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CHALLENGING THE CRITICS OF JFK'S NEW FRONTIER

By David J. Garrow

PROMISES KEPT: John F. Kennedy's New Frontier.
By Irving Bernstein. Oxford University Press. 342 pp. $24.95. Illustrated.

Anyone with an appetite for books on the Kennedy presidency that do not revolve around Marilyn Monroe and Frank Sinatra, or Judith Campbell and Sam Giancana, would be well advised to take note of Irving Bernstein's well-written and straightforward history of John F. Kennedy's domestic-policy initiatives, "Promises Kept."

Bernstein is a master of smooth and clear descriptive narrative, an accomplished writer who lends clarity and cogency to incremental policy developments that in less skillful hands could easily become boringly soporific. A retired academic who previously has authored several volumes on American labor history and collective-bargaining practices, Bernstein in his newest book presents not a political history of the Kennedy years but instead a policy history, a detailed account of the major domestic legislative efforts -- successful and unsuccessful -- that were launched from the White House between 1961 and 1963.

Policy history has emerged in the last several years as one of academia's most notable growth areas, with historians, political scientists and others increasingly appreciating that traditional political history -- concentrating on elections and dramatic public events -- usually gives short shrift to the long and unheralded periods of incubation that preceded eventual enactment of truly notable governmental initiatives. Recently, the University of Notre Dame has begun sponsorship of the Journal of Policy History, and scholarly studies of American domestic politics more and more focus upon the contemporaneously unpublicized evolution of federal executive agencies' rulemaking, and unheralded bills that initially drew little legislative attention, rather than on public developments that received headlines in daily newspapers.

While many of these books, such as Hugh Davis Graham's "The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy," look at one issue area across several decades, Bernstein's approach in "Promises Kept" is to look at a half-dozen or more within a very truncated time frame. His principal motivation, stated both in his introduction and in the book's title, is to challenge previous histories of the Kennedy years -- especially ones with titles such as "The Kennedy Promise" and "The Promise and the Performance" -- which have argued that John Kennedy's actual domestic policy record was marked more by hesitation and failure than by initiative and success.

Two elements in this debate are becoming shopworn and stale. First, little that is valuable or original can be added to previous discussions of how credit should be apportioned between Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, for legislative achievements -- such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 -- which were well on their way to fruition at the time of Kennedy's assassination but which took final form and won final congressional passage only after Johnson became president. Both with that civil rights bill and with the Kennedy tax cut, the Revenue Act of 1964, which Johnson signed into law three months after Kennedy's death, Bernstein leans

heavily toward according extensive although not exclusive credit to events and agreements that predated Nov. 22, 1963.

Second, little if anything that is new can be said with regard to how heavily constrained Kennedy's legislative options were by the Republican and Southern Democrat alliance that represented a functional rather than partisan majority in Congress in 1961-'62. Bernstein predictably terms Kennedy's face- off with that "reluctant and sometimes hostile Congress" as "the decisive fact of political life" for the new president, and quotes from Kennedy's own acerbic 1962 conclusion: "When I was a Congressman, I never realized how important Congress was. But now I do."

Bernstein's eagerness to repair the damage he believes Kennedy's political reputation has suffered at the hands of historians over the last 20 years does not blind him to the fact that the "Kennedy domestic program . . . was not invented by Kennedy" and that all four of Kennedy's major proposals -- on civil rights, taxes, federal aid to education and Medicare -- "had their legislative origins in bills introduced earlier in Congress." Likewise, Bernstein also is fully aware of popular culture's excessive and wrongheaded tendency "to personalize the times and the administration, to pile up the credit, or the blame, on the President" individually and alone, rather than to welcome a less simplistic but far more accurate history.

Bernstein has done a complete and comprehensive job of productively mining previous histories of civil rights, of the aid-to-education struggle and of the other issue areas he surveys. Bernstein's accounts of the tax-cut debate and of unemployment and manpower-training initiatives are especially clear and persuasive, and he similarly but more briefly draws attention to significant yet often overlooked subjects, such as the January 1962 Executive Order that virtually "transformed labor relations in the federal government." Aside from a tiny number of incorrectly rendered organizational and individual names, "Promises Kept" appears virtually error-free. Bernstein rarely lets a chapter go by without a caustic remark being directed at John Kenneth Galbraith, and he surprisingly labels Chicago's anti-integrationist school superintendent, Benjamin C. Willis, as "outstanding," but otherwise his brief biographical sketches and portraits are both fair-minded and accurate.

In 1983, a Gallup poll found that John F. Kennedy was retrospectively the most popular of American presidents. Perhaps even more significantly, Gallup found 65 percent of its respondents thought that the United States would have been "much different" over the following two decades had Kennedy not been killed in office. Thomas Brown articulated the most important point very succinctly in his valuable 1988 book, "JFK: History of an Image": "It is the circumstances of Kennedy's death rather than the events of his life that have elevated him to a primary place in the political consciousness of Americans." Irving Bernstein's successful survey of Kennedy's domestic-policy record manifests no direct quarrel with those findings, but Bernstein's firm accent on the most positive aspects of Kennedy's presidential legacy will not significantly alter our historical evaluation of the Kennedy years.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross," which received the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for biography and the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award.