A war hero and the scion of a powerful businessman, John F. Kennedy distanced himself from liberals while serving in Congress in the early postwar period. But once elevated to the Senate in 1952, he hired the “militant liberal” Theodore Sorensen as his assistant, and together they directed what one biographer has called “a literary campaign” for the presidency. This campaign consisted of a steady production of articles under Kennedy’s byline for journals and magazines. In his memoir Sorenson describes the intent of creating “an image of intensive progressive thought, nationally disseminating his personal philosophy and helping balance the flood of superficial articles about his good looks and his romance with Jackie.”

Kennedy and Sorensen’s collaboration on Profiles in Courage (1956) took this “literary campaign” to another level. Enjoying a positive critical reception, the book became a best seller and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for biography. Rather than a treatise on policy, it was a work of middle-brow literature that combined narrative verve with a meditative voice to elicit an emotional adherence to a series of politicians who, at crucial moments in American history, had defied their constituents. That voice concluded by posing the ultimate question, to be decided outside the text, of whether the book’s author, John F. Kennedy, and his reader were similarly capable of defying social, political, and institutional pressures in the higher interests of the nation: “The stories of past courage can define that ingredient – they can teach, they can offer hope, they can provide inspiration. But they cannot supply courage itself. For this each man must look into his own soul.”

A number of recent studies have focused on ways in which Profiles in Courage reflects mainstream thinking of the postwar era about the American past. One scholar, for instance, points out that “Kennedy’s representation of Reconstruction was in keeping with the prevailing historiography,” and that “he had only a fragmentary understanding of American history as regards the indignities of slavery and the brutal realities of its legacy throughout
such observations, while significant, overlook the elements of Profiles in Courage that made the book seem a unique, perhaps even a risky, project for a future presidential aspirant.

Those same elements can be found in the writings of a community of postwar radicals who became known as the New York intellectuals. In the account of historian Allen J. Matusow, Kennedy only set out to win liberal intellectuals in 1959, when he “began making occasional trips to Boston to meet with Cambridge academics, soliciting their advice, sometimes even taking it.” But Kennedy had already modeled his self-presentation in Profiles in Courage upon the premises of the New York intellectuals. These writers and thinkers were increasingly influential in the late 1940s and 1950s, and the Harvard academic and liberal political activist who was Kennedy’s most important contact with liberals, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., was their strong ally. One scholar has argued that the Irish Catholic Kennedy’s main purpose in writing Profiles in Courage was “to identify him with the heroic mythology of a nation that still identified its mainstream as white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.” But the community whose ideas drive Kennedy’s book, while not all Jewish (Mary McCarthy was a Catholic from the West Coast and a graduate of Vassar), has been characterized as having a “particularly Jewish ethos.” The courage they advocated, rather than a simplistic national legend, was a variation upon the solitary self-making that they found in the European existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. And, while they were influenced by the tragic and ironic Christian vision of Reinhold Niebuhr, they were secular in orientation, former or present anti-Stalinist Marxists, who looked to cultural modernism, Freud, and Tocqueville to warn of the potential dangers of the irrational and the totalitarian lurking in the moral passions of American democracy.

In several identifiable respects, Profiles in Courage hews to the existentialist, tragic, and complex vision of the New York intellectuals. Throughout the book, Kennedy asks the question of whether and when a politician, or any citizen, should leap into the abyss of separation from one’s society for the higher interests of that society. He starkly urges a reader to consider the costs, not the rewards, of pursuing the lonely course of alienating one’s “constituents, friends, a board of directors or our union, whenever we stand against the flow of opinion on strongly contested issues.” He implies that the Democratic majority should always be questioned and, if the stakes are sufficiently great, resolutely defied. Profiles in Courage is a lonely, a cautionary, book in its vision of a succession of heroes who were marginalized and isolated, who in some cases failed to achieve the aims for which they sacrificed their career, and who, the narrator considers, in some cases may even have been wrong.
Tracing the sources of Profiles in Courage to postwar ideas flowing from the New York intellectuals can bring into focus neglected aspects of the significance of Kennedy’s image, both as a presidential candidate and, more than half a century later, as an enduring icon in American culture. By focusing upon the distinctive preoccupations of Profiles in Courage, and locating how they parallel the critique of American society offered by the New York intellectuals, we can bring into focus the forward-thinking aspect of Kennedy’s book and of the unfolding cultural narrative that constructed Kennedy’s compelling public image.

During the postwar era the New York intellectuals, many of them former Trotskyite and independent radicals who were veterans of battles with Stalinists and fellow travelers during the 1930s and 1940s, modified New Deal liberal thinking to valorize the individual over the collective. They argued that intellectuals needed to show toughness and courage in their thought and in their public stands, confronting the utopian collectivist creeds on the left and right that had culminated in the Soviet brutalities and the Nazi death camps. Anti-utopian though not conservative, the New York intellectuals emphasized tensions, uncertainties, and anxieties as inevitable conditions of human existence. They saw conflict, fallibility, and frustration rather than a malleable creature that could be perfected. Instead of adherence to an ideology, they valued independent determination and creativity. The worldview of the New York intellectuals thus combined Marxism with literary and artistic modernism. While they wrote for other journals, as well, extending their influence into numerous literary and cultural communities, Partisan Review was their home, and they attracted many like-minded writers well beyond their immediate circle to its pages. Richard Pells describes the highly influential role of Partisan Review in the late 1940s and 1950s, when it appeared (with the exception of a brief period as a bimonthly) on a monthly basis:

Though its circulation hovered around 10,000, the journal was required reading for intellectuals, not least because at one time or another it printed the work of almost every major American writer. In any issue one might find an essay, story, or poem by Edmund Wilson, Saul Bellow, Paul Goodman, Meyer Shapiro, Alfred Kazin, Leslie Fiedler, Daniel Bell, C. Wright Mills, Arthur Schlesinger, Diana Trilling, Pauline Kael, James Agee, Irving Howe, Harold Rosenberg, Richard Chase, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Robert Brustein, Mary McCarthy. As they gained prominence, the New York intellectuals, formerly ignored and marginalized, increasingly disseminated their ideas into the wider culture of educated readers through the pages of such magazines as the New Yorker, Esquire, and McCall’s.
The premises of the New York intellectuals pulse through the pages of Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage*. This should not be surprising, considering Kennedy’s omnivorous reading, especially of nonfiction; his wife Jacqueline’s love of literature and the arts; and his assistant Sorensen’s grounding in liberal activism. The ideas of the New York intellectuals were as available as the magazines, book clubs, and shelves of paperbacks that in the postwar era accompanied the expansion of higher education and of a professional middle class. Editors and writers took their cues from such prominent New York intellectuals as Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, and Dwight Macdonald, as well as from close affiliates of their community like David Riesman and Arthur Schlesinger.

The central theme of *Profiles in Courage* echoes the emphasis of the New York intellectuals upon the necessarily tense, lonely, and sacrificial relation of the heroically independent thinker to society. Kennedy’s profiles of heroic senators resemble the New York intellectuals’ profiles of their own position. *Partisan Review* founder and editor, Philip Rahv, asserted that the modernist movement in literature and the arts was, as an avant-garde, dedicated to “resisting the bourgeois incentives to accommodation, and perforce making a virtue of its separateness from society.” As Hugh Wilford observes of the New York intellectuals’ interest in modern literature, “There were, it seemed to them, startling correspondences between the suffering and loneliness of the alienated modern artist and their own experience of marginalization.” Articles in *Partisan Review* argued that modern authors, both artists and intellectuals, must suffer a “terrible loneliness” if they were to maintain independence from the pressures and lures of society. Irving Howe, one of the core New York intellectuals, recalled that vision: “We felt that we were always on the rim of heroism, that the mockery we might suffer at the moment would turn to vindication in the future, that our loyalty to principle would be rewarded by the grateful masses of tomorrow.” If the New York intellectuals adopted for themselves the same heroic ideal that they found in the suffering, isolated modern artist, *Profiles in Courage* extends that heroic ideal to courageous politicians who accept the price of being ahead of society. Kennedy’s profiles celebrate politicians who on great issues are willing to suffer precisely that “terrible loneliness.” In *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy repeatedly emphasizes that his heroic politicians find vindication only later in their lifetimes or in posterity.

Kennedy’s characterizations and historical narration also demonstrate the influence of the New York intellectuals’ modernist assertion of complexity. Lionel Trilling, one of the most prominent of the New York intellectuals, had been widely touting the importance of modern literature to contemporary politics in essays on culture and politics that first appeared in the late
1940s in journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *American Quarterly*, influential magazines of culture and politics such as the *New Leader* and the *Nation*, and the middlebrow *New York Times Book Review*. Trilling compiled these articles for *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (1950), which sold 100,000 copies as one of the first “serious” books issued in paperback, making its author a public figure. Trilling had succeeded Edmund Wilson as the nation’s most eminent literary critic, and he recognized that the striving postwar generation of upwardly mobile, optimistic professionals, as their intellectual interests expanded at an energetic pace, welcomed his guidance on cultural matters; during the 1950s he even wrote “monthly reports to subscribers of book clubs.”

Beyond its role in literary criticism, *The Liberal Imagination* was regarded as a major statement of the outlook of postwar liberal intellectualism. In the preface, Trilling emphasized that “just as sentiments become ideas, ideas eventually establish themselves as sentiments.” He therefore argued that “the connection between literature and politics will be seen as a very immediate one.” Dismissing protest and propagandistic literature, such as the proletarian novels favored in the 1930s, Trilling instead “stressed the political relevance of those artists (particularly Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats, Kafka, and Gide) who most accurately portrayed the ‘variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty’ of human life.”

In *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy produced a work that avoids advocating a specific political cause or even his own Democratic Party’s point of view, focusing instead on establishing a tragic sentiment similar to the modernist vision of life as full of the variety, possibility, complexity, and difficulty that Trilling was urging liberals to adopt. In his opening chapter, for instance, Kennedy focuses on the myriad pressures and conflicting interests facing senators in order to show that it is never an easy task for a sincere idealist to decide what is right or precisely when the stakes are sufficiently important that one should defy one’s constituents. Enhancing the complexity of *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy characterizes his heroes as compounds of strengths and weaknesses; addressing John Quincy Adams’s chronic dissatisfaction with himself and Daniel Webster’s readiness to accept monetary gifts, Kennedy arguably portrays these heroes as neurotic (a trait the New York intellectuals idealized as accompanying creative thinking) or, in some regard, self-deceiving. In this way Kennedy’s book exemplifies Trilling’s “moral realism.” Trilling believed that the political Left, which he judged excessively rational and thus naive in its outlook, should turn to the insights of modernist artists because “an appreciation of their work could give liberals a modesty and toughness they presently lacked.” *Profiles in Courage* elicits precisely such a sentiment.
If *Profiles in Courage* appears to bear the influence of Trilling’s “liberal imagination,” it seems even more strongly to follow the lead of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s postwar call for a “vital center.” The Harvard historian Schlesinger wrote in his memoir that he was not a New York intellectual, but that he enjoyed “friendly relations with them through Mary McCarthy, Dwight Macdonald and Lionel and Diana Trilling.” He also expressed admiration for the editors of *Partisan Review*, William Phillips and Philip Rahv, who “were putting out the most stimulating magazine of the day.”  

Alexander Bloom observes: “Schlesinger moved into the New York Intellectual orbit, although he was never assimilated into the heart of the community. He came to this place in the late 1940s by roads very different from those taken by the other New Yorkers.”  

Neil Jumonville describes the alliance:

> When the politics of the *Partisan* circle had cooled into liberalism after World War II, Schlesinger shared their liberal anticommunism, wrote *The Vital Center* (1949) in defense of that outlook, contributed to some of their publications, attended an occasional conference, and joined their American Committee for Cultural Freedom.

The educational background, war service, and politics of this close associate and ally of the New York intellectuals made him a congenial resource and valuable liberal contact for the author of *Profiles in Courage*. As undergraduates only one year apart at Harvard, Kennedy and Schlesinger had both expanded their senior honors theses into published books. Both had subsequently served overseas in the war. In London, while a member of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Schlesinger learned of Kennedy’s heroism after the sinking of PT-109 in the South Pacific when he “read an article in the June 17, 1944, *New Yorker* by John Hersey about a young fellow he distantly remembered from Harvard named John F. Kennedy, class of 1940.” As returned veterans, Schlesinger and Kennedy found themselves placed together on the Jaycees’ 1946 list of “Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Year.” In 1952, Schlesinger, by then an associate professor of history at Harvard, was also a significant figure in liberal activism. When Kennedy ran for the Senate that year against Republican Henry Cabot Lodge, his father, Joe, “delegated James Landis, who was on good terms with Massachusetts liberals, to get in touch with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a founder of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), and arrange for Jack to appear before the executive committee.”

In the preface of *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy credits Schlesinger’s criticisms for having “greatly improved” chapters 2 through 10. Schlesinger had responded positively to Kennedy’s letter asking if the historian would...
consider reading and providing feedback on his manuscript. Kennedy was likely motivated to involve Schlesinger in his book for more than his expertise in American history. The move represented an opportunity to strengthen his contact with a leading liberal intellectual who had served on the campaign staff of the Democratic nominee for president, Adlai Stevenson, in 1952 and would do so again in 1956. In his letter to Schlesinger of June 23, 1955, Kennedy wrote, “I hope that you will be ruthlessly frank . . . not only on the historical accuracy of these chapters, but also on the general themes, style, and overall contribution.” After receiving a detailed critique from Schlesinger, Kennedy included in his response a gesture of his interest in further contact: “I hope that you will be pleased with the final product – and that we may have a chance to get together in the near future.”

Kennedy had good reason to believe Schlesinger might regard his manuscript favorably, for Profiles in Courage reads like a narrative illustration of Schlesinger’s major political treatise of the postwar period. Highly influential, with sections first published in Partisan Review, the Nation, Life, and the New York Times Sunday Magazine, Schlesinger’s The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom (1949) popularized the major themes and sensibility of the New York intellectuals. In its fundamental premises, Kennedy’s Profiles in Courage follows Schlesinger’s The Vital Center in reproducing the New York intellectuals’ worldview.

Profiles in Courage also follows The Vital Center in stressing the relevance of modernist literature to contemporary politics. Schlesinger takes his epigraph for The Vital Center from modern poet W. B. Yeats’s “The Second Coming” (1920), which describes the turbulent atmosphere after World War I. The poem famously laments:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Since that situation only led to World War II, Schlesinger calls for liberal centrists this time around to match the tenacity of utopian-minded extremists. Kennedy similarly opens his book by invoking Ernest Hemingway’s definition of courage as “grace under pressure.” He uses the Nobel Prize–winning modern novelist’s tense figurative phrase to frame his own historical analysis of politicians who, in critical moments of American history, stood up to constituents possessed by zealous fervor. Both Schlesinger and Kennedy begin their books by fulfilling the New York intellectuals’ call to look to the great modern artists to help assert the relevance of a tough-minded liberal approach to politics.

Profiles in Courage also shares The Vital Center’s positive view of American democracy, a view it holds even while acknowledging American society’s
frustrations and imperfections. Both books reproduce the New York intellectuals’ celebration of the broad success of democracy in the United States, a decisive shift from New Deal liberals’ fascination during the 1930s and 1940s with the utopian project in the Soviet Union. Rather than abolitionists and Radical Republicans, or secessionists and sectionalists, Kennedy extols those – northern or southern, Democrat or Republican – who worked to preserve the democratic system responsible for conversation and contention, and to prevent any particular faction from achieving totalitarian control. Consistently privileging Schlesinger’s “vital center,” Kennedy celebrates senators such as Daniel Webster, who, amid the passions over slavery and secession in the years leading up to the Civil War, sought compromise with the North; Sam Houston, who refused to vote for secession in the South; Edmund Ross, a Radical Republican who in the Civil War’s aftermath voted against President Andrew Johnson’s impeachment; and Lucius Lamar of Mississippi, who voted against the sectional interests of the South on the issue of “free silver.” In the twentieth century, Kennedy admires Nebraska Republican George Norris for his filibuster against the Armed Ship Bill that Norris believed was designed to push the United States into World War I, and he praises Ohio Republican Robert Taft for his principled stand after World War II against an ex post facto law to punish Nazi and Japanese leaders for “waging an aggressive war.”

A third discernible parallel between Kennedy’s Profiles in Courage and Schlesinger’s The Vital Center is their shared investment in the New York intellectuals’ vision of complexity and ambiguity. The New York intellectuals were strongly influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr’s emphasis on original sin and the “irony of history,” and in his book Schlesinger refers to Niebuhr’s theological insights as valuable metaphors for human limitation. The Vital Center asserts that the utopian visions of both the right and the left have lost credibility in the aftermath of Hitler and Stalin: “Indeed we have no assurance that any solution is possible. The twentieth century has at least relieved us of the illusion that progress is inevitable.” Profiles in Courage expresses a similar lesson about the dangers of self-righteousness or ideological purity drawn from Kennedy’s own political experience: “And nine years in Congress have taught me the wisdom of Lincoln’s words: ‘There are few things wholly evil or wholly good. Almost everything, especially of Government policy, is an inseparable compound of the two, so that our best judgment of the preponderance between them is continually demanded.’” In The Vital Center, Schlesinger laments: “Utopians believed man to be perfectible; and that radiant belief permitted some of them to slide over into the inevitable next step – that is, to believe that they, at least, were already perfect.” In Profiles in Courage, Kennedy goes to considerable lengths to
emphasize the imperfections of his heroes. No one, reading Kennedy’s portraits, would wittingly turn over absolute power to any of them. Kennedy’s concluding chapter, “The Meaning of Courage,” includes an ironic dig at conventional hagiography:

Some of them may have been pure and generous and kind and noble throughout their careers, in the best traditions of the American hero; but most of them were not. Norris, the unyielding bitter-ender; Adams, the irritating upstart; Webster, the businessmen’s beneficiary; Benton, the bombastic bully – of such stuff are our real-life political heroes made.33

Kennedy’s book reflects the vision of human fallibility that Schlesinger and the New York intellectuals found in the theology of Niebuhr and the literature of the high modernists, mobilizing this vision to offset the easy utopian certainties that, in the postwar mind, had led to both Hitler and Stalin.

Kennedy, finally, also follows Schlesinger in the belief that knowledge of human fallibility and of the grim prospects for success are no excuses for inaction. Rather than apathy or despair, Schlesinger argues that the loss of faith in utopianism can be replaced by a courageous embrace of postwar uncertainty: “There is no more exciting time in which to live – no time more crucial or more tragic.” Schlesinger looks with the New York intellectuals to Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism for his vision of the free individual engaged in heroic self-making: “By making choices, man makes himself: creates or destroys his own moral personality. This is a brave and bleak expression of our dilemma.”34 In Profiles in Courage, Kennedy vividly illustrates this “brave and bleak expression” with accounts of politicians who refused to flee from their freedom to act. In his last chapter, dismissing conventional platitudes concerning heroic selflessness, he echoes Schlesinger’s and the New York intellectuals’ celebrations of existential self-making:

On the contrary, it was precisely because they did love themselves – because each one’s need to maintain his own respect for himself was more important to him than his popularity with others – because his desire to win or maintain a reputation for integrity and courage was stronger than his desire to maintain his office – because his conscience, his personal standard of ethics, his integrity or morality, call it what you will – was stronger than the pressures of public disapproval – because his faith that his course was the best one, and would ultimately be vindicated, outweighed his fear of public reprisal.35

One scholar of the New Deal liberalism of the 1930s has pointed out its philosophical emphasis upon security: “In its ‘ideal’ form, social security had as much to do with modernist alienation as it did with financial insecurity; it was the New Deal’s answer not simply to unemployment and other economic exigencies, but far more broadly, to the displacing conditions of..."
modern life in a rapidly evolving capitalist society.” In *The Vital Center*, Schlesinger distinguishes postwar liberalism from its 1930s version by stating the need to recognize “that security is a foolish dream of old men, that crisis will always be with us.” In *Profiles in Courage* Kennedy in turn illustrates Schlesinger’s dismissal of the desire for security by constructing a historical memory consisting of successive crises, each of which was met by an individual who gave up security in an act of heroic defiance.

In the opening chapter of *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy expresses his concern about a particularly strong postwar source of standardization and uniformity of opinion, observing that “our everyday life is becoming so saturated with the tremendous power of mass communications that any unpopular or unorthodox course arouses a storm of protests such as John Quincy Adams – under attack in 1807 – could never have envisioned.” Kennedy is touching upon one of the major themes of the New York intellectuals during the 1950s, their fear of mass culture, which they alternatively called popular culture or kitsch, and their greater fear of middlebrow culture, which they found even more insidious for its pretense of seriousness and originality. Deplored the spread of mass-produced ideas and art for excluding anything not conforming to popular norms, for creating and satisfying artificial fake desires, and for turning culture into a manipulative commodity, they regarded the combination of middlebrow and mass culture as a variety of benign totalitarianism, preferable to the Soviet kind, but nevertheless to be resisted as antithetical to intellectual values. In a 1952 symposium in *Partisan Review* on “Our Country and Our Culture,” Lionel Trilling, David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, Arthur Schlesinger, and Norman Mailer presented their views on this threat. Mailer expressed his disdain for any suggestions that artists should give up the stance of isolation “and decide whether we can work with the movies.”

Coming of age in the late 1940s and 1950s, Mailer was a “third-generation” New York intellectual who had won early fame with his war novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1946). Five years after the *Partisan Review* symposium, Mailer once again addressed the fear of standardization and uniformity, this time in a controversial essay celebrating marginalized and self-marginalized communities and individuals who in the postwar United States were resisting the forces of repression. In “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” originally published in a 1957 issue of *Dissent*, Mailer developed his theory of the hope to be found in such rebellion. Pells succinctly summarizes the argument:

In Mailer’s eyes, the hipster, the blacks, the hoodlums, the Beats, and the juvenile delinquents were linked by their “emphasis upon courage at the moment of crisis.” Ultimately, he submitted, the “isolated courage of isolated people”
might provide a “glimpse of the necessity of life to become more than it has been,” thereby “widening the arena of the possible” for everyone.⁴¹

In language, however removed in context from Kennedy’s, that echoes the heroic existential preoccupations of Profiles in Courage, Mailer writes in “The White Negro” that “the heart of Hip is its emphasis upon courage at the moment of crisis.”⁴²

In the 1960 presidential campaign Mailer would find his hipster in the author of Profiles in Courage himself. Michael Szalay has observed: “No liberal politician could run on Mailer’s vision. But Mailer thought that John F. Kennedy came close to doing so, by way of Hemingway.”⁴³ Assigned by Esquire to cover the party conventions, Mailer was granted an interview with the presidential candidate at the Kennedy family compound in Hyannis Port, where he was greeted by campaign aides including Schlesinger, now a Kennedy speechwriter. Mailer produced an article that would be widely noted for its application of rich description and metaphor to politics and that now stands as “a foundation stone of the New Journalism” of the 1960s.⁴⁴ In “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” Mailer interprets Kennedy’s relation to the public in terms that echo the “terrible loneliness” that the Partisan Review editors had felt to be the necessary stance of modern artists and intellectuals in relation to the mass: “Kennedy’s most characteristic quality is the remote and private air of a man who has traversed some lonely terrain of experience, of loss and gain, of nearness to death, which leaves him isolated from the mass of others.”⁴⁵ In Mailer’s profile of Kennedy, the presidential candidate now appeared strikingly like one of the heroes of Profiles in Courage.

Mailer speculates that, if they put Kennedy in the White House, Americans could break free of dull postwar conformity by identifying with a heroic presidential image that would encourage them to pursue their suppressed fantasies: “America’s politics would now be also America’s favorite movie, America’s first soap opera, America’s best-seller.”⁴⁶ Mailer here departs from his fellow New York intellectuals’ hopelessness before the specter of mass-produced commodities or art. The strident participant in the Partisan Review symposium of 1952 who had contemptuously dismissed the idea of the artist’s attempting to “work with the movies” now sees the possibility of change in the unexpected form of a politician. Kennedy’s mass-produced image as “hero,” Mailer writes, “can capture the secret imagination of a people,” and “so allows each private mind the liberty to consider its fantasy and find a way to grow.”⁴⁷

From the elevated platform of the White House, President Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline, promoted the life of the mind and the status of intellectuals.
They began by inviting writers and artists to the inaugural festivities. Robert Frost read the first inaugural poem. Robert Lowell wrote Elizabeth Bishop after the event, “With a lot of reservations, I feel like a patriot for the first time in my life.” During the administration the president and First Lady repeatedly expressed the importance they placed on the role of intellectuals and artists in American society. In 1962 they held a state dinner for Nobel Prize winners to which they invited many eminent creative figures. Lionel and Diana Trilling were among the small group invited upstairs to the East Room afterward for a more intimate gathering.

Other New York intellectuals found themselves invited upon occasion to dine at the White House. Alfred Kazin lunched with the president but resisted his overtures, and Kazin was surely not alone in his skepticism. Schlesinger, serving in the administration as special assistant to the president, later recalled of Kazin: “A few months later he came to dinner and announced that the New York intellectuals considered Kennedy slick, cool and empty, devoid of vision, an expert and a calculating pragmatist.” Schlesinger added, “Yet, most of the radicals, even at their most critical, felt a sense of reluctant kinship with the President.” And in fact many of the most prominent would later testify to the elevation in status and increased connection with their government that they felt with Kennedy in office.

At the time, Kennedy understood their ambivalence. In 1963, at a memorial service for Robert Frost, the president echoed the view of the modern artist that the New York intellectuals had adopted as their own, calling Frost “the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state.” Nevertheless, he was determined to strengthen that state’s role in the arts. On June 12, 1963, Kennedy announced the establishment of the Advisory Council on the Arts, the forerunner of the National Endowment for the Arts, asserting, “The concept of the public welfare should reflect cultural as well as physical values, aesthetic as well as economic considerations.” And Kennedy looked to intellectuals when he considered future policy. After Kennedy read Dwight Macdonald’s 13,000-word, fifty-page essay-review in the *New Yorker* on books about poverty in the United States, he became intent upon launching a campaign after the 1964 election to break poverty’s cycle. Schlesinger had persuaded Kennedy to invite novelist William Styron to the White House. Learning that Styron was working on a novel about Nat Turner, who had led a nineteenth-century slave uprising in Virginia, Kennedy questioned the author intently about slavery. At a subsequent social event in New York, shortly before his assassination, Kennedy asked Styron if he could help him
reach out to black men of letters: “Did I know any Negro writers? Could I suggest some Negro names for a meeting at the White House?”

During the 1960s the New York intellectuals, as their status ascended, quietly dropped their opposition to middlebrow and mass culture. Perhaps they recognized that with Profiles in Courage, and the resulting inflection of its author’s mass-produced image, Kennedy had employed the apparatus of middlebrow and mass culture to vividly impress upon the public precisely the worldview he had adopted from them.

NOTES
2 Sorensen, Counselor, 144–45.
8 Kennedy, Profiles in Courage, 224.
12 Ibid., 74.
14 Thomas Bender, “Lionel Trilling and American Culture,” American Quarterly 42 (June 1990): 324.
15 Ibid., 341.
18 Ibid., 137.
21 Jumonville, Critical Crossings, 60.
22 Schlesinger’s book Orestes A. Brownson: A Pilgrim’s Progress (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939) chronicled the development of the nineteenth-century
New England intellectual and activist; Kennedy’s *Why England Slept* (1940) was a study of Great Britain’s failed appeasement policy in the 1930s.


29 Ibid., 197–98.


33 Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, 221.

34 Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 52.


46 Ibid., 44.

47 Ibid., 42.


