

The last days of Camelot

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1963 found Jaime García Terrés in the United States. This essay relates his impressions of President John F. Kennedy's sudden death and the final days of the youthful and confident administration known as Camelot.

I Washington, 1963. In the U.S. capital there is a growing thirst for intellectualism. For that reason the Hispanic group comprising different writers and artists, of which I was a member, was received without any difficulty by the President at the White House. The next day we were interviewed by the President's brother, Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General. Inevitably, everybody called him Bobby, but this in no way detracted from his being one of the most influential members of the John F. Kennedy administration.

We then found ourselves at the house of Ted Yates, an agreeable character who had assembled much of the Washington elite for the occasion. This event would have easily delighted the most calculating or naive of name droppers. The President's other brother, the young Senator Edward Kennedy, also attended. And who is that gentleman waving me over to where he's sitting? There's no time to work it out.

"So what do you do?" he asks me.

"Oh, nothing, I'm just waiting for dinner to be served."

"Ha, ha, how amusing, I mean what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a writer, and yourself?"

The man, who was physically insignificant, turned pale. I then realized that I had unknowingly committed the cardinal sin of not recognizing a personality that no one else in Washington would have failed to identify. But it was too

late to go back now. My pale friend swallows hard and stammers:

"I...I'm a journalist."

"Wow, that's great. And what newspaper do you work for?"

The man turns even more pale. Today is obviously going to be one of those days. I've managed to upset a man who I don't know, who I've never seen before, and who has never done me any harm. He then explodes, gritting his teeth so that no one else can hear.

"Look, let's keep this short. I'm a T.V. journalist. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but that's what I do."

Without uttering another syllable, he turns, highly vexed, and chats with a nearby woman who no doubt is also very important because she throws an icy and disdainful gaze in my direction. Gody Szyzlo, a



John and Jacqueline in their motorcade. Never more would Americans enjoy such relaxed access to their presidents.



Like a King Arthur presiding over his Round Table, John F. Kennedy seemed to be leading America to an heroic and high-minded destiny.

silent witness to the scene finally attempts to clear things up for me, reproaching me in his best Peruvian manner.

"I can't believe it! Don't you have any... That gentleman is none other than David Brinkley, one of the major celebrities of American television. Look how you've put his nose out of joint. Didn't you know that Ted Yates is his producer and that everybody treats him with reverence?"

The sad thing was that I still didn't understand. The name meant even less to me than the face, but either way I had meant no harm. We were still on the subject when Ted Yates came along and introduced me to another gentleman with a clear and cordial countenance.

"Jaime, have you met Senator McGovern?"

No, I didn't know him either, although I would have liked to have chatted with him in order to rid myself of the bitter taste that lingered in my mouth after the previous incident. But dinner was announced. Ted Yates places me at one of the main tables, opposite Edward Kennedy and ...David Brinkley. Ugh!

At the table the young Kennedy conducts the ceremonies as if he were presiding over some senatorial meeting in permanent session. Habit I suppose. His words and gestures are so authoritative that one of the other guests mutters that perhaps Barry Goldwater would have been better suited for the job, and is astonished upon learning that I do not willingly listen to his inopportune and exaggerated comments. The South American question had to wait until dessert to be discussed. The discussion was entitled more specifically "The Role of the Super Powers in Latin America." Senator Kennedy invites Mr. Brinkley to give his opinion.

"Would you comment on that, David?"

David Brinkley, who seemed not to have the slightest idea on the subject, responds, now fully in control of the situation:

"Well you can all say what you like, but the U.S., unlike all the other great powers, has never formally occupied any foreign territory."

I could have told him that it was not possible to make such a statement in the presence of a Mexican, reminding him that Mexico had lost half its territory to the U.S., or that there was also the small but very current matter of Guantánamo.

I would like to have dealt Mr. Brinkley another blow, this time a deserved one. But it was not quite the right time.

II

From Washington we took an air shuttle to New York, taking just under an hour to cover the distance between the two cities.

We were tired after the lavish dinner at Ted Yates's house but nevertheless happy to return to New York and see our many friends there.

We listened to the radio in the taxi that took us from the airport to the hotel. The announcement came as we were about to get out of the taxi. The door was opened and our luggage was still on the roof when the newsflash came over the air, erupting like a violent jolt.

"The President has been shot in Dallas."

I can still recall the piercing tone of the voice that related from the radio station with increasing panic the slow, confused, and disorganized information. John Fitzgerald Kennedy had been the victim of an assassination attempt. No, no, it was more, much more than an attempt. The President was at death's door. Nobody knew anything else.

Passers-by gathered around the taxi. Some had caught snippets of information, and not fully believing them had congregated around us to confirm their fears. I remember an old man with dark glasses and a cane, and a woman dressed in red. They approached us to ask about the news. What could I tell them? I who knew nothing but feared the worst. The old man and the woman threw their arms up in the air screaming, Oh God! Oh, my God!

If unconsciously we still clung to uncertainty, it did not last long. As soon as we got to our awaiting hotel room we switched on the T.V. and remained glued to it for several hours. They went through all the events leading up to the shooting and transmitted live. The commentators kept repeating that this was the first televised assassination in living history. Fortunately they didn't add that this incredible occurrence was brought to us care of Coca Cola or Chrysler, or at least I do not recall them doing so.

I have never again lived such an experience, the vaguely frightening sensation that a world was crumbling in front of our very eyes, although it has to be said that it was not our world. The few times that we left the hotel we met the same scenes on the street. People cried openly on street corners, in front of shop windows, and in telephone

booths. This is not a figure of speech. It was truly something to behold, those men and women that we were used to imagining as made of dry ice.

In the evening we met up with a few others from the Hispanic delegation at the apartment of Tom Head, one of the officials from the Inter-American Committee who had invited us to the Barranquitas symposium and other meetings in Washington and New York. Tom served martinis and offered English tobacco. But our morale was dragging along the ground.

Our American colleagues seemed particularly depressed. Jack Thompson disappeared for a moment and then came back explaining that he had telephoned his friend, the poet Robert Lowell.

"Do you know what he told me? He said nothing less than that Lyndon B. Johnson will be a great President for sure."

Juanito García Ponce told us that he and Juan José Gurrola were still in Washington watching films in Yate's studio when the news of the assassination was released. He described the crowd that gathered outside the White House, flags already at half mast. They had no definite purpose, only to wait. He finished with the words that the porter at the Hotel Washington kept repeating, running back and forth with tears in his eyes.

"It's true, our President is dead. The President is dead, our President is... We don't have a President anymore."

III

At Yale, Chester Kerr, who was head of publishing, had invited us to lunch with a few noteworthy academics. In view of its informal nature there seemed no reason to cancel. Besides, we needed a distraction, if only for a little while. We took an early train from Grand Central which



John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the torchbearer of a short-lived dream.

took us into New Haven at midday. Despite the pleasant company, the most part of whose names I have now forgotten, that gathering possessed an inexorably forlorn atmosphere which was lifted only briefly by a visit to the monumental library, a glimpse of its now legendary manuscripts, and the return journey in our friend's car, stopping at a country guest house and sitting down to an old fashioned but nevertheless welcome meal.

But on returning to New York City, our social life had all but come to a halt. We spent the few days that remained in our room at the Hotel Drake practically chained to the T.V. set. On the screen the by now unforgettable face of David Brinkley kept popping up.

I will not even attempt to analyze, a quarter of a century later, the emotional crisis that we shared during those dramatic days with the greater part of the population of the United States. I would only fall into clichés. I would rather recall the still moving words that a friend of Chester Kerr's said to me when I bumped into him one stifling summer's afternoon in Athens.

"Nothing like it has ever been seen in the States. We were all so used to perfect institutional order that the assassination of a President, our President, threw us completely off balance. It was like losing, without previous warning or preparation, the patriarch of a great tribe, the universal father. John F. Kennedy, who like us had been an academic, though not necessarily more brilliant than the average academic, was a man who possessed a certain elegance as head of the nation. Then suddenly, solely by virtue of his absence, of his brutal suppression, he took on an immense importance. It was like the end of the world. An unspeakable horror. What we had always flippantly deplored in other countries was now happening to us, in our own backyard, in the backyard of the White House, if the play on words has any significance. The head of state had just been brought down by a senseless bullet. Anonymous irrationality triumphed over the most academic and precise of formulas. I'm not saying that to portray it we need a Shakespeare, a Dostoyevsky, or a Homer. It was more an episode worthy of Conrad's pen. Do you remember the Sargasso Sea in *Nostromo* or the Gulf of Siam in the *Shadow Line*? Dead seas ruled by mysterious currents that mysteriously paralyze any mariner that crosses them. There is nothing supernatural about them. There are simply hostile elements of Nature that manifest themselves without warning and leave a slow trail of fever and corpses."

His casual homage is one of the most impressive exercises in literature that I have ever heard anywhere.