

Thomas Merton and Presidential Politics

By Shawn Quinn

Throughout his years at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton kept journals and wrote letters. Initially, Merton felt that writing would be at odds with his vocation, worried it would lead to a tendency towards individualism. Fortunately, Merton's superior recognized he had a talent for writing and allowed him to do so. By the time Merton's autobiography and spiritual work became internationally recognized, Merton was much more attuned to the politics consuming the country in the 1960s. Merton's writings accordingly shifted to reflect a broadly human viewpoint that was deeply concerned with issues like war and peace. Far from his initial unease that his writings would lead to individualism Merton, to varying degrees, began criticizing the policies of each president of the 1960s. In his writings Merton became a political analyst and commentator, often remarking on presidential candidates and elections, public presidential approval, presidential policies, and even the character of the presidents themselves. On the whole, Merton admired President Eisenhower but detested his policies, supported and liked both the character and agenda of President Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy (although at times criticizing each), and downright loathed the person and platform of President Johnson as well as future Presidents Nixon and Reagan.

In both his personal journals and in letters to friends, Merton discussed politics. Merton's sense of approval and frustration of the political world in each of these sources remained the same. The colorful language and rants Merton sometimes used to describe the presidents was shared in his personal and private notes to himself and others.

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Merton's political conscience began to blossom as President Eisenhower's second term was coming to a close. Accordingly, of all the elected presidents, the quantitative written comments on President Eisenhower are less numerous than on subsequent presidents. Nonetheless, Merton's rhetoric on this president remains just as strong.

As would be the case for all other presidents, the lens in which Merton saw President Eisenhower's policies was premised on conflict. The potential for total destruction by nuclear weapons was real and of great concern to Merton. In criticizing President Eisenhower's administration, Merton blames Eisenhower for perpetuating the notion "that nuclear war is reasonable and that it makes sense trying to consider it as a real possibility."¹ Merton viewed this as "a very dangerous step, for if this country comes to accept nuclear war as a reasonable solution to anything, we are very likely to have one" (*CWL* 52). Since Eisenhower did little to deter this perception, Merton had little regard for President Eisenhower's policies.

In evaluating the president, Merton referred to "[President] Eisenhower who, with his whole administration, was a complete failure and did much harm to the country. . . . As a president he was zero" (*CWL* 52). Eisenhower and his administration's failure to stop the nuclear arms

race was cause for Merton's poor review of Eisenhower as president. However, Merton did see some redeeming qualities. Merton considered Eisenhower "a very fine person" outside his duties in the White House (*CWL* 52). Regardless, Merton admitted that his view of Eisenhower as president was skewed because of the "favorable contrast" President Kennedy represented to President Eisenhower during the 1960 election. Merton wished that "Kennedy may be able to rise above his own level and grow into a great president, for we certainly need one" (*CWL* 52). Accordingly, Merton voted for John Kennedy in the 1960 election.

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In casting his vote for Kennedy in the 1960 election, Merton certainly hoped that Kennedy would be an outstanding president. Before the 1960 election, Merton studied the candidates by listening to material on them in the refectory before voting.² Merton also noted that much of the monastery would be voting for Kennedy as many brothers told him they would be doing so and by seeing "Vote Democrat" bumper stickers placed on monastery equipment (*TTW* 63). Despite who and why others voted for any candidate, Merton voted for John Kennedy not because he was Catholic, but rather because Merton thought "there was not too much to choose between them but that Kennedy is the better man, at least shows promise of much more development."³ Foreshadowing, the 1968 election, Merton was no fan of Richard Nixon, Kennedy's opponent.

The election of 1960 was one of the closest presidential races the nation has ever seen. The day following the election, Merton turned political analyst, remarking on how the race would and did play out. Merton states:

This morning early rumors were already going around that the Cellarer had sat up all night listening to the radio and that Kennedy was in. This was a bit premature, but by Chapter time the California returns cinched it for Kennedy. I am not surprised and not especially impressed either. But he ought to make a reasonably good president – with the aid of his brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles etc. And that old turkey his father. If I had known yesterday something of his history in finance. I would have been even more hesitant to vote than I actually was. The story was read in refectory today but have had nothing but Kennedy for days, with occasional interludes of Nixon. (*TTW* 64)

As the election continued to unfold for the next couple of days, Merton continued his outspoken analysis of the election returns. Merton weighed the results in California and came to the conclusion that the vote as is was too close and would be determined by absentee ballots. As California's electoral votes remained in limbo, Merton observed that Minnesota's late returns "cinched it for Kennedy" (*TTW* 64). Summarizing the results of the election, Merton concluded that it was a

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“curious election, symptomatic of the conflicts, ambiguities and confusions of this country” (*TTW* 64). The 1960 election marked the beginning of Merton’s outspoken involvement in presidential politics.

Merton’s view of Kennedy is bipolar. For extended periods of time Merton praises the president. Equally, Merton criticizes Kennedy, sharing the sentiment that he has little hope in his policies. When Kennedy was officially declared the winner, Merton “was happy” at the outcome of the election (*RJ* 237). Merton explains:

I think [President] Kennedy is all right, and his brother [Robert F. Kennedy] is a good man. I know his brother’s wife [Ethel Kennedy]. They are reasonable people, and probably as good as anyone we have at the moment. In a word I think Kennedy is fairly capable Some of his cabinet are pretty good men too. But the task is enormous, and the dangers are very great. (*CWL* 52)

Merton was indeed correct in his assessment about the burdensome challenges that the country and President Kennedy would have to face and endure in the upcoming years. For the time being, Merton was happy that President Kennedy would lead the country and government during these troubled times. After Kennedy’s inauguration speech was read aloud in the monastery, Merton remarked, “Clear and intelligent enough. The country has a good president – it remains to see what the country will do about it” (*TTW* 89). Merton’s initial remarks that President Kennedy was a capable and sincere politician would soon come into question during the president’s handling of the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis.

Merton’s belief that since World War II “the military have really taken over from the politicians (or taken the politicians over)” seemed to come true during the American sponsored military invasion of Cuba (*TTW* 206). Merton saw the invasion as a “very sad, hopeless business, engineered by some fools who thought they knew what they were doing” and a “great waste of lives and effort” (*TTW* 118). Furthermore, Merton asserted that it was a failed attempt of Kennedy’s to “sell [his] soul for the next immediate gain, and the result is hell for everybody” (*TTW* 127). The military invasion of Cuba gave Merton great cause to change his early positive impressions of the president. Merton’s optimism turned into pessimism:

I have little confidence in Kennedy, I think he cannot fully measure up to the magnitude of his task, and lacks creative imagination and the deeper kind of sensitivity that is needed What is needed is really not shrewdness or craft, but what the politicians don’t have: depth, humanity and a certain totality of self-forgetfulness and compassion, not just for individuals but for man as a whole: a deeper kind of dedication. Maybe Kennedy will break through into that someday by miracle. But such people are before long marked out for assassination.⁴

Merton’s eerie prediction of Kennedy’s death and a possible change towards compassion would later come true. However, before it did, Merton took the responsibility to change Kennedy’s policies personally by writing to his relatives.

In writing to the president's sister-in-law, Ethel Kennedy, Merton hoped to inspire the compassion and depth of humanity in the president that he thought would lead the world in a better direction. Merton felt that writing to Ethel was the least he could do to try and change government policy. Following the Bay of Pigs, Merton became increasingly concerned that Kennedy would be all too quick to start a global nuclear war. Thus, Merton's intention in writing to Ethel was to make "an explicit statement of objection to the resumption of nuclear testing" (*TTW* 158). In his correspondence with Ethel, Merton shared his thought that "War is the main enemy" and our country should be fighting the temptation to go to war, rather than the Russians (*CWL* 27). Merton also addressed President Kennedy's Bay of Pigs fiasco to Ethel saying "We have made mistakes and will make more of them, but I hope we can learn to be a bit more realistic about all that, as long as we avoid the biggest mistake of all: plunging the world into nuclear war" (*CWL* 27). Finally, in the hope that Merton, through Ethel, would be able to forward his advice to the president himself, Merton gave Ethel suggestions on what the president could do to avoid nuclear war. He states, "The President can certainly do more than any one man to counteract this by word and example, by doing everything that can help salvage the life of reason, by maintaining respect for intelligence and humanist principles without which freedom is only a word" (*CWL* 28). Whether or not Merton's advice ever reached Kennedy, the president changed, seeming to have greater depth and respect for humanity. While Merton was once skeptical that Kennedy would ever undergo this change, he recognized it after the president's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Merton's warning of total nuclear destruction never was as relevant as during the Cuban Missile Crisis. President Kennedy's military advisers almost unanimously urged him to launch missiles as a preemptive strike against Cuba. President Kennedy however refused to do so. During the events of this crisis, Merton was convinced that a nuclear war would occur: "How, in a situation like this, a nuclear war can be avoided is difficult to see: doubtless it *can*, but taking into account the past patterns of [President Kennedy's] behavior and the accumulated commitments of each side, I would say the folly is inevitable, unless all the politicians and military men suddenly drop dead" (*TTW* 260-61). Merton's dire prediction aside, President Kennedy avoided nuclear war. Merton, stunned that war did not break out, did not see this aversion as necessarily something to be glad about. Merton did not want the country to perceive America's "strong stand" as an indication that the country was in control and safe (*TTW* 276). Nonetheless, Merton acknowledged President Kennedy's "good honest intentions" in his efforts to avoid war (*CWL* 110).

Before his final forecast of President Kennedy's assassination would come true, Merton softened his view on Kennedy, having a more positive outlook. As a strong supporter of the civil rights bill, Merton appreciated and approved of the president's efforts towards equality for blacks. Merton remarked, "I think the Kennedys are sincere with their civil rights bill, but the problem is to get it through Congress, with all the cornpone Neanderthals officiating there!" (*TTW* 338). Although having little to no information from the outside political world, Merton once again acted as a political analyst, assessing the political world around him to which he

was not fully attuned.

While being largely removed from newspapers or any other information that would give Merton a complete sense of the presidential politics, Merton was dead accurate with his predictions on Kennedy. As what eventually happened, Merton remarked that Kennedy would be “marked out for assassination” if he changed, as he did during the Cuban Missile Crisis (*HGL* 205). Upon hearing of President Kennedy’s death, Merton was “bewildered and slightly sick.”⁵ Merton could not make sense of the assassination calling it “absurd” (*DWL* 37). In the days that followed, Merton could not stop thinking about the president’s death (*DWL* 37). Merton drafted letters to Ethel and to President Kennedy’s wife, Jacqueline, expressing his prayers and condolences to each of them and their families (see *HGL* 447-48; 449-50). In his letter to Jacqueline, Merton remembered the president. “There can be no doubt now that the greatness of President Kennedy has been made dazzlingly clear to everyone, and that the scope and integrity of his work have established themselves beyond all question” (*HGL* 450). In his private journals, Merton remembered President Kennedy as “a good president, vigorous, honest, fairly shrewd, with undoubted limitations, but trying to go in the right direction” (*DWL* 37). In death, Merton changed his view of Kennedy again. Similar to his initial excitement of President Kennedy’s election, Merton remembered Kennedy as a good man.

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As Johnson took the oath of office following Kennedy’s death, Merton wondered what kind of president Johnson would be. Merton wrote, “Will he, like Truman, be the one left to carry out a momentous and destructive decision that may affect, and radically so, the whole future of the world?” (*DWL* 39). Merton soon answered his own question. After the appointment of Thomas Mann to run the country’s Latin American affairs bureau, Merton saw this as “the first indication . . . of President Johnson’s limitations” (*DWL* 65). Merton’s initial lukewarm view of President Johnson only intensified.

Merton could never separate President Johnson from the war in Vietnam. Even before the conflict escalated, Merton analyzed Johnson’s upcoming election. Merton asserted:

There is some worry about President Johnson’s policies in Asia. To make sure of votes, he has to threaten war and promise “results” against the Communists. Something very strange about a system where political power for a party demands the sacrifice of lives of poor people thousands of miles away who never heard of democrats and republicans! I am not talking about Communist power only, but that of Democrats or Republicans. Can I honestly vote for any one in this year’s election? (*DWL* 123-24)

Unlike the limited amount of research available before the 1960 election, Merton had everything that he needed to know before the 1964 election. Merton was so disillusioned with presidential politics he nearly forgot to vote on election-day (*DWL* 161). It was not until after the election that Merton found out about the campaign. After hearing snippets about the ongoing election from his monastic brothers, Merton remarked that the campaign “was hot and dirty” (*DWL* 163). Merton saw “the quasi-religious character of the zeal” for Johnson’s opponent, Barry

Goldwater, and was accordingly surprised that he did not get more votes and that Johnson won in as big a landslide as he did (*DWL* 162-63). Despite Merton's frustrations with both presidential candidates, Merton cast his vote for President Johnson (*DWL* 284).

Voting for President Johnson later caused Merton to have great regret in doing so (*DWL* 284). As Johnson ordered the escalation and bombing of Vietnam, Merton was disillusioned with the president:

I don't know what news comes from Asia – certainly the war goes on and will go on. Johnson is listening to the Pentagon crowd, and his stubbornness and vanity will harden him against criticism or differences of opinion. I deeply regret having voted for him; but the landslide was significant. We got the president we deserved – and, I suppose, wanted. He is doing what Goldwater would have done, but in a manner that most people can accept: without moralizing too much, acting as a shrewd operator, vulgar, self-indulgent; an American Khrushchev. (*DWL* 288-89)

For the remainder of his term in office, Merton was relentless in his criticism of President Johnson and the Vietnam War. As the deaths and combat in Vietnam increased, the public also turned against Johnson. Picking up on the public's outrage Merton noted, "No one really trusts Johnson and it is evident that even the most seemingly honest gestures . . . are ninety percent hoax" (*HGL* 379). On a different occasion, Merton shares the same sentiment saying, "The country is not behind [the Vietnam War], and yet Johnson insists on going on. I think he is very stupid and that he, and everyone else, will have cause to regret it" (*HGL* 370). "Maybe Johnson has finally got his big war, but he still hasn't got the country with him. Never was anyone such an unconvincing fraud!"⁶ Neither the President nor the man got any praise from Merton.

Merton was convinced that Johnson wanted war. "Johnson and the establishment are not averse to a big war."⁷ "He is determined to have a world war" (*OSM* 47). Even Johnson's "war on poverty" was not making a fan out of Merton: "A few gestures in a futile 'war on poverty' that changes nothing. A few slogans about a 'great society.' And a frenzied all-out effort at mammoth war with machines – a war on women and children and trees and rice fields – this society is cursed with destructiveness and thinks itself . . . creative and progressive" (*LL* 187-88). Merton's initial uncertainty of the kind of president Johnson would be never escaped him. Merton was convinced that the man was up to no good.

Merton's paranoia of Johnson's plot to start and continue wars did not subside in the 1968 presidential elections. Before Johnson's announcement that he would not seek another term as president, Merton predicted the dirty political tactics he would use in order to win another term in the presidency:

Johnson will attempt some sort of compromise gesture that may effectively lull the awakening suspicions and questions of "good ordinary folks" and draw the sting out of much of the resistance. Then when he is re-elected-step up police repression and control by force, subtle and overt, perhaps withdrawing

to some extent from vast foreign involvements- a more fascist idolatrous idea.
(*OSM 51-52*)

Merton so loathed President Johnson, he would create and imagine scenarios in which Johnson would try to manipulate and play the American electorate. Under the impression that Johnson would receive the Democratic nomination, Merton turned to the Republican Party. Merton pondered the possibility that Senator Rockefeller would win the Republican nomination, in which case Merton considered, “there will be at least a choice – though not much of one” in the 1968 election (*OSM 65*).

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Given Merton’s past favorable relationships with President Kennedy and Ethel Kennedy, he became excited at the possibility that Bobby Kennedy could become president. Merton examined the possibility of Bobby Kennedy entering the race. “A lot of people would [vote for him], I think, if he got the nomination. It might be harder for him to get nominated than elected” (*OSM 74-75*). However, Merton could not contemplate the possibility of Bobby entering the race without Johnson having a trick up his sleeve. In talking about a nomination fight between Kennedy and Johnson, Merton saw Bobby in an uphill struggle against “The power of the Johnson machine. In spite of the noise of the war hawks I think the majority of people in this country are utterly sick of Johnson and recognize his falsity” (*OSM 75*).

Even after Johnson announced he would not again run for President, Merton still thought that Johnson might have a diabolical scheme planned. Merton considered that Johnson’s plan was, “eventually to be ‘drafted’ again at the convention [as a way] of circumventing Bobby Kennedy” (*OSM 76*). If this was indeed the case, Merton saw this prospect as “depressing” (*OSM 76*). However, what caused Merton’s depression was Bobby Kennedy’s assassination following his California primary victory (*OSM 126*). In his journal Merton commented, “A murder is bad enough in itself – but a political assassination of one whose brother has already been the victim of one, and when R. K. was in a good position to get the Presidential Nomination and even the presidency: it is shattering” (*OSM 127*). Merton was undoubtedly fond of Bobby Kennedy and his family and was likely to vote for him for president if in fact he won the Democratic nomination.

Following Bobby Kennedy’s death, Merton once again began to scrutinize the current race for the presidency:

I don’t expect McCarthy to be nominated. Johnson’s machine is too powerful.
If it is a choice between Humphrey and Nixon, Tweedeed and Tweedledum
– in fact, two nonentities – I can’t vote at all. Still less for a goof like Reagan.
And how vote for Rockefeller? He may be fairly capable but, like all these
others, he will push the Vietnam War to its limit. If McCarthy is not nominated
I don’t see my way to voting for anybody. (*OSM 127*)

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Since Merton had a negative view of Ronald Reagan in the 1960s, it is likely that had he lived in the 1980s, Merton would have remained steadfast in his initial impressions of the future

president just as he had with Johnson. As the presidential primary continued to unfold Merton continued his commentary:

Useless to put down “what people think” of the presidency. Nixon will doubtless be nominated by the Republicans in Miami – maybe already is, who knows? Still a strong possibility of Johnson being “drafted” because Humphrey could not beat anyone – even Nixon. Small hope of McCarthy being nominated. Conclusion: prospect of one of these for President – Nixon, Humphrey, Johnson. Three zeros, and the worst is Johnson – who might die or get shot and then we’d have Humphrey. Or God knows – Reagan as survivor of Nixon! The next four years do not look good for America or for the world. (OSM 151)

All in all, with the exception of McCarthy, whose anti-war platform likely appealed to him, Merton saw little prospect in the election after Bobby Kennedy’s death. Merton’s distaste for politics and the repeated remarks of assassinations, convinced him of the worst-case scenario.

Only after Humphrey was nominated did Merton finally become persuaded that Johnson’s term was going to end as president. Despite his disliking for President Johnson, Merton saw the three candidates for president in 1968 – Humphrey, Nixon, and Wallace – as “three complete zeros to vote for” (OSM 162). Even if Merton followed through in his plans not to vote for any presidential candidate, it is likely that Merton would not have voted anyway as he was in Asia. In one of Merton’s last journal entries before he unexpectedly died on his trip, he commented on the outcome of the election: “Nixon of course has won the presidential election. But Humphrey was closer that I expected. Wallace was nowhere, and I am glad to hear he did *not* take Kentucky (Nixon did). Our new president is depressing. What can one expect of him?” (OSM 265). What Merton would come to expect of President Nixon and his escalation of the war in Vietnam and later Watergate is unclear. However, if Johnson is Merton’s measurement of Nixon’s potential success, it would be reasonable to say Merton would not be very fond of Nixon’s time in office.

Despite being in solitude at the monastery in Gethsemani, Merton had a keen awareness of the presidents, their policies and their elections. Even while getting limited information, Merton had some surprisingly accurate predictions about presidential politics, despite his false obsession that Johnson was diabolically planning something in order to get re-elected in the 1968 campaign. In both instances when the Kennedys were assassinated, Merton was deeply disappointed, fearing the potential polices of the next president to ascend to the office. Merton’s ideas about the presidents were based on war and military conflict: Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis, Johnson and the Vietnam War, Nixon and Reagan and the perceived possibility of the escalation of war. While deeply immersed in prayer, contemplation, and solitude as a monk, Merton also concerned himself with the presidential politics of his day.

1. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 52; subsequent references will be cited as “CWL” parenthetically in the text.

2. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 63; subsequent references will be cited as “*TTW*” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 237.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 205; subsequent references will be cited as “*HGL*” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 36; subsequent references will be cited as “*DWL*” parenthetically in the text.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 46-47; subsequent references will be cited as “*OSM*” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 224; subsequent references will be cited as “*LL*” parenthetically in the text.