INTRODUCTION

On August 24, 1965, John Kenneth Galbraith wrote to Senator Robert F. Kennedy recommending that his personal letters not be published: “I would like to ensure against their publication, in whole or part, without my specific permission, which will not be forthcoming. This is not for reasons of security or taste but because, since I do not intend to capitalize on them at this time, I see no reason why anyone else should. It is my understanding that you will make this letter an instruction to the Kennedy Archive.” Fortunately for all of us, Galbraith changed his mind. Almost 40 years later, on December 30, 2004, he signed an agreement to deed his letters, papers, and other material to the US government to be deposited in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. And on November 20, 2008, Galbraith’s entire personal papers were made available to the public.

This decision was influenced by the publication of a number of Galbraith’s letters to President Kennedy in a small edited volume by James Goodman in 1998. In the introduction to that volume, Galbraith reflected on why these letters should be published: “The question arises as to why, the usual vanity of authors apart, they should now be published. The answer, one often too easily offered, is that history has its claims . . . But there is a further claim. John F. Kennedy was an extraordinarily intelligent person. He was also a prodigious reader and far from uncritical in his reactions. Accordingly, he commanded from his correspondents a strong effort in any written communication; there was always the thought that

1 Letter to Robert F. Kennedy dated August 24, 1965, concerning his correspondence and other material to be archived at the Presidential Kennedy Library.
2 Though some of JKG’s material has been open to the public at the Kennedy Library since 1975, the entire personal papers of JKG were not made available to the public until November 20, 2008. The collection is over 500 cubic feet, covering the years from 1932 to 2006, with approximately 545,709 items. Other collections of material from JKG can be found at Houghton Library, Harvard University; Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute; Papers of George McGovern, The McGovern Center, Mitchell, SD; Gabriel Hauge Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library; Fortune magazine archives in New York City, NY; and the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University. Other letters and material can also be found in related collections and archives in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
anything dull, profuse, too obviously self-serving, would be quickly and perhaps not quietly discarded … Reflecting on these letters, I am led to say that possibly some of my better writing, certainly some of my most attentive writing, was for an audience of one."

These same standards that we find in the letters to President Kennedy are routinely found in his other letters, which were also written for an audience of one – from his tailor in Hong Kong to other American presidents. Almost every day of his working life Galbraith would send a note, memo or letter to a family member, colleague, public figure, newspaper editor, friend, foe, or enthusiast. The letters give us his views and insights over an array of topics that are more personal than found in Galbraith’s other writings. Along with his pungent and provocative style and the brilliance of his analysis on economic and political affairs, we can see his creative process at work and read his assessment of the writings and research of others. During his professional career Galbraith became friends with many of the great figures of the twentieth century across the economic and political spectrum. The letters give us his frank and often amusing innermost thoughts about the strengths and inevitable weaknesses of these people. In addition, the correspondence provides us details of his family life and those that had an impact on his growing up and professional career.

THE LETTERS

His correspondence seems to fall into two camps: The first are his personal letters to family, friends, and colleagues; and the second are academic, professional, and political correspondence and memos. The amount of Galbraith’s correspondence over 70 years is staggering. In different archive holdings, mostly at the Kennedy Presidential Library, there are over 40,000 letters, memos, and notes. It is not clear why Galbraith saved so much material, including many drafts of his letters. In letters to friends, Galbraith suggested that his correspondence was kept for practical purposes, particularly to be used for writing projects like *Ambassador’s Journal* (1969), *Letters to Kennedy*...

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5 Galbraith died on April 29, 2006, at 97; he wrote or dictated letters up to two weeks before he passed away.
6 This does not include research material, draft copies of books and articles, transcripts, legal documents, and clippings from newspapers and magazines also in the archives.
7 His wife, Kitty, was known for saving family letters and material, and that might have been an influence on him. Her material is archived at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.
(1998), and A Life in Our Times (1981), rather than for posterity. One can also see the use of his letters in many of his amusing articles on people like John Steinbeck, Dean Acheson, and William F. Buckley, Jr.

Another reason given for saving the material comes from Andrea Williams, his devoted administrative assistant and editor, who insisted that meticulous records be kept for personal, professional, and political reasons. Since the early 1940s, Galbraith had regular secretarial help to type and organize his files and correspondence. Starting in 1958 there was a marked change in the attentiveness given to his letters and how they were organized. This was the year Galbraith hired Andrea Williams, who would be with him for the next 40 years. The importance of her role with Galbraith’s letters and other material cannot be over-emphasized. Following his generation’s practice of responding to letters from others, Galbraith answered almost all his mail. This included letters from the well-known and powerful to the less known, like a young boy asking what books he should read to get into Harvard. He wrote with sincerity and interest, offering his trademark candor and wisdom, which might include admonishments and rebukes.

Andrea Williams provided a routine to Galbraith’s letter writing. In the morning she would open his mail and organize it. After a morning of writing, Galbraith would go through the mail and scrawl a reply in handwriting that was unreadable to most people, which Andrea Williams would type. The next day he would sign the letters and they would be mailed. Galbraith mentioned to his son, Alan, that he followed the American journalist H. L. Mencken’s example of answering all correspondence within a day. He used this daily routine for decades, broken only for trips, vacations, and other responsibilities that might come up.

Because his handwriting could only be read by a handful, Galbraith or secretarial help typed most of the correspondence that survives. In a letter to Jackie Kennedy on April 18, 1963, he wrote: "I am very sorry about my handwriting. There is no way you can decipher it. So even my most tender observations on such delicate matters as pregnancy and childbirth must be filtered through a typewriter." Though most of the letters are typed, roughly one-fifth are not. With the help of others, particularly his son, Alan, many of these letters were deciphered for this volume. Some of the letters, particularly from the 1930s, were simply too difficult to read in full and were not added.

The letters are in different forms. Some of Galbraith’s letters included draft articles, reports, and speeches. If the draft was attached to a letter, it was considered for this volume. An important part of Galbraith’s professional life

8 There was also much secretarial assistance besides Ms. Williams.
was public service. The primary way he communicated with others in government was by writing memorandums, which are included to give a complete picture of Galbraith’s correspondence with others over his career. Occasionally an important draft of a speech written by Galbraith for a public figure or organization that was not part of a letter or memorandum has been added. This is to provide the reader with a broader perspective of his daily activities and influence.

Unfortunately, because of the great volume of material, a complete history of Galbraith’s contributions to economics, politics, and his humorous insights about politicians, economists, and celebrities over his lifetime cannot be fully covered in a single volume. But this volume does provide a broad picture of Galbraith’s influence and impact in economics and politics, along with his brilliant and sagacious comments about those he met and knew during his full and rich life. The criteria used for the selection of material were based on picking the correspondence that would help tell a clear story of Galbraith’s personal and professional life, along with showing his intellectual and political development. Consideration was also given for letters that captured his unusual wit, extraordinary writing ability, or provided an insight about a particular person or historical event. The selection process was challenging, since the breadth of Galbraith’s activities and knowledge was immense, along with his talents and ability. As his long-time assistant Andrea Williams observed, “The interests in his life are many, his limitations few, for he has been blessed with energy, optimism, and the discrimination to know what suits him best.”

The letters, primarily in chronological order, give us insights into the personal and professional events that occupied Galbraith during his long life, and how he was influenced by major events. But more importantly, they shed a light on the three subjects that he cared for most: economics, politics, and writing. In each of these areas he showed a remarkable level of professional talent, aided by hard work. Reading through the letters and speeches, there is a clear sense of a disciplined man abetted by high intellectual and moral standards, and someone who simply did not want to be bored with life. As he once quipped, “The best place to write is by yourself, because writing then becomes an escape from the terrible boredom of your own personality.” He also dealt with boredom by the immense pleasure he took from elegant dissent, ingeniously describing the often incongruous behavior of others, notably the rich and powerful. Galbraith throughout his life had a playful irreverence toward authority for he was skeptical.

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of how those in such a position got there and kept it. His mission in life, it seemed, might be captured by one of his own retorts: "In all life one should comfort the afflicted, but verily, also, one should afflict the comfortable, and especially when they are comfortably, contentedly, even happily wrong."12 This peppery attitude in one of America’s finest writers gives us letters full of Galbraith’s unconventional thinking, wit, and insights about people and events.13

Many of the letters were written quickly on the back or side of received letters, which provide a very different style of writing than we find in Galbraith’s books and articles. The letters are less guarded, allowing him to open up and explore his thoughts and feelings. Along with his good nature and humor, there are flashes of brilliance and wit, as well as moments of anger and impatience with stupidity. There’s always the same level of honesty and forthrightness in his responses to everyone. However, starting roughly around the early 1950s, there is a clear change in Galbraith’s writing style. Though the letters from the 1930s to the 1940s are well written and have their own touch of wit and subtlety, the Galbraithian style that we know today, with its own unique tone, syntax, and ironic acumen, was something that developed over time. By the 1960s he had mastered the style that would put him in the exclusive and distinct category of being one of America’s great writers.

There were a number of factors that influenced the development of his writing and explain the phenomenal increase in his output that began in the early 1950s. One was receiving tenure at Harvard in November 1949 after a difficult battle. Up to the time of his tenure, Galbraith had published a handful of academic papers and co-authored one book with Henry Dennison,14 along with publishing a few dozen magazine articles. From 1950 to his death in 2006, the quantity of his writing could only be considered a deluge. For the last half of the twentieth century, Galbraith would publish hundreds of articles in newspapers, journals, and magazines, along with more than 40 books, which included American Capitalism (1952), The Affluent Society (1958), The New Industrial State (1967), and Economics and the Public Purpose (1973). These books, along with his others, made him the best-selling economist in history. Tenure gave him freedom, both personally and professionally.

13 Proof of his reputation as one of the best American writers is the Library of America volume published in 2010 of his selective work, the first devoted to economics. It also contains a detailed chronology of his life’s work, prepared by his son, James K. Galbraith.
14 Henry S. Dennison and John Kenneth Galbraith, Modern Competition and Business Policy, Oxford University Press, 1938.
After ten years of periodic moving, the Galbraith family finally found some stability in their lives. In 1950 they bought their main residential home, a redbrick house on Francis Avenue in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which remained their primary residence for the rest of their lives. It would be known as a place of warmth and hospitality. Almost every day they would have friends and guests over. It was also known for the Harvard graduation party that Ken and Kitty would give each June in their backyard. Another factor that seemed to influence Galbraith’s writing at this time was the tragic death of his second son, Douglas, from leukemia in the early summer of 1950. As Richard Parker states in his splendid biography on Galbraith, “following his son’s death the way he wrote changed forever.”

Galbraith also attributed his time at *Fortune* magazine as editor from 1943 to 1948 as a major influence on his writing style. He particularly mentions the role of Ralph D. Paine, the managing editor of *Fortune*, along with Henry R. Luce, the American magazine magnate. As Galbraith tells it, “Luce was a … superb editor … Nothing so troubled him as wasted words … By then I had learned to drain out excess verbiage. But it was a marvel to see how much more Harry, with a few sweeps of a soft black pencil, could remove and how little in consequence would be lost … Not since working for Harry Luce have I gone over a manuscript without the feeling that he was looking over my shoulder, that his pencil would presently pass through my paragraphs as he said, ‘This can go’ … In 1960, at a luncheon at *Time*, he [Luce] remarked to John F. Kennedy, to the latter’s frequently expressed delight, ‘I taught Kenneth Galbraith to write. And I tell you I’ve certainly regretted it.’”

Another important event in his writing career was the great success of *American Capitalism*, published in 1952. The book represented a popular writing style not found in his other publications up to that time. The success of *American Capitalism* also influenced Galbraith’s letter writing. First, the amount of his correspondence increased significantly as he became a more established author who needed to respond to a worldwide readership. Second, the bold and energetic sentences found in *American Capitalism*, often ending with a surprise or a witty twist, came to be the élan style of his letters. No matter the recipient, the letters now had that “Galbraithian touch” of wit, self-confidence (some called it arrogance), and generosity. By 1960 you find a master letter writer with an acerbic

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intellect equal to that of George Bernard Shaw who could wield his pen to taunt the rich and powerful and provide pleasure and laughter for friend or foe.

How much do the letters personally reveal about Galbraith? By nature he was reserved. This is partly due to his upbringing and the Scotch in him. Most of his writing gives an impression of wanting to stay at arm's length from his subject. He once said, “I have always tried for a measure of detachment, I've felt that one should hold some part of one's self in reserve.” However, in the letters at times, we see a man who wanted very much to give comfort and support to friends and others. An example is when Jacqueline Kennedy lost her child, Patrick, in August 1963 (three months before her husband was assassinated). Galbraith in a handwritten note wrote: “But life goes on. About ten years ago the youngster who was nearest my soul (and most especially my own) developed leukemia. The worst thing, I think, were the letters from friends. Some were tongue-tied and painful. Others were devoid of thought and painful. Truly my thoughts have been with you.” As this letter shows, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis held a very special place in Galbraith’s heart, along with her husband. Galbraith adored both of them. President Kennedy's intelligence, drive, and energy, represented in Kennedy’s New Frontier, captured Galbraith’s imagination and hope for America. He mentioned in a number of letters how impressed he was with Kennedy's ability to maintain inner peace and self-confidence. Galbraith also appreciated Kennedy’s sense of humor and preference for open dialogue. After Kennedy became president, their correspondence showed a gradual change in their relationship, from a student and professor to a close friend and trusted adviser. Galbraith’s influential role of confidant to the president seemed to increase rather than diminish when he was named ambassador to India in 1961. For example, when Kennedy received an economic memorandum from Galbraith when he was in India, he often sent it to cabinet members and others and asked for a response. And Kennedy asked him to take on a number of special assignments and tasks. A particularly important one was a private trip to Vietnam in 1961 to report back to Kennedy on whether American troops should be sent.

The letters during the time Galbraith was ambassador show a talented administrator and diplomat, and someone who in many ways found the job not that burdensome. Though there were intense moments during his time in India, like the October–November 1962 Sino-Indian war, overall Galbraith didn’t think the job required that much work. His son, Peter, US Ambassador to Croatia in the

Clinton administration, said: "He found being an ambassador boring, comparing it to being an airline pilot: hours of boredom accompanied by moments of panic. He wrote while attending the many tedious speeches that accompany the job. He said it would be rude to read during a speech but, if you write, everyone thinks you are exceptionally attentive."

To relieve his ennui with the post, Galbraith sent letters to family members in Canada to solicit material about his boyhood home around southern Ontario above western Lake Erie to write a book, *The Scotch* (1963), about the area in which he grew up. He also decided to write his first fiction book, *The McLandress Dimension* (1963), under the pseudonym of Mark Epernay. Besides writing books, Galbraith sent numerous letters and memorandums to the president and others in Washington. Some of that correspondence is in this collection.

**AMERICAN LIBERALISM**

A major theme found in the letters is Galbraith’s commitment to American liberalism. He was a Roosevelt liberal and believed that Kennedy's New Frontier captured many of the ideas and values of American liberalism. In a speech in support of Kennedy’s run for the presidency in 1960, Galbraith expressed confidence that Kennedy would advance the liberal agenda:

> The issue, at once so old and so new, is the attitude toward life and change. Is the present to be protected for what it is? Or is it to be regarded as a step to something better? Is change to be feared and resisted or is change the law of life? Shall we cling nostalgically and even fearfully to what exists? Or shall we welcome the adventure of innovation if it offers the chance to abolish poverty; to enlarge liberty; to relieve suffering and heal the sick; to come compassionately to the aid of the poor wherever they may be; to see the end of terror in the intercourse of nations; to see the clearer promise of peace itself . . . I have said that the issue is change, of willingness to see the present as a step toward something better. No one who saw Senator Kennedy toiling in . . . Congress to get approval of the minimum wage bill and of a decent health bill or to rescue the school construction bill could doubt the depth of his commitment to this goal . . . John F. Kennedy is a man of intelligence, judgment and inner power. The hopes of every American, new and old, old and young, ride with him in this campaign . . . So let us elect him . . . No one is ever aware of his powers of persuasion until he tries them. You try yours — every day from now until November . . . If your energy ever seems to flag, remember one thing that will do wonders; It’s John F. Kennedy. Or it’s Richard Nixon. 19

19 Part of a campaign speech Galbraith gave in the fall of 1960.
There are probably no two American writers that had more influence on the building of American liberalism than Galbraith and his close friend and Cambridge neighbor, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Both played important roles in extending Roosevelt liberalism into the postwar era and defining a new direction for the Democratic Party. They helped form the organization Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the leading voice of liberalism in the 1950s, with Eleanor Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. In a letter to Reagan on August 17, 1977, Galbraith wrote with some tongue in cheek congratulating Reagan’s public comment about the last episode of his television program, *Age of Uncertainty*, which was filmed in the summer of 1977 in Vermont.

August 17, 1977

Dear Governor:

I listened with much pleasure to your lucid and civilized comment on my final program last night and with some admiration for the precision with which you move on the points most open to debate.

I shared the television set with Bill Buckley who was our houseguest for a couple of days. Nothing gave me more pleasure than to tell him that it was precisely the virtuoso performance that I would expect from an old ADA colleague! My cordial regards.

Yours faithfully,

John Kenneth Galbraith

The goal of ADA was to extend the ideas of Roosevelt liberalism into the second half of America’s twentieth century, and provide an alternative to the politics of the Left and Right. The liberal movement in the United States, Galbraith and Schlesinger believed, had to respond to Communist tactics that could endanger the Democratic Party. On the other hand, they were concerned with the intimidating behavior of Senator Joseph McCarthy and other members of the Right in attacking the free speech and civil liberties of Communists, which pushed them into the uncomfortable role known as “anti-anti-Communists.” However, Galbraith and Schlesinger were determined to build a progressive agenda in America as they fought a two-front battle to establish a liberal anti-Communist organization that represented Roosevelt liberalism. They felt the best way to fight Communism was to deal with the economic threats of chronic depression, inflation, and inequity found in laissez-faire capitalism at home, and build an international consensus for peace and prosperity abroad. It was during the 1950s that Galbraith started to write political speeches for many prominent Democratic leaders, focusing on issues like monetary policies,
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taxation, agricultural subsidies, and job creation. In September 1953 he co-founded the Finletter Group to advise Adlai E. Stevenson and other Democrats on economic and social issues for midterm elections and the 1956 presidential campaign. In 1957, again with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., he chaired the Democratic Advisory Council, bringing together New Deal veterans to develop policies for the progressive side of the Democratic Party.

Galbraith’s influence in the Democratic Party was on both domestic and foreign issues. In January 1958, Galbraith sent to Hubert H. Humphrey, Adlai E. Stevenson, Lyndon B. Johnson, and then Senator John F. Kennedy a memo titled “Democratic Foreign Policy and the Voter: A Suggestion for Self-Criticism,” expressing his concern over the drift within the State Department and the Democratic Party toward Cold War policies. The memorandum is included in this volume and attached to what appears to be Galbraith’s first correspondence with Kennedy as a senator. Galbraith believed that the Cold War of the 1950s not only created international tension that could possibly lead to a nuclear exchange, but also threatened civil liberties at home (as represented by McCarthy’s “Red Scare”). In addition, it was used to justify an agenda of “Military Keynesianism” at the expense of domestic programs needed to address unemployment, education, poverty, race discrimination, urban renewal and support for the arts. Galbraith felt it was the charge of liberal Democrats to protect and promote an agenda of peace and prosperity. This required forward-looking initiatives leading to a new American spirit of global cooperation that challenged us to think beyond the use of the Big Stick.

Galbraith saw no sensible alternative to capitalism, but recognized it as a system with faults. As he would say many times, those positioned best to protect the virtues of capitalism were the liberals. They knew which reforms to put into place to save capitalism from its own self-destruction, making it both more humane and stable in the United States and worldwide. By showing how private and public enterprises along with individual initiatives can work together, he believed that America could be an example of how liberty and social responsibility work together. The goals of the US government should be domestically to reduce suffering and create opportunity, and internationally to transcend the politics of the Big Stick to a new global cooperation among nations to heighten the quality, richness and horizon of human life.

Galbraith was also farsighted in understanding the environmental and social threats of economic growth. He pointed out in the 1950s that the consumption and environmental consequences seen in the industrialization of the United States were not something to be emulated by developing countries. Instead the United States should show leadership in how to think of consumption, production, and the environmental use of the world’s resources, and go beyond

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