

A Wound Left Unhealed

Looking back at another time of war and a leader silenced too soon.

By FRYE GAILLARD, BA'68

IT WAS 35 YEARS AGO THIS spring, and what I remember most is the crush of the crowd—how they jammed together and filled up the airport, and screamed and waved signs and surged forward at the sight of him, trying to shake his hand or just touch him.

He made it halfway from the plane to his car, a step-at-a-time journey of maybe 15 minutes. But finally he was surrounded, and there was nowhere to move; so they hoisted him unsteadily to an escalator railing, and as he balanced there precariously, looking frail and very tired, he made a brief speech about the problems of the country.

These were urgent times, he said, full of war and injustice and pointless human pain. But they were not impossible times, not an occasion for cynicism or despair.

There was nothing revolutionary about the words he spoke; platitudes were as abundant as startling insights. But somewhere imbedded in his Massachusetts twang, somewhere in the strange and enigmatic intensity of his icy blue stare, in the jab of his forefinger and the tousle of his hair, in all the little components that made up his presence, there was an urgency and a passion that were soon to disappear. For this was March 21, 1968, and the man was Robert Kennedy, newly announced candidate for president of the United States.



He had come to Nashville on this particular occasion to deliver a speech at Vanderbilt University. More than 10,000 people waited for him there, but the people at the airport wanted a glimpse of him, too, and when he disembarked from the railing and resumed his slow journey in the direction of the car, the force of the crowd was nearly overwhelming.

I was in the middle of it, wide-eyed and trying to stay upright, shoving to keep up with Kennedy, whom I was supposed to introduce.

When we finally squeezed through the doors of the airport terminal, it was raining outside—a cold and windy drizzle that would soon turn to ice.

I had an umbrella clutched tightly in my hand, but it was still closed, and in the delirious surge of bodies there was no way to open it, or even to lift my arm. It struck me then that the crowd, though friendly, was edging toward a mob, caught up in a kind of Pied Piper blindness for which I feel no nostalgia. But for the slouched and slender man at the center of it, there are those—and I suppose I am one—who still feel a nostalgia that borders on an ache.

When he died 74 days later, you knew with a certainty beyond shock and grief that American politics would never be the same. And it isn't. Kennedy came to Vanderbilt to serve as keynoter for the IMPACT symposium, a student-run speakers program that had brought

a number of celebrities to the campus—William Buckley, Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael and Barry Goldwater, to name just a few. Kennedy's speech was at least as memorable as any of the others. He spoke during a time of war and division, of urban riots and racial injustice, and against that backdrop he talked about the patriotism of dissent. It was, he thought, the duty of the people who loved their country to speak out strongly against its imperfections.

"There are millions of Americans," he declared, "living in hidden places, whose faces and names we will never know. But I have seen children starving in Mississippi, idling their lives away in the ghetto, living without hope or future amid the despair on Indian reservations, with no jobs and little hope. I have seen proud men in the hills of Appalachia who wish only to work in dignity—but the mines are closed, and the jobs are gone and no one, neither industry or labor or government, has cared enough to help. Those conditions will change, those children will live, only if we dissent. So I dissent, and I know you do, too."

For some of us at least, those words are haunting 35 years later, as we enter a new era of national division—potentially, at least, a profound and agonizing disagreement about what kind of country we want to become in the wake of the terror of Sept. 11. There is no way to know, as this story goes to press, if the divisions will become a kind of tortured replay, or even an echo, of the 1960s. But what some of us fear is that there are no Robert Kennedys among us today—no political leaders, Republican or Democrat, who have yet stepped for-

ward with the wisdom and the vision to lead us through the pain.

I don't mean to idealize Kennedy. For some time now, scholars have picked their way through his record, revealing his contradictions and his flaws. Even in the '60s, some were unconvinced by his urgency, seeing him as a cynical and ruthless politician. And even his admirers had to acknowledge that he *could* be ruthless, or at least so driven that you couldn't tell the difference. But he was not cynical.

I remember the car ride from the airport to Vanderbilt—three Tennessee politicians crowded into the front seat, while Kennedy shared the back with John Glenn and one slightly awed student who was astonished by the frankness of it all as the politicians tried to tell Kennedy what to say and not to say. It's a campus audience, they told him, so talk about the Vietnam War if you want. But this is still the South, so go a little easy on the issue of race.

Kennedy listened for a while, then turned to me and asked without warning: "What do you think I ought to say tonight?"

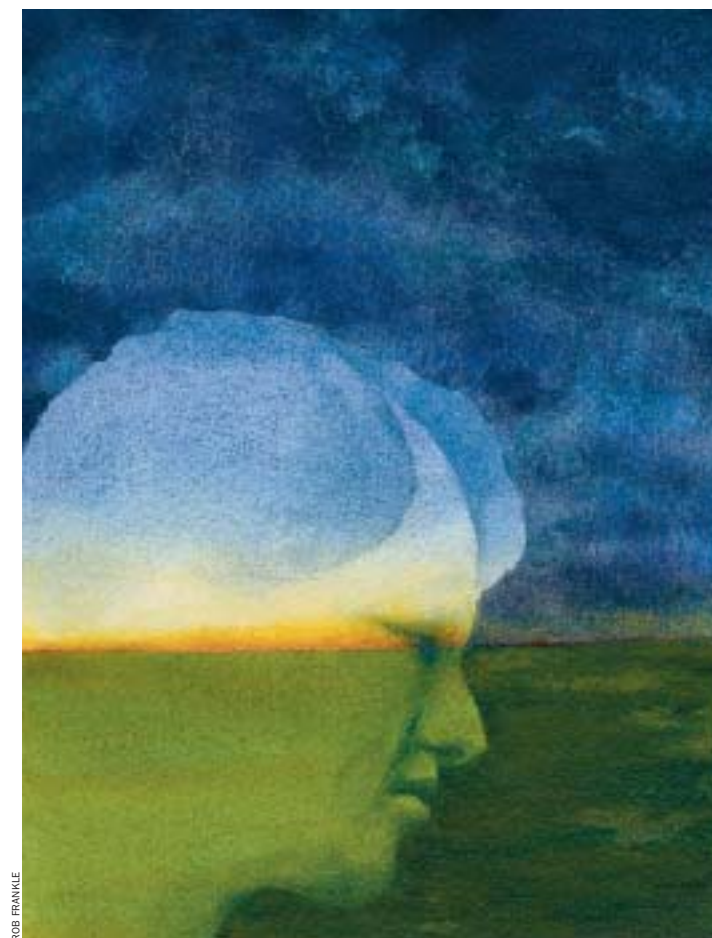
I hesitated briefly, then told him it was fine to talk about the war, but I also thought he should talk about poverty and injustice at home. I told him it was true those subjects were still sensitive in the South, but that was all the more reason to address them there—and that he might be surprised by the sympathy of the crowd.

"Thank you," he said. "That's what I'll do."

Then he sank into himself and rode along in silence, brooding enigmatically as the politicians in the front seat laughed and joked and exchanged old stories. I had no idea what Kennedy was thinking, but there was certainly a great deal for him to brood about. He could have reflected, as he did sometimes, about the shabbier contradictions of his earlier career—his time as attorney general in his brother's administration when he permitted wiretaps on civil rights leaders and angered groups of blacks who came to him regularly with horror stories from the South, telling them abruptly and with no apparent sense of irony: "Well, you

know we've all suffered."

But in the end, of course, Kennedy did suffer, and for a brief period of time—less than five years, in fact, for that was all there was between his brother's death and his—Kennedy embodied an identification with pain. He spoke at every campaign stop, including the one at the Vanderbilt gymnasium, about the trou-



bling things he had seen in the country—"the slow destruction of a child by hunger, and schools without books, and homes without any heat in the winter."

Despite his pleadings, the wounds of the country only seemed to grow worse, culminating on April 4, 1968, when Martin Luther King was murdered in Memphis. Kennedy heard the news on a plane to Indianapolis, where he was scheduled to appear that night at a campaign rally in a black neighborhood. All across the country the ghettos were burning, with looting and bombs and sniper fire from the high-rise apartments. But Kennedy insisted on keeping his appointment.

Standing alone on a flatbed truck, hunched against the cold in his black overcoat, he told the crowd what had happened to King, and as

the people cried out in disbelief, he told them he understood how they felt.

"In this difficult day," he said, "in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black, you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can

move in that direction as a country, in great polarization—black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another.

"Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand.

"My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: 'In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.'"

There were no riots in Indianapolis that night. "I guess the thing that kept us going," said one of King's aides, "was that maybe Bobby Kennedy would come up with some answers."

For the next two months, a lot of people held grimly to that hope, especially as Kennedy did well in

the primaries, and the thought began slowly to form in our minds that despite all the tragedy and despair of the decade—the war and the riots and the murder of good men—Robert Kennedy might be the next president.

He might find the policies to implement his vision, and the country might find a way through its pain. But then in the first week of June he was gone, following unbelievably in the martyred path of Dr. King. In a way, it was the culmination of the '60s, the death of a promise that had been so strong.

Thirty-five years later, it seems clear enough that the wound to the country has never really healed. There is only the scar—the cynicism born on a California night when the most decent politician of our time lay in a spreading pool

continued on page 85

son & Johnson and Chick-fil-A, and the writings of contemporary Protestant theologian Harvey Cox. Along the way, he mentions relevant areas of his research, such as examining the role of business leaders as public theologians of a sort, and evaluating the “ethical climates” that determine the moral boundaries in various companies and organizations.

This broad style of inquiry comes naturally to Victor, says colleague Bruce Barry, a one-time graduate student of Victor’s who is now the Brownlee O. Currey Associate Professor of Management at Owen. “A lot of business schools have an ‘ethics guy.’ And you could look at Bart and say we do, too. But I think what *we* have is actually something unique, which is an ethics guy who first of all is well grounded in the underlying moral philosophy of ethical reasoning—and, sadly, you can’t say that about all business-school ethics professors.

“But more important than that, we have somebody who has core pieces of intellectually focused experience that are grounded in key areas outside of that—one of which is corporate strategy, which he has taught successfully here and at other places. And another is this firm grounding in social science at both micro and macro levels. What we have, then, in Bart Victor is unique, in that he brings not just a focus on ethics but also a real grounding in other social sciences.”

Victor’s work experience reflects his broad academic interests. Starting with an undergraduate degree in sociology, he moved from social work to service as executive director of a system of 20 day-care centers, then on to management consulting on day-care issues. Drawn to graduate school in business (“I just needed to know more”), he earned a Ph.D. in business administration at the University of North Carolina. After teaching at the universities of Nebraska and North Carolina, he took a plum position at the Institute for Management Development International (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland. (“It’s a world-renowned place that’s kind of part western business school and part executive development laboratory,” says Barry.) Victor taught there three years and ran the IMD’s program for executive development.

What drew him to Vanderbilt in 1999 was the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration inherent in the Cal Turner Chair in Moral

Leadership. The chair is part of an entire program in moral leadership, endowed in 1994 by Vanderbilt trustee Cal Turner Jr., BA’62, the recently retired CEO of Dollar General Corp., which brings together Vanderbilt’s professional schools (medicine, law, nursing, divinity and business) to explore topics that present ethical issues for all, such as genetic research.

Under the auspices of the Cal Turner Program, Victor leads an interdisciplinary course in moral leadership offered through both Owen and the Divinity School that is open to students of all the University’s professional schools and is co-taught by Victor and faculty from the various schools. Similarly, his Turner Program connections have led him to invite faculty from the other schools into his Ethics in Business course to expand the frame of reference.

Bringing together faculty and students from these other disciplines, says Victor, “allows us to deal with [ethical] problems in the way they really are. The interesting problems don’t just fit here in the business school. They don’t just fit in the law school. Just as business isn’t simply a concern of business.”

Indeed, says Victor, “business is the single most significant social defining force in the world today. It reaches everywhere. The world has never seen a social movement as significant, as powerful, as pervasive as business.”

Which, come to think of it, makes the idea of teaching moral leadership in business seem all the more imperative.

Despite all the recent corporate news of accounting fraud and executive deceit, Bart Victor remains upbeat about the possibilities for American business. He sees it not as some faceless, out-of-control juggernaut but as an engine that we all have some power to control. “I like business. I think business is a great, positive thing. I think it can do awful stuff, like anything powerful. It is not simply good in and of itself. It is a human creation. *We* are business. *We* are the market. Not somebody else. So let’s take responsibility for it.” ▼

An English major when at Vanderbilt and now a Nashville freelancer, Paul Kingsbury, A’80, is the author of books on the Grand Ole Opry and Nashville’s historic Hatch Show Print poster shop. His articles have appeared in Entertainment Weekly, US, Nashville Life, and other magazines.

Virtuoso Performers *continued from page 59*
content with her performance that she left immediately afterwards for the W.O. Smith Community School of Music to teach a percussion class to school-aged children.

After the competition Krystal derived some satisfaction in knowing she had played “Rhapsody in Blue” very well—maybe even well enough to win. A few weeks passed, however, before she truly understood why she had undergone so many hassles for an experience she just as easily could have sidestepped. “On Wednesday night,” she says, “I played through “Rhapsody in Blue” for the first time since the competition. An upright piano was in the Ingram Performance Hall lobby, and I always like playing on pianos I find in random places. I played through the whole piece, solo, without the cuts for the competition excerpt. It was a joy just to be able to play this particular piece of music. Even if I don’t get to perform it with an orchestra, it’s a great piece to have learned: an American concerto flavored with jazz, a piece with rhythmic vitality, a piece with melodies that one leaves the practice room singing.”

That’s why Gershwin called it a “rhapsody.” And, more than any other reward, the discovery of such rhapsody drives students at the Blair School of Music to keep performing. ▼

A.P.O.V. *continued from page 69*

of his blood and whispered to the people rushing to his side, “Is everybody all right?”

The answer, of course, is that none of us was. In the political life of our troubled young country, there was simply no cure for that kind of loss. ▼

Frye Gaillard, BA’68, was chairman of the IMPACT program that brought Robert Kennedy to the Vanderbilt campus. During his lengthy career as a journalist, Gaillard has written about that event in several places, including the Charlotte Observer, for which he served as southern editor, and in his family memoir, Lessons from the Big House: One Family’s Passage Through the History of the South.