Kemp et al. are the true heirs of this liberal darling.

Honoring RFK's real agenda

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

Thirty years ago, Robert F. Kennedy's life was cut short as he celebrated his greatest political triumph. Having lost the Oregon presidential primary to Gene McCarthy days earlier, he won decisively in California and was eagerly anticipating battling it out with Hubert Humphrey all the way to the convention.

Commentators were surprised at the disparate coalition Kennedy forged in his brief, belated campaign. It included Irish ward heelers, student leaders, Chicanos, American Indians and more than a few corporate executives.

Also there were millions of urban ethnics, now known as Reagan Democrats: Catholics, grateful to John F. Kennedy for having opened the door to increased respectability for them; poor Protestant whites in Appalachia; and scores of Southern white progressives eager to rise above the sordid racial history of their region.

Conspicuously absent from Kennedy's army was a group that reveres him today: the liberal establishment. Organized labor stayed with Humphrey. Most intellectuals on the left were for "Clean Gene."

Kennedy had had run-ins with this crowd before. Many never forgave him for working as counsel to Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy's investigation committee. He offended others in 1960, when he was rounding up delegates for his brother and they wanted to draft Adlai Stevenson.

Kennedy also had his problems with labor. He exposed corruption within the Teamsters union and relentlessly went after its leader, Jimmy Hoffa. He antagonized AFL-CIO President George Meany by asking at a Senate hearing why only a minuscule number of African Americans held skilled jobs in the building trades.

He was equally unsparing of another Democratic Party powerhouse: the education lobby. Kennedy tried unsuccessfully to require measures of student performance and to determine whether federal aid made a difference. School administrators and union bosses fought his "competition" initiatives as vigorously as they oppose school choice today.

Kennedy challenged a primary tenet of liberal orthodoxy: that increased education spending was the way to lift urban students from poverty. He favored greater accountability; higher standards and expectations of students; job training; and stringent anti-discrimination measures.

His travels to places most of his colleagues dared not venture convinced Kennedy that New Deal/Great Society-style, federally imposed solutions to America's social ills were not working.

Twenty-eight years before Congress "reformed" welfare, Kennedy attacked a system that made the absence of fathers from the home a precondition of aid. Decades before names like James Dobson and Pat Robertson meant anything, Kennedy preached the importance of family values to safe neighborhoods and productive societies.

"We know the importance of strong families to development; we know that financial security is important for family stability and that there is strength in the fathers' earning power," he said. "But in dealing with the poor, we have nevertheless said that for them, it will be different. For them, the price of aid will too often be the stable family life we value so highly. Then, for good measure, we berate them for failing to have stable families like the rest of us."

His proposal to revive the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn combined elements of the left and the right. It rested on community participation; funneling private and public investment through neighborhood-based nonprofit and charitable institutions (rather than government agencies); and tax credits to businesses that set up shop and provided jobs. The plan set the precedent for Republican Jack Kemp's enterprise zones and Democrat Bill Clinton's empowerment zones.

Today, Kennedy might find a home among a small group of members of Congress who want to use resources at their command to empower communities and individuals. They share his insistence that "the most effective way to encourage new enterprise in urban poverty areas is through tax incentives."

They call their plan the American Community Renewal Act. The Republican initiative, introduced last year, aims to create scholarships, charitable tax credits, empowerment zones for poor communities, and support for faith-based organizations that serve the inner city.

If it is to become law, Republicans and Democrats must put aside attitudes they have held for generations. They will also need to stand down powerful interests that make up part of their political bases.

Should they do this, they will honor the memory of a statesman who was at least 30 years ahead of his time.

Alvin S. Felzenberg is the majority staff director of the House Committee on Small Business' subcommittee on empowerment.



Associated Press

Robert F. Kennedy concludes his last speech moments before his assassination.

David Boldt *Alarms and Diversions*

Street takes commonsense step toward restoring city's civility

John Bawden, neatly attired in Polo shirt, windbreaker and canvas porkpie hat, was standing in the back of the City Council chamber, taking it all in.

The place was packed with placard-waving members of Philadelphia's principal economic-growth area — the poverty industry — awaiting the hearing on Council President John Street's bill to limit panhandling and sleeping on sidewalks.

Bawden, a retired executive, was delighted he'd skipped the trials at the criminal justice center he usually attended on weekday mornings, in favor of this piece of political theater.

He did have one question: "Isn't anyone here *for* this thing?"

He had a point. Sitting quietly on a bench across the room was a small group of men in suits — Center City District director Paul Levy, Chamber of Commerce president Charles Pizzi, Rendell administration homeless "czar" Michael Nardone, among others — who would speak for the ordinance later.

But several citizen cohorts were clearly under-represented. For example, not one of the 400 or so people who will be moving out of Philadelphia this week was present.

And where were the residents and visitors who had told Center City District pollsters that the top priority for improving the sense of safety in the city was to reduce the number of aggressive panhandlers?

The larger question about the ordinance — which would ban sitting or lying on a sidewalk and panhandling near a bank or ATM — is why it has become necessary. When did we give up on the idea of cities as places people should be able to come together and conduct their business without being harassed or intimidated?

The path was paved with the good intentions of "reformers" who decided in the 1960s that the way to balance community concerns and individual desires was to come down entirely on the side of individuals. Repressive measures like anti-loitering laws would have to go, and the Supreme Court agreed in a series of decisions that colorfully invoked the rights of "rogues and vagabonds" to loaf and litter.

Because some of these laws had been selectively enforced on a racial basis, there was good reason to be glad to see them go.

But there was an awareness even then that there might be negative effects. Reformers were willing to take the risk.

In a 1972 report for the National Institutes of Mental Health, sociologist Gilbert Geis wrote: "Under certain conditions, certain societies (like certain people) are better off dead — at least, if we maintain that there are certain values whose preservation is more important than the survival of people or societies."

Thus, if surrender of community control to individual whims destroys cities like Philadelphia, well, that's the way it goes.

And so it has. Most Americans have left the cities, and even more would if they could.

This anti-urban thinking was evident at Wednesday's hearing in the testimony of Karl Baker, speaking for the American Civil Liberties Union. The government could never prohibit aggressive panhandling on a public sidewalk, he said. Businesses in malls could, though.

And we could go that way as a society — moving to a world of ever-more-lavish suburban malls, gated communities and hotels with lobbies on upper floors.

Such a world would pose no problem for the technological elite, as former Labor Secretary Robert Reich has pointed out. They can communicate by phone, fax and modem from corner offices of buildings with armed security guards in the lobby. It's been called "the fortressing of America."

It would be tough on poor people who actually need safe and civil public space. But, once again, that's the way it goes.

Who can really take Jane Jacobs seriously with her quaint maunderings in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* about how "sidewalk contacts — lowly, unpurposeful, and random though they appear — are the small change from which a city's public life may grow?"

Or her contention that cities need to make sure that "strangers can dwell in peace together on civilized, but essentially dignified and reserved, terms?"

Well, I can take it seriously. So, evidently, can John Street — and so, I hope, will a majority of City Council.

Many other cities have enacted the kind of narrowly drawn restrictions proposed in the sidewalk ordinance, said former U.S. Attorney Michael Baylson, who represented the Washington-based Center for the Community Interest at the hearing. None has been found to violate the U.S. Constitution, he added.

Nor do these ordinances constitute an attack on the homeless, whose programs are unaffected. Levy's testimony noted that the federal and city governments now spend $62 million a year on Philadelphia's homeless, up more than 50 percent since 1992.

The ordinance is simply a carefully calibrated return to common sense.

Tomorrow: Sister Mary Scullion of Project HOME argues against the bill.

Trudy Rubin *Worldview*

School of life teaches Indonesians democracy's promises and pitfalls

JAKARTA, Indonesia — In a small classroom at the University of Indonesia, you can learn why Americans should be modest about giving developing countries advice on establishing democracy.

A handful of student leaders who helped organize the siege of the parliament that hastened President Suharto's exit cluster around a white easel covered with a complex chart. On the left is a black circle around the word *Habibie*, the Suharto crony who took over as president when his boss fell. On the right is a red circle around the word *elections*.

Midway along a line linking the circles are the words *June: hyperinflation*, scratched angrily in black. June is when Indonesia's government may run out of money and have to start the printing presses.

The students are struggling to resolve the issue that is preoccupying the country: If they push for B.J. Habibie's ouster and a fast transition to democratic elections, the ensuing political circus will distract the country from the need to focus on economic reforms. But if they hesitate, Habibie may consolidate his hold, or the military may push its candidate (probably wearing civvies) into power.

The students' chart is covered with lines all intersecting at *June: hyperinflation*. Each represents a political scenario and its effect on the economy crisis.

"Everyone is busy talking about starting new political parties," says Padang, an intense 23-year-old economics major. "But most are forgetting that our economy is heading toward the bottom, and our basic food stocks could be gone by July."

What a distance separates these young Indonesians from the boisterous students who hoisted a mock Statue of Liberty at Tiananmen Square in 1989! This group has none of the exuberance of Filipinos celebrating the 1986 triumph of "people power" or Russians pulling down statues of Lenin in 1991. These aspiring democrats know much more about democracy's weak points.

They know that even if "Asian values" — the idea that only authoritarian rule leads to prosperity — has been discredited, that doesn't mean democracy has all the answers.

Consider the burden on the slim shoulders of Padang and his fellow students Dendi and Gede. In Indonesia's political upheaval, students have become the moral conscience of the nation, a throwback to the 1965 movement that helped overthrow President Sukarno.

In a country where all but puppet political parties have been banned for three decades, most adults were too frightened to confront the regime; even now, opposition leaders think that only students have the credibility to oust Habibie. They expect that the students will soon be back on the streets; indeed on Wednesday, several thousand marched on parliament, demanding that Habibie quit.

As scores of would-be leaders — pre-Suharto pols, released dissidents, Suharto hacks-reborn-as-democrats — announce new political parties, only the students seem focused on the goal of a clean new system. Activists describe the students as *pure*, even though they are divided over tactics. "They think we talk to God," says Padang, rolling his eyes.

Off camera, young reformers weigh political change versus economic instability.

But these are still kids. True, they grew up in an era in which Western consumer culture linked them to the outside world. Despite Suharto's repression, they could watch CNN and MTV, read Newsweek, hang at glitzy malls, wear the latest U.S. fashions, and eat at the Hard Rock Cafe or Cindy Crawford's Fashion Cafe.

But until recent months, they knew more about America's culture than its politics. In recent weeks, a handful of professors, most with American doctorates, has been giving them a crash course on the past decade's experiments with democracy. "At first, they asked us what civil society was," says Professor Riga, an adviser to the students who holds a doctorate from Georgetown University.

Since then, the students have watched tapes on Tiananmen Square and on the Korean student movement of the 1980s. They have learned the difference between reform and revolution, talked about the Thai experience, where the military gradually gave way to democracy, and even about the spirit of change in Iran.

Their lessons should be sobering to anyone who wants to wax triumphal over democracy's victories of the past decade.

Lesson One: Sometimes a country might be better off if it slows the pace of political change to focus first on economic reforms. Doing both simultaneously can be dangerous: These kids have seen the news about democratic Russia's economic collapse.

"It's like a chicken-and-egg game," says Padang. "If we put the economic improvement first and postpone elections, the army here has a better chance of taking over. But if we put democratization first, we have to keep ourselves from starving."

Lesson Two: If elections happen too fast, they can be worse than no elections at all. "We don't want a general election to reproduce the same regime," says Gede, "so the main question is how we can create the necessary political infrastructure — like freedom of speech, a good election law, and an independent judiciary — before elections." They probably can't.

Lesson Three: Rushed democracy in multiethnic countries can also ignite ethnic tensions. Suharto's fall emboldened local thugs to carry out an ugly orgy of looting and arson against wealthy Indonesian-Chinese. The students fear the sliding economy could encourage some politicians to play the ethnic card.

Lesson Four: Sometimes there are no good choices on the road to democracy. Despite the risks, the members of the University of Indonesia presidium still want Habibie out by summer and new elections by December. They know that they are picking the lesser of two evils, that democracy is imperfect, but still they choose it.

They have a maturity that previous student rebels lacked.

Trudy Rubin's column appears on Wednesdays and Fridays.

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