How does a President make up his mind? How does a President choose, in a moment of crisis, between the olive branch of peace and the arrows of war? In the following article, the second in a two-part series, President Kennedy's Special Counsel examines three major factors in this decision-making process. The two articles are previews of Mr. Sorensen's forthcoming book, Decision-Making in the White House: The Olive Branch or the Arrows (Copyright © 1963 Columbia University Press). In last week's article Mr. Sorensen described, among other factors, the limitations affecting Presidential decisions and explained why, in his view, "what is desirable is always limited by the possible or permissible."

THREE fundamental forces influence most White House decisions: Presidential politics, Presidential advisers, and the Presidential perspective. Some purists—if not realists—may blush at the fact that politics heads the list. But we are discussing our prime political office and the nation’s prime politician, a man who has been chosen by his party as well as the people. Some Presidents may assert that they are “above politics,” yet politics, in its truest and broadest sense, still colors their every decision (including the decision to appear non-political). Some issues have been traditionally deemed to be outside of politics, but considerations of public and Congressional support still affect their disposition.

There is nothing dishonorable about the influence of politics on White House decisions. In a nation governed by the consent of the governed, it is both honorable and indispensable. While limitations of responsibility and accuracy should always be present, to say that we should remove such issues as Berlin or Red China from politics is to say they should be removed from accountability and scrutiny.

Politics pervades the White House without seeming to prevail. It is not a role for which the President sets apart certain hours. It is rarely the sole subject of a formal Presidential meeting. It is instead an ever-present influence—counterbalancing the unrealistic, checking the unreasonable, sometimes preventing the desirable, but always testing what is acceptable.

But democratic government is not a popularity contest, and no President is obliged to abide by the dictates of public opinion. Our political idealism may be filled with assumptions of human virtue and wisdom, but our political history is filled with examples of human weakness and error.

Public opinion is often erratic, inconsistent, arbitrary, and unreasonable—with a “compulsion to make mistakes,” as Walter Lippmann has put it. It rarely considers the needs of the next generation or the history of the last. It is frequently hampered by myths and misinformation, by stereotypes and shibboleths, and by an innate resistance to innovation. It is usually slow to form, promiscuous and perviduous in its affection, and always difficult to distinguish. For it rarely speaks in one loud, clear, united voice.

A President, therefore, must remember that public opinion and the public interest do not always agree. The value to this nation of a foreign aid program, for example, is not determined by its popularity. Voter enthusiasm for our space effort is high after each flight of a Soviet or American astronaut, but in between flights new doubts and complaints will emerge. And almost any pollster in any state will find that most voters want higher federal expenditures in their areas of interest, lower expenditures elsewhere, and a balanced budget always.

No President could simply accede to these pressures. He has a responsibility to lead public opinion as well as respect it—to shape it, inform it, woo it, and win it. It can be his sword as well as his compass. But arousing public opinion is a delicate task. President Kennedy’s plea for fallout shelters in his 1961 discussion of Berlin ended the prevailing national apathy on civil defense, but it also unleashed an emotional response which grew to near-hysterical proportion before it receded once again to near-apathy. His warnings on the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba had to be sufficiently somber to enlist support around the world without creating panic here at home.

In short, Presidential appeals for public support must be timed correctly and with the right frequency, if they are to be effective. On other occasions he may need to alienate a portion of his public support, for serving as President of all the people does not mean offending none of them. But this also cannot be done too often if he is to maintain his position, and it should be done for meaningful or hoped-for causes.

One important distinction should be kept in mind. In domestic affairs, a Presidential decision is usually the beginning of public debate. In foreign
affairs, the issues are frequently so complex, the facts so obscure, and the period for decision so short, that the American people have from the beginning—and even more so in this century—delegated to the President more discretion in this vital area; and they are usually willing to support any reasonable decision he makes.

But public opinion cannot be taken for granted. Some Presidents have tried to change it, others have rushed to latch up with it, but none has repeatedly defied it. Jefferson warned: “Great innovations should not be forced on slender majorities.” “With public sentiment on its side,” Lincoln said with some exaggeration, “everything succeeds; with public sentiment against it, nothing succeeds.” Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote: “I cannot go any faster than the people will let me.”

No President respects public opinion simply out of fear of impeachment or even solely out of a desire for re-election—for the same principle is followed in both his terms. Instead, both his conscience and his common sense, both his principles and his political judgment compel him to seek, to the extent possible, the approval of the voters who elected him and who can defeat him, the consent of the governed who are affected by his decision and on whose consent its success may depend.

Every President must, therefore, be a keen judge of public opinion, must be able to distinguish its petty whims, to estimate its endurance, to respond to its impatience, and to respect its potential power. He must know how fast and how often he can appeal to the public—and when it is better left undisturbed.

No President reaches that summit of public favor without believing he possesses (and he usually does) an extraordinary instinct for public opinion. He does not rely on the views expressed in his mail, or in public petitions, or by pickets in front of the White House, for they all too often reflect only a tiny organized group. He does not rely on opinion polls, which, outside of testing comparative candidate strengths, are still an inexact measure of the voters’ views. He does not rely on the crowds that greet him on his travels, knowing they are usually a disproportionately partisan sample. Nor does he generalize from conversations with visitors, reports from his advisers, or his reading and viewing of mass media. His political intuition is in part an amalgamation of all of these—but he is likely to regard his own invisible antennae as somehow more sensitive than any. President McKinley, according to Speaker Cannon, retained his popularity by “keeping his ear so close to the ground he got it full of grasshoppers.”

I no longer believe those who say that a poor politician could be a good President, “if he could only be appointed to the job.” Without the qualities required of a successful candidate—without the ability to rally support, to understand the public, to express its aspirations—without the organizational talent, the personal charm, and the physical stamina required to survive the primaries, the convention, and the election—no man would make a great President, however wise in other ways he might be.

EACH President must also judge when to oppose or accommodate a single segment of public opinion—a region or state, an occupation or age group, an industry or profession, a pressure group or lobby. Some will have views the President respects, such as nuclear scientists on nuclear tests. Some will have influence he seeks to enlist, such as the organization of older citizens on behalf of his health bill. The least respected and least effective lobbies in Washington, I might add, are those that rush forward to testify on every measure of every kind, whether directly related or not to the interests of their members.

There will always be a small but noisy group of critics intolerant of the gap between hope and possibility, complaining of a lack of leadership when long-awaited measures are not immediately enacted, while an equally small and vocal group will wait that each step forward the President takes is a gross usurpation of power.

The task is not always one of choosing between two interests. No President, even if he so wished, could suspend the laws in response to complaints. But he may find it desirable to accept amendments to a measure, or to reach informal understandings on concessions regarding a bill, in order to secure the passage of those bills with the support of a diverse coalition. A President’s own ties with some economic or other interest group may give him additional bargaining power with that group or reduced influence with another. A President with close ties to business, for example, will meet
less resistance to his anti-inflation or antitrust efforts. As is true of public opinion, the views of one or more members of Congress must sometimes be resisted, sometimes reshaped, sometimes ignored, and sometimes accepted, depending not only on the validity of those views but on the power of those who express them and on the extent to which they are shared throughout the Congress. Presidents have differed in the degree of their deference to (or domination of) Congressional opinion, according to their own legislative experience, their control of their party, and their party’s control of the Congress, but all Presidents since Washington have noted the change in climate that occurs when Congress adjourns.

Finally, Presidential politics includes attention to the American press and other media. Their selection and description of particular events—far more than their editorials—help to create or promote national issues, to shape the minds of the Congress and public, and to influence the President’s agenda and timing. Ever since George Washington expressed the wish in 1777 “that our Printers were more discreet in many of their publications,” our Presidents and the press have engaged in what the jargon of the Cold War would call a “contest for men’s minds.”

The winning side in this contest is debatable. The advent of television has given the President great resources for directly reaching the public, but even Presidential corrections rarely catch up with those misstatements that now and then appear in the press. For example, the great newspaper chain which headlined a totally false scare story about Soviet planes overflying the southeastern United States has never acknowledged its error.

I have often been asked why President Kennedy, unlike his predecessor, should bother to read so many newspapers when so much of their important information and arguments—excluding overseas statements and events that occurred during the night—is at least twenty-four hours old to him. Obviously this would be even more true of weekly and monthly magazines. He reads them, I believe, partly to gain new insights for himself but primarily to know what the public and the Congress are reading, to see how his actions or choices appear to others without his access to the facts. For any President, any politician dependent on public opinion, is concerned with how that opinion is shaped, with how, to use a current phrase, the news is being “managed” in the only place it can be managed, the media editorial offices.

The second major force influencing White House decisions—the President’s advisers—has its basis in the Constitution, which provides that the President “may require the Opinion in writing of the principal Officer in each of the Executive Departments upon any subject relating to the Duties of their respective offices.” But it does not prevent him from requiring their opinion orally. It does not prevent him from obtaining a Cabinet member’s opinion on subjects not relating to his respective office. If a Secretary of Defense has a business background, for example, that would be helpful in a dispute with the steel industry. Nor is the President prevented from seeking the opinion of those who are not principal officers of the Executive departments.

In short, each President must determine for himself how best to elicit and assess the advice of his advisers. Organized meetings of the Cabinet and National Security Council, for example, have certain indispensable advantages, not the least of which are the increased public confidence inspired by order and regularity and the increased esprit de corps of the participants. Regularly scheduled meetings can also serve to keep open the channels of communication. This is the primary purpose, for example, of the President’s weekly breakfast with his party’s legislative leaders.

But there are other important advantages to meetings. The interaction of many minds is usually more illuminating than the intuition of one. In a meeting representing different departments and diverse points of view, there is a greater likelihood of hearing alternatives, of exposing errors, and of challenging assumptions. It is true of the White House, as in the Congress, that fewer votes are changed by open debate than by quiet negotiation among the debaters. But in the White House, unlike the Congress, only one man’s vote is decisive, and thorough and thoughtful debate before he has made up his mind can assist him in that task.

That meetings can sometimes be useful was proven by the deliberations of the NSC executive committee after the discovery of offensive weapons in Cuba. The unprecedented nature of the Soviet move, the manner in which it cut across so many departmental jurisdictions, the limited amount of information available, and the security restrictions that inhibited staff work, all tended to have a leveling effect on the principals taking part in these discussions, so that each felt free to challenge the assumptions and assertions of all others.

Everyone in that group altered his views as the give-and-take talk continued. Every solution or combination of solutions was coldly examined, and its disadvantages weighed. The fact that we started out with a sharp divergence of views, the President has said, was “very valuable” in hammering out a policy.

In such meetings, a President must carefully weigh his own words. Should he hint too early in the proceedings at the direction of his own thought, the weight of his authority, the loyalty of his advisers, and their desire to be
on the "winning side" may shut off productive debate, indeed, his very presence may inhibit candid discussion. Yet no President—at least none with a firm cast of mind and concept of office—could stay out of the fray completely until all conflicts were resolved and a collective decision reached. For group recommendations too often put a premium on consensus in place of content, on unanimity in place of precision, on compromise in place of creativity. Had the Gettysburg address been written by a committee, its ten sentences would surely have grown to a hundred, its simple pledges would surely have been hedged, and the world would indeed have little noted or long remembered what was said there.

Even the most distinguished and forthright adviser is usually reluctant to stand alone. If he fears his persistence in a meeting will earn him the disapprobation of his colleagues, a rebuff by the President, or (in case of a "leak") the outrage of the Congress, press, or public, he may quickly seek the safety of greater numbers. At the other extreme are those who seek refuge in the role of chronic disserter, confining their analytical power to a restatement of dangers and objections.

The quality of White House meetings also varies with the number and identity of those attending. Large meetings are less likely to keep secrets—too many Washington officials enjoy talking knowingly at social events or to the press or to their friends. Large meetings are also less flexible instruments for action, less likely to produce a meaningful consensus or a frank, hard-hitting debate. President Kennedy prefers to invite only those whose official views he requires or whose unofficial judgment he values, and to reserve crucial decisions for a still smaller session or for solitary contemplation in his own office.

The difficulty with small meetings, however, is that, in Washington, nearly everyone likes to feel that he, too, conferred and concurred. For years agencies and individuals all over town have felt affronted if not invited to a National Security Council session. The press leaps to conclusions as to who is in favor and who is not by scanning institutionalized traditions of the White House aides. To the key meetings on Cuba were invited highly respected Foreign Service officers as well as policy appointees, retired statesmen as well as personal Presidential assistants.

There is no predictable weight that a President can give to the conclusions of each type. The technical expert or career specialist, to begin with, operating below the policy-making level, may have concentrated knowledge on the issue under study that no other adviser can match. Yet Presidents are frequently criticized for ignoring the advice of their own experts.

The reason is that the very intensity of that expert's study may prevent him from seeing the broader, more practical perspective that must govern public policy. As Laski's notable essay pointed out, too many experts lack a sense of proportion, an ability to adapt, and a willingness to accept evidence inconsistent with their own. The specialist, Laski wrote, too often lacks "insight into the movement and temper of the public mind. . . . He is an invaluable servant and an impossible master."

Thus the atomic scientist, discussing new tests, may think largely in terms of his own laboratory. The career diplomat, discussing an Asian revolt, may think largely in terms of his own post. The professional economist, in urging lower farm price supports, may think more in terms of his academic colleagues than of the next Presidential election.

But not all experts recognize the limits of their political sagacity, and they do not hesitate to pronounce with a great air of authority broad policy recommendations in their own field (and sometimes all fields). Any President would be properly impressed by their seeming command of the complex; but the President's own common sense, his own understanding of the Congress and the country, his own balancing of priorities, his own ability to analyze and generalize and simplify, are more essential in reaching the right decision than all the specialized jargon and institutionalized traditions of the professional elite.

The trained navigator, it has been rightly said, is essential to the conduct of a voyage, but his judgment is not superior on such matters as where
"What this world needs is a summit meeting where the statesmen could sit down and get loaded together."

EXPERT predictions are likely to be even more tenuous than expert policy judgments, particularly in an age when only the unpredictable seems to happen. In the summer of 1962, most of the top economists in government, business, and academic life thought it likely that a recession would follow the stock-market slide—at least “before the snows melted” was the cautious forecast by one economist from a cold Northern state. But, instead, this year’s thaw brought with it new levels of production—and, naturally, a new set of predictions.

In short, a Cabinet of politicians and policy-makers is better than a Cabinet of experts. But a President will also weigh with care the advice of each Cabinet official. For the latter is also bound by inherent limitations. He was not necessarily selected for the President’s confidence in his judgment as well as his skill in administration.

Moreover, each department has its own clientele and point of view, its own experts and bureaucratic parochialism, its own relation with the Congress and certain subcommittees, its own statutory authority, objectives, and standards of success. No Cabinet member is free to ignore all this without impairing the morale and efficiency of his department, his standing therein, and his relations with the powerful interest groups and Congressmen who consider it partly their own.

The President may ask for a Secretary’s best judgment apart from the department’s views, but in the mind of the average Secretary (and there have been many notable exceptions) the two may be hardly distinguishable. Whether he is the captive or the champion of those interests makes no practical difference. By reflecting in his advice to the President his agency’s component bureaus, some of which he may not even control, he increases both his prestige within the department and his parochialism without.

Bureaucratic parochialism and rivalry are usually associated in Washington with the armed services, but they in fact affect the outlook of nearly every agency. They can be observed, to cite only a few examples, in the jurisdictional manoeuvring between the Park Service and the Forest Service, between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Engineers, between State and Treasury on world finance, or State and Commerce on world trade, or State and Defense on world disarmament.

They can also be observed in Cabinet autobiographies complaining that the President—any President—rarely saw things their way. And they can be observed, finally, in case studies of an agency head paying more heed to the Congress than to the President who named him. But it is the Congress, after all, that must pass on his requests for money, men, and authority. It is the Congress with which much of his time will be spent, which has the power to investigate his acts or alter his duties. And it is the Congress which vested many of his responsibilities directly in him, not in the President or the Executive branch.

The parochialism of experts and department heads is offset in part by the President’s White House and executive staff. These few assistants are the only other men in Washington whose responsibilities both enable and require them to look, as he does, at the government as a whole. Even the White House specialists—the President’s economic advisers or science advisers, for example—are likely to see problems in a broader perspective, within the framework of the President’s objectives and without the constraints of bureaucratic tradition.

White House staff members are chosen, not according to any geographical, political, or other pattern, but for their ability to serve the President’s needs and to talk the President’s language. They must not—and do not, in this Administration—replace the role of a Cabinet official or block his access to the President. Instead, by working closely with departmental personnel, by spotting, refining, and defining issues for the President, they can increase governmental unity rather than splinter responsibility. A good White House staff can give a President that crucial margin of time, analysis, and judgment that makes an unmanageable problem more manageable.

But there are limiting factors as well. A White House adviser may see a departmental problem in a wider context than the Secretary, but he also has less contact with actual operations and pressures, with the Congress and interested groups. If his own staff grows too large, his office may become only another department, another level of clearances and concurrences instead of a personal instrument of the President.

If his confidential relationship with the President causes either one to be too uncritical of the other’s judgment, errors may go uncorrected. If he develops (as Mr. Acheson has suggested so many do) a confidence in his own competence which outruns the fact, his contribution may be more mischievous than useful. If, on the other hand, he defers too readily to the authority of renowned experts and Cabinet powers, then the President is denied the critical service his staff should be providing.

There is no sure test of a good adviser. The most rational, pragmatic appearing man may turn out to be the slave of his own private myths, habits, and emotional beliefs. The hardworking man may be too busy and out-of-touch with the issue at hand, or too weary to focus firmly on it.

The most experienced man may be (Continued on page 46)
TRANSLATING HAMLET: Marvelous are the ways of modern man and among them none more marvelous than the compulsion upon him to "clarify" art—and even to clarify it out of existence. Few men have worked as hard for clarity as has Mr. Irving Fiske, who has put together a yet unpublished Hamlet in modern English. In the course of his work, moreover, he has compiled some impressive praises. Of Fiske's Hamlet G. B. Shaw wrote, "Your work needs no justification," and while the comment might be read as an example of evasive ambiguity, several other high praises that Shaw has heaped upon Fiske would indicate that he meant no sly second thoughts here.

Certainly there is no possible ambivalence in William Saroyan's blurb. "Terrific," he writes, "the people's Hamlet." Van Wyck Brooks is equally specific: "You have wonderfully cleared Hamlet for me. I never realized Shakespeare is. The theatregoer will gain immeasurably by seeing your Hamlet. It is done with great skill—I am all with you." And with the instinct of the true artist, Orson Welles goes even more directly to the point. "It will," he writes, "make a million dollars." (TV producers, please note.)

Mr. Fiske has sent me a sampling of his text with a request for my opinion, and while I cannot share the enthusiasm of Shaw, Saroyan, Brooks, and Welles, I am sure many SR readers will want a look at how it goes, as I am sure they will be able to reach their own opinion of it.

If, therefore, the class will take out its own copies of Hamlet to follow the text more or less as the editors think Shakespeare wrote it, let us begin with Scene 2 of Act III, the speech to the players that begins in the original with "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue." Mr. Fiske's version follows:

HAMLET (to the actors): Speak clearly and distinctly, so that everyone can hear you—but on the other hand, you merely shout, the way some actors do, I'd as soon have a street-peddler speak my lines. And don't go flinging your arms in the air; but even when you're portraying the most violent and passionate tempest of emotion, use restraint and discipline. Ah, it makes my skin creep to see some fool actor on the stage howling like a steam-whistle, in order to impress the kind of people who are taken in by cheap substitutes for genuine emotion—let's have none of that, please.

FIRST ACTOR: We can promise you that, your highness.

HAMLET: Don't be too reserved, either; but let your own good taste be your guide: harmonize your movements with the words, and the words with the movements—above all, always keep in mind that the real purpose of drama, now and forever, has been to show life, not as it appears on the surface, but as it really is underneath, at bottom—to extract the true inner essence of every human question and problem, and to hold it up fearlessly for the whole world to see. Now, when the actor violates this purpose, merely to display his personality, he may impress a whole houseful of thoughtless onlookers, but to any discriminating theatregoer, the spectacle is painful beyond words. Ah, I've seen plenty of so-called actors and actresses—praised to the skies by the critics, too—who strutted and flounced about, showing off and smiling and goggling at the audience, until you'd have thought they were some pretty badly made mechanical dolls, instead of human beings, they did such a rotten job of it.

FIRST ACTOR: I think we've gotten rid of that sort of thing pretty much, your highness.

HAMLET (with a friendly smile): Get rid of it altogether.

(to the other actors)

And let's have none of this business of trying to steal the show. There are some actors who'll do anything to get a laugh out of a few foils in the audience, even though some essential point of the play has to be sacrificed—that's horrible; it reveals a pitiful stupidity.

(pause)

Well, better go now, and get ready.

That much, of course, is from prose to prose. If the class will now skip a few lines to Hamlet's speech to Horatio, in which the blank verse begins with, "Nay, do not think I flatter," we may now compare that with Mr. Fiske's modern version, in which, among other things, "Horatio" is modernized to "Horace":

HAMLET: No, don't think I'm being flattering. What have I to gain by flattering you, who have nothing to your name but your courage and your cheerfulness? Why flatter a poor man? No, we'll leave the sugar-coated phrases to those lofty circles of society where fawning and cringing are expected and well rewarded. Do you hear?—ever since I was old enough to know the real difference between men, you're the one I've always felt closest to; because you're the kind of man who stands like a rock through good luck and bad, who can take either life's victories or defeats with equal grace—and fortunate is he whose judgment and whose appetites are so well mingled that he's not a straw to be blown about by every wind of circumstance. Give me the man who is not the slave of his desires, and I will take him to my heart, yes, to its very core, as I do you.

(with a quick, embarrassed laugh)

That's enough of that.

(Hamlet draws Horace closer)

Now, there's a play being put on before the king tonight; and there's one scene in it that duplicates almost exactly the circumstances of my father's death, as I related them to you. When that scene is being played, I implore you, keep watching my uncle. If his guilt doesn't show itself during a certain speech, then that ghost we saw was a fantasy, and my suspicions are as false as hell itself. Watch the king closely, and I—I'll keep my own eyes glued to his face; and after the play's over, we'll both meet again, to compare notes.

HORACE: Right, your highness. If there's any twist of expression on his face that I miss, I'll gladly pay any penalty.

HAMLET (looking up; excitedly): They're coming now. I must fool around a bit. Go find yourself a seat.

Well, class, I know what I think. But I promised Mr. Fiske a dispassionate (well, a reasonably dispassionate) hearing. And there it is—the people's Hamlet for a million dollars, needing no justification, and an immeasurable gain to the theatregoer.

—JOHN CIARDI.