

## NONFICTION IN BRIEF

By Richard J. Margolis

### JFK

*The Presidency of  
John F. Kennedy.*  
By Herbert S. Parmet.  
608 pp. New York:  
The Dial Press. \$24.95.

In this second volume of his two-volume biography of John F. Kennedy, Herbert S. Parmet strikes a nice balance between romance and revision, between Camelot and the realities of Kennedy's 1,000 days in office. At his inaugural celebration Kennedy delighted us by dancing through the night. Later, when he stumbled as President, we kept hearing the music. Even after the Bay of Pigs debacle, as Mr. Parmet reminds us, Kennedy's popularity zoomed to an all-time high: He "could do no wrong. He had restored vigorous leadership. American power and American idealism were both on the offensive."

Mr. Parmet seems to view the Kennedy charm as a kind of potion against which intellectuals in particular lacked immunity. He notes in a rather testy epilogue that Kennedy "dazzled a generation of intellectuals accustomed to having a 'nitwit' in the White House." They were enchanted by the classy parties, the literary talk, the chamber music. And when they recovered from the charm and reviewed the era, "they resented the deception."

In Mr. Parmet's view, "Kennedy's legislative objectives were closely tuned to what was possible" — which turned out to be little. In his dealings with Congress, the President shrank from challenging the Republicans and Southern Democrats. His hesitations doomed the New Frontier's domestic program. Tax reform, health care and aid to education went begging; minimum-wage legislation was decimated by the conservative coalition. Only on civil rights did Kennedy strongly assert his will, and even there he had difficulty keeping up with events. In the end, however, he did champion the cause and shaped a lasting legacy.

Mr. Parmet's overall assessment of Kennedy's Presidential



John F. Kennedy, 1964.

performance is devastating: "He 'stood up' to Khrushchev but capitulated to Congress. He followed a domestic course that precluded battling for the fulfillment of the economic and social welfare needs of the Democratic Party's post-depression constituency. . . . He had vowed to 'get the country moving again' but failed to deliver in key ways." As for foreign affairs, Mr. Parmet concludes that Kennedy's "constant need to demonstrate toughness had helped to manufacture potential disasters everywhere. In Southeast Asia, in particular, he left behind a prescription for even greater disasters to come."

The picture that emerges is of a finely tuned politician — young, glamorous, brilliant — who disappointed the expectations that he was so good at arousing.

### A HISTORY OF EUROPEAN SOCIALISM

By Albert S. Lindemann.  
395 pp. New Haven:  
Yale University Press. \$25.

The European road to socialism was paved with generous intentions, yet one branch led to Joseph Stalin and another to Margaret Thatcher. With so many shrewd thinkers to smooth the way — Marx, Shaw

and Sartre, to name a few — how could the history have been so bumpy? Some answers can be found in Albert S. Lindemann's scholarly chronicle, "A History of European Socialism," which carries us through two-and-a-half centuries of illusion and delusion.

Mr. Lindemann is nothing if not thorough. He begins with Charles Fourier (1772-1837), who preached that "it was possible to make all work into play, to make it pleasant and desirable, deeply satisfying." And he concludes with François Mitterrand, whose moderate socialist reforms have put thousands of Frenchmen back to work, pleasant or not. The saga that unfolds between them makes melancholy reading for anyone harboring "visions of a more harmonious human condition and a more perfect humanity."

Mr. Lindemann reminds us that Hitler marched to power under a National Socialist banner, which did not deter German capitalists from flocking behind him. Mussolini too began his career as a socialist, even leading the Italian Socialist Party for a time. One gets the impression that for many in those days affiliation with the left was a convenient stepping stone to an assumption of power on the right. Mr. Lindemann's account tells us less about the evil that good men do than it does about the evil that evil men do.

Still, socialist history does not lack for heroes, only for triumphs. Mr. Lindemann supplies a number of sympathetic cameos, including one of Sergei Kirov, a "moderate" disciple of Lenin who fought Stalin every step of his bloody advance to power. In 1934 Stalin had Kirov assassinated and then used his murder as a pretext for mass arrests.

Although Mr. Lindemann's descriptions tend to be skimpy, he grows relatively expansive in his portrait of Léon Blum, the brilliant French intellectual who twice headed socialist governments in the decade preceding World War II. Blum's difficulties as head of the Popular Front regime presaged those that would be encountered a generation or two later by Clement Atlee, François Mitterrand and most other Western socialists unlucky enough to be handed the responsibilities of office. The reforms that Blum

pushed through — a 40-hour week, with higher wages and paid vacations — lowered both productivity and profit margins. In 1937 he "acknowledged defeat by declaring a 'pause' in the implementation of the Popular Front program." The pause refreshed the French treasury but not French morale. Many were ready to chant, "Better Hitler than Blum!" And that, of course, was what they got.

Mr. Lindemann is instructive, but his apparent resolve to tell us everything we ever wanted to know about European socialism, and more, makes for slow going at times. The details of those Byzantine disputes within the various Cominterns might well have been glossed, and so might the lengthy sketch of Marx's career, which is likely to be familiar to any reader of this book. On the other hand, he has unaccountably scanted the socialist experience in Scandinavia, devoting just four pages to Sweden and none to Norway or Denmark. That's a pity; after all those disappointments, one could use a few success stories.

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## **AMERICA'S QUEST FOR THE IDEAL SELF**

*Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60's and 70's.*

*By Peter Clecak.*

*395 pp. New York:*

*Oxford University Press. \$27.50.*

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Liberals have grown accustomed in recent years to deploring the narcissism of youth of the 70's while reminiscing fondly over the commitment of the 60's. Now Peter Clecak, a University of California historian, is here to tell liberals not to worry: The two decades were really all of a piece. The selflessness and the selfishness, he says, were both part of a typically American quest for personal fulfillment.

"I have chosen to emphasize two complexly related dimensions of fulfillment," Mr. Clecak writes in "America's Quest for the Ideal Self," "salvation and social justice." What linked the two, in his opinion, was a kind of plebeian chemistry, "the bubbling of democratic sentiment from below," which "many critics of the left regarded as a contaminating disease rather than as an element of a cure."

Viewed from Mr. Clecak's cheerful perspective, just about

everything that has happened over the past 20 years can be stuffed into the same definitional bag. The religion and therapy fads of the 70's become examples of democratic dissent, while both the radical protests of the 60's and the neoconservative versions that followed become examples of personal therapy.

It is all very encouraging, if a bit abstruse. "The therapeutic cast of the quest," Mr. Clecak writes, "disposes people to be involved more than ever in the immediate, the local." As for issues like the nuclear arms race, they "involve people in a democracy of danger. . . . Under certain circumstances, large issues may come to seem personal, even local." The good news appears to be that we can do no permanent harm to ourselves or to the body politic as long as we behave in a democratic manner. ■