

Sen. Kennedy's Classification of Presidents Ignores History

BY RAYMOND MOLEY

In a recent speech before that Washingtonian "House of Intellect," the National Press Club, Sen. John F. Kennedy reopened the old academic game of classifying Presidents as "strong" and "weak."

There was plenty of quibbling on that subject before the senator saw the light of day. I started to teach political science in a university the year before Kennedy was born, and my expositions were full of the accepted platitudes, which I regret. That was before I knew something about real Presidents, rather than Presidents in books.

As examples of "strong" Presidents, Kennedy mentioned first Franklin D. Roosevelt, then Jackson, Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Wilson and Truman. This is the mythology prevalent in academic circles today.

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I suspect the hand of certain academicians in the senator's speech. In any event, the theory runs parallel with the political historiography of Prof. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., biographer of Jackson and F. D. R.

My suspicion is invigorated by the significant sentence: "He (the next President) must reopen the channels of communication between the world of thought and the seat of power."

If this means anything, it says that the turnpike should be opened between the senator's alma mater, Harvard, and the White House. That highway was

well traveled in the early days of F. D. R. That indefatigable recruiter of Harvard talent, Prof. Felix Frankfurter, commuted thereon. And loads of one-way riders moved from the "world of thought" to Washington. Many are still there. Two notable ones are brain-trusting for Sen. Lyndon Johnson.

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Perhaps there was a good reason for the omission of that incomparable table-thumper and chauvinist, James K. Polk, who was elected on the indefensible challenge to England, "54-40 or fight." If we had made good on that, and had England yielded, the United States would now have senators from the richest part of British Columbia.

But having been elected, Polk turned south and, in a war later denounced by Lincoln and Grant as unwarranted (Woodrow Wilson called it "inexcusable aggression"), tore away the greater part of Mexico.

Perhaps Kennedy's omission was due to the fact that Polk defeated a senator, Henry Clay, who was selected by Kennedy himself a few years ago as one of the five greatest. Clay's three defeats established the tradition that senators are not very good candidates for President.

The fallacy in this common classification of Presidents as "strong" and "weak" is that it identifies noise, publicity and table-thumping with achievement. In this sophomoric category, William

H. Taft and William McKinley are called "weak." But let us see.

McKinley was the gentlest and most patient of men. But his vision of American interests moved our defenses westward, first to Hawaii and then to a self-governing ally in the Philippines. He held off war with Spain until Congress was ready to declare, with or without Presidential approval.

But once over, his terms of peace provided for the protection of American interests to the south and far east. With his great secretary of state, through the "open door" policy, he prevented the partition of China by rapacious European powers. At home he restored the confidence which brought prosperity to farms and jobs to workers.

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After nearly eight years of T. R.'s shouting about trusts and evil tariffs, Taft had the courage to tackle the latter and really do something about the former. His tariff bill made him unpopular with farmers, who never seem to be happy. And his quiet suits busted the Standard Oil and tobacco trusts.

He inherited a financially bankrupt reclamation mess which T. R. had loudly proclaimed as his greatest domestic achievement. And Taft, not T. R., was years later proved right in the controversy over Interior Secretary Ballinger.

Sen. Kennedy proves that a little knowledge of history is a dangerous thing.