

A New Look at John Kennedy

by Suzannah Lessard

It was a different spirit. One knew that he was clever and a ruthless politician, but he was playing a big game in a big way and he had the guts and the nerve to be really actual about it. And he would have said he was wrong: there was a candor about it. One had the feeling that things would open up. He generated somehow a hope in the people which no other man who has run for President has since.

—from a conversation with my father.

I remember that when Kennedy was elected my parents, like thousands of other people, felt that their generation had, at long last, come into its own; that Kennedy represented their collective spirit and, slick as he might be, would go after what they all knew in their bones was good and right. The emotional investment was incalculable. When he was shot he was mythologized into a static essence

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—representing chiefly the potential, the unfulfilled. And when he was shot, a lot of these people dropped out of politics. They voted and read the newspaper, but half-heartedly, so that the gravity of issues like Vietnam crept up from behind, and the radical movement burst upon them with total unexpectedness.

Another group who felt the same way when Kennedy was elected, having run into the regressive aspects of the Administration, now see Kennedy as a betrayer, a wolf in sheep's clothing, the same as "all the others," and are bitterly wary of being duped again. A prominent writer who ran afoul of the worst in Kennedy early on recently explained that he was reluctant to write for *The Washington Monthly* because he had heard that Jay Rockefeller (young, elegant, rich and liberal) had contributed financially to the magazine. The writer explained in essence that he was too leery of being Camelotted again to associate himself with anyone who smacked of that old appeal. This par-



ticular disenchantment is not confined to a small group. John Lindsay's followers were dismayed by the apathy with which his arrival on the presidential scene was greeted. Though a few years ago his class, looks, and rhetoric would have caused a hopeful stir, regardless of his record (Kennedy's was unspectacular when he ran), today those qualities are liabilities. The White Knight image and beautiful people chic no longer produces Pavlovian salivation; on the contrary, among many these ingredients inspire suspicion that there is something sour in the soup.

Similarly, a sign of the change in the times—an angle which makes Kennedy seem at best archaic—is that the secret admiration for his reputation as a cool Don Juan would not be inspired by the same image today. On the contrary, it would probably make people think there was something wrong with the guy. Nor is the obsession with winning—winning moon races, wars, and showdowns as well as ladies—any longer an appealing attitude.

There is a third group of people—like myself, younger—whose personal political trauma is located more recently and diffusely in the failure of the New Left. Our dismissal of Kennedy came too easily, ricocheting off the shock of our parents and our own amazed and immature perception of events. It all happened so early, so fast, and so finally that it was simply indigestible, and in the name of radical thought we demonstrated to ourselves Kennedy's mistakes and foggily dismissed the whole package as too sullied to salvage.

Yet Kennedy cracked the crust of the old politics wide open, and if the crack was so fresh it closed up after his death, or whether his failings would have sabotaged the promise had he lived, does not invalidate the relevance of that experience to the present and future. The fact that the legacy is mixed makes it all the more pressing not to put it under glass as an irreducible unit. It seems to me essen-

tial that we undo our knotted attitudes and reevaluate this critical portion of our own history—extract the gold from the dross, the vital from the poisonous—so that we can plow it into what we want from the future. It also seems to me that the negative elements are as sharply revealing as the affirmative strains, and as critically important to isolate and recognize.

The positive and invaluable qualities which John Kennedy brought to a presidency long deprived of them were the ability to admit that he was wrong, candor, the capacity and willingness to grow, humor, tremendous intelligence, and the competence to execute the dictates of intelligence. These, combined with the straightforward appetite to achieve real change, cleared the stuffy air of the fifties in which foreign policy was a stiff—though gripping—pantomime played about the trigger of apocalypse, while the economy slipped and social problems festered unacknowledged. His positive and open approach made people believe that perhaps something could be done—that nuclear war and social injustice weren't inevitable and that the human race was not helpless before its destiny.

But the quality which electrified people most immediately, and which also in some ways conflicted with the more profound attributes, was his style. Style was perhaps Kennedy's greatest political asset. He won the election on it. T. H. White wrote of the campaign that though “there certainly were real differences of philosophy and ideas. . . rarely in American history has there been a political campaign that discussed issues less or clarified them less. . . specifics and issues had all but ceased to matter; only style was important.”

The only issue, if you can call it that, was national prestige, the perfect vehicle (both before and after the election) for the Kennedy style. He projected an image of himself—tough but sophisticated, cerebral but un-squeamish, a dynamite combination

of intelligence and strength—as the image he would give the nation in the world. This seemingly felicitous union of issue and style lived beyond the inauguration.

The tendency to think of policy in terms of prestige, to allow considerations of appearance to influence the course of decisions, was one of Kennedy's most serious flaws. A particularly disturbing example of this weakness is the way that fear of people finding out we had backed down motivated the Administration to go ahead with the Bay of Pigs. In Arthur Schlesinger's extensive account of how that decision was made, every time the pendulum began to swing towards cancelling the venture, the spectre of the Cuban band spreading the word of Kennedy's timidity throughout the hemisphere jolted the group back towards the invasion. Having trained for a year, having invested all their hopes in the operation, the Cubans would indeed have been angry and done their best to make Kennedy look like a fool and a coward. That loss of image could hardly have been a worse price than the failure of the invasion itself; but though it was never put forward as the main reason for going ahead, loss of face repeatedly provided that critical extra kick towards proceeding with the plan. Yet immediately after the fiasco the opposite quality came into play. The urge to recover his stature must have been considerable. But against pressure from the public and from some of his most trusted advisors, including his brother, Bobby, he resisted the temptation to salvage his prestige by going in and smashing Castro.

No Argument Like Success

Ted Sorensen, one of Kennedy's closest aides, talks of the brief term as a transition period. The conflicting strains, as encapsulated in his behavior during the Cuban affair, do indeed point backwards to the fallacies of the past and forward to the principles of the future. But it was not a transition

in the sense of a clear progression from one philosophy to another, in the sense that Kennedy was basically aware of where he was going and what he wanted to leave behind; more accurate to say that it was a term of conflict between the old and the new; that just as his choice of advisers reflected that dichotomy, he himself embodied the conflicts; that the two antithetical strains coexisted to the end.

His policy in Laos, for instance, was far more advanced than our Vietnam policy today. But having gotten out of Laos for the right reasons, in Vietnam he fell prey to the notion that we could send in an elite corps, manipulate political events behind the scene, "win," and get out. Though Kennedy aides deny that there is any connection, it was the day after the Bay of Pigs, according to the Pentagon Papers, that Kennedy ordered a review of the Vietnam situation to "appraise . . . the Communist drive to dominate

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Vietnam and recommend a series of actions (military, political and/or economic, overt and/or covert) which . . . will prevent Communist domination of that country." At that point it looked as though Vietnam might be a place where we could *win*, a perfect testing ground for Maxwell Taylor's theories of counterinsurgency and a timely opportunity to—and this was the real objective—score against the Soviets. We looked bad in Cuba, maybe we could look good in Vietnam.

"I think if people walk back a step they will find that we had to be hard with the Soviets," says Ken O'Donnell, another close Kennedy aide. "If we started to falter, then the allies got nervous, and the Russians had made some pretty good moves. We were trying to redress the psychological balance of power." Sorensen and O'Donnell both stress that the world was different then than it is now. It's true that Khrushchev's stance at Vienna suggested that he might be an insatiable aggressor beyond reason, who could only be dealt with by force. It's true, too, for instance, that the British had employed counterinsurgency successfully, and probably for the best, in Malaya, so why shouldn't we in Vietnam. Nothing was as clear then as it is now. But the failure, it seems to me, was not in seeing through to the future, but in thinking through one's assumptions, through the form to the content. The psychological balance of power—the prestige game—was negative because success meant you looked stronger and better (more competent) than your adversary, and he in turn would be spurred to look stronger and better than you. Kennedy in his greatest moments took the risk and cut through that game. But he also was very, very good at it, and his competence—which O'Donnell stresses over and over again as his supreme qualification, and indeed, it is hard to overvalue competence in a President—in a way prevented him from seeing the foolishness of what he was doing because he was doing it well. The notion still persists that what you want to do

is come out on top—that if our counterinsurgency policy (with a little hocus pocus in the background) had "worked" in Vietnam then it would have been right for us to fight for that shoddy government; that the failure of the Bay of Pigs was a failure to have a good plan.

The worst thing about the prestige game is that success and failure, right and wrong, are contingent not even upon whether something works or not, but upon whether it appears to work. Further, the gravity of confrontations is not contingent on real threats but on symbolism—affronts to prestige. Of the Cuban missile crisis, assumed to be one of Kennedy's great successes, Sorensen wrote, "To be sure, these Cuban missiles alone, in view of all the other megatonnage the Soviets were capable of unleashing upon us, did not substantially alter the strategic balance *in fact*—unless these first installations were followed by so many more that Soviet military planners would have an increased temptation to launch a preemptive first strike. But that balance would have been substantially altered in appearance: and in matters of national will and world leadership, as the President said later, such appearances contribute to reality."

Recall the clammy sweat on the brow of mankind as every morning it stared at newsphotos of Soviet ships nearing the American blockade. The sweat was real, but evidently the issue was somewhat less than central. Recall, too, the surge of relief and triumph when the Soviet ships turned around, and Kennedy not only was proven "right" but had won in the most appealing Kennedy style.

Kennedy did not ride his triumph, however. Having looked down the nuclear gunbarrel over an essentially minor issue, he recoiled from the senseless danger of such confrontations, and, in Sorensen's words, "realized that we had to find another way." He refused to capitalize on the prestige and specifically instructed his staff not to say we had won, set it up

in fact so that Khrushchev could say he had won. This gesture in a man who liked nothing better than winning was dramatic, although the risk in terms of appearances was minimal. In a way it was a case of having your cake and eating it too, since it was obvious to the world that we had called their bluff. As with his sense of humor about himself, which, charming as it was, always really made him look better, this gesture, far from making the world think Kennedy had lost, made him look magnanimous.

Getting Back

Yet far from a glad step forward, his restraint wrenched him. An indication of the tremendous tension his forbearance wrought is the article he obviously prompted ridiculing Stevenson for his position during the crisis. The piece in the *Saturday Evening Post* was written by Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, a close friend of Kennedy. It made Stevenson out to be a fool for suggesting that we seek a bilateral solution by admitting the comparable impudence of our missiles in Turkey. Yet Kennedy had ordered those missiles removed before the crisis; they were still there only because of the inefficiency of the State Department, and indeed they were removed shortly thereafter. In other words, Kennedy kicked Stevenson for being right. Similarly, Bobby Kennedy excoriated Chester Bowles after the Cuban invasion. Bowles had been strongly against the invasion, surely a praiseworthy judgment in light of the consequent fiasco. But Bobby flattened Bowles for letting it be known to the press (actually Bowles' friends leaked it without his knowledge) that he had been right.

Formulas are basically trinkets, but for what it's worth, Kennedy was at his best when thinking about his opponent's prestige, and at his worst when thinking about his own. He obviously recognized this to some degree, and though it was not an easy

insight for him to accept, he was able to act on it. He may have been unable to resist the urge to kick Stevenson, but he did resist the greater urge to crow about his victory and use his gratuitous restraint to lay the groundwork for one of his greatest accomplishments, the Test Ban Treaty. That restraint and the subsequent treaty were daring and radical departures from the game of upmanship and were accomplished under great pressure to do otherwise, perhaps the strongest clues to the man's capacity to grow rather than harden under tension and to his commitment to build a new and better world.

The Peace Corps, another of Kennedy's most affirmative inspirations, is a perfect paradigm of this conflict between intent and appearance. First, there's the name with its obvious militant connotations. Then there is the training ground in Puerto Rico, which from all accounts resembled a Marine boot camp, though what purpose it served other than to emphasize that this was no sissy operation is difficult to perceive. But most significant was the tension between trying to do something actual and cultivating the propaganda value. During the first year the thrust of volunteer training was American studies, communism, and world affairs, at the expense of technical skills and the language and culture of the host country. During that period, too, great capital was made of statistics, great satisfaction drawn from boasting that we had 800 volunteers in the Philippines. What those volunteers were accomplishing other than proselytizing their hosts was less a concern.

Sorensen claims that Kennedy's butch image was largely a ruse—"That was one of his greatest talents—slipping a soft policy through with a hard face"—and points to how Kennedy got the Test Ban Treaty through a reluctant Congress by decrying it as essential to our national security. No doubt such ruses were often used but it remains that the tough-guy image had a fundamental appeal to Kennedy

and his staff. He never rejected the hard-liners like Acheson and especially Joseph Alsop (he conferred the high honor of calling at Alsop's house the night of his inauguration) and was condescending towards advisors who were openly soft-line. He appointed Justice Byron White (who as a former Rhodes Scholar and All-American football star fit to a T the Kennedy mystique and therefore was assumed to be "with it," though he turned out to be one of the most conservative justices on the bench) to the Supreme Court and Scoop Jackson to the chairmanship of the Democratic party.

The Good Guy Hang-up

The fear of being thought cowardly or sentimental is a very common liberal neurosis. And however susceptible they were, the pernicious influence of that anxiety was not unrecognized in the Administration. In a memorandum to the President, Arthur Schlesinger wrote about the tendency to define the Berlin issue as: "Are you chicken or not? When someone proposes something which seems tough, hard, put up or shut up, it is difficult to oppose it without seeming soft, idealistic, mushy, etc. . . . Nothing would clarify more the discussion of policy towards the Soviet Union than the elimination of the words 'hard' and 'soft' from the language. People who had doubts about Cuba suppressed those doubts lest they seem 'soft.' It is obviously important that such fears not constrain free discussion of Berlin." The double awareness was there from the beginning: Schlesinger wrote this memo in 1961.

Another key manifestation of the conflict was the Administration's attitudes toward moral sensibility. The Kennedy Administration had a distinct sense of mission, but the very common notion that while the moral point of view is appropriate in the formation of general goals, it is a hindrance and a sign of woolly-headedness in achieving those goals, apparently prevailed. Moral considerations

were often seen as in conflict with pragmatism; the ethic was that if you wanted to get something done, you sought the most competent men and efficient methods. For the sake of argument you explored all courses of action, including those you should have dismissed as morally out of the question. It seems fairly clear, for instance, that Kennedy was dead set against sending combat troops into Vietnam, yet he allowed all the arguments for such a policy to be made and the contingency planned for. And when he sent Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam to consider strategies, the first strategy listed was, according to the minutes of the meeting as reported in the Pentagon Papers, "bold intervention to 'defeat the Viet Cong' using up to three divisions of American troops." One can imagine that if an adviser objected, pointing out that this was fundamentally against policy, a violation of the Geneva accords, and therefore not worth considering, he would have been mollified with assurances that the mission was only the exploration of an alternative.

As Schlesinger wrote of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy "did not yet realize how contingency planning could generate its own momentum and create its own reality." He became increasingly opposed to military solutions to political problems, but the military arguments, having been made, were then inevitably compromised with. He thought of the military build-up as a diplomatic threat, but, as Sorensen puts it, "State was inefficient and the Pentagon was just the opposite, so when the problems arose it was the military solution which was at hand." *The New York Times* report on the Pentagon Papers states it even more clearly: "The decision to build up combat support and advisory missions, was made 'almost by default' because the Kennedy Administration was focused so heavily in the fall of '61 on the question of sending ground combat units to Vietnam. That decision," the analyst writes, "was reached 'without extended study or

debate' or precise expectation of what it would achieve." The concept that you draw lines beyond which you simply will not consider actions because you believe they are wrong was not easily adaptable to the cool cerebral mystique.

More than a Matter of Style

Two books are out which focus on this separation of moral sensibility from pragmatic debate. The first is Chester Bowles' memoirs, *Promises to Keep*. The former Under Secretary of State provides an extremely vivid example of the sensibility which Kennedy shared but was in conflict over within himself. Bowles did not share the tough, super-sharp pro ethic nor the softy phobia. Already in the spring of 1961 he was disturbed by what he felt was a lack of moral ballast in the Administration. In his personal notebook he wrote, "The question which concerns me most about the new Administration is whether it lacks a genuine sense of conviction about what is right and what is wrong Anyone in public life who has strong convictions about the rights and wrongs of public morality, both domestic and international, has a very great advantage in times of strain, since his instincts on what to do are clear and immediate. Lacking such a framework. . . he is forced to lean almost entirely on his mental processes. . . . Under normal conditions . . . this pragmatic approach should successfully bring him out on the right side of a question. What worries me are the conclusions that such an individual may reach when he is tired, angry, frustrated, or emotionally affected. The Cuban fiasco demonstrates how far astray a man as brilliant and well-intentioned as President Kennedy can go who lacks a basic moral reference point."

The next November he was transferred from the State Department to an impressively titled but unimportant post. The purported reason was that State was inefficient and Bowles was



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not an administrator. At the bottom, however, was a fundamental difference in perception which was most noticeable in clashes of style. "There was a fatal difference in tempo between Bowles and the New Frontier," wrote Schlesinger in his memoirs. "... he tended to catch hold of a question a long distance back... to discourse on its relation to the multiple revolutions of our times... and to move down to the present with all deliberate speed. Kennedy agreed with nearly everything Bowles would say, but he had generally thought of it before. And he grew impatient... Bowles spoke the unabashed Liberal language of the New Deal; again the junior officers of the Second World War disagreed not with the sentiment but with the sentimentality. The New Frontier put a premium on quick, tough, laconic, decided people... 'Chet's a fine fellow,'" Schlesinger recalls Kennedy saying, "but he's just not doing the job. He was perfect for Ambassador to India... his intelligence, his sympathy... but he is not precise or decisive enough to get things done.'"

Yet Bowles was the only close advisor who had been right on Cuba, expressing instant horror when he learned of the invasion plans. He was in Schlesinger's words "identified with the affirmative impulses of American foreign policy... [he tried to] redress the balance toward the underdeveloped nations and toward political rather than military solutions." He embodies the best of the Kennedy vision—as Schlesinger remarks, Kennedy agreed with nearly everything Bowles said. Yet the Under Secretary was an irritant. His long-windedness was understandably exasperating, and the New Deal rhetoric, much as one may agree with the sentiments, is indeed a bit too sappy to swallow, but the scale of the reaction against him indicates a deeper motivation. His treatment invites comparison to the covert retaliation against Stevenson. The spontaneous moral reaction of an intelligent man can cut swathes

through the strict cult of competence to the root of an approach, and if the root is off-base, the whole approach is likely to be askew. If you are trying with all your might to figure out the most effective way to do something, the moral response seems tediously irrelevant. But if it turns out to have been right in the strictly operational sense—which is supposed to be your territory—it becomes intolerable. All this is not to mourn lost opportunities, nor to make Bowles into a hero—he just provides a telling example—but to expose the subversive dynamics which locked the Kennedy team into its own assumptions, which prevented things from opening up.

A Penetrating Fiction

The second book which explored these themes is *A History of the Modern Age* by Julian K. Prescott, rumored to be a pseudonym for John Kenneth Galbraith, who knew the players well. The history is a parody in which facts, exchanges, and personalities are left in tact with a slight twist to the lens, highlighting the drift, the impasses, the philosophical clashes, and the blindnesses. On John Foster Dulles the parody can be quite broad, but on the Kennedy years it's more like a fine David Levine drawing. At first the picture is appealing, and sensible, but slowly something wrong emerges and then leaps out.

Prescott, too, finds Bowles a handy vehicle for his message. At one point in the history the Under Secretary says, "Mr. President, I'm a little troubled about the Taylor-Rostow report, about counterinsurgency. On the face of it, as Secretary McNamara explained it, it bears an ominous resemblance to the sort of thing that Metternich and the Congress of Vienna did in the 19th century. First we declare ourselves international policemen or firemen. Then we intervene to curb disorders or extinguish the flames. Always we would find ourselves intervening on the side of reactionary rulers against rebellious popu-

lar groups. The very term counterinsurgency suggests this. After all, from a practical standpoint, what petty dictator won't ask us to help him suppress what he calls Communist rebels?" Then he points out that we won't always be able to put out the flames and will be faced with the choice of pulling out in defeat or of sending more and more men in. "The possibility is remote, I admit, but it is possible under the principle of counterinsurgency." " 'When you put the issue this way, Chet,' Kennedy replied, 'we would all agree with you. The point is, the possibility is infinitesimally remote. Our objective under counterinsurgency is not to shore up reactionary governments. It's designed to allow the people to determine their own fortunes without fear of disruptive minorities. At all events, as Bob McNamara said, we must seek ways of protecting our national interest short of major war. That, I believe, is what counterinsurgency's all about.' " Then he allows that he doesn't think anyone will confuse him with Metternich: " 'Not unless Pope John and I agree to Catholicize the World.' (Loud laughter in the room)."

The scenario puts a finger on the critical failure to think a policy through to its roots. Bowles comments sound general, intelligent, but a bit obvious and off-base to Kennedy. He can't hear that Bowles is saying, "Whose side should we be on?" and, quite practically, "If you blunder onto the losing side in a delicate internal situation you're in for a lot more than you asked for." Kennedy, shocked by the spontaneous generation of communists out of the Cuban hills, saw counterinsurgency as a device to trump the ace card—native guerrillas—drawn by our global competitor. Bowles was looking way beyond that simple gameboard and saw that in most situations, by definition we would be supporting the cause of repressive dictatorship. Kennedy, not hearing, deflects Bowles by seeming to understand it, presenting a positive view of the policy and then making

Bowles' point look remote with a joke. The rest of the room, relieved to have this rather corny picture of "reactionary rulers and rebellious popular groups" dismissed, laughs loudly, and Bowles, unable to counter Kennedy's quick intellect and charm, is routed. The scenario is a good illustration of how the relevance of a moral view was lost on Kennedy, how his brilliance allowed him to believe he had dealt with a trenchant argument when he had not, and how humor can dissipate a moral observation. As one reads on, the mutual appreciation of wit and charm, the highly appealing style, the confident elitism, and the glittering intelligence become grotesque as again and again what should have been an opening of minds is complacently by-passed. The *History* is a fiction, but it rings alarmingly true: too much of it is drawn from fact and from familiar traits to dismiss. (Not to compare myself with Chester Bowles, but, funnily enough, my conversation with Ted Sorensen in some ways resembled the Prescott scenario. I brought up every point raised in this article, and each one he appeared to understand and agree with. Yet at the end of each little foray, he had turned it around so that the Administration was impeccable.) While one hopes dearly that we will see Kennedy's style, brilliance, and humor in the White House again, the lesson must not be lost that those qualities need not, but can, serve as blocks.

Two Kinds of Courage

There is little use to say in retrospect where Kennedy went wrong and what advice he should have taken and leave it at that, because it's impossible to travel back in time to those years, reconstruct the pressures and uncertainties which since had dissolved or clarified, and project by analogy solutions to the new set which has replaced them. Most politicians of stature now recognize the folly of cold war gamesmanship and whether they

pursue them energetically or not, advocate once-controversial policies like conciliation because they have become part of the "conventional wisdom." That they now seem obvious and expedient is part of the Kennedy legacy. But what is of use for sorting out the new set of problems are the more general parables. One of those parables is how intelligent people can fail to see the sound truth when it is set before them because they are distracted by a belief in the superficially pragmatic, and suspicious of the relevance of moral principles to practical and strategic problems.

The tensions inside Kennedy were never resolved; the potential beamed through erratically like a moving light in a fog. The light never steadied partly because it was a time of transition, but partly, too, because it didn't seek a solid personal sense of right and wrong to ground itself upon. The sense was there, but it wasn't trusted to govern. The irony is that Kennedy overlooked moral perceptions as impractical, whereas it turns out they were profoundly pragmatic. The New Frontiersmen seemed to feel that their own idealism might prove to be their fatal flaw and fought to be cerebral and to stick to principles of "fact" rather than conscience lest they prove fools before the world. The vision of the Cuban exiles trumpeting the Administration's timidity, by analogy, remained to the end a powerful motivating factor.

Kennedy wrote in *Profiles in Courage*, "A man does what he must in spite of personal consequences, in spite of dangers—and that is the basis of all human morality." Physical risk never cowed John Kennedy, but there is another kind of consequence—one which Chester Bowles certainly faced in the company of those brilliant, elegant, rapier-quick young men—which can threaten a person like Kennedy more than any danger. That is: in order to be true to one's sense of morality—to state it or pursue it—one must, like Don Quixote, be prepared to look ridiculous. ■

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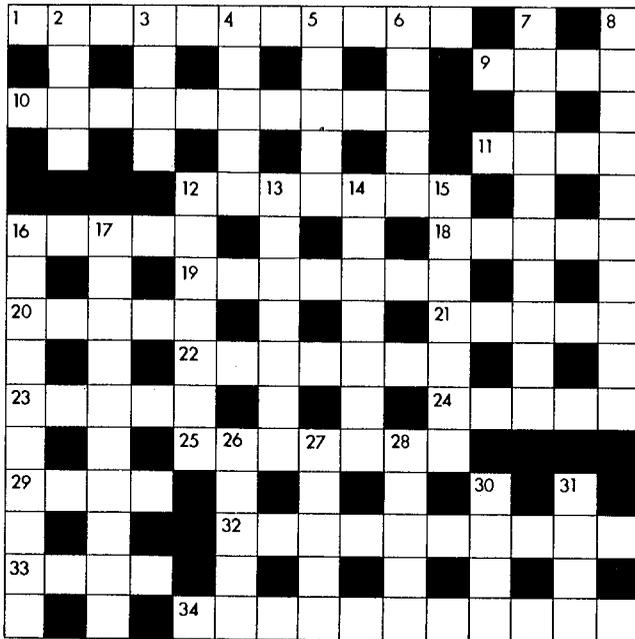
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Across

1. Congress' action, but not with lewd Presidential proposal. (7, 4)
9. Respectable attire in Southern France. (4)
10. Coal today? (5, 5)
11. Georgia Carnegie follower. (4)
12. What cop does on rear streets. (7)
16. Give him and her it. (5)
18. No action as yet but it should come. (5)
19. Vindicates Mitchell off the avenue. (7)
20. Cat has more than Elvis. (5)
21. Effective way to get at nut. (5)
22. Hard look at Livy with ease. (4, 3)
23. Super ad follower. (5)
24. Cover the ears by mistake? (5)

25. Me write essays? Why not? (4, 3)
29. Pres. as ton follower. (4)
32. Italy relic found in backward areas. (10)
33. It droops at the end. Sorry! (4)
34. No cool saint is satisfied with some reward. (11)

Down

2. White Tammany follower. (4)
3. Hard thumb follower. (4)
4. He will repel us back again. (5)
5. So we'd try again to find water. (5)
6. What pessimist sees in new or strange events. (5)
7. You can detect him if face numb. (6, 4)
8. Cheats stir revenue-sharing proposals. (4, 6)
12. Early birds see new eras, sir. (7)
13. Moscow or Peking, for example. (3, 4)
14. High Fabian follower. (7)
15. Bring order to messy street. (7)
16. No evil ties for this medium. (10)
17. Saver posed First Amendment problems. (10)
26. Autopsy on Naomi confirms acid use. (5)
27. Lists water pollution causes. (5)
28. Praise a newly-converted freeway? (5)
30. Dixie auto follower. (4)
31. Choice opposite we were told. (4)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 6.