

TED SORENSEN INTERVIEW  
THE INTERVIEW ARCHIVE

**Ted Sorensen, Political Advisor**  
**July 31, 2003**  
**Total Running Time: 1 hour 43 minutes**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

00:00:05

INTERVIEWER

So how did you come to meet and work with President Kennedy?

00:00:10

TED SORENSEN

I graduated from law school and went to Washington to look for a job. My first job with a government agency was sufficiently low level that I accepted a friend's invitation to try a job on Capitol Hill, which was for a temporary congressional committee, six months long. And when that committee expired, I couldn't get back into the executive branch because Eisenhower, the first Republican president in 20 years, had put a freeze on executive branch employment. The chairman of the committee, Paul Douglas, wonderful Democratic senator from Illinois, said, "Don't worry, there are a couple of new senators who have served in the House. I know them both, and I'll recommend you and arrange for you to meet them." One of those was John F. Kennedy.

00:00:58

INTERVIEWER

And when you met John F. Kennedy, did you feel an instant sort of, Hey, this guy's just he's just like me, This is my kind of man. And could you sort of instantly relate to him?

00:01:08



TED SORENSEN

The extraordinary thing about John F. Kennedy, I've said before, was that he was like an ordinary person. He didn't try to overwhelm you with his importance or his wealth or his fame or his good looks or his heroism in the war. He was an ordinary guy. He had an ordinary handshake and a familiar, genial way of speaking, and he and I got along immediately.

00:01:33

INTERVIEWER

And yet, did you ever stop and think about your differences? You were from Nebraska.

00:01:38

TED SORENSEN

I thought many, many times about our differences. On the surface, our differences were enormous. He was from New England, I was from the Midwest. He was from a millionaire's family, I was from a middle-class lawyer's family. He was a Roman Catholic, I'm a Unitarian. He was a Ivy League war hero, I came from the University of Nebraska and never served in the military. But those turned out to be surface differences and when it came to ideas and principles and how to look at the world and our fellow human beings, we found ourselves thinking very much alike.

00:02:19

INTERVIEWER

That was beautifully said, I just want to tell you that. And it's no surprise when you think about your incredibly fluid and powerful language that you have composed over these years. In the inaugural address that you wrote

00:02:40

TED SORENSEN

I never acknowledge writing it.

00:02:41

INTERVIEWER

You don't?

00:02:42

TED SORENSEN



You don't want me to say that on camera, do you?

00:02:45

INTERVIEWER

No. I mean if you want, I just want you to say the truth. Did you write the inaugurals the inaugural address?

00:02:52

TED SORENSEN

I take the fifth.

00:02:53

INTERVIEWER

Really? Okay. All right. Because what I wanted to talk to you about was the call for citizenship and the call for a new frontier, passing the torch to a new generation, those were incredibly powerful images and really seemed to have touched a chord in the country. And I'm wondering how that was crafted and if John Kennedy was aware at the time how potent his language was.

00:03:30

TED SORENSEN

By the time we reached the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles in July of 1960, John F. Kennedy and I had been on the road together in all 50 states for almost four years, and we had tried out every theme, every speech, every sentence, every phrase. And one of the themes that meant most to him was the call to public service. His mother had said, those to whom much is given, much is required. And he wanted to, in a sense, extend that to the country as a whole. The United States was fortunate, fortunate in terms of the education of the people, the resources of the land. And therefore, we owed something to the world. We owed something to mankind. And he looked upon the presidency as an opportunity for service, and his call to the American people, particularly young Americans, was a call to service. So at the convention, we developed the idea of the new frontier, the challenges that awaited America.

00:04:39

TED SORENSEN



It was a very new world, the new world of space that we had not yet entered. New challenges in civil rights at home and human rights abroad, new challenges in science and business and trying to improve American education. These were all new frontiers that Jack Kennedy wanted to cross, and that was his way of serving, and those two themes, the theme of New Frontiers and the themes of public service, became the two themes of his presidential campaign, and they were reflected in his inaugural address as well.

00:05:18

INTERVIEWER

When did you meet Robert Kennedy?

00:05:20

TED SORENSEN

I first met Robert Kennedy at some point for just a matter of minutes during my first year in John F. Kennedy's senatorial office, 1953. Robert Kennedy was also working in the Senate at the same time he was working for Senator Joe McCarthy's subcommittee on permanent investigations. A fact that didn't endear me to him or him to me, but nevertheless, that's when I met him.

00:05:51

INTERVIEWER

When you met him, what was your impression of him?

00:05:53

TED SORENSEN

That first meeting was all too brief to build any lasting impression, but it was clear to me that he and Jack had different personalities. Robert was a little rougher, Jack was a little gentler, Robert was more passionate, Jack was more intellectual, Robert was much closer to his gruff and very conservative father, and Jack often expressed his very clear disagreements with his father.

00:06:27

INTERVIEWER Let's talk about those relationships with his father for a moment since you raised them. Can you tell me a little bit more about that? How each related to the ambassador and how their differences in that relationship sort of told you about each son's character?



00:06:47

TED SORENSEN

Both Jack and Bobby Kennedy loved their father. However gruff and difficult and outspoken he might sometimes be, however his positions may differ from theirs, particularly with Jack's, they didn't differ at first that much from Bobby's, but he loved them and he had great pride in them, he had great ambitions for them.

00:07:12

PRODUCTION

We should stop this. And okay.

00:07:16

INTERVIEWER

Okay. You wanna just pick up and and let's I'll re-ask the question. What is the difference in their relationship with their father tells you about each man?

00:07:33

TED SORENSEN

In the 1950s and 60s, Jack Kennedy was a successful politician and legislator, and soon a successful candidate for president and president. He loved his father, but he knew that his father's views were formed in a different era, and he did not always let those views guide him very much, to put it bluntly. Bobby was younger, he was still forming his own career. He was very close to his father, and his father, I think, felt that Bobby was more in his own image. Bobby was could be rough and tough, and the ambassador, as everybody called him, liked that, and it reflected the differences between the two individuals in every walk of life. Jack Kennedy when he was, when was it, I think it was when he was leaving Chicago after the convention - and no, no, it was later. Sorry, it was much later in the campaign. And someone told him that Martin Luther King's father had decided to switch from Nixon to Kennedy, but he had been supporting Nixon because he didn't like Kennedy being a Catholic. And John Kennedy replied, Martin Luther King's father, a bigot, imagine that. Then he said, well, we all have our fathers.

00:09:23



INTERVIEWER

It's a great story.

00:09:25

TED SORENSEN

On the evening of the first debate. So important, so tense, so much writing on it. The live television debate with Nixon. JFK and I walked off the sound stage in Chicago, where the debate had been held together, and there was a payphone on the wall. And he said, wait a minute, you have a quarter - or maybe it was a dime in those days. And he dialed his father. And I stood there for a minute, and I could see a smile light up on JFK's face and finally he said, "Thanks, Dad," put down the phone, he turned to me and said, "That's the great thing about my father. If I had fallen flat on my face out there, he would have said, Jack, the way you picked yourself up off the floor was magnificent."

00:10:23

INTERVIEWER

So there was a deep love and

00:10:26

TED SORENSEN

Bobby loved his father so much, even after his father was ill, maybe even more after his father was ill. His father had a stroke at the time that Bobby declared his candidacy for president. One day on the way, not exactly on the way, or way out of the way, from Washington to a union convention in Atlantic City, UAW, Bobby directed the plane to take us up to Hyannis port or to Cape Cod so he could have lunch with his father. His father was not going to give him any advice about a union convention. Even if he had been well, he wouldn't have been in a position to give much eyes about a union convention. But the father was not well, and he could not express himself. And we sat at lunch, Bobby and I, with his father and his mother.

00:11:25

TED SORENSEN

We talked a little about the campaign, the father clearly interested, clearly listening, clearly understanding, but the victim of a stroke, unable to speak, and so frustrated by his inability to speak. He wanted to advise his son. He



wanted to commend him and congratulate him and express his confidence in him, but he couldn't, and he cried. Tears poured down his cheeks as he sat there, unable to communicate with us. It was a touching moment, and Bobby, with tears in his eyes, embraced him before we left.

00:12:08

INTERVIEWER

What do you think that the qualities were in Robert Kennedy that John Kennedy most admired?

00:12:16

TED SORENSEN

The quality in Robert Kennedy that John Kennedy most admired was Bobby's loyalty. He knew that Bobby was with him. He knew that Bobby would look at issues and people, whether they were adversaries or friends, the way that John Kennedy looked at them. He knew that the policies that he formulated would be supported by Bobby, but he also knew that Bobby's judgment, Bobby's advice, particularly on those issues in domestic affairs such as crime and race relations, where Bobby was the expert and had responsibility, would be good advice. He needed someone whose advice he could rely on in those sensitive areas. And even in foreign policy, where Bobby had no previous experience, where Jack had much more experience, he found Bobby on major international crises was once again a dependable voice, but one that was skeptical of other persons' recommendations, who wanted to do what was best for the nation and for the Kennedy presidency.

00:13:31

INTERVIEWER

I wanna back up for one minute just because you're one of the few people we're talking to who was actually - who can actually remember the night of the nineteen sixty election. Were you with the president that night?

00:13:45

TED SORENSEN

Yes.

00:13:45

INTERVIEWER



In Hyannis port? Can you tell me any memories you have of him that night? What it was like in Hyannis port at the house at that night and stuff?

00:14:00

TED SORENSEN

On election night, 1960, several of us gathered in front of the television set in the family house living room at Hyannis port. One hallmark of the Kennedy campaign from the very beginning had been confidence, not overconfidence. We knew that to defeat an incumbent vice president of an administration that had brought the country peace and prosperity was going to be an uphill battle, that Nixon was a tough, shrewd opponent, that the country had never supported a Roman Catholic nominee for that kind of high office. And so in many ways the odds were against us. But we knew we had a good campaign as well as a good candidate. We knew we had positions on the issues that were right and best for the American people. We were tense. Bobby was in and out constantly on the phones to friends and allies all over the country getting the latest returns, coming in now and then with some encouraging news, but it was too close to call as the night wore on.

00:15:24

TED SORENSEN

And finally we got into the early hours of the morning, and Jack went over to his house and went to sleep. And Bobby and I stayed watching for a while, but it was not altogether clear until dawn practically, which way it would go. Then a report, incorrect as it turned out, but a report that California was going for Kennedy, and that sewed up along with Minnesota, Illinois, Texas, Missouri, emboldened me to go over and find out if enough of the morning had passed that the candidate was awake. And the maid or whoever I encountered that morning said yes, she had hear him move upstairs, get up and go to the washroom, whatever.

00:16:26

TED SORENSEN

And so I mounted the stairs, went into his room. And just as I entered, he got a call from his mother-in-law congratulating him, and he thanked her, looked at me, and I said, yes, it looks as though you're the winner, Mr. President. And





we chatted briefly, and there was a meeting called for later in the day after sufficient returns confirmed the outcome and a congratulatory concession telegram from his opponent arrived.

00:17:10

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember those brief words that you had just the two of you after he got the call from his mother in law? Do you remember what he said by any chance?

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TED SORENSEN

Wish I did.

00:17:19

INTERVIEWER

Me too.

00:17:19

TED SORENSEN

If I did, I'd put it in my book.

00:17:22

INTERVIEWER

Right, of course. Did President Kennedy ever talk to you about choosing his brother as attorney general?

00:17:48

TED SORENSEN

The choice of the president's cabinet was a matter that he left largely in his own hands. He had a search committee headed by his brother-in-law Sarge Schriver, and with help from Larry O'Brien and others, that came up with some good names and suggestions. From time to time, I and others put in our own names and suggestions. The question of selecting an attorney general was never really on the list because President Kennedy, President-elect Kennedy at that time, always had in the back of his mind that that was the best spot for his brother Bob. He wanted his brother Bob in the cabinet. He wanted him close as an advisor. He wanted him to have major responsibility.

00:18:45



TED SORENSEN

I haven't the slightest doubt that his father was urging that upon both of them. I haven't the slightest doubt that Bobby wanted to be in a position where he could provide maximum help and have some ability to recommend and serve. He had the same passion for service that Jack did.

00:19:08

INTERVIEWER

Was there anybody in the administration - did you ever hear chimes of resentment? You know, nepotism? Any jealousy?

00:19:21

TED SORENSEN

I never heard of any suggestion that anyone in the administration resented the fact that the brother that the president had named his own brother as attorney general. Very quickly other members of the cabinet recognized that Bobby had the intelligence as well as the drive to take on any responsibility in government, and they recognized the president's need to have someone of unquestioned loyalty in a position of that kind. No one resented Bobby, and Bobby was, I think, careful not to step out of bounds to try to throw his weight around to give orders to other members of the cabinet or anything of that sort.

00:20:13

TED SORENSEN

On the in the first month, maybe even the first week, as I recall, of the administration, a Washington social fun club called the Alfalfa Club traditionally invites the new president to make a speech, and it's supposed to be a funny speech, and therefore I was supposed to come up with some funny lines talking about topical news, and one of the lines was that he was appointing his brother as attorney general because he thought he ought to get a little experience before he went out and practiced law. JFK thought that was a very funny line and used it. I hope Bobby thought so too, but I never heard one way or the other.

00:21:00

INTERVIEWER



How do you think the thousand days in the White House pulled these two men closer together as brothers?

00:21:12

TED SORENSEN

I know very little about their relationship as brothers prior to 1960. Bobby had been his campaign manager in the race for the Senate in 1952, as I recall, and had done a good job. And Bobby played an important role in the 1960 campaign. He came in after it had begun with our travels around the country, but he soon proved himself to be a master of the data, the names, the requirements for getting on the ballot and for winning in each state. And he was an excellent campaign manager. Once the campaign was underway, I was on the road constantly with JFK and saw comparatively little of Bobby except on those rare moments that he would fly from Washington or from his other duties and locations as campaign manager to join the campaign briefly for talk about strategy, a report on how things looked and so on. I think the age difference between the brothers had made them less often companions and confidants during the years before 1960 than they became during the campaign. But during the campaign they became very close, and that only continued to grow after JFK was in the Oval Office.

00:22:53

INTERVIEWER

And then it seems as though they became as close as two brothers really can be. They I mean they really seemed to understand one another's thinking and vision and they shared a great deal. Can you tell me about the closeness of that relationship during the White House years?

00:23:22

TED SORENSEN

In the meetings in which both Bobby and I participated, including the meetings of a so-called ExCom during the Cuban Missile Crisis, his recommendations always received the president's attention. If occasionally he disagreed in part, he would say so gently, sometimes with a chuckle. He sometimes noted to others the impatience the attorney general had with the slow pace of the group decision making, but that's because JFK himself was



impatient. But it was clear that the mutual love and respect and support deepened only further during those unbelievable, unprecedented 13 days.

00:24:19

INTERVIEWER

Do you know how Bobby's relationship to his brother changed after the Bay of Pigs?

00:24:24

TED SORENSEN

JFK was angry after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, mostly angry at himself. Angry at himself, he told me as we walked around the lawn in the back of the Oval Office, angry at himself for listening to the experts. He said, I got where I got by not depending on experts. I should know better. And then he asked Bobby Kennedy and me, as people who thought the way he did, who knew and shared his interests and views, to sit in on National Security Council meetings thereafter, because we could ask the tough-minded questions, because we could be skeptical and we're not over-awed by the brass or gray hairs of the so-called experts.

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INTERVIEWER

In what way do you think Robert Kennedy influenced the president in matters of foreign policy?

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TED SORENSEN

Not sure that he did.

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INTERVIEWER

They perform very well together under pressure. Can you tell me a little bit about that? What it sort of said about their characters?

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TED SORENSEN

JFK was superb under pressure. As someone who had experienced danger and nearly disaster in wartime, as someone who had been willing to face the worst kinds of illness as well as political risks that others thought were



insuperable, he was not awed or deterred by pressure. He had this ability to remain cool and calm and objective and to keep his eye on the prize, keep his eye on the need to avoid nuclear war, keep his eye on the objective in the missile crisis, which was to get those missiles out of there without precipitating a nuclear war.

00:26:52

TED SORENSEN

Bobby, I think, though he was a more emotional person than JFK, learned from his brother, learned from observing his brother, and therefore was the ideal messenger to communicate the administration's position, the president's private position, to the Soviets through a meeting with Soviet ambassador Dubrennin on the penultimate day of the crisis.

00:27:27

INTERVIEWER

What do you think - it seems to me that there were several times during the Kennedy administration when both brothers believed the nation was on the brink of war. Did the president talk to you about his concerns and his fears?

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TED SORENSEN

No, I don't agree that they thought that several times.

00:27:51

INTERVIEWER

Okay. Let's say when the president was concerned about being at the brink of war, did he talk to you about his fear and concern about that?

00:28:13

TED SORENSEN

On the day the president made his decision on the Cuban Missile Crisis, the first Saturday at the end of the first week after the ExCom had been meeting and had recommended the blockade or so-called naval quarantine approach. The president beckoned me to come out when the meeting ended to come out on the so-called Truman balcony behind the second floor of the White House. And I think Bobby was there also, and the president talked about the implications of the decision, the possibility that the Soviets wanted war, were



trying to precipitate a war, or the even greater danger that they would push us so far to the wall that they would have the bargaining power to use threats to get their way into West Berlin, the isolated outpost of Western freedom that was the most sensitive spot in the world, which the United States could not abandon.

00:29:24

TED SORENSEN

And that also led to the possibility of war. And the president was in a philosophical mood. Not just American children. Children of the world. He talked about the fact, which he was more sensitive to because he had two small children of his own. Talked about the fact that they would suffer the most because they had their entire lives ahead of them, and if a nuclear war broke out and civilization was eradicated, those children would never lead those lives, would never know a happy existence. And yet they were totally blameless, he said. They had no responsibility for the mess the world had gotten itself in for a cold war, a clash between communism and the enemies of freedom.

00:30:22

TED SORENSEN

Like every other decision involved in the campaign for the presidency, JFK approached the decision on choosing a running mate with his usual analytical, careful fact-filled approach. We found out something very interesting. Because the presidential candidate is clearly the most respected, popular, vote-winning person in the entire party, anyone else whom you pick is going to dilute the quality of the wine in that particular bottle. And therefore, it's how much will you be hurt, not how much will you be helped when you pick a running mate. Now, Lyndon Johnson, whom JFK respected, although sometimes he laughed at his manner, way mannerisms in ways, Lyndon Johnson had everything, not only the superficial balance of being a Protestant from the South, who was older and therefore offset Kennedy's potential handicaps as a national candidate, as a Catholic, a liberal from the liberal wing of the party and the Northeast.

00:31:57



TED SORENSEN

But in addition to that, Johnson was a national figure. He was the head of the Democratic Party in the Senate. He'd had years of experience, more years of experience in the House than JFK had. So he was a logical person, perhaps more logical than any of the other potential candidates. And he tested well in all of our inquiries, whether public opinion polling or simply sampling of opinion. We weren't sure that he would be interested. He had often expressed disdain for the very idea of taking second place, particularly to a young candidate whom he didn't know all that well. Kennedy had not been a member of the inner club in the Senate, so to speak.

00:32:57

TED SORENSEN

But leaving dinner one night at Joe Alsop, Johnson's closest friend and advisor, Bobby Baker, who was the assistant to the Secretary of the Senate, said to me, "You know, our two guys ought to run together." And I said, well, yes, sure, if your guy's willing to take second place. I just said that laughingly, and he then said totally seriously, you know, I think he might. And I, of course, reported this to JFK. We had been careful not to promise the vice presidency to anyone else in order to win their support, particularly those who had delegations to come with them. But while not promising, we dropped a few hints here and there that they might be considered.

00:33:57

TED SORENSEN

That's that's only fair. But I seriously believe that he had not made any commitment to anyone. He wanted to wait and see if he was nominated, and what happened? What was the party divided? Where was the party most against him? Where did he need to shore up strength? And what little he told me about the choice was that he just felt that logically, if not necessarily, it should be offered first to Lyndon, but he wasn't certain whether Lyndon would accept. And somewhat to his surprise, Lyndon did accept, and he thought, fine. Bobby, as a liberal who had been working with liberals in labor and elsewhere to secure the nomination, reacted strongly against that. He didn't like Johnson himself very much.



00:34:58

TED SORENSEN

He thought it would hurt the ticket. He thought that there would be a revolt within the party, and he tried to argue against the choice. Jack sent him down to see Lyndon, who naturally reacted poorly to receiving any such message from Bobby, which got their relationship off to a on a bad foot, which continued for the rest of Johnson's years in the White House. Bobby had only Jack's best interests in mind in opposing Jack's choice. But I think Bobby was wrong.

00:35:44

TED SORENSEN

I think that Lyndon Johnson did help the ticket carry not only Texas, but a few other southern and border states, which were essential to a winning campaign. And while I recognize that a vice president should be judged primarily on whether he will make a good president, the fact is that every presidential nominee who doesn't pick the rest of his cabinet until he's actually been elected president is primarily considering whether his vice presidential pick will help him get elected so he can have a cabinet.

00:36:28

INTERVIEWER

Give me a little thumbnail sketch of how these two men were different, JFK and LBJ. Give sort of contrasting portraits if you could.

00:36:44

TED SORENSEN

JFK and LBJ were about as different as any two United States senators could be. They both liked politics, but LBJ liked a very different kind of inside politics with experience in Texas in all the rough and tumble of some parts of Texas that are violent, corrupt, and all the rest. JFK in Massachusetts had not gone through that kind of politics. He looked upon politics more as exercise in democracy and the people's choice, and he thought that he was fulfilling the principles of the founding fathers and running for office and accepting office.

00:37:40

TED SORENSEN





LBJ was a little less educated than JFK and felt insecure about it. JFK knew that he had a tremendous education at Harvard as well as experience as a world traveler and from his father the ambassador, and felt totally secure in his knowledge and abilities in international affairs and in national affairs. LBJ, to be frank about it, could be crude on occasion in his speech and his humor in his conduct. Jack Kennedy may not have passed all the virtues tests that some would impose, but one thing he was not, he was never crude.

00:38:45

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think Robert Kennedy loathed LBJ?

00:38:50

PRODUCTION

Eddie closed you gotta start closing that window. Good to the balance, right? Yeah. Thanks.

00:39:01

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think Robert Kennedy loathed LBJ and why do you think LBJ in turn wasn't crazy about Bobby Kennedy?

00:39:12

TED SORENSEN

I don't know that Robert Kennedy loathed LBJ, but it's certainly true that he did not like him. Every vice president's job in part is to remind the president of his mortality, and Bobby didn't like anyone who had that job, who had that role. He loved the president so much he didn't he couldn't bear the thought that someone might take his place someday. And because LBJ and JFK were so different, and some of their differences were on issues that were important to Bobby, including civil rights and how aggressive or military-based a foreign policy should be. So he his own Bobby's own liberal instincts, which were growing during the late 50s and early 60s caused him to turn away from LBJ, and they got off to a poor start in the dispute over whether LBJ should be the vice presidential nominee, and it only well, it's it never I don't think it ever improved much during the administration.

00:40:29



TED SORENSEN

I don't know that they had much contact. Bobby noticed at cabinet meetings that whenever the president asked LBJ for his opinion, LBJ would always duck at saying, I don't know enough about that, which was his way of saying, you haven't arranged for me to be thoroughly briefed on that. And Bobby caught that, and he resented LBJ ducking. JFK, on the other hand just took it in his stride, and he just smiled and he knew what LBJ was doing, and nothing riled him up. JFK was very rarely angry about anything, and certainly not something in politics.

00:41:18

INTERVIEWER

I want to play you a clip that Robert Kennedy delivered. This is during his oral histories, and he was talking about LBJ's sort of unusual thoughts about JFK's assassination.

00:41:45

TED SORENSEN

About LBJ's unusual thoughts?

00:41:48

INTERVIEWER

Yeah. And Robert Kennedy was sort of responding and he sort of explains that to you.

00:41:56

TED SORENSEN

Wait a minute, he explains it to whom?

00:41:58

INTERVIEWER

As you hear it you'll understand better.

00:42:00

TED SORENSEN

All right, I mean I wanna hear it, but go ahead.

00:42:11

PRODUCTION

Is that not one minute? Oh. No, it's not.



00:42:25

TED SORENSEN

I can't hear it.

00:42:38

INTERVIEWER

Can you help?

00:42:41

ROBERT KENNEDY

[unclear] Lyndon Johnson said to P. S. Alinger that he wasn't sure that the assassination of President Kennedy didn't take place in retribution for his participation in the assassination of Trujillo and President [unclear].

00:43:08

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER

You mean divine retribution? Or what was he suggesting?

00:43:12

ROBERT KENNEDY

Divine, no divine retribution. He said that [unclear] said that that's what happened and that when he was growing up one of the somebody that he knew misbehaved ran down a tree and or ran was on a sled or something and he ran into a tree and hit his head and became cross-eyed. And he said that was God's retribution for people who were bad and so you should be careful of cross-eyed people because God put his mark on them and that this might very well be God's retribution to President Kennedy for his participation in the assassinations of these two people.

00:43:57

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER

I never heard that.

00:43:58

ROBERT KENNEDY

No, I know.

00:43:58

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER

Jesus. God.



00:44:09

INTERVIEWER

What is your response to that?

00:44:24

TED SORENSEN

If it's true that LBJ thought that the assassination of John F. Kennedy was divine retribution for American involvement in the deaths of other foreign dictators, then I think the man was more twisted than I ever thought. That's a monstrous thing to say. But do believe it. And LBJ undoubtedly had a deep religious upbringing that I might not understand. But for the man who owed everything he had in life, his presidency and fame, to Kennedy's decision to anoint him as vice president, to then say that Kennedy was killed as an act of God's will. Monstrous is all is the only word for it, grotesque.

00:45:48

INTERVIEWER

Go ahead, sorry. Let's talk for a minute about civil rights. What were President Kennedy's feelings about the Freedom Riders in nineteen sixty one? Do you remember whether or not he was shocked when he first started reading the headlines in the papers about what was going on down south?

00:46:15

TED SORENSEN

You have to remember that John F. Kennedy had relatively little contact with Black Americans during his youth. Even the military service was largely segregated, at least in the Navy. And there weren't any Blacks in growing up in Hyannis port or other parts of Massachusetts and New York where he lived. He believed in civil rights. He voted for civil rights legislation as a congressman and as a senator, but it was not a passion with him, as it later became with Bobby. It was not one of his major issues compared to housing and minimum wage and other economic and social issues, and it wasn't one of his great interests the way foreign policy had always been his interest since he was really quite young.

00:47:18

TED SORENSEN



And yet he had the courage to permit the Democratic Party Platform Committee at the Los Angeles Convention, which he basically controlled, to put forth a- the most progressive platform on civil rights that the party had had, knowing full well that the Southernns would object, and they did, and that if those objections were carried forward, they would do all they could to deny him their electoral votes. The Southern strategy in 1960 was to try to prevent anyone from getting a majority in the Electoral College so that they would have the balance and they could dictate who the candidates would be, what their platform would be, they would impose conditions before they threw their so-called independent electors or electors pledged to Southern candidates to the to the Democratic nominee.

00:48:30

TED SORENSEN

But Kennedy was willing to take that risk because he knew that favoring civil rights was the right thing to do, and he often talked about it in his campaign around the country, not just in Harlem, he talked in speeches north, south, east, and west about how few black ambassadors we had, about how far behind we were on civil rights, how that was one of the new frontiers that needed to be crossed. And in his early legislative program, he talked about the possibility of a civil rights bill comparable to the one that had been defeated by the Congress when it had a lot more Democrats during the last year of Eisenhower. But it still was not one of his priorities.

00:49:23

TED SORENSEN

It's not a surprise that young students, black and white, decided to put pressure on the administration by organizing the so called Freedom Rides into the South, testing the judicial rulings that interstate transportation had to be free of segregation, even though that they knew that would set Southern states and counties and their sheriffs on edge and it would result in mobs and riots, and sometimes by the police themselves. And then they could put more and more pressure on the White House and the Justice Department to come in and protect them.

00:50:17



INTERVIEWER

Was Oxford, Mississippi a crucial turning point in the Kennedy presidency?  
Was it hard for him to send in federal men to the South?

00:50:32

TED SORENSEN

John F. Kennedy felt very strongly about his constitutional obligation to see that the laws are faithfully enforced, and that included the rulings of the federal courts. And when the federal courts ruled that a black man, James Meredith, was entitled to be admitted to the University of Mississippi, he made it clear that he was going to see that that ruling was enforced. And when the governor of Mississippi and all the other powers that be in Mississippi said they would not permit that, that only made John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy as attorney general all the more determined to see that it was done. And we spent a long night in the cabinet room coordinating the dispatch of marshals and ultimately federal forces and nationalization of the Mississippi National Guard, as I recall, to see that it was done.

00:51:31

INTERVIEWER

Excuse me. Was President Kennedy ever concerned about the attorney general being accused of taking drastic measures?

00:51:41

TED SORENSEN

No.

00:51:42

INTERVIEWER

Okay. When he saw the brutality that was being thrust upon the Freedom Riders and the civil rights workers, what did he learn about this country that he might not have known?

00:52:03

TED SORENSEN

Kennedy had to fight his way to the White House because of his religion. And he felt that kind of discrimination deeply, and he recognized very early the similarity between religious discrimination that he had suffered and racial



discrimination that Blacks were suffering. And he wanted to do something about it. He did not want to do it in a way that caused his entire legislative program to be killed in the Congress by from opposition from Southern Democrats whose votes were needed to enact anything. But he nevertheless felt that he had to press ahead. And the more he saw of the violence meted out against black demonstrators and protesters in the streets in the South, the more he recognized that it was a moral issue and one which required the leadership of the President of the United States. That's why he was there.

00:53:06

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that Robert Kennedy drew on those experiences later on after nineteen sixty three?

00:53:14

TED SORENSEN

Which experiences?

00:53:15

INTERVIEWER

Being the attorney general during the civil rights process.

00:53:21

TED SORENSEN

Yes, of course. Robert Kennedy, even more than John F. Kennedy, had an education in civil rights and racial discrimination during the three years of the JFK presidency. He recognized that the bitterness on the part of Southern whites would not dissipate easily. He recognized that laws were required to enable Blacks to have their rights, equal rights as American citizens. And he was determined to see that through even after legislation passed in 1964-65.

00:54:05

INTERVIEWER

Robert Kennedy says that there were very few conversations between he and his brother regarding civil rights because they had such a similar understanding, a basic agreement. Do you think that that's is that correct? They were of one mind in that on that topic?

00:54:32



TED SORENSEN

I think both Robert and Jack Kennedy were determined to push forward with equal opportunity for all Americans regardless of color. Jack perhaps based his determination more upon his recognition as president of the intellectual justification for equal rights. Robert perhaps based his more on his emotional passion that the treatment of Blacks in this country was so unfair and unjust as to be un-American. But they so agreed on the on the bottom line, on the ultimate goal, that there was probably not a lot of discussion as to slightly different rationales.

00:55:31

INTERVIEWER

I think that's really well said. By 1963, especially in the South, people were beginning to refer not just to the president and the attorney general, but instead to the Kennedy brothers. And I want to play you another clip from Robert Kennedy, where he discusses how his heavy involvement with civil rights issues could potentially become a political problem for his brother in the subsequent election, his concern.

00:56:06

ROBERT KENNEDY

By 63, in my judgment, the fact that I was attorney general caused him many more problems than if I had been his brother. Instead of talking about Robert Kennedy, they started talking about the Kennedy Brothers, which he used to point out to me frequently, but it was no longer Robert, the attorney general, but now they were talking about the Kennedy Brothers. Before, 61-62 was focused on me, and he wasn't such a bad fellow. By 1963 it was focused on both of us. And that caused problems politically as we got ready for the election in 1964. In fact, it got to such an extent that in 1963 I discussed with him about trying to get out of it.

00:56:50

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER

That would have been very hard for you also.

00:56:52

ROBERT KENNEDY





Well, it wasn't that important. The important thing really was that he got elected. And this was causing a lot of problems.

00:57:06

INTERVIEWER

What do you think about that?

00:57:14

TED SORENSEN

That excerpt is a good example of Bobby's philosophy of putting his brother first and being more concerned about his brother's prospects for reelection and the continuation of all the efforts and programs that his brother supported at home and abroad. And yet I think that his brother did not share that concern to the same extent that they were now talking about the brothers. I think when he frequently reminded Bobby about it, that was a just another humorous way of giving Bobby a little needle, and it was not even a hint of asking him to step down because he not only loved his brother, he wanted him as a close advisor.

00:58:14

TED SORENSEN

He wanted him in the cabinet, and he wanted him to handle the civil rights issue as well as others that were under the purview of the Department of Justice. Speeches in the White House, like speeches in the campaign and the years leading up to it, were one of my responsibilities. Speeches don't always get prepared for specific occasions. Sometimes there is a subject looming on the national horizon, and you know that sooner or later you're going to have to address it. You start putting materials aside. Civil rights was one of those. JFK and I talked on occasion that sooner or later he would need to address the country on the issue of civil rights. It was a burning issue facing the whole country.

00:59:10

TED SORENSEN

It was the headlines in most of the newspapers, north, south, east, and west, for a long time as the demonstrations, the protests, and the brutality continued. But the specific occasion did not raise itself. On June 9th, the



president flew to Honolulu to address the National Conference of Mayors and gave a very far-reaching talk asking for their help in trying to cool down the civil rights controversy by recognizing the right of Black citizens to have the equal opportunities that all Americans were entitled to. Asked for their help in their local cities to do something about segregation and discrimination.

01:00:07

TED SORENSEN

It was a brave speech because there were a lot of Southern mayors in that meeting as well as Northern. Two days later was the day for the- set by the courts, I believe, for the admission of two black students to the University of Alabama, just as James Meredith had been, with difficulty, admitted to the University of Mississippi six, seven months earlier. And George Wallace, the racist segregationist governor of Alabama, had made his- had based his entire political career, excuse me, on vowing that segregation in Alabama would continue undiminished. And his little dramatic way of saying it was that he would stand in the doorway of any school, house or educational institution where segregation- desegregation was attempted.

01:01:13

TED SORENSEN

And he made clear well in advance of June 11th, that's what he was going to do at the University of Alabama. And we made clear to him well in advance that he was not going to be permitted to do that. And ultimately, with great work by the Justice Department under Robert Kennedy, including Nick Katzenbach and Burke Marshall and a variety of others, a little scenario, shall we call it, was worked out, that Wallace could have his moment in the sunlight and in the doorway. But that once he did that and carried out his campaign pledged to Alabamians that Nick Katzenbach would notify him that he should stand aside and that the Alabama National Guard had been federalized and was going to require him to stand aside.

01:02:16

TED SORENSEN

And he did. And Bobby and the president and I - I can't remember now whether Burke Marshall was in the room or not, but I think he may have been



down in Alabama - we're watching all this on the Oval office television set. And when it finally happened and went off quite smoothly as choreographed, the president, I was sitting behind the president, he turned around and said to me, I think we better give that civil rights speech tonight. And I thought to myself, what civil rights speech? You know, there isn't any civil rights speech written yet. And tonight, what time did he mean tonight? And he sent Pierre Salinger, the press secretary, out to check with the networks, and they came back and said eight o'clock. Well, by this time, I think it was about five o'clock. And the speech hadn't been written. And Bobby said to me, Don't worry, we've got a lot of good material. We'll send it over.

01:03:15

TED SORENSEN

So I went back to my office down the hall and started to write. Now JFK, as I mentioned earlier, had talked about civil rights often during the campaign. We had some good materials from that. It happens that I had a rather extensive background in civil rights as a young student, both high school and college and law school in Nebraska, and had prepared my own views and thoughts and felt very strongly about the subject and was able to express to that, and I began to write, and some of the material the Justice Department sent over was useful, perhaps some of it for speech purposes was not. But in any event, I managed to put together a a speech, and about if I recall, it was about 7:40.

01:04:21

TED SORENSEN

The president came into my office. He had never come into my office. And he said, How are we coming? I said, Well, it's in good shape. I'm just finishing up the last revision here, and the rest of it's in the typewriter and my secretary's typewriter, and he said, Oh, he said, I thought I was gonna have to go extemporaneous on national television. And he had jotted some things down on the, I don't know if it was the back of an envelope, but it was on just a spare piece of paper, which he wanted to use. And about that same time, I'm reliably informed, McGeorge Bundy told the guests at a dinner party who said, let's tune in, watch the president's speech tonight. McGeorge Bundy



said, there isn't going to be any speech tonight. I left the White House just ten minutes ago and there was no speech yet. Well, there was a speech. The president was.. he took my final draft.

01:05:24

TED SORENSEN

I think he inserted some of the materials either in handwriting or extemporaneously or orally, as he delivered the speech. If you analyze it closely, you can probably tell where the rhythm or the syntax or something changes a little bit, and it's his words which are just as good. Well, what am I saying? They're better than mine. So no other president in history had ever said that racial discrimination and segregation in the United States on a legal basis should be banished forever. That's what he said.

01:06:21

INTERVIEWER

What's your response to critics who say the reads that the Kennedy's offered too little too late for civil rights?

01:06:31

TED SORENSEN

My response to the critics who say the Kennedy's offered too little too late on civil rights is number one, they're right. If I had a magic wand, I would have said- I would have seen to it that President Kennedy said, to hell with my legislative program, I'm going to speak out for a comprehensive elimination of racial segregation and discrimination in this city, no matter how the Southern Congressmen and Senators react on the rest of my legislative program, and no matter how important that legislative program is to Black citizens who need the minimum wage, who need the unemployment compensation, who need the aid to depressed areas, who need the new housing programs, who need all the rest of that Kennedy program.

01:07:25

TED SORENSEN

They would have suffered if Kennedy had spoken out boldly like his critics wanted him to do much earlier when there were no votes in Congress to pass civil rights legislation, so it just would have been a symbolic gesture. But I



would also point out that inasmuch as he did speak out as no president had spoken out before, and the attorney general did fight for that legislation in a way no attorney general had before, I would say the critics should be satisfied that in the long run, and it wasn't that long, things came out pretty well.

01:08:14

INTERVIEWER

Describe Robert Kennedy's relationship to Jackie.

01:08:26

TED SORENSEN

I don't know.

01:08:27

INTERVIEWER

Okay. Really?

01:08:31

TED SORENSEN

Well, I know a little bit about it after the president's death.

01:08:34

INTERVIEWER

That's okay. Let's talk about that

01:08:43

TED SORENSEN

After President Kennedy was killed, Robert Kennedy made a point of being Jackie's big brother, protecting her, guiding her, shielding her from some of the vicissitudes of life and Washington, as well as giving all the help that he could with the rearing of Caroline and John. He was a wonderful friend to Jackie, and his loss shattered her just as it shattered me to have that double loss of both Kennedy brothers just was that was difficult for anyone who loved them to bear.

01:09:35

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember when Robert Kennedy actually went on Air Force One when Mrs. Kennedy was there as Lyndon Johnson was sworn in, where he went on the plane after



01:09:49

TED SORENSEN

Of course not. He was in Washington.

01:09:50

INTERVIEWER

He was in Washington.

01:09:51

TED SORENSEN

LBJ was sworn in in Dallas.

01:09:54

INTERVIEWER

Right, but when the plane came to Washington, they flew back.

01:09:57

TED SORENSEN

Yes.

01:09:57

INTERVIEWER

And then didn't he go on the plane to escort Mrs. Kennedy off of the plane or to go be there for her?

01:10:03

TED SORENSEN

I have no idea.

01:10:04

INTERVIEWER

Okay.

01:10:08

TED SORENSEN

If somebody says it happened, it happened, but I don't I was I was in the crowd standing out there on the tarmac. I didn't see who got on the plan. That sounds like something he would do.

01:10:21

INTERVIEWER

What was the atmosphere like on the tarmac then?



01:10:24

TED SORENSEN

Oh please. I'm not gonna recall that.

01:10:28

INTERVIEWER

Okay. When was the last time you saw the president?

01:10:36

TED SORENSEN

I don't remember the exact date when the president left the White House to start a tour of several southern states. I think he may have been first going to Florida before he ended up in Texas. I, in my usual last minute rush, ran out the back door of the west wing carrying some papers to hand to him as he climbed on the helicopter that would fly him to Andres Air Force Base for the Air Force One flight south.

01:11:19

INTERVIEWER

And then where were you on November twenty second?

01:11:24

TED SORENSEN

Do we really- do you think this is important?

01:11:26

INTERVIEWER

It's up to you. I'm not gonna push you.

01:11:30

TED SORENSEN

On November 22nd, I had lunch with a very distinguished newspaperman from Middle America, Roy Roberts, editor, publisher of the Kansas City Star. I remember, I remembered almost the next day, that we had talked a little bit about Lyndon Johnson and the fact that president by the same name, Andrew Johnson, had succeeded Abraham Lincoln, although s sad to say, succeeded him by the assassination of Lincoln, and that Johnson then had a difficult time in the presidency. I then returned to my White House car, and in the car over



the radio came a message that I was to return to the White House as soon as possible.

01:12:33

TED SORENSEN

I had no idea what, and the message said nothing more than that. I went back directly to the White House. I walked in and I believe the first thing I saw was Robert Kennedy on a direct telephone hookup with Parkland Hospital in Dallas, waiting to hear the report of the doctors. And the report was that he was dead. That just seemed unbelievable. Too cruel to have happened. And Bobby was as crushed, more crushed than I was. Everybody in the room was. He asked me to inform the speaker of the House, who was the, I believe Bobby thought, the next in line in succession after the vice president.

01:13:41

TED SORENSEN

And I did that. The speaker already knew, but it was a very brief and sad conversation. All the rest of that day is pretty much a jumble. There was an early meeting about what kind of services and ceremonies should be planned. I presided over one meeting as I recall I also at someone's request maybe Sarge Shriver who was instrumental in all this came up with some JFK quotations that I thought might be appropriate for weekend ceremonies. It's not all that clear to me. We heard finally that the plane would be coming in the plane Air Force One carrying LBJ and Mrs. Kennedy would come into Andrews Air Force Base and that early that evening maybe six o'clock I don't remember exactly and I decided I would go out.

01:14:59

TED SORENSEN

There was nothing I could do. But I wanted to be there. And I stood on the tarmac with all kinds of other people, strangers, friends, watched the plane land, watched LBJ and Jackie descend the steps and get into helicopters and fly off and I returned to my car and I went back to the city. My brother who worked for the government had very kindly invited me to dinner at his home that evening, knowing that I would otherwise be alone and it was a sad dinner and in the middle of dinner the telephone rang and my brother picked





it up and said it was Mr. Johnson or LBJ calling and I spoke to him and he said a lot of nice things about how sorry he was and how he knew how deeply I felt and how much he wanted me to stay on and help him and he hoped I would come in and see him and in his office- the vice president's office the next day.

01:16:34

TED SORENSEN

But I don't remember precisely. All I remember is that when the conversation ended, I said, thank you, Mr. President. And when the words Mr. President passed to my lips, I broke into uncontrollable sobbing. And that continued most of the night and it's not a time I really want to talk about even now. It's very difficult.

01:17:16

INTERVIEWER

There seem to be some people who feel that Robert Kennedy changed or was somehow transformed by the death of his brother in a way that was beyond perhaps- I don't know if there is a normal transformation, I don't know if there is such a thing- but who who remark about the transformation of Robert Kennedy after his brother's death. There are other people who seem to feel that Robert Kennedy didn't change, he grew, but what was there, what was responsive to the world, were elements that were always part of Robert Kennedy. And I'm wondering what you think about that.

01:18:05

TED SORENSEN

Robert Kennedy and I became much closer after the president's death. So I'm not in a position to say I knew all of his inner feelings and traits during the years before, but for those who say that he went through a transformation as a result of the president's death, I would point out that Robert Kennedy had been changing and growing for the three or four years before the president's death. He was no longer living in his father's house. He was now a part of his brother's administration, an inner circle. He had for the first time in his life seen firsthand the ravages of poverty and discrimination in this country and elsewhere in the world.



01:19:06

TED SORENSEN

And all of that new information, new exposure had broadened his visions and increased his empathy for others, and he was much less the rough, tough son of Joseph Kennedy that he had been before, even before Jack's death, but Jack's death hit him so hard that it softened him. It made him more attuned to the miseries of the world because of the misery that he felt. He and I became very close in talking and planning and working, on administration matters, on political strategy. He advised me on my book about President Kennedy.

01:20:02

TED SORENSEN

He and I saw each other for sport as well as serious talk in Hyannis port. I represented him as a lawyer later on on his literary efforts and then began the practice of seeing him almost once a week while he was United States Senator. He would talk to me about his changing views on Vietnam. And about his interest in the presidency. I had counseled him against running against his brother's running mate. And he was genuinely undecided because he was being urged by a great many young people in the anti Vietnam movement to get Johnson out of office, but he knew that Johnson had been his brother's choice and that to for him in particular to start a revolt within the Democratic Party might have adverse consequences for the party and only help elect a Republican.

01:21:11

INTERVIEWER

I want to go back, if we can, just for a minute to 1964, which seems to me to be a pivotal year in the life of Robert Kennedy. Can you describe-

01:21:23

TED SORENSEN Is that the year he first ran for the Senate?

01:21:30

INTERVIEWER

Yeah.

01:21:30

PRODUCTION



Oh sure. Won the Senate.

01:21:34

INTERVIEWER

He went from being, as John Siegenthaler just described to us, truly tortured by the death of his brother. He was really, really saddened and trying to make sense of the world, sort of trying to reconstruct his sense of how things worked, almost. And he was so shattered. Do you remember him during those days? Before he made the decision to run for the Senate?

01:22:22

TED SORENSEN

It's hard for me to separate '64 and '65, '66 in my mind, to be honest with you.

01:22:31

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember-

01:22:32

TED SORENSEN

I would endorse what Siegenthaler said, but I'm not sure I could give you any detail or examples.

01:22:43]

INTERVIEWER

How do you think he got out from under himself?

01:22:50

TED SORENSEN

I think that Robert Kennedy after launching his campaign for the United States Senate became more than ever interested in politics and government as a direct participant, not simply as an assistant advisor to someone else, his brother, but on his own. And that became important to him, and the causes that he advocated became important to him. And that was increasingly the cause against the Vietnam War, not all out at first, but increasingly. And it was also the cause of racial justice.

01:23:45

TED SORENSEN



It was also the other causes for improvement of urban conditions in New York City and fighting poverty and hunger and other parts of the country, those became very important to him, not merely carrying on the legacy of John F. Kennedy, but in building his own causes and leading them.

01:24:17

INTERVIEWER

I want to go back to one thing that I forgot to ask you about during the Kennedy administration, and I think will be much more fun to talk about, and that is the president's trip to Ireland.

01:24:30

TED SORENSEN

Ha ha. Did you see Irish television a couple of weeks ago?

01:24:33

INTERVIEWER

No.

01:24:34

TED SORENSEN

Well, I'm sure they'll give you a tape of it.

01:24:38

INTERVIEWER

Why?

01:24:40

TED SORENSEN

Because no, I'm talking about a New York program.

01:24:44

INTERVIEWER

No.

01:24:45

TED SORENSEN

Yes, there's a just I think two weeks ago, a lady named O'Reilly. Patricia O'Reilly. She represents Irish television in this country. And she came out and interviewed me at length about President Kennedy's trip to Ireland, and then she put it together on a program which appeared on Long Island Public



Television, Channel 21. And I think she did a terrific job. She wove together clips from the trip with clips from my interview. Mm-hmm. And you're professional TV people, you would be a better judges than I, but I thought she did a very good job of it, and if you tell her that you'd like to see it, I'm sure she'll send you the video tip.

01:25:44

INTERVIEWER

Well it's been said that that was one of the happiest moments in his presidency.

01:25:50

TED SORENSEN

That's true. It was, clearly.

01:25:55

INTERVIEWER

What well I need you to sort of- what was?

01:26:04

TED SORENSEN

The summer of 1963, President John Kennedy's final, sad to say, summer in office, was a stormy one in some ways. World crises continued, domestic civil rights crises continued, sharpshooting critics from the press and the right wing and the Republicans in Congress continued to attack his programs and motives and all the rest. And not surprisingly, he decided that was the time to visit Ireland, the home of his ancestors. They had been asking him to come, and he thought, why not? He had a message. And the message which he delivered to the Irish Parliament, the Dow, was the importance of little countries in the pursuit of world peace.

01:27:14

TED SORENSEN

He spoke to the Dow. He also visited the town where his great-grandfather came from. Of course, he had grandfathers on both sides from Ireland. He visited all parts of Ireland. He received honorary degrees from the two competing universities in Dublin. Trinity, more favored by the Anglo-Irish and National University, more favored by the Irish Catholics, and remarked



afterwards that, since he obviously appreciated both honorary degrees, that if they ever met in a game of Gaelic football, he would cheer for Trinity and pray for National University.

01:28:02

TED SORENSEN

He also loved meeting in Phoenix Park, which is like the White House, with the aged president of Ireland, Eamon DeValera, and his even or equally aged wife, who was herself a storehouse of Irish literature, culture, poetry, history, and so on. That was a dinner that went on for hours, but he drank in every moment of it, and only a couple of days later, when he was leaving Ireland, quoted one of the poems that Mrs. DeValera had recited to him about looking on old Shannon's face again, coming back in the springtime. And he said, I'll try to come back in the springtime and look on old Shannon's face again, and you know, despite the needs for him all over the world, I think he meant it.

01:29:14

TED SORENSEN

He had had such a wonderful time, such a warm reception, coming right after his unbelievable reception in Berlin, that I think had he lived he would have visited old Shannon's face again in the springtime.

01:29:34

INTERVIEWER

I think that there was a certain dynamic between the three brothers that I just want to touch on.

01:29:41

TED SORENSEN

Yeah, we gotta be careful here.

01:29:42

INTERVIEWER

Okay.

01:29:43

TED SORENSEN

Because if we're really talking about 1959 to 1963... Oh yeah, is this camera on and sound are now off?



01:29:53

PRODUCTION

It's on.

01:29:53

INTERVIEWER

It's okay.

01:29:54

TED SORENSEN

Oh it's on. Oh in that case I won't finish.

01:29:56

INTERVIEWER

They really weren't together that much, they didn't really see each other that much. .

01:30:00

TED SORENSEN

He was out of it.

01:30:03

INTERVIEWER

So he really wasn't part of the scene 'cause he was out?

01:30:07

TED SORENSEN

Well, of course he was part of the scene, but he did wasn't part of the administration. He was instrumental in the campaign, he was put in charge of the Western states. He even took a dangerous, if not reckless, ski jump, maybe the first in his life, just to show the crowd that Kennedy's cared. And he was very popular in the West, and we did well in the West, so I give Teddy a credit for that. In 1962, he bested a difficult opponent in the Democratic primary, and then difficult opponent, maybe even, as I recall, opponents in the general election, and was elected United States Senate. And you know, imagine 40 years of service in the United States Senate, where he has been a leader on the cutting edge. People underestimated Teddy, and they made a mistake because he proved to be, in many ways, the most active, effective senator of anybody in the family.



01:31:21

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember when Robert Kennedy climbed Mount Kennedy? Well, it wasn't Mount Kennedy then, but you know what I mean. Had that climb.

01:31:28

TED SORENSEN

Yes.

01:31:29

INTERVIEWER

Tell me what you remember and what it felt like to watch him do that.

01:31:34

TED SORENSEN

I didn't watch him.

01:31:36

INTERVIEWER

Or tell me what it felt like.

01:31:39

TED SORENSEN

No, I don't. When Robert Kennedy heard that the tallest peak, if I recall correctly, in the Canadian Rockies was going to be named for his brother, he declared in typical Robert Kennedy fashion, I'm going to climb it. And a few people warned him that that was no easy task, but he set out to make the acquaintance of a very well-known professional mountain climber, Jim Whittaker. And Whittaker agreed to train him and guide the expedition. And they did, and he climbed it. And he told me afterwards it was the most difficult, harrowing experience of his life. He regretted his decision when he was halfway up or more. He knew he had to go on.

01:32:38

TED SORENSEN

The air was thin, the conditions were perilous, the wind was icy. He said he'd never been so miserable in his life. But that was honest of him to admit that. It's a warning to any other would be mountain climbers out there. But he did it, and that's Robert Kennedy. He did it.





01:33:03

INTERVIEWER

What made him have to do that and finish it? And that is Robert Kennedy, I completely agree.

01:33:11

TED SORENSEN

It's just like Jack Kennedy once recalled the time. They were out on the sailboat, and Robert was a little kid, maybe four or five years old. He kept jumping off the sailboat into the Atlantic and climbing back in, then jumping off again, climbing back in, jumping off again, climbing back in, and Jack said. Either it showed he had a lot of guts or that he was a little crazy, maybe both.

01:33:46

INTERVIEWER

The oral histories that Robert Kennedy gave between 1964 and 1967, how did he change during that time? He changed between early 1964 and late 1964. How was he different by '67? What was going on in his life during these interviews? Do you know?

01:34:13

TED SORENSEN

No.

01:34:14

PRODUCTION

Yeah, can I just

01:34:15

TED SORENSEN

I really don't, with all due respect, Nancy, I don't think that's a particularly important question.

01:34:19

INTERVIEWER

Okay.

01:34:23

PRODUCTION



I'd like to actually say one thing. Robert cared so much to do these oral interviews and what they meant to him.

01:34:27

INTERVIEWER

How that process might have been for him.

01:34:30

PRODUCTION

Why did he put so much effort into it and what did he get out of it? What was he trying to accomplish by it?

01:34:39

TED SORENSEN

Robert Kennedy regarded himself as his brother's legate, and he wanted to make sure his brother's legacy was carried on at the Kennedy Library and Archives. And he wanted all of us to be sure that we provided oral history for those archives. And he wanted to set a good example by providing a thorough, comprehensive oral history of his own. He thought that would be important for the history of the Kennedy family and administration, and perhaps useful to him in writing a book about it himself in the future.

01:35:17

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that was a process that came easily to him?

01:35:27

TED SORENSEN

Probably. He liked talking about his brother.

01:35:33

INTERVIEWER

How did knowing President Kennedy change you?

01:35:40

TED SORENSEN

How many more hours have you got? John Kennedy totally changed my life. He was my idol, my teacher, my leader, my inspiration. He gave me an opportunity to serve, to have a voice in making this country a better place, even in making the world a better place. That's how my parents raised me,



was to try to do some good in the world and make it a better world. And here all of a sudden, at a very early age, thanks to Jack Kennedy, I had that opportunity. And that's still important to me. I'm still deeply in debt to the man and his memory for what he did for me. I helped him, yes, I wanted to help him. I wanted to do everything I could to help him succeed because I knew he would be a tremendous leader. He had these unique abilities that most politicians don't have.

01:36:55

INTERVIEWER

Do you think about him every day still?

01:36:58

TED SORENSEN

Yes.

01:36:59

INTERVIEWER

And is it one of those, like in different contexts, sort of you see something that might remind him.. Let me try this a different way: what do you miss about President Kennedy most?

01:37:14

TED SORENSEN

Well, I miss going into his office as the day drew to an end and talking about the events of the day, the news of the day, the issues that were coming up in the near future, whether it was in the campaign or in the government. I miss the friendly, warm talks we had, sometimes exchanging jokes, sometimes exchanging a little gossip about politicians or people we knew. But he was not only my boss, he was my friend.

01:37:55

INTERVIEWER

And how about Robert Kennedy? What do you think that you miss most about him?

01:38:01

TED SORENSEN



Well, I you see if I give an answer to that, people are going to compare them, which I don't want them to do. Be I didn't have a relationship with Robert Kennedy for eleven years. Day in, day out, the way I had with JFK. So I think it would be unfair to give that answer to that.

01:38:21

INTERVIEWER

Well, maybe without comparing your relationships, because I think you're absolutely right. That would be unfair. And yet the country has suffered a huge loss, obviously, in losing Robert Kennedy. I mean, I think about that. I think about what would have happened.

01:38:37

TED SORENSEN

Oh yes.

01:38:37

INTERVIEWER

You know. The unfinished business, you know, the agenda that was cut short and the spirit, you know, that great spirit that was so beautifully expressed in that inaugural speech, challenging the best in all of us. I miss that.

01:39:03

TED SORENSEN

You're talking now about John Kennedy or Robert Kennedy?

01:39:05

INTERVIEWER

Both, because I think they both embodied asking people to be their best.

TED SORENSEN

Okay, so what do you want from me?

INTERVIEWER

I want you to...

TED SORENSEN

Ask me a question.



INTERVIEWER

I will

TED SORENSEN

Don't just give me a speech

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel that the country has suffered in losing them?

TED SORENSEN

This country, for a long time, has had more economic power, more military power, more industrial power than any other in the world, many any other two or three combined. But we haven't always had a surplus of leaders to make the most of our intellectual power, our willpower, our moral power. That's what John and Robert Kennedy offered. John Kennedy and his call to service and his summoning young Americans to man the new frontiers of science and space and civil rights and education and economics, was showing that this country could live up to the dreams of the founding fathers; that it could be a beacon to the world. Robert Kennedy wanted to carry that on. He had the same spirit; he was determined to carry it on with a legacy. He had leadership abilities that I'm certain would have carried him into the White House, that would have made his presidency a successful presidency. It would have brought the Vietnam War to an end much earlier without the waste of 55, 56 thousand lives, without the billions being squandered on weapons of mass destruction that were not available for schools and clinics in this country, without the riots among our students, our minorities, and others who lost all hope when the Kennedys were no longer there. No, it'd be a different country if we had not lost those two lives, as well as Martin Luther King Jr.. The country can't afford to... When leaders- when leadership of that quality is so rare, to lose two, three such leaders within the space of five years was just too much. And I don't think the country has ever recovered from that.



INTERVIEWER

I think the only last question- and then we're really done, I promise- is if you had to describe the story of the Kennedy brothers, how would you describe it? The story of the Kennedy brothers is a story of what?

TED SORENSEN

The story of the Kennedy brothers is the story of two young men with enormous talent who they wanted to devote to making this a better country and a better world, who were cut down tragically but who left behind a legacy of hope for all Americans and, in some ways, for all the world.

END TC: 01:43:21

