Profiles in Courage

John F. Kennedy

1. What definitions of courage emerge from these profiles? How would you define courage? Do you agree or disagree with the extended definition of courage presented in the book's final chapter? Why? To what degree is Kennedy's conception of courage relevant today?

2. In his "Foreword," Robert Kennedy wrote that his brother's book "is a study of men who, at risk to themselves, their futures, even the well-being of their children, stood fast for principle." Why might it be of primary importance in some instances to stand fast for principle regardless of the consequences?

3. Why might President Kennedy have judged courage to be "the most admirable of human virtues"? Why might it be more admirable than such qualities as toleration, charity, or justice, for example? What other virtues might contend with courage as "the most admirable"?

4. Many of the acts of courage that JFK narrated involved refusal to compromise. Others, however, depended upon an ability to compromise. What is the role of compromise in today's political process, whether in the United States Senate or your town's governing council, or even in your own student council? What circumstances might call for compromise, and what circumstances might demand a refusal to compromise?

5. "Where else, " asked President Kennedy, "in a non-totalitarian county, but in the political profession is the individual expected to sacrifice all . . . for the national good? . . . In no other occupation but politics is it expected that a man will sacrifice honors, prestige and his chosen career on a single issue." How accurate do you think this statement is in today's world, for both men and women? In what other professions might men and women be expected "to sacrifice all" for the national—or other greater—good?

6. Referring to the political climate of 1955, JFK wrote, "Today the challenge of political courage looms larger than ever before." In what ways might that same
statement be made regarding politics in the United States today? What factors today intensify the need for political courage? How have some present-day political figures met or failed that challenge?

7. To what extent might John Quincy Adams's decisions and actions have reflected an inflexible moral and intellectual righteousness rather than unalloyed courage? What might be the proper role or application, within the political context of our federal democracy, of Adams's "principle of Puritan statesmanship . . . 'The magistrate is the servant not of his own desires, not even of the people, but of his God.'" Where might such a principle, in fact, leave the people of a democracy?

8. "Great crises produce great men, and great deeds of courage," wrote JFK. What instances can you recall or have you observed of great crises (not necessarily political) producing great deeds of courage?

9. Kennedy quotes Daniel Webster as stating that "there is one sort of inconsistency that is culpable: it is the inconsistency between a man's conviction and his vote, between his conscience and his conduct." How does that statement apply to Webster's own conduct in 1850 and the conduct of the other senators whom Kennedy profiles? How might it apply to the conduct of present-day politicians and other public figures?

10. Thomas Hart Benton's "overbearing and merciless roughness, personal vindictiveness and uncompromising enmity," wrote JFK, drove away many whose support he might otherwise have won by conciliation." To what extent was Benton's conduct in defense of his position a matter of stubborn rectitude, and to what extent a matter of bold courage? Might he have defended his position and reached a satisfactory end through conciliation?

11. Why might "the contradictions in the life of Sam Houston a century ago [be] irreconcilable today"? What public figures of recent or present times display apparently irreconcilable contradictions?

12. Kennedy noted that the decades following the Civil War were marked by "easy money, sudden fortunes, increasingly powerful political machines and blatant
corruption" and that "the Senate, as befits a democratic legislative body, accurately represented the nation." In what ways did the Senate accurately represent the nation in the years between 1870 and 1900? In this same spirit, in what ways do both the Senate and the House of Representatives represent the nation today? How does your state legislature reflect the state of your state?

13. What comparisons and contrasts may be drawn between the impeachment of Andrew Johnson and the impeachment of Bill Clinton? In what ways were the attitudes of Republican leaders in Congress similar? In what ways were the actions of the House of Representatives and the Senate similar or different? To what degree did Clinton's impeachment reflect "a struggle between Executive and Legislative authority," as did Johnson's?

14. Compare the methods and tactics of party politics today with those during the times covered in Kennedy's profiles? To what extent have mudslinging, negative "advertising," personal attack, truth twisting, and other deplorable practices characterized partisan American politics during the past 200 years? To what degree have things gotten better or worse?

15. Kennedy linked the courage of Lucius Lamar to his hope for making "the North realize that the abrogation of the Constitutional guarantees of the people of the South must inevitably affect the liberties of the people of the North." To what degree still does "the future happiness of the country . . . lie in a spirit of mutual conciliation and cooperation between the people of all sections and all states"?

16. Kennedy wrote that the political profession's loss of prestige at the turn of the century "was due in part to the public reaction to the new type of legislator who too often, in 1900, included the swollen corporation lawyer and the squalid political boss." What types of legislators make up the present U.S. Senate and House of Representatives? What impact have they had upon public opinion regarding the worthiness of political endeavor?

17. Of George Norris's opposition to the Armed Ship Bill in 1917, Kennedy wrote, "It is not now important whether Norris was right or wrong. What is now important is the courage he displayed in support of his convictions." And of Robert Taft's condemnation of the Nuremberg trials, he wrote that "we are not concerned today with the question of whether Taft was right or wrong . . ." To what extent do you
agree or disagree with the notion that the question of right or wrong becomes secondary to the question of political courage or cowardice? Are there any instances in this book, or instances that you have observed or read about elsewhere, in which courage was wasted for a wrong cause?

18. In his final chapter, Kennedy enumerated the kinds of courage shown by the men he profiled and the different ways in which they demonstrated courage. What were some of those kinds of courage and some of the ways in which these Senators and others exhibited courage? In what similar ways might political figures today demonstrate courage?

19. What specific principles were important to each of the men profiled by Kennedy? What did these men have in common in terms of principles, beliefs, and values? What were some of the significant differences among them? Are the same kinds of commonalities and differences observable among today's prominent political figures?

20. While Kennedy wrote exclusively about men, there have been many courageous women in American history. Discuss specific instances of courageous behavior on the part of American women, from Anne Hutchinson and Sojourner Smith through Susan B. Anthony, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, and others.

21. "The true democracy, living and growing and inspiring, puts its faith in the people-faith that the people will not simply elect men [and women] who will represent their views ably and faithfully, but also elect [those] who will exercise their conscientious judgment-faith that the people will not condemn those whose devotion to principle leads them to unpopular courses, but will reward courage, respect honor and ultimately recognize right. To what degree is this statement applicable to democracy in America today? How might American democracy be brought closer to this ideal?