

Praise for
The Selected Letters of John Kenneth Galbraith

John Kenneth Galbraith occupied a unique place in American economics: a scholar, a policy advocate, a public official, and a popular author on both the printed page and the television screen. We admired each other and were good friends while both at Harvard. The letters now published reveal the sharp intellect and precision of wording in nailing down personal, political, and economic presentations and exposing cant and imprecision.

Kenneth J. Arrow, Professor of Economics, Stanford University,
and winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics

John Kenneth Galbraith prided himself on the quality of his writings and that is apparent in the precision and wit of these letters. Even more than in his published writings, he used irony and humor to skewer the conventional wisdom. What is also striking is the quality of the advice he gave his correspondents – both the powerful and the obscure – and how seldom he was wrong. John Kenneth Galbraith will be remembered for his intellectual and diplomatic achievements but these letters also record extraordinary friendships.

Ambassador Peter W. Galbraith

Letter writing is fast becoming a lost art, killed by social media. And that is why Ric Holt's volume is especially welcome and important, preserving the wonderful elegant voice of John Kenneth Galbraith: economist, public intellectual, diplomat, and Harvard professor. After reading this book, all readers will learn, laugh, and emerge more educated.

Henry Rosovsky, Harvard University

Economist, public intellectual, adviser to presidents, ambassador to India, liberal activist, Harvard professor, keen observer of politics, John Kenneth Galbraith led a grand and important life. It is fully captured in Ric Holt's superb collection. Herein lie the ideas, passions and recollections of a brilliant man in letters that capture some of the most compelling events and personalities of the twentieth century.

Ellen Fitzpatrick, Professor at the University of New Hampshire,
and author of *Letters to Jackie: Remembering President Kennedy*

Kenneth Galbraith's remarkable life is mirrored in these letters. Witty, always thoughtful, wise, they reflect a humaneness from which our harried age will benefit.

Henry A. Kissinger

John Kenneth Galbraith towered over the twentieth century, literally and intellectually. He gave voice and reason to those wishing to comfort the afflicted and to responsibly afflict the comfortable. These letters give an unparalleled glimpse into an unparalleled life.

Robert B. Reich, University of California at Berkeley

To receive a letter from Ken Galbraith was a delicious treat, even if it came wrapped in stinging nettles. To read this collection of Galbraith's letters is to replay the political and intellectual history of the United States during the twentieth century. Few Americans knew so many people involved with the country's great currents, or thought so incisively about the great questions of the day, or played so active a role in addressing them. No one wrote about them more engagingly, or with more grace and eloquence and wit.

Benjamin M. Friedman, William Joseph Maier Professor of
Political Economy, Harvard University

This remarkable collection reveals one of the great American liberals of the twentieth century, Ken Galbraith, to be a witty, elegant, and wise correspondent with some of his era's most fascinating figures – presidents, politicians, intellectuals, movie stars, and journalists. Galbraith was a brilliant, sometimes playfully irreverent observer, one always committed to his deeply held ideals – a vital participant in the great political and cultural arguments and events of his time.

Katrina vanden Heuvel, Editor and publisher, *The Nation*

John Kenneth Galbraith's published writing was among the wittiest and best informed ever printed. Happily, his private letters are just as pleasurable and edifying to read. How fortunate that his generation corresponded regularly, and preserved what they wrote. Students of Galbraith and of modern history will appreciate this splendid sample.

Robert Kuttner, Co-Editor, *The American Prospect*

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-01988-1 — The Selected Letters of John Kenneth Galbraith
Edited by Richard P. F. Holt
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THE SELECTED LETTERS OF
JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

The Selected Letters of John Kenneth Galbraith invites readers to join in conversations with presidents and first ladies, diplomats and schoolchildren, the McCarthy “loyalty board,” foreign heads of state and fellow economists, and a host of other correspondents. In his long and cosmopolitan life, Ken Galbraith wrote thousands of letters, and editor Ric Holt has selected the most important of these from his archival research, now available in print for the first time. The letters provide an intimate account of the three main political goals to which Galbraith devoted his professional life: ending war, fighting poverty, and improving quality of life by achieving a balance between private and public goods in an affluent capitalist society. Showing his thoughtful insights and charming wit, this collection confirms Galbraith as a man of broad learning, superb literary skills, and deeply held progressive ideals.

Richard P. F. Holt is Professor of Economics at Southern Oregon University. He has authored, coauthored, and edited many books, two of which were named a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Book Title. He has also published more than 60 articles and book reviews in a variety of academic journals, along with serving on various editorial boards.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107019881

10.1017/9781139095853

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First published 2017

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-01988-1 Hardback

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For My Mentors
Thomas Boylston Adams, F. Murray Forbes, Jr.,
and Carl Scovel

I write letters . . . not to persuade people, for which such
communications are largely worthless, but to please
myself, to celebrate absurdity and because the truth on
many matters is a most agreeable weapon.

John Kenneth Galbraith

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FOREWORD

Why should you read the letters of an economist – especially a dead one?

Economists are rarely celebrated, after all, for felicitous wit or the elegance of their writing style – and for many otherwise highly intelligent and literate readers, economic theories, models, equations, and arguments are, to say the least, uninvitingly abstruse.

John Kenneth Galbraith was different.

He was, during the second half of the twentieth century, America's – indeed the world's – most famous living economist, someone instantly recognized by millions across the planet. His major books – *American Capitalism*, *The Great Crash 1929*, *The Affluent Society*, *The New Industrial State*, and *Economics and the Public Purpose* – became international best-sellers from the moment of publication. These were just five of the nearly four dozen books (and thousands of articles, speeches, and opinion pieces, not to mention the letters collected here) that he wrote in his lifetime.

Galbraith's books, published in dozens of languages, have together sold more than 6,500,000 copies, making him – as he loved to remark – the second-best-selling economist in history, after Karl Marx. (He would often then add “in fairness” that it was Marx, not he, who should rightly rank second “since my books, unlike his, were all read voluntarily.”)

Galbraith taught at Harvard for 40 years, the years when Keynesianism was academically redrawing the boundaries and focus of economics. And like Keynes, he was by no means a conventional academic economist. By “conventional,” I mean both in the ways he thought and wrote about economics and in the life he lived, which ranged far more widely – into politics, journalism, diplomacy, and the arts – than all but a handful of his contemporaries, economists and non-economists alike.

Many so-called “mainstream” economists during his lifetime (as well as since) vehemently objected to Galbraith's theories about individual and collective economic behavior, and his doubts about the efficacy of the sorts of mathematical models which became de rigueur for professional advancement in economics after World War II. Well aware of their criticisms, he never hesitated to push back, arguing that excessive formalism in economic models as well as an

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often-well-concealed institutional (and at times partisan) conservatism undermined their claims to be closer than he to “neutral” and “scientific” analysis.

To be honest, Galbraith never considered himself a “scientific economist,” but rather an economist who could only conceive of the great economic problems by reference to institutions, prejudices, ignorance, and power. He was well acquainted with the history of both modern economies and modern economics, and from his reading (and personal experience) had little doubt that too much of conventional economic thought obscured more than it revealed about modern market societies.

That said, what is the value of his collected letters today – and why should you read them?

First is the sheer scope of these letters: They span Galbraith’s seven decades of adult life, beginning in the early 1930s with the Great Depression as background and ending only with his death in 2006. What one sees immediately is that Galbraith possessed an uncanny ability to befriend (and win the respect of) the celebrated and the powerful, from literary laureates and movie stars to business titans and diplomats, presidents and prime ministers. As his career and writing transit across modern American history, the letters trace his early experiences working for the New Deal and teaching at Harvard, his wartime work managing the nation’s prices to prevent inflation and scarcity on the home front, his introduction to journalism at *Fortune*, and then his return after the war years to Harvard with tenure, and purchase of the big Georgian house on Francis Avenue where he and his wife Kitty would thereafter reside for the rest of their lives.

It was to those postwar years that Galbraith first owed his fame, as America wrestled with its new-found role as global hegemon, and Americans unsteadily embraced big government and big business, worried about the risks of nuclear war, and struggled to come to terms with the level of affluence that prewar America, still tied to its Calvinist origins and ideals, could never have anticipated (or perhaps even conceived).

The letters secondly show him as an impressive and fast-rising political strategist and speechwriter in a Democratic Party that was laboring to find its way without Franklin Roosevelt. In 1952 and 1956, he worked tirelessly for Adlai Stevenson, and as one of the candidate’s speechwriters took pride in providing Stevenson with some of the sharpest jibes aimed at Vice-President Nixon. Behind the scenes, working through Americans for Democratic Action, the Finletter Group, and at Democratic leadership conferences, he labored to shape the party’s policies on almost every issue of consequence, from agricultural and fiscal policy to foreign affairs and military spending.

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With the election of President Kennedy in 1960, Galbraith took a leave of absence from Harvard to become Kennedy's Ambassador to India. By then, he was a keen observer of politics and politicians at home and abroad, and used his authentic friendship with JFK (the two had known each other since Kennedy's undergraduate days at Harvard) to educate the young president in the complexities of Keynesian economics as well as about the dangerous overreaching of America's military-industrial complex. Early on, he recognized the threat Vietnam posed for the new administration and the country, and lobbied the president relentlessly to avoid committing America to a land war in Asia.

If the Camelot years represented in some sense the apogee of his active political career, the subsequent presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were its perigee, as America itself seemed to slowly come apart. Galbraith began the Johnson years as a great enthusiast of the Great Society, recognizing in the larger-than-life Texan a fellow Rooseveltian, whose enormous 1964 victory over ultra-conservative Barry Goldwater offered an unprecedented opportunity to act once again on the New Deal's vision. By 1968, however, the president and the economist were no longer on speaking terms thanks to the White House's headlong plunge into Southeast Asia, and Galbraith actively campaigned against LBJ's reelection by persuading Senator Eugene McCarthy to run as an insurgent opponent in the early Democratic primaries.

The Nixon years, needless to say, brought no joy to Galbraith – or to the liberal tradition he represented – and he spent much of the time campaigning against the administration and its policies. These were also years of growing frustration in economics, although his fellow economists had elected him president of the American Economic Association in 1971. A new academic conservatism – led by Milton Friedman at Chicago – was gaining ground on the Keynesians as more and more Americans (including many of its best economists) began to view Keynesian policies as part of the country's economic problem, not its solution. (Nixon had not helped Keynes' reputation in announcing that he himself was now a Keynesian convert – and then proceeded to lead the country through repeated policy miscalculations and missteps that sharply worsened the nation's economic performance.)

What often stands out in his letters now are the correspondents themselves – Ralph Nader, Jackie Kennedy, Richard Burton, Henry Kissinger, Gloria Steinem, Milton Friedman, George McGovern, Edward R. Murrow, Clare Booth Luce, Nelson Rockefeller, Barry Goldwater, to name but a few. Comfortable in and confident of his own celebrity, he now mingles with the era's greatest figures on a first-name basis. But the letters aren't a vacuous celebration of shared celebrity; rather, they are quite consistently appeals or arguments about the vital political

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and economic issues of the day, from stagflation to Watergate, or the sudden rise of supply-side economics to the equally sudden fall of the Shah.

By now, Galbraith's authorial "voice" in these letters seems familiar – the seriousness of subject matter leavened with sly humor (often directed at himself), the tireless commitment to core liberal values, his abiding conviction that more work, more effort, more courage will overcome all but the worst of the world's crises. Even as a newly renewed conservatism in the 1980s rode roughshod over liberal programs in Washington and over liberal economics in the academy, Galbraith soldiered on, making the case for reestablishment of Rooseveltian politics and Keynesian economics in a new book every year or two, in articles by the score, and of course in these letters.

Ric Holt's careful selection of letters here by no means exhausts future scholars' opportunities to explore the thousands more that remain unpublished. His choices, however, give us an unparalleled introduction to one of the monumental figures of the twentieth century, to the times in which he lived, to the friendships and connections he cultivated, and to the values which animated so many of his generation to join the century's fights against fascism and communism, poverty and bias, Armageddon weapons, and the earth's despoliation.

It is a world that this volume ably recreates, reminding us thereby of the cycles of history and why those liberal principles may for a time be neglected but are never abandoned – and live on today, underscoring what needs still to be done.

Richard Parker
Harvard Kennedy School

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND PERMISSIONS

Without the assistance and help of staff members from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, Massachusetts, the Cambridge Edition of *The Selected Letters of John Kenneth Galbraith* would not have happened. The Galbraith papers at the library consist of a collection of over 500 cubic feet covering the years from 1932 to 2006. I collected thousands of letters from the library, which represents the heart of the collection for this volume. I'm indebted to Stephen Plotkin, Stacey Chandler, Michael Desmond, and Jane Silva for their help. They were always there to assist with my daily work of going through hundreds of boxes of material. I appreciate their support with this project, along with so many other wonderful staff members associated with the library and museum. I would also like to thank the archive staff at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, where Catherine Galbraith's letters and material are housed. Their assistance was invaluable. In addition, I would like to thank William Massa at the manuscript and archives department at Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University for his help.

A very special thank you needs to go to Ken Galbraith's three sons. Though this project might have been accomplished without their help, the overall quality would have suffered. Alan, Peter, and Jamie were always there for me and truly went out of their way to be supportive and answered all my questions over many years of research. I particularly would like to thank Alan for going through the letters after I finished editing them to provide insights about people and events that I would have missed – and pointing out my numerous typing mistakes. Another thank you to Richard Parker for his encouragement to move forward on the project at some tiresome moments. A debt of gratitude goes to Christopher Buckley for his many suggestions in making the volume better, and keeping my spirits up throughout. Unknown to me at the time I was plowing through the material for this book, Steve Schlesinger was editing, with his brother, a volume of letters by his father, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. After a lovely summer lunch in New York City, we agreed that it was important for American history to have the letters of Galbraith and Schlesinger out there for the public to see. I will always be grateful to him for his support.

Acknowledgments and Permissions

I would also like to thank friends, colleagues, and family members who provided support. They include Ken Arrow, Sylvia Baldwin, Alan Blinder, Sissela and Derek Bok, Sam Bowles, Jaren Breault, Philo Wigglesworth Cushing, Ellen Fitzpatrick, Lorna Forbes, Robert H. Frank, Benjamin Friedman, Herb Gintis, Alan Dershowitz, Neva Goodwin, Robert Gordon, David Greenway, Daphne Greenwood, Bob Gordon, Jim Katz, Cam Kerry, Diana Kerry, John Kerry, Peggy Kerry, Arthur MacEwan, Karen Maloney, Lila Marroquin, Tiffani Morrison, Scott Parris, Ramelle and Michael Pulitzer, Ali Righter, Alice Rivlin, Henry Rosovsky, Juliet Schor, Carl Scovel, William vanden Heuvel, and Serita Winthrop.

I also owe a great debt to those individuals who gave me permission to publish letters written to Ken Galbraith by themselves or family members: Letters from Jacqueline Kennedy reprinted with permission from Caroline Kennedy; Jan Martel to print letters from her father, Milton Friedman; Martha Sweezy for permission to publish the letters of Paul Sweezy; Nicholas Baran to publish letters from his father, Paul Baran; Robert J. Gordon for publishing the letters of his father, Robert Gordon; Joseph S. Nye, Jr. to publish his letter; Christopher Buckley for allowing me to publish the letters of his father, William F. Buckley, Jr.; Roger Tobin to publish the letters of his father, James Tobin; Steve Schlesinger to publish the letters of his father, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.; Henry Rosovsky for allowing me to publish his letter; and finally Dr. Kissinger for allowing me to publish his letters.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

To help the reader, I regularized the placement of name, date, and place where the letter was sent. The salutation and valediction, along with the signature, are exactly what are found on the letters. Spacing and paragraph indention in most cases follow that of the letter, but in some instances it was changed to avoid erratic spacing. Letters that were transcribed from handwritten letters tried to capture the letter's appearance, but there are no facsimiles of letters in the volume and what is reproduced might physically look different from the actual letter. Annotation of the letters appears as footnotes or headings. To avoid overwhelming the reader with too many editorial comments, there was a conscious effort to minimize the number of footnotes to mostly identifying people and events, and to use heading annotations to provide a context of time, place, and event for the letters.

Words or phrases underlined by Galbraith are italic. Square brackets are occasionally used in a letter to spell out an acronym, to indicate illegible or missing words or text, or to add a word to make a sentence understandable. The original spelling and punctuation have been preserved, except in instances where an obvious typing mistake was made or the lack of a punctuation mark would make the statement meaningless. Every effort has been made to identify individuals mentioned in the letters, and reference them in the annotation. However, some identities could not be ascertained. Also, Galbraith received many letters from strangers. If the person was not a friend, family member, colleague, professional associate, or a well-known figure, I have indicated the person by the place from where their letter was sent. With a few letters, to save space, I have published only part of the letter, which I footnote. In most cases I have provided biographical information of people mentioned in footnotes when they first appear. Occasionally, if I felt it would be helpful to the reader, I have repeated that information in another letter. But in most cases I have provided biographical information only once.

Because much of the correspondence between President Kennedy and Galbraith was published in an edited volume by James Goodman, *Letters*

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Note on the Text

to Kennedy, in 1998 by Harvard University Press, I decided to focus mostly on letters that have not been published between Kennedy and Galbraith in this volume. For a complete look at the correspondence between Kennedy and Galbraith, I suggest going to Goodman's book along with this one.