

Adolphus Hailstork: JFK: The Last Speech

Less than 30 days before he was assassinated, President John F. Kennedy was mourning the death of another part of himself, one which formerly held a friendship with Robert Frost. We are rarely offered a script for, or example of, composure when processing the dissolution of a friendship. It's a different kind of hurt from a romantic breakup, or even the kind that affects Former Friends Forever, suddenly set adrift in different vessels, carried by separate currents to different parts unknown.

Kennedy and Frost shared a special friendship—in fact, in January 1961, Frost became the first poet to perform at a presidential inauguration. That day, Frost had bypassed Kennedy's request that the former recite his poem "The Gift Outright." Instead, Frost composed an entirely new poem for the occasion. (Unfavorable conditions made it difficult for the elder poet to read his new work; "The Gift Outright" was then recited from his

memory).

Summer 1962, mere months before the dread of the Cuban Missile Crisis, at a Washington dinner party: Robert Frost and Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador, are engaged in lively conversation. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall notices this budding rapport, and suggests to Kennedy that Frost be part of the diplomatic party to Moscow. Kennedy assents, and Frost sets off, hoping to play his own part in the easing of tensions between East and West. The trip seemed to be going well. But when they returned home in early September, in front of the press, Frost carelessly attributed one of his own phrases "too liberal to fight"—to the Soviet Premier. The resulting headline from The Washington Post: "Frost Says Khrushchev Sees U.S. as Too Liberal' to Defend Itself." To Kennedy, it was a national

embarrassment. He did not invite Frost to the debriefing. He cut off contact.

Frost died four months later in January 1963.

Nine months after that, on October 26, 1963, Kennedy delivered a speech at Amherst College as a new library was to be named for the poet. "The great artist is thus a solitary figure," spoke Kennedy, as he memorialized friend. "He has, as Frost said, a lover's quarrel with the world. In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time. This is not a popular role."

Kennedy's somber voice wavers and seems to even crack, as he shares the sometimes uncomfortable truth that art holds the power to account. Art, he says, isn't propaganda. A good artist's job, by Kennedy's definition, isn't always going to make you feel good: "If

Robert Frost was much honored in his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths."

Now, Adolphus Hailstork sets this moving speech to music, breathing new life into old truths; an affirmation of the transformational power art can have on the spirit of an individual or a nation.