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 approach to management taken by his idol.

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

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-

The New Generation Gap

In *New Oxford Review* (Sept. 1993), historian Christopher Lasch defends the supposed "lost generation" of the 1980s and '90s.

Abbie Hoffman and other relics of the 1960s spent the latter part of their careers, and incidentally made a good deal of money in the process, berating college students for their lack of political commitment. Instead of marching and picketing and protesting and generally making themselves obnoxious, they were grinding away at their studies in the hope of getting jobs. The truth of the matter, however, which people like Hoffman never understood, is that today's students are deeply skeptical of the kind of ideological appeals that inflamed and still inflame so many of their elders. They have inherited a perfectly terrible world, in many ways a terrifying world, and they have no illusions about making it dramatically better in the short run, or maybe even in the long run.

Commentators on the current scene often describe the younger generation as holding their parents responsible for leaving the world in such a mess. But this is a baby boomer's way of looking at the issue. The point about the new generation is that they just aren't terribly interested in the politics of blame and recrimination: the only politics the boomers seem to understand. They recognize that the sorry state of the world can't be blamed on any particular generation any more than it can be blamed on any political party. This is what often makes them the despair of their elders—they can't be mobilized, can't be pressed into the service of prefabricated political or ideological causes and crusades. And it is this radical skepticism about movements and causes and slogans that invites the false charge of political indifference.

I must say I find this skepticism more attractive than not, especially when it is contrasted to the ideological politics that has played such a prominent part in American life since the '60s and is still pathetically playing itself out, the second time as farce (as usual) in university departments of literary and cultural studies and other centers of the most self-consciously advanced academic thought—I use this last word with a lively sense of its limitations. . . .

An absence of illusions, of course, carries with it the danger of cynicism, but even here, it seems to me, the cynicism that pervades our culture is more likely to come from people who once had big illusions than from people who never had any illusions to lose. What I sense in my best students is better described as a cold-eyed realism that is by no means incompatible with warm hearts. . . . [The] best of our students . . . have a much better grasp than many of their so-called role models of the things that really matter in life—love, useful work, self-respect, honor, and integrity. When [their] voice begins to get a hearing, I think we can look forward to a marked improvement in the quality of our public conversation.

parent inability to function effectively. Fourteen states decided in referenda last year to join Colorado and impose term limits on members of Congress. (The tenure of 156 of the 435 representatives is eventually to be subject to limits.) The recommendations of a Senate-House joint committee on reorganization are expected in December. Roos, a political scientist at the University of Notre Dame, warns that the failure of past reforms holds important lessons.

In the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, he notes, liberal reformers aimed to make Congress a full partner in the activist government that had emerged from the New Deal and World War II. The act streamlined the committee structure, expanded the staff on Capitol Hill, and increased funds for the Congressional Research Service and for Congress's investigative arm, the General Accounting Office. The tenor of the times, Roos says, was reflected in an influential 1945 report by the American Political Science Association, with its Progressive and "good government" "touchstones [of] modernization, rationality, efficiency, and democratization." The

reformers, however, underestimated the power of the congressional "barons" who controlled most of the important committees, and the power of the shifting conservative coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats.

After years of frustration with their own institution, compounded by suspicion of the executive branch during the Johnson and Nixon years, congressional reformers of the 1960s and '70s looked, naively, to "the American people" as a deus ex machina. Strip "the anti-democratic barons" of their powers and make them responsible to rank-and-file Democrats, thought reformers such as Representative Donald Fraser (D.-Minn.), and the "will of the people" would push desirable (liberal) legislation through Congress. The House reforms of 1970–74 included limiting the powers of committee chairs and weakening the important House Ways and Means and Appropriations committees.

Was it realistic to assume "that rank-and-file Democrats want to and will balance budgets, allocate scarce resources within limits, and make hard and unpopular choices"? The decades since have given the answer, Roos says. If Congress is "to regain its crucial role as an equal constitutional partner," it will not be enough to make it more rational, more efficient, or more democratic. Today's reformers will have to devise changes in the institution that permit its titular leaders once again to lead.

Schoolhouse Politics

"The Quagmire of Education Finance" by Charles Mahtesian, in *Governing* (Sept. 1993), 2300 N St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

In state politics, few issues are more explosive today than school finance. Since 1989, when state courts struck down school financing systems in Montana, Texas, New Jersey, and Kentucky, leaving governors and legislators to grope desperately for replacements, legal challenges have multiplied. Roughly half the states now find themselves in court. The issue is almost always the same, reports Mahtesian, a *Governing* staff writer: disparities in per-pupil spending between rich and poor school districts.

Court-mandated efforts to equalize outlays have been marked by bruising political fights and increasingly, says Mahtesian, a sense of futility. After the Texas Supreme Court threw out the state's funding system in 1989, it rejected three substitutes enacted by the state legislature; the voters vetoed a fourth. A fifth system adopted last spring faces another court challenge.

What makes the politics of equity so murderous, writes Mahtesian, is the fact that in most states the only fiscally practical road to parity "involves capping the expenditures of the wealthier districts—promoting mediocrity by 'leveling down.' " Such remedies stir angry opposition in those districts. Parity may not even be the right goal, some liberals have come to think: Do not inner-city and rural schools have special needs that make them *more* equal than others?

Now legislators and others are moving away from equity and embracing "adequacy." The concept comes from a 1979 case in which the West Virginia Supreme Court ruled that the schools of Lincoln County were not providing the "thorough" and "efficient" education guaranteed by the state constitution. Adequacy focuses on what comes out of schools rather than what goes into them, and thus meshes neatly with the national trend toward uniform educational standards and goals. It does not necessarily involve robbing Peter to pay Paul. In Oklahoma, a group of poor districts is suing the state on the grounds that they lack the resources to meet the standards set in the state's comprehensive school reform of 1990.

Adequacy may take some of the poison out of the politics of school financing, but it creates its own controversies: What is "adequate" and what is the best way to achieve it? However it is defined, adequacy does not seem to come cheap. Voters in Illinois last year rejected a constitutional amendment that would have made adequacy cases easier to win—and thus would have cost taxpayers $1.8 billion to $3 billion. Of course even the best ideas are worthless if the political will to implement them is lacking. In Lincoln County, Mahtesian writes, people are still waiting for the big improvements in schooling they thought they had won back in 1979.