Views Differ on JFK Test at Vienna

But Sorensen, Schlesinger Agree on Facts Of His Painful Encounter With Khrushchev

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By Murrey Marder
Washington Post Staff Writer

FUTURE historians now have a choice of two detailed but differing appraisals of the late President Kennedy's performance in his one summit encounter with former Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev.

Marder

In two remarkable books, insiders Theodore C. Sorensen in "Kennedy" and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. in "A Thousand Days" present previously unpublished blow-by-blow accounts of that historic two-day meeting in Vienna in June, 1961.

Their facts agree. But they reach markedly different conclusions about the impact of that conference on the President they both admired so much.

To Sorensen, the greater intimate, Mr. Kennedy was, as always, supremely equal to the task at Vienna.

By Sorensen's account, the somber exchange over Khrushchev's threat to sign away within six months the Allied war-worn rights in Berlin, even if that meant a new war, produced a "legend."

What the President was trying to do after the conference ended, writes Sorensen, was to dispel any notion that a new spirit of East-West cordiality would flow from the Vienna conference, or that there were "easy, magic ways to deflect the Soviet drive."

But the President, Sorensen writes, may have over-managed" the news.

"His (Mr. Kennedy's) private briefings of the press were so grim, while Khrushchev in public appeared so cheerful, that a legend soon arose that Vienna had been a traumatic, shattering experience, that Khrushchev had bullied and browbeaten the President and that Kennedy was depressed and disheartened."

ON THE contrary, writes Sorensen, Khrushchev later acknowledged that he found the President "tough" but admired him personally. "Actually," Sorensen finds, "neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev emerged victorious or defeated, cheerful or shaken"; instead, "Each had probed the other for weakness and had found none."

But was what Sorensen calls a false legend about Mr. Kennedy really so overdrawn? If so, it was one of the greatest examples of news "management" in history. This reporter, among others who were at Vienna and talked to many allied officials afterwards, finds historian Schlesinger's account more convincing.

Schlesinger relates that the President, "depressed by the blank wall of dogma" he encountered in the first day's talk, asked Llewellyn E. Thomson, his chief adviser on Soviet affairs, "'Is it always like this?' Thompson replied, 'Par for the course.'"

After the second day Schlesinger recounts, "for all the poise and command" that the President "displayed in the talks, the experience deeply disturbed him."

THIS REPORTER recalls that when the President reached London, he grimly tossed Khrushchev's aide memoire demands on Berlin to another veteran diplomat, and asked what he thought. Back came a similar bland reply: "About the usual thing."

Despite what Sorensen calls the "legend," when the President returned to Washington he was obsessed in private talks with many close friends about what he regarded as the real danger of a nuclear war over Berlin that could take millions of American lives.

If a non-insider can be allowed an assessment, the Vienna conference was an example of major miscalculation by both sides. Khrushchev's Soviet shock treatment worked far more than Khrushchev anticipated; he overshocked the President.

The President, overreacting, boosted the American defense budget and reinforced West Berlin, putting unexpected pressure on Khrushchev's position. When the Soviets ordered erection of the Berlin wall and washed out their ultimatum on signing over Berlin access rights to East Germany, that was primarily a defensive reaction, as Schlesinger suggests. The experience of miscalculations made in Vienna, fortunately, served the United States and the Soviet Union well in the truly great missile crisis over Cuba.