Politics isn't a game, as Katzenbach's memoir proves

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At a National Security Council meeting in 1967, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach spoke against Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to resume the bombing of North Vietnam. The president asked if anyone present agreed, and Katzenbach got one vote — his own.

In mid-November, when Katzenbach sent a memo to the White House, pressing for early negotiations to end a war that was doomed to failure, speech writer Harry McPherson commented, "Well, Nick, you have guts."

And brains. As an official in the Justice Department in the John F. Kennedy administration, Katzenbach stood in the "school house door" at the University of Alabama, sweating profusely, "half from the heat and half from nervousness," and demanded that Gov. George Wallace protect Vivian Malone and James Hood, the first two black students admitted to the institution.

As Johnson's Attorney General, Katzenbach shepherded the civil rights bills of 1964 and 1965 through Congress, defeating a Southern filibuster by assembling a bi-partisan coalition.

In "Some of It Was Fun," Katzenbach provides an insider's view of one of the most turbulent decades in American history. He is modest, self-deprecating and an unabashed partisan of Democratic liberalism. Acknowledging that the 1960s had more than its share of crime, drug use, urban riots, Black Power protests and anti-war demonstrations, he chooses to remember it as "a time of hope, as America attempted, at least — and at last — to face its problems and live up to its principles."

Katzenbach adores Robert F. Kennedy. Though Bobby could be brash and blunt, the younger Kennedy was a moralist, "adamant that one did not cheat, even for a worthy cause." He "invariably identified with the underdog."

His assessment of Johnson is a bit more balanced — and more in line with conventional wisdom. A "consummate politician," with a "sixth sense of when to apply pressure and when to turn it off," Johnson was by turns considerate, crude and cruel. His civil rights record, Katzenbach reminds us, was extraordinary. Had he been able somehow to extricate the nation from Vietnam, he "might well have gone down in history as a great president."

With some justification, Katzenbach says that 21st century politicians might take civics lessons from their '60s counterparts. Congressman William McCullough and Sen. Everett Dirksen, he recalls, voted for civil rights bills "with no political gain" for themselves. Had they left the problem to the Democrats, justice and the rule of law "would have been immeasurably damaged."

In foreign policy, Katzenbach concludes — wisely — the unlearned lesson of the 1960s is that the president must lead but must also be willing to share responsibility with the elected representatives of the people. Leadership involves not only the power to decide but the responsibility to persuade with rational arguments. Secrecy "is the enemy of shared values and the friend of governmental blunders."

Politics, of course, ain't beanbag — and Katzenbach doesn't provide much evidence that it was (or is) all that much fun. He does, however, make a compelling case that public policy need not be poisonous, partisan and polarizing. "Change" is everybody's mantra. But it won't come unless we, the people hold elected officials — and ourselves — to a higher standard.

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Associate Images:
Some of It Was Fun

Working with RFK and LBJ

NICHOLAS deB. KATZENBACH