

Name-Dropping

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This is a book of name-dropping. By acknowledging this in the title, the author forestalls all obvious criticism. Galbraith, although a Canadian citizen has from his very youth been a trusted consultant to American Government and with access to its very pinnacle. How come? His expertise, his commanding figure, or plain luck? Those are questions that he wisely chooses not to address. Instead he regales the reader with private glimpses and off-hand commentaries on the political celebrities of his time. Whatever the literary and informative virtues such a book, it makes for a good read, even when forgettable. The natural thing is to briefly review the personages passing by. The first one to mention is of course Franklin D. Roosevelt, the head of the New Deal, which in retrospect appears as an unbelievable leftist interlude in American politics. The reason for that are obvious, or rather there are obvious reasons that may not be real reasons. The depression was the biggest trauma that ever happened to the States in the 20th century. It is almost on par with the Civil War of the previous, and definitely much worse than the Second World War that cured the depression. The trauma was so deep that it profoundly shook the American faith in the Capitalist system. In fact trust in Capitalism wavered all over the West bringing a brief flirtation with the Soviet Union. In fact during the New Deal people with definite Communist leanings were allowed access to the Government. War of course is different than peace. Toleration, not to say desire for a planned economy is widespread, not to say enthusiastic. Then the War was concluded with an after-shock consisting of the Korean War and then under Truman the scene was set for a back-lash orchestrated by the Senator McCarthy. Of course McCarthy was not the sole mover, may not even the prime one, his crusade must have resonated well in government circles, he was just able to bring it to a pitch. McCarthyism was soon discredited, but its seismic chock endured frozen by the Cold War that rigidified American policy even beyond its eventual thaw and disappearance. This is the setting in which the political life of the author would be enacted and understood.

Naturally Galbraith was in awe of Roosevelt. This is natural, after all what do you expect in an encounter between a young man on the rise and a respected and charismatic father figure? Likewise he is charmed by his wife - Eleanor, and points out her central role in the Democratic party. With Truman he is more skeptical. He acknowledges his common sense and true political instincts, and commends him for his treatment of MacArthur, although he blames him for the Cold War and the anti-Leftist hysteria. Even if he may not have been directly responsible, his policies enabled such developments. On Eisenhower he has little to say, only noting how well he looks in comparison with subsequent Republicans. It is understood that Eisenhower was never a Republican at heart, he could as well have been a Democratic candidate. No doubt both parties courted him. Given his status as a general, he would be a sure win on the ticket. The real political love affair Galbraith had was with Adlai Stevenson. So devoted were he and fellow acolytes that they were

blind to his obvious shortcomings, which Galbraith only reluctantly acknowledges in an extended retrospect. Stevenson was the wet dream of any liberal intellectual. A man who is intelligent, thoughtful and principled, raising politics onto a higher elevated level is of course irresistible. His very strengths were of course his failings. A democratic election is not a test of worthiness, it is a big sell. Stevenson could not be sold to the American public. He was not stupid and vulgar enough, which may be forgiven him; but what was worse he was not willing to appear more stupid and vulgar than he really was. How could an average voter identify with him at all? A voter who in later years would cast his ballot for somebody like George W. Bush, just because of the utter unworthiness of the man, and hence his easy identifiability. Democracy is in its popular and visible aspect a game of playing to the rubble. This the ancients know and warned about. But of course this is not the whole game, in fact only a small part of the game, but one that can only be disdained at your peril. Stevenson was out. The fact that he was given two chances to run is a tribute to the innocence (and decency?) of domestic American politics of the 50's. But the 50's is always looked back upon as an idyllic time. An interlude of little consequence.

With Kennedy there was finally the possibility to combine elegance with popular appeal. To many liberals the brief period of the Kennedy administration - the court of Camelot, seems almost a fairy-tale. Galbraith is convinced that had Kennedy continued in power the big mistake of the Vietnam war would never have happened. As to the sordid revelations about the private life of Kennedy, which surfaced many years after, the author has little to say. He claims that he never heard of them while close to the office, and concludes that they are to a large extent falsifications. When it comes to Lyndon Johnson he makes a distinction between the domestic Johnson and his vision of the great society, and the one who was mired into the Vietnam war due to bad advice. Johnson as the last New Dealer in office is to be commended, even revered. As a congress man he was very effective and motivated by a genuine social pathos. One should not forget that after the War the American administration took strong measures to curb racism and to transform a racist society. This did eventually bear fruit and was no mean achievement. However, it has been overshadowed by the Vietnam War. Due to Johnson's foreign policies, Galbraith was forced to break with him. After Johnson Galbraith lost his standing with the Government, and his memoirs deal then with either domestic service of the governments with somewhat lower standing, such as Bowles, Ball and Harriman, who were not allowed to play the crucial role in forerign policy for which they were eminently qualified. Or with the Canadian prime ministers Pearson and Trudeau who come out very well in comparison with their American counterparts. Needless to say some comments are bestowed on leftist British politicians of note.

Somewhat apart from those are the pieces on Nehru and especially that on Speer. For Nehru there is mostly admiration, Speer is a strange bird on the collection. How come he is included? True Galbraith met him briefly after the war. I guess he is inserted as a cautionary tale, and as an illustration of the fact that you need to elevate the enemy. The Nazi bunch was a sorry lot of pathetic and incompetents done in by drink, only Speer seems to regain some dignity. The need was to dignify him as a worthy enemy, and Speer might have sensed that and played in perfect tune, thus saving his skin. As some accomplice

of his noted. He was the man to be hanged. Now, an even better representative of the worthy enemy is Rommel, the subject of some almost adulatory American movies directly after the war. Bit of course Rommel was forced to commit suicide before the end of the war, and thus never figured in the Nuremberg proceedings.

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