Chapter 12

Remembering Adlai Stevenson*

Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Dr. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., late renowned historian and author, was assistant to Governor Adlai Stevenson during his 1952 and 1956 Democratic presidential campaigns. In the 1960s he served as special assistant to President John F. Kennedy and, on behalf of the White House, was on numerous occasions in contact with Stevenson while the latter was U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

I first met Adlai Stevenson in 1946. Edward Weeks, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, suggested that I write a piece about the impending mid-term congressional election. It was the first postwar national election, the first since FDR’s death, the first since the dropping of the atomic bomb. It was also the first national test for the Truman administration—and people were already complaining and making condescending cracks, like “To err is Truman.” I thought it would be a good idea to take the political temperature in a few key states.

* This chapter, with the permission of Dr. Schlesinger, was taken from remarks he delivered in a lecture on February 17, 2000, in Springfield, Illinois, sponsored by the Illinois Historical Library in celebration of Adlai E. Stevenson II’s centennial birthday.

Illinois, a pivotal state, was high on my itinerary. The day I was to leave Washington on the overnight train to Chicago (people still traveled on sleepers in those faraway days), I happened to lunch with a wartime friend and a one-time Chicago lawyer, George Ball (who later served as Undersecretary of State in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations where he distinguished himself by his opposition to the war in Vietnam). When I told George Ball about my assignment, he said, “You must talk with my old friend Adlai Stevenson—he’s been staying with us, and he’s going back to Chicago tonight, on the same train. Give me your seat number, and I will pass it along to him.”

Soon after I settled in my seat and the train was chugging away from Union Station, an agreeable man of medium height, balding head and beguiling smile introduced himself. He suggested a drink. We had more than one, then went to the dining car (no plastic pre-cooked meals then), then adjourned to the club car and talked till late in the night.

I was utterly delighted by Adlai Stevenson, his intelligence, his wit, his wide range of reference, his shrewd, slightly cynical, insight into people and motives, his belief in high standards of public service, his hopes for the republic. We talked from the start with the easy candor of old friends, and I felt that I had never in my life got to know anyone so well so quickly. Oddly, in the subsequent years of close association, I never felt that I had got to know him much better than that first night. His engaging openness masked a mysterious privacy.

One thing, however, that struck me then and later was his deep love for Illinois. Lincoln was his hero, and he well understood Lincoln’s unmatched understanding of the moral dimension of politics, so exquisitely expressed in his speeches and letters, the quality that, joined with a capacity to act, made him the greatest of our presidents. Lincoln too was a man for whom humor concealed mystery.

I was struck also by Adlai’s pride in his Illinois ancestors. It is odd, if you think about it, that dynasties play such a role in the politics of a democracy. [In February 2000] we face[d] a likely contest between two famous names—one the son of a president and another son of a distinguished senator. And John McCain after all is the descendant of a well-known naval dynasty.

Adlai found much gratification in recalling that his own great grandfather Jesse Fell, the founder of the Bloomington Pantograph,