

Not the Best Or the Brightest

Camelot's Court

By Robert Dallek

(Harper, 492 pages, \$32.50)

When John F. Kennedy entered the presidency, Americans were fascinated not only with their youthful, handsome and articulate new leader but with all those around him, glamorous by association. Witness "The Kennedy Circle," a book of profiles of his advisers published in 1961, when the administration had hardly begun.

There had been no comparable public interest eight years earlier in the circle around Dwight Eisenhower, whose cabinet, made up almost entirely of businessmen, was derisively said to consist of "nine millionaires and a plumber" (the last a union head and the secretary of labor). Kennedy, by contrast, wanted to find "the brightest and the best people possible," declared Sargent Shriver, the Kennedy-in-law in charge of the talent search. Among the newly chosen, a newsmagazine counted 16 Phi Beta Kappas, four Rhodes Scholars and a Nobel Prize winner.

In "Camelot's Court," the historian Robert Dallek sprinkles brilliance upon the heads of leading advisers—

something he hadn't found need to do in the pertinent chapter of "An Unfinished Life," his rightly acclaimed 2003 biography of Kennedy. In this new book Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara shows "brilliance as a student" on page 85, is reputed "a brilliant manager of a large corporation" on page 86 and becomes simply "brilliant" on page 87.

National Security Adviser Mc-

George Bundy has a "reputation for brilliance" on page 89, which is swiftly confirmed a few sentences later by a reference to "his brilliance." Bundy's deputy, Walt Rostow, is described two pages later as "one of the brilliant academics" that Kennedy had come to know as a senator and a Harvard overseer.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk, though a Rhodes Scholar, is conspicuously denied the b-word. Since Kennedy intended to be his own secretary of state, Mr. Dallek notes, he initially found the self-effacing bureaucrat's diffidence appealing but eventually judged Rusk to be ineffectual. Even so, the secretary of state provided an important "voice of reason" in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

The author believes that candidate Kennedy meant it when he told a potential supporter that "the key thing for the country is a new foreign policy that will break out of the confines of the Cold War." The unnamed potential supporter was Harris Wofford, who later wrote that, though he was impressed by the candidate, "his arguments were obviously honed to my interests." Even if Kennedy did mean what he said, he had, as Mr. Dallek observes, "no clear agenda for how he would achieve his larger designs." The president hoped to get fresh ideas from his advisers.

Kennedy's critics faulted the president for approaching issues of foreign policy and national security as a politician above all.

His predecessor, Mr. Dallek reports, was unimpressed by Kennedy's approach to governance. Eisenhower, preferring to rely more on "smooth-running bureaucracies . . . , considered Kennedy naïve in thinking that he could find miracle workers who would help him solve national and international problems."

By the summer of 1961—after Nikita Khrushchev's alarming threat regarding West Berlin in January, the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in April and the tense Vienna summit in June that left the Soviet leader convinced of the president's weakness—Kennedy might have been willing to concede that Ike had a point. "No one seemed to have answers to any of the major problems that had descended on him so quickly," writes Mr. Dallek.

A sense of disappointment faintly echoing Kennedy's will be experienced by any reader hoping to find in "Camelot's Court" fresh ideas about the Kennedy administration. Mr. Dallek's criticism of the administration's "conventional thinking" about the Cold War is itself conventional liberal thinking. Nor are there any curbscating insights into the relationship of a president and his advisers. "Tensions and divisions . . . eventually develop in every administration," Mr. Dallek notes, and Kennedy "learned that even the brightest and most well meaning of advisers [can] misjudge a situation and offer poor counsel." Nevertheless, by focusing on "Kennedy's interactions with his ministry of talent," Mr. Dallek's history does cast light on his "presidential performance," as the author asserts, though the sight is not really new.

In an essay published in January 1962, Hans Morgenthau, an eminent political scientist, faulted Kennedy for approaching issues of foreign policy, such as the proposed invasion of Cuba or the crisis over Berlin, as a politician. That is, when faced with a choice between two incompatible alternatives, he tended to opt for a half-measure, seek a middle ground or temporize by claiming to need more information (or fresh ideas). A statesman, Morgenthau said, "must cross the Rubicon or refrain from crossing it, but he cannot have it both ways. . . . There is no riskless middle ground." The statesman, he added, must act in spite of his "ineluctable ignorance" of the consequences.

Morgenthau's distinction between the politician and the statesman was too sharply drawn, however, as Kennedy demonstrated later that year in the Cuban missile crisis. Forced to act, politician Kennedy avoided both incompatible extremes (a military strike or doing nothing), opted for a half-measure (blockade), kept a military response in reserve and reached a deal with Khrushchev. Having resolved the crisis without a nuclear war and without seeming to yield to nuclear blackmail, JFK emerged an admired statesman, and rightly so.

Kennedy was then free to revert to the role of dithering politician in the less-urgent matter of Vietnam. Uncertain whether to limit America's role there or to press on to prevent a Communist victory, he expressed himself on both sides of the question. As for his brilliant advisers, they were divided and, in this matter as in others, unable to provide the sure guidance he craved. Kennedy's indecisiveness, Mr. Dallek writes, "opened the way to [President Lyndon] Johnson's unequivocal determination to use U.S. power to preserve South Vietnam's autonomy, arguing that this is what Kennedy would have done." What Kennedy would have done is, of course, unknown.

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