

### *In the Shadow Of JFK*

"The Lines of Control Have Been Cut" by Richard Reeves, in *American Heritage* (Sept. 1993), 60 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

President Bill Clinton's White House has been likened to a college dorm, complete with bull sessions and all-nighters. His general style of management is informal. Veteran political writer Reeves, author of a new study of John F. Kennedy's presidency, fears that Clinton may be following a very bad example—the disorderly



JFK, who in 1963 shook 17-year-old Bill Clinton's hand at the White House, remains an important model for him.

approach to management taken by his idol.

JFK came into office in 1961 wanting "to open up the White House to new information" and to break up "the old bureaucracies and systems" that he thought had isolated his predecessor. Believing, as he explained at the time, that general meetings of the National Security Council were "a waste of time," he opted instead, says Reeves, for "small ad hoc task forces, their number rising and falling with the president's perception of crises," and all of them, ideally, under his direct control. President Dwight D. Eisenhower "had built up what amounted to a military staff apparatus to methodically collect and feed information [to him] and, at the same time, had created separate operations to coordinate and implement his decision making." Kennedy wanted to be in the center of all the action, not at the top of an organization chart.

But Kennedy-style openness carried its own

risks. National security adviser McGeorge Bundy warned JFK in April 1961 that the task forces set up to deal with the most important foreign-policy crises—Laos, the Congo, and Cuba—had "nobody in particular in charge" and no "clearly focused responsibility." Two weeks later came the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion. Kennedy had approved the Central Intelligence Agency plan, notes Reeves, after "a series of unstructured meetings" with the CIA director, the secretaries of defense and state, "and pretty much whoever else happened to be around."

During the Eisenhower-Kennedy transition of 1960–61, the two men had discussed decision-making in foreign affairs. Ike came away, Reeves says, privately worried "that the new man did not understand the complexity of the job." Kennedy seemed to think that it just entailed getting the right people in the right positions.

Some historians have argued that Kennedy "grew" in the job. They cite his handling of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty negotiated in 1963. "But without gainsaying those achievements," Reeves writes, "it seems clear that after two years in office Kennedy was moving the United States into combat in South Vietnam in a slow and drawn-out replay of the Bay of Pigs invasion. He still seemed unable to sort through bad information. He focused on political appearance rather than military reality and continued to think the key to the problem was finding the right man—which meant eliminating the wrong one." In Cuba, the man to be eliminated was Fidel Castro; in South Vietnam, it was Ngo Dinh Diem. Castro survived while Diem did not. In both cases, the Kennedy style of management had the same outcome: disaster.

### *Reforming Congress, Again*

"Thinking About Reform: The World View of Congressional Reformers" by John Roos, in *Polity* (Spring 1993), Northeastern Political Science Assoc., Thompson Hall, Amherst, Mass. 01003.

Talk of reforming Congress is once again in the air. A number of conscientious lawmakers have resigned in frustration over the institution's ap-