

Talk about standing on the doorstep of history. Nicholas Katzenbach '39; P'67, P'68 describes himself as “the bald guy in the suit” on June 11, 1963, when he stood on the doorstep to the University of Alabama’s Foster Auditorium and confronted then-Gov. George Wallace.

The governor, flanked by state troopers, was blocking the door in a symbolic attempt to prevent the first two black students from registering at the all-white school. Katzenbach, deputy U.S. attorney general under Attorney General Robert Kennedy and, ultimately, President Kennedy, was tasked with enforcing a federal court order to allow the students entry. “The whole thing was kind of annoying,” he now says of the event.

“Governor Wallace had made a campaign promise that he would stand in the door, and he was determined to do this,” Katzenbach continues. “It was all a political show he was going to put on for the benefit of racist supporters in the South, and the North too, I suppose. We could have treated the students as registered without going through all that. But Bobby [Kennedy] said Wallace would turn nasty, and there might be violence if he didn’t have his moment in the sun, or in the shade as it really was. He put me in the sun, and it was hot as hell—over 100 degrees.”

The photo on the cover of Katzenbach’s new memoir, *Some of It Was Fun*, depicts him wiping his brow with a handkerchief that day. “My wife selected that photo, and the editor took one look at it and said, ‘She’s absolutely right,’” he says.

Katzenbach wrote the book, he declares, “to some extent out of boredom. I’m getting awfully old. It’s like my daughter says, ‘You’re not getting old, you’re old.’” At 87, he’s certainly had a distinguished career. After leaving the federal government, he served as IBM’s general counsel for 17 years, then moved to the storied law firm Riker, Danzig, Scherer, Hyland & Perretti. Since then, he has voted for Bill Clinton as a member of the New Jersey Electoral College, served on several boards of directors of major corporations, and testified on behalf of the late W. Mark Felt (Watergate’s “Deep Throat”).

The book covers his years in government from 1961 to 1969, “a time,” he writes in the preface, “of collective optimism, full of energy and determination on the part of many of us...” In his eight years in public service, he worked with a veritable alphabet soup of VIPs: RFK, JFK and LBJ.

After serving as assistant attorney general and deputy attorney general for four years, he was appointed attorney general in 1965 by President Johnson and then undersecretary of state in 1966, a position he held until the president’s term ended.

The fun part, Katzenbach says of his career in government, was “being successful at getting things done. It was fun working with people like Burke Marshall [’40, a fellow assistant attorney general under Kennedy who led the Civil Rights Division], who

were both bright and able, and close friends. It was fun to work as a team, and Bobby was very good at creating a feeling of team. It was like if you played football and Exeter beat Andover.”

In his book, Katzenbach spends several chapters describing what it was like to work under Robert Kennedy. He writes that “he impressed the group with his factual knowledge, and he encouraged free-flowing discussion and differing views.”

Katzenbach observes, however, that this description could apply to President Obama.

“I think it describes any really good government official, because the higher you are, the more necessary it is to have those skills,” he points out. “How can Obama know all the answers? I don’t care how good he is, he can’t possibly. The only thing he can do is locate the best people and hear what they have to say. That’s the only way you can make the decisions.”

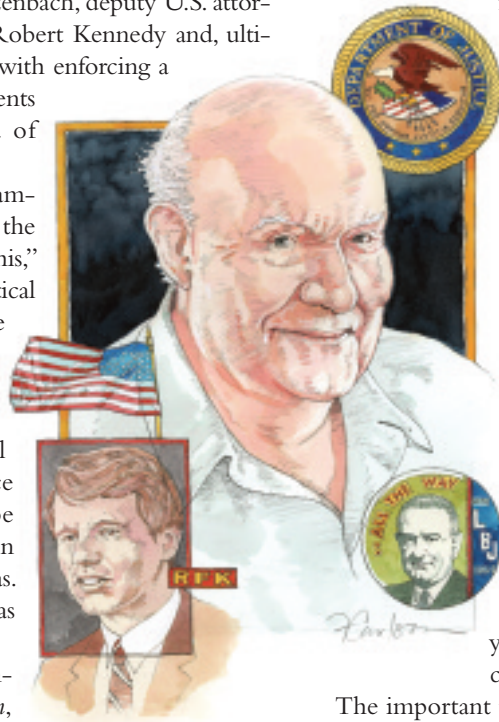
Katzenbach acknowledges that the new administration faces quite a few problems. He says, “I think Obama’s got a lot on his plate, but I think he will move in the right direction. He can do what he wants if he has the courage to do it.

“He has an awful lot to do in restoring the rule of law,” he continues. “You can get rid of the politics in the Department of Justice; you can get rid of illegal search and seizures; you can get rid of torture. That doesn’t cost anything.”

The important thing, he says, is to deal with hurdles “in ways that don’t destroy our faith in the government. You can have very strong disagreements with the government without losing faith in it. Somehow we have succeeded in losing faith, and I think one of the reasons is that you haven’t had public discussion in a long time. People haven’t had the chance to argue with each other, which I think is one of the more important things. It’s like at Exeter, where the learning process is not confined to what the teacher tells the students; it’s what the students tell each other, and I think the government is the same. Produce enough information so people can know the facts and discuss [them].

“There’s been too much secrecy in government for the last hundred years,” he continues. “We seem to have got to the point where it’s hard to say, ‘I did something wrong.’ I keep thinking about President Kennedy, after the Bay of Pigs, standing up and saying he made a bad mistake. Since most of us have made mistakes, we understand what you are talking about when you say that.”

In spite of the many obvious challenges, Katzenbach predicts a successful Obama administration for this reason: “He ran a very, very efficient campaign. I’ve had a theory for years, and it’s not original: A president who can’t run an efficient campaign cannot run an efficient government. The two are not that different. Leadership isn’t making decisions, it’s trying to persuade everyone to a position.” ●



FRED CARLSON

*Editor’s note: At press time, Mr. Katzenbach was named the 2009 recipient of the John Phillips Award, which will be presented to him at an assembly in October.*