to see Johnson as "deceptive and dishonest," and in the wake of JFK's assassination, "everything Bobby said about President Johnson was negative and often bitter."

In contrast, LBJ "made an effort, never really reciprocated by Bobby," to work in harmonious tandem. "They could be civil to each other, but that was about the extent of it -- and even that took effort," Katzenbach reports.

Katzenbach came to be "tremendously impressed" with Johnson's passionate desire for racial justice and a society free from want. One evening at an intimate White House dinner, "the politician, the wheeler-dealer, the often crude manipulator disappeared" and LBJ unveiled the powerful eloquence he would later display in public when calling upon a joint session of Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

At other times, especially given Johnson's proclivity for telling demeaning stories and jokes about blacks, "it was difficult to see this man as the idealist I believe he was," Katzenbach admits.

In late 1966, feeling burnt out at the Justice Department, Katzenbach surprised even himself by volunteering to take the vacant post of undersecretary of State. The shift thrust him into the midst of Johnson's reluctant pursuit of military victory in Vietnam.

Katzenbach says LBJ was "essentially uninterested" in world issues and "saw foreign affairs in domestic political terms." Thus, for Johnson the war "was motivated as much by fear of domestic political consequences if territory was lost to the Communists as it was by any serious calculations about the consequences of the loss in terms of national security."

In line with previous accounts, Katzenbach explains that "LBJ desperately wanted to get out of Vietnam but was unwilling to just cut and run." Yet Johnson exhibited a furious intolerance toward anyone who publicly dissented from his policies. When Katzenbach, at LBJ's request, brought RFK to the White House to discuss peace negotiations, an "angry and irrational" president lashed out, accusing Kennedy of prolonging the war.

"You have blood on your hands," an "almost totally out of control" Johnson shouted.

"I don't have to listen to this, I'm leaving," RFK replied, and Katzenbach accompanied him out.

LBJ's behavior "worried me for a long time," Katzenbach writes, and no headway toward ending the war was made during the balance of Johnson's presidency.

Katzenbach confesses that he found his two years as undersecretary of State "terribly frustrating" and that 40 years later he feels "disappointment and sadness" over the Johnson administration's "failure to end the venture in Vietnam."

That latter portion of "Some of It Was Fun" is understandably not as consistently engaging as the earlier chapters involving civil rights, but Katzenbach, now 86, should be justly proud of a memoir that so acutely brings Kennedy and Johnson back to life.

PHOTO: HE WAS THERE: Former Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach was involved in civil rights cases (including moving Gov. George Wallace out of the doorway) during the 1960s.
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