

ROGER MILLS

The President and the Poet

SATURDAY MORNING, October 26, 1963.

Early ground fog obscured the Connecticut Valley, but overhead the sky was clear; by 9 a.m., the fog burned off.

According to the White House appointment book, President John F. Kennedy left the White House at 9:20 a.m. for Andrews Air Force Base, where he and his party boarded Air Force One for Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts. At 11:30 a.m., they boarded three waiting helicopters at Westover. Interior Secretary Stewart Udall rode with the president. (White House appointment book, 1963.) Minutes later, the helicopters thundered over the practice fields just downhill from the Amherst College gymnasium.

Kennedy's speech at the convocation, held in "The Cage" (Amherst's field house), began just before midday. Library dedication at the construction site began a few minutes after 1 p.m. At 2:05 p.m., the helicopters lifted off. (White House appointment book, 1963.)

Three weeks later, the president was dead.

PRESS COVERAGE OF Kennedy's speech at Amherst was modest. An article in the Sunday *New York Times* described the event as "without any overt political tones" and emphasized Kennedy's friendship with Frost (Weaver). The *Times* article included a few quotes from the convocation speech, and gave a modest nod to Archibald MacLeish, three-time Pulitzer Prize-winner and former Librarian of Congress. In contrast, the front page of the newspaper had three above-the-fold Cold War headlines featuring Russia: "Soviet bars race with U.S. to land men on the moon," "Moscow says it may balk at wheat sale conditions," and "Khrushchev asks easing of rancor in China dispute." And on page E3, a young reporter named David Halberstam had a foreboding feature under the head "View in Saigon." Assessed by column inches in the news of that week, the president's eulogy for Robert Frost, delivered at a small college in the hills of New England, had very little impact at all.

History may judge differently.

ROBERT FROST, like many other successful modern writers, managed to contrive his own public image. In the words of biographer Jay Parini, “He liked to mythologize himself, and had a vested interest in putting forward certain views of himself” (75).

Frost was a San Francisco native, where his father had been a newspaper editor, but he relentlessly promoted himself as a crusty New England farmer, whose ambition was “a quiet job in a small college where I would be allowed to teach something a little new . . . and where I should have some honor for what I suppose myself to have done in poetry” (56).

Frost’s breakthrough as a poet did come, not in New England but in the two years from September 1912 through February 1915 that he spent living and writing in England, funded by the proceeds from the sale of his grandfather’s farm.

F. D. Reeve commented that “He remembered his two years in England with special affection. It was there . . . that he passed from obscurity to recognition, that he became the sort of man he wanted to be, that he was first called ‘a poet’” (32).

When he returned to the States, Frost undertook a lecture tour, and “was rapidly building a stage presence and perfecting a mode of public address that satisfied him” (Parini 174). Parini states Frost “put himself forward boldly and cleverly. Although he continued to play the role of the Yankee farmer-poet, especially when reading his poems in public, he did not want to be mistaken for a rube, especially by critics of poetry” (189). Parini adds, “Frost was busily at work creating a self-myth that would accommodate and facilitate his writing life He was intensely ambitious, artistically” (173).

On the return leg of his tour, in response to an invitation from a student group, he spent two days at Amherst College. “It occurred to him that here was the kind of small college where he might like to teach one day” (Parini 175). A few months later, Alexander Meiklejohn, Amherst’s president, offered Frost a faculty position for the spring semester of 1917. Frost’s association with Amherst would endure, with interruptions, for forty-six years and culminate in the Robert Frost Library.

During the last decades of his life, Frost spent much of his time “barding about,” with visits to college campuses. As early as 1941, he also began to take a more vocal role in public affairs when, in connection with a presentation at the Library of Congress, he gave a lecture titled “The Role of a Poet in a Democracy.” He was appointed Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (the position now known as The

Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress) for the 1958–1959 term.

With his Washington appointment, he developed a friendship with then congressman Stewart Udall¹ that would shape much of his future public life.

Politically, Frost inclined toward the conservative, but “Party affiliations just do not apply to Frost, who was neither a Republican nor a Democrat in any consistent or recognizable way” (Parini 264). In addition to their friendship, Frost and Udall shared their political enthusiasm for Senator John F. Kennedy. In the course of his congressional campaigns in Massachusetts, Kennedy had acquired a staunch and outspoken supporter in Frost, who was forty-six years his senior:

Before Jack Kennedy had even declared himself as running, Robert Frost announced that the young man from Boston would be the next President. On March 26, 1959, prior to a gala to celebrate his 85th birthday, Frost gave a press conference at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York City. Among the questions was one concerning the alleged decline of New England, to which Frost responded: “The next President of the United States will be from Boston. Does that sound as if New England is decaying?” Pressed to name who he meant, Frost replied: “He’s a Puritan named Kennedy. The only Puritans left these days are the Roman Catholics. There. I guess I wear my politics on my sleeve.” (Wolfe)

After Kennedy won the election, Udall, who was about to join the new cabinet as Secretary of the Interior, suggested to the president-elect that Frost should participate in the inaugural.

Frost was the first poet to speak at a presidential inauguration. He had written a new poem, “Dedication,” for the event. When he could not read “Dedication” in the glare from the freshly fallen snow, the old poet crumpled the sheet on which it was printed. Instead, he recited “The Gift Outright” from memory (Goodwin 814).

By 1962, Frost was an eighty-eight-year-old man with significant health problems. However, he “had come to see himself as a cultural activist,” and had enjoyed a warm meeting with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Russian ambassador (Reeve 10). Dobrynin proposed a cultural exchange in which Frost would visit Russia, and Alexander Tvardovsky, the leading Russian poet and writer, would subsequently visit the United States. (Tvardovsky’s visit never materialized.)

Secretary Udall and the State Department made the American arrange-

ments. Frost and F. D. Reeve, a Wesleyan University professor of letters acting as translator, accompanied Udall on a visit to Moscow in August. After arriving in Moscow, the busy schedule took its toll. By the time he arrived in Gagra to meet Khrushchev, “Frost was fatigued and running a 101-degree fever” (Udall, “And miles . . .”). Khrushchev sent his own physician to examine Frost, and then traveled to the poet’s bedside for their appointment.

Frost and Khrushchev had a wide-ranging discussion lasting some ninety minutes. Reeve was an eyewitness. At the conclusion of the meeting, he reported, “Khrushchev turned politely, walked around the bed, and went out of the room. The others followed. ‘Well, we did it, didn’t we?’ said Frost, dropping back on his bed, very tired. ‘He’s a great man,’ he added, ‘he knows what power is and isn’t afraid to take hold of it. He’s a great man, all right’” (138).

Frost had been ill in Gagra, and by the time he arrived home on September 9, after a seventeen-hour flight, “he was in no condition to be interviewed, but a cluster of reporters surrounded him, and he made some off-the-cuff remarks . . . he would soon come to regret” (Parini 434).

As Udall recalled it, “he [Frost] had been awake 18 hours by the time we finally deplaned and was bone-tired . . . the reporters were out in force As he was beginning to repeat himself near the end of his New York press conference, Frost astonished me by suddenly blurting out, ‘Khrushchev said he feared for us because of our lot of liberals. He thought that we’re too liberal to fight—he thinks we will sit on one hand and then the other.’ The next day *The Washington Post* carried a banner headline: “Frost Says Khrushchev Sees U.S. as ‘Too Liberal’ to Defend Itself.” (“And miles . . .”)

Kennedy was not pleased:

“Why did he have to say that?” Kennedy growled to Udall. Kennedy was sensitive to charges that he was reluctant to stand up to Khrushchev. Frost’s statement seemed to give credence to the view that the president lacked moxie. JFK felt betrayed by Frost, and there was nothing he disliked more, Udall noted privately, “than being crossed.” When he thought himself wronged, he did not seek revenge; instead, he ignored the offending individual. For the rest of his life, Frost felt Kennedy’s “cold shoulder.” (Smith 29)

President Kennedy never contacted Frost to acknowledge his efforts in making the trip. There is no record that the two men had any further communication.

Three months later, Frost entered the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston. Surgery revealed extensive metastatic prostate cancer. “At one point he observed, “The only trouble with dying is not knowing how it will all turn out” (Udall, “And miles . . .”).

Six weeks later, Robert Frost died. His rift with Kennedy, the president he had supported so faithfully, remained unsettled.

KENNEDY WAS SEVEN YEARS older than George H. W. Bush; he remains forever forty-six years of age in our memories. Jack Kennedy was a member of a rich and famous family with homes in New York and Palm Beach and a summer compound on Cape Cod; he attended Choate and Harvard, and became something of a war hero after the PT-109 incident. He returned to Boston after World War II to launch his career in politics and won election to three successive terms as a congressman and then two more terms as senator. He won the 1960 presidential election, defeating Richard Nixon by only 112,827 votes nationwide (0.17 percent) to become the nation’s first Catholic president.

His father, Joseph P. Kennedy (“Joe Sr.”), the head of the Kennedy clan, provided the motivation, direction, and financing for JFK’s political career. Joe Sr. recognized that “High public office, which FDR’s administration opened to Catholics and Jews, had replaced accumulating money as the greater social good and a worthy aspiration for second- and third-generation immigrants reaching for higher social status” (Dallek 112).

For all his very real flaws, Joe Sr. had a streak of genius. He could foresee trends developing in public life, and he understood how to profit from them. With his experience in Hollywood making the magical seem real, Joe Sr. realized the emerging importance of public relations in national politics. And Joe Sr. was directing the show.

By the time then Senator John F. Kennedy embarked on his campaign for the presidency, the Kennedy organization had worked for years to cultivate his public image as the tanned, fit World War II hero of PT-109, as a writer with two books, one a Pulitzer Prize-winner (for *Profiles in Courage*), to his credit,² as a foreign-policy expert in the U.S. Senate, and as a loving husband and father with a beautiful wife and baby daughter.

Building the Kennedy mystique involved a substantial effort. Young Jack Kennedy was frail, thin, and ill much of the time. “Hiding family problems, particularly medical concerns, later became a defense against jeopardizing election to public office” (Dallek 73). In addition to his health, Jack’s private behavior could be problematic. The Blairs quoted a

Kennedy friend, Betty Spalding, describing him, “His manners were really terrible. He didn’t have any manners, in the sense of letting women go through the door first or opening doors for them. . . . He was nice to people, but heedless of people” (Blair 504–505). Udall made a similar observation: “Reserved men are often thoughtless men, and John Kennedy (for all his public charisma) was essentially a very private person” (Udall, *Oral History*). During the Bay of Pigs episode, Richard Goodwin observed that “there was an inner hardness, often volatile anger, beneath the outwardly amiable, thoughtful, carefully controlled demeanor of John Kennedy” (Dallek 370). Incurring Kennedy’s anger often led to the offender’s excommunication.

The president’s neglect during Frost’s final illness was well documented: “Udall was prominent among Frost’s many visitors and well-wishers. Kennedy was not. Kay Morrison³ reported that Frost “brooded” over the president’s indifference. JFK failed to telephone and sent no flowers, telegram, or note. That lack of concern pained Frost, Morrison noted, but mainly he ‘kept this hurt to himself—the old spartan’” (Smith).

For Kennedy, his speech at the dedication of the Robert Frost Library offered not only a way to acknowledge his former friendship with Frost but also the opportunity to offer a public apology for his behavior toward the poet.

THE SPEECH HAS BEEN described as “One of the remarkable speeches of his presidency. . . a recognition of the vital role the artist plays in a free society” (Seay). Udall described it as “the most noble speech of [Kennedy’s] career. It was more than a personal tribute to Frost. He used Frost’s inaugural theme as his text and delivered a soaring, powerful paean to poetry and power” (“And miles. . .”). Excerpts from the text were first published in the *Massachusetts Review*, and the speech in full was included in a collection of noteworthy eulogies titled *Farewell, Godspeed: The Greatest Eulogies of Our Time* and in William Safire’s collection of great speeches, *Lend Me Your Ears*.

Kennedy began by bluntly challenging his audience, “in return for the great opportunity which society gives the graduates of this and related schools, it seems to me incumbent upon this and other schools’ graduates to recognize their responsibility to the public interest. . . . Privilege is here, and with privilege goes responsibility.”

He continued,

There is inherited wealth in this country and also inherited poverty. And unless the graduates of this college and other colleges like it who are given a running start in life—unless they are willing to put back into our society those talents, the broad sympathy, the understanding, the compassion—unless they're willing to put those qualities back into the service of the Great Republic, then obviously the presuppositions upon which our democracy are based are bound to be fallible.

The problems which this country now faces are staggering, both at home and abroad. We need the service, in the great sense, of every educated man or woman.

He moved on to eulogize Frost. "Today this college and country honor a man whose contribution was not to our size but to our spirit . . . not to our self-esteem but to our self-comprehension." Frost had fulfilled the poet's true role in public life. "The men who question power make a contribution . . . especially when that questioning is disinterested. For they determine whether we use power or power uses us."

Then, going beyond honoring Frost, Kennedy turned to the role of art in society. "If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him." He continued, "In democratic society, the highest duty of the writer, the composer, the artist, is to remain true to himself and to let the chips fall where they may."

Kennedy articulated a vision that had matured during his presidency; his privileged audience had a moral responsibility to serve the public good, to live their lives with personal integrity, and to promote the role of art in questioning power.

FROST AND KENNEDY may well have hit it off because each recognized something of himself in the other. Over the years, each had first fashioned and then become his public image.

The world tacitly accepted JFK's apology. Today, the USSR is gone, and no one remembers the "too liberal to fight" incident. NPR's Bob Edwards later commented, "Robert Frost's 1962 trip to the Soviet Union is one of those fascinating events of the past that seems to have fallen by the historical wayside." An older generation, still living, remembers only the drama of the old poet Robert Frost "saying" his work at the youthful President Kennedy's inauguration. Now, more than fifty years after the speech, we rightly turn our attention from the apology to the challenge. How did the audience, and how will the country, understand and accept Kennedy's challenge?

Today, for the “Great Republic” at large, the importance of the liberal arts for broadly educating citizens to think, write, and speak clearly and for their humanizing influence is actively in question on many fronts. Under pressure on one hand from the concept of the modern research university as an institution primarily for the creation of new knowledge, and from the pragmatic need for new technical skills on the other, why does liberal education matter in today’s society?

Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan, answered, “Liberal education intertwines the philosophical [research] and the rhetorical [classical canon] so that we learn how to learn, so that we continue both inquiry and cultural participation throughout our lives because learning has become part of who we are” (Roth 5).

As Kennedy said in his brief remarks at the library site, “and the nation which distains the mission of art invites the fate of Robert Frost’s hired man, the fate of having ‘nothing to look backward to with pride, and nothing to look forward to with hope’” (“Remarks”).

NOTES

For more information about Reunion '64 and the documentary film *JFK: The Last Speech*, go to reunion64.org.

¹ Udall later served as Secretary of the Interior from 1961 to 1969 under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

² Albeit, the former with the help of Arthur Krock and the latter with the support of Ted Sorenson.

³ Kay Morrison “signed on during the summer of 1938 as [Frost’s] secretary and would remain his closest companion until his death twenty-five years later” (Parini 314).

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