

Joseph Kraft Post 1-6-77

Sorensen at the CIA

Much of this city and at least some of the country has been puzzled by the designation of President Kennedy's top domestic aide, Theodore Sorensen, as Jimmy Carter's Director of Central Intelligence. Doubt about the reasons for the choice has created a vacuum for the circulation of vicious slanders.

So the true story of how the nomination was made is worth telling. If nothing else it will provide a fair basis for measuring Mr. Sorensen's worth.

Before recounting the story I must acknowledge that I have known Sorensen for many years. I worked for him as a speechwriter in the 1960 campaign and kept in touch thereafter.

We discussed the CIA job, and I volunteered the view that he would be crazy to leave a lucrative and interesting New York law practice for such a thankless task. He was certainly not in sharp disagreement with that appraisal. For—and this is the first canard that needs to be crushed—he did not seek the intelligence job.

The person who tapped, not to say fingered, Sorensen for that position was Prof. Richard Neustadt of Harvard, an aide to President Truman and adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Neustadt has been helping the Carter people during the transition period by defining the qualities required for certain critical posts, including that of the Director of Central Intelligence.

In describing the job, Neustadt started with the proposition that the CIA was in trouble. He felt it lacked the confidence of the public, of the Congress and of the incoming administration.

He further felt that it was absolutely essential that the agency be rebuilt. He assumed that the rebuilding should be supervised by a person in whom the President-elect had complete confidence; who knew his way around both the executive branch and the Congress; who was sensitive to issues of civil liberty; who was familiar with the needs of the ultimate consumer of intelligence, the President himself; and who was bright and experienced enough to penetrate any self-serving project the CIA might try to put over.

On those assumptions Neustadt then cast around for an appropriate person. Sorensen came to mind. Neustadt felt that he had strong analytic powers. Also that he had unparalleled experience both in seeing the agency's weakness following the abortive Cuban invasion

of 1961 and in working with the agency thereafter, especially during the Cuban missile crisis. Without even telling him, Neustadt recommended him for the job. When Neustadt later checked with Sorensen, Sorensen said he would not take the post.

The Neustadt definition of the job, plus the recommendation of Sorensen, went to Carter's chief transition official, the Atlanta lawyer Jack Watson. Watson was deeply impressed and passed the job specification and recommendation on to Carter with his own support. He also subsequently informed Sorensen, who again said he would not take the job.

Carter, however, was totally persuaded. He asked Sorensen, who had been looking for another job, to take the intelligence post. Sorensen accepted.

At that time, however, Sorensen indicated—and this should put an end to the canard that he is somehow out to do in the agency—that he did not want to make any advance judgments as to the organization of the intelligence community. In particular, he was not committed, as Vice President-elect Walter Mondale apparently is, to stopping all covert activities. Nor does he have any advance commitment to the proposition that the Director of Central Intelligence should withdraw himself from the CIA and supervise all parts of the intelligence community. On those questions Sorensen wants to wait and see.

No doubt the designation of Sorensen is unorthodox. He is an avowedly political man, not the kind of antiseptic poohbah usually picked to build public confidence. Unlike most previous directors, his primary experience has not been in foreign policy—certainly not in fighting the cold war. Neither does he have vast administrative experience nor special knowledge of intelligence.

But Sorensen undoubtedly has other qualities. He is intelligent, experienced and honest. He has been a "President's man" and knows what a President needs. He does have the complete confidence of Jimmy Carter.

So there is room for some debate about the Sorensen choice. His qualities can be balanced against his deficiencies. But nobody has to obscure the serious issue by inventing malicious stories about a post that has already been blackened and a man who has suffered not a little.