



Thoughts from Linda:

Profiles in Courage

John F. Kennedy
1956

This book review is being written in March of 2024, a Presidential election year in the United States of America. I believe the book itself offers a timely reminder of just what we are 'up to' in our country with our democratic republic, as it includes deep insights and a great review of the rights as well as responsibilities of all citizens. This is both an informational and inspirational book. Written by John F. Kennedy in 1955, a time when America was just one decade out of WWII, it profiles eight individuals who exhibited extraordinary courage in the United States Senate. These Senators' terms range from the early days of our country to those serving just prior to his arrival in the Senate.

Most Americans know some of the history of JFK, but this book is a reminder of his days as a younger man, living a life that required much courage. He had scarlet fever as a young boy and serious back trouble as he aged. He was a sickly child and adult. He was also a recognized and revered hero of WWII. As a naval officer in the war, he commanded Patrol/Torpedo (PT) boats in the Pacific theater. During the war, his 80-foot boat, the Elco, was operating in the Solomon Islands and ended up being hit broadside by a Japanese destroyer. With his boat cut in half, he and the other survivors swam 3 miles to a small island where they were ultimately rescued. For his actions in saving his crew, he was awarded the Marine and Navy Corps Medal of Heroism.

As his brother, Robert Kennedy, wrote in the Foreword to the book, "Courage is the virtue that President Kennedy most admired...that is why this book so fitted his personality, his beliefs. It is a study of men who, at risk to themselves, their futures, and even the well-being of their children, stood fast for principle. It was toward that ideal that he modeled his life. And this in time gave heart to others."

The word 'courage' comes from the French word 'coeur,' meaning 'heart.' The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition reads as "mental or moral strength to venture, persevere and withstand danger, fear or difficulty." In this Pulitzer Prize-winning book, written only 100 years after the events of the US Civil War, you will learn very specific stories that explain the context of the moment, the pressures each man faced, and the actions they took in their own display of courage. The men included were John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Thomas Hart Benton, Sam Houston, Edmund G. Ross, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar, George Norris, and Robert A. Taft. There is a chapter devoted to each man's story. If you read nothing else, read the introduction and the final chapter, entitled *The Meaning of Courage*.

With several stories set in the run-up to the US Civil War of 1861-1865, you'll learn much about the very specific searches for compromise and failures to achieve peaceable solutions to the issues that led to the war that cost 620,000 American lives. In 1850, two groups were threatening to break away from the newly formed United States of America. Abolitionists in the Northern states declared that "the Constitution is a covenant with death and an agreement with hell." In the South, John C. Calhoun wrote to a friend, saying, "Disunion is the only alternative that is left for us." Daniel Webster, a US Senator, wrote to his son, "I am nearly broken down with labor and anxiety...I know not how to meet the present emergency or with what weapons to beat down the Northern and Southern follies now raging in equal extremes...I have poor spirits and little courage."

I appreciated the story of Daniel Webster as told by Kennedy, as it reveals much of the complexities of his forceful personality and illustrates his genius. JFK says, "There could be no mistaking, he was a great man--he looked like one, talked like one, was treated like one and insisted he was one. With all his faults and failings, Daniel Webster was undoubtedly the most talented figure in our Congressional history...this was not in his ability to win men to a cause...he was no match in that with Henry Clay, not in his ability to hammer out a philosophy of government...Calhoun outshone him there, but in his ability to make alive and supreme the latent sense of oneness, of union, that all Americans felt but which few could express."

At a time when we fail to see an abundance of courage, in my judgment, on the part of so many politicians in this country, it is a refreshing experience to re-read this book, written by then-Senator John Kennedy in 1955. He had been elected to the House of Representatives from Massachusetts in 1946 (in a freshman class that also included Richard Nixon), again in 1948, and then to the US Senate from the same state in 1952.

He served there until his election in 1960 when he defeated Richard Nixon for the Presidency.

He was inspired to write the book after learning of a very courageous act by John Quincy Adams when he served as a Senator from 1803 to 1808. With Kennedy's own background in the Senate, he was interested in finding some of the many generally unknown or little-remembered examples of Senatorial courage. It was his belief that this institution represented a uniquely difficult situation for anyone, and he wanted to illustrate what it took to stay true to oneself and conscience in the midst of so many pressures. Kennedy was assisted by Ted Sorensen in the writing of this book. In fact, much credit is given to Sorensen for the completion of the original first draft, which was edited by JFK. The process happened when Kennedy was bedridden with Addison's disease, recovering from back surgery that he had in 1954 and 1955.

This book is a great history book, written by a scholarly Senator, destined for greatness as the youngest US President. Focusing on the events of a century before 'his time,' he identified individuals who stayed true to themselves in the face of unbelievable opposition. It offers a very detailed view, from the Senate's perspective, of events of the day, with a heavy focus on the timeframe leading up to and following the American Civil War.

The individuals profiled often held several titles in American history, but his focus is their role in the US Senate, which, in his judgment, offers a unique challenge for elected individuals who represent their constituencies. As Kennedy notes, senators face three main pressures.

The first pressure is a form he noted "is rarely recognized by the general public. Americans want to be liked--and Senators are no exception. They are by nature--and of necessity--social animals...Realizing that the path of the conscientious insurgent must frequently be a lonely one, we are anxious to get along with our fellow legislators and our fellow members of the club, to abide by the clubhouse rules and patterns, not to pursue a unique and independent course which would embarrass or irritate the other members...Politics and legislation are not matters for inflexible principles or unattainable ideals." He goes on to note, "The federal system of Government requires compromise between the desires of each individual and group and those around them...all legislation is founded upon the principle of mutual concession."

The second pressure he viewed as unique to this group was the thinking of that next campaign- the desire to be re-elected. As he noted in 1955, "Where else, in a non-

totalitarian country, but in the political profession, is the individual expected to sacrifice all -including his own career- for the national good? In no other occupation but politics is it expected that a man will sacrifice honors, prestige, and his chosen career on a single issue."

Third, he addressed what he called the most significant source of pressures that discourage political courage—"that of their constituency, the interest groups, the organized letter writers, the economic blocs and even the average voter." Of course, he is making these comments in the mid-50s, long before the advent of computers, much less the many other forms of communication available today. He would most likely be appalled by the money involved in politics in this century.

His thoughtful treatment of the pressures that make taking a courageous stand so rare for a Congressional representative came from his experience in the House and Senate, and he clearly differentiated the pressures on the President, even though he had not yet experienced them himself. He felt that the Senate offered more challenges than those faced by the Presidency.

You'll learn about Sam Houston and the many contradictions in his life, making him an enigma to friends in his own time. As JFK noted, "He was fiercely ambitious, yet in the end, he sacrificed for principle all he had ever won or wanted. He was a Southerner, and yet he steadfastly maintained his loyalty to the union...His contradictions actually confirm his one basic, consistent quality: indomitable individualism, sometimes spectacular, sometimes crude, sometimes mysterious, but always courageous. He could be all things to all men--and yet, when faced with his greatest challenge, he was faithful to himself and to Texas."

My favorite story was that of Edmund G. Ross, a name little remembered today. As Kennedy says, he may have "preserved for ourselves and posterity Constitutional government in the United States--(he was) the man who performed in 1868 what one historian has called 'the most heroic act in American history.'" Edmund Ross refused to vote for the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson. The detailed story of this process, with the many pressures involved, is a remarkable example of the best that America has to offer.

The book includes information about the Profiles in Courage Award, given to an individual who displays the kind of exemplary political courage and integrity described in the book. The list of recipients includes former Congressman John Lewis from Georgia, Liz Cheney of Wyoming, and Senator Mitt Romney of Utah. Several recipient

speeches are reprinted in the book, including an intimate and extraordinary one by State Representative Dan Ponder, Jr., a Republican from Georgia.

In his concluding reflections, President Kennedy mused on the problems of courage and conscience in words that certainly ring true today. "...the problems of courage and conscience...concern as well every voter in our land--and they concern those who do not vote, those who take no interest in government, those who have only disdain for the politician and his profession. They concern everyone who has ever complained about corruption in high places and everyone who has ever insisted that his representative abide by his wishes. For in a democracy, every citizen, regardless of his interest in politics, 'holds office;' every one of us is in a position of responsibility; and, in the final analysis, the kind of government we get depends upon how we fulfill those responsibilities.

We, the people, are the boss, and we will get the kind of political leadership, be it good or bad, that we demand and deserve."

This is a profound book, and its words are profound for our present moment. It is a very important book written by a most courageous American.