

Sorensen on Kennedy—a footnote

WASHINGTON:

John F. Kennedy might have been—in this reporter's opinion almost certainly would have been—one of our half-dozen greatest Presidents if he had not been murdered. This is the best excuse for the rather unseemly haste of his intimates to get their still-vivid recollections into print. The current crop of personal memoirs of the murdered President are not history, because history is essentially impersonal. But they are the stuff of which history is made.

Theodore Sorensen, whose book on Kennedy is the October Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, has produced the first of the major Kennedy memoirs. For the benefit of the historians, it seems worth adding a footnote to Sorensen's book. For he refers, fleetingly and incompletely, to a couple of episodes which made a stir at the time, and in which this reporter (who was no intimate of the late President) was intimately involved.

The references occur in the section of Sorensen's work devoted to President Kennedy's relations with the press. Sorensen writes: "The reporter who purported to discover 'Kennedy's Grand Strategy' for an article in 1962, wrote another article, in the same magazine one year later, entitled *The Collapse of Kennedy's Grand Design*."

The reporter in question was this one, and the magazine was the *Post*. The first article to which Sorensen refers created at least a minor international sensation. Moreover, the whole episode also raised an interesting question about John F. Kennedy, and the way he operated, which the historians may want to ponder.

The article appeared with a photograph of the reporter interviewing the President, and included numerous direct quotes by the President. This of course meant to every knowledgeable Washingtonian (except, apparently, Sorensen) that the article had been submitted to the White House for review. Any article which quotes the President of the United States at length on sensitive international issues is automatically submitted for review.

The President read the article, and so did press secretary Pierre Salinger and presidential aide McGeorge Bundy. A few changes were made and the President then approved the article as accurately reflecting his views—in this sense Kennedy's "purported" grand strategy was his own version of his strategy.

In the interview the President talked at some length about his drive for a true "Atlantic partnership" and about the need for a "centrally controlled" (i.e., American-controlled) nuclear deterrent. These basic elements of his "grand design" later collapsed. They collapsed,

as Kennedy was well aware, not in a year, but in a day—January 14, 1963, when General de Gaulle said a flat and wintry "non" to the basic concepts of the Kennedy grand design.

But what interested Kennedy most, and what he talked most about in the interview, was the balance of nuclear power, and the risk of nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States. This was at the time of the long-drawn-out, infinitely dangerous Berlin crisis. The late President laid stress on the need for sufficient conventional strength to make it possible to meet minor Communist challenges short of a nuclear holocaust.

But he also talked about how dangerous it would be if the Communist side came to the conclusion that the United States would never meet a major challenge—in Berlin, say—with nuclear weapons.

Here are the two key sentences in this section of the article: "Khrushchev must not be certain that, where its vital interests are threatened, the United States will never strike first. As Kennedy says, 'In some circumstances we might have to take the initiative.'"

Now, this was news—indeed it was rather big news, since it had always been the American doctrine that this country would "never strike first." I knew it was news, of course—a cub reporter would have known—and I waited with interest to see what changes the White House would make. Not a word was changed in the key sentences quoted above.

When the article was published, it created a stir. Among others, Chalmers Roberts of the *Washington Post* wrote a story on the significance of the President's directly quoted words. The Russians read the article too—and proceeded to raise hell about it.

Pravda thundered against the President's "threat." Marshal Malinovsky ordered a special alert for the Soviet armed forces, in the light of the President's "menacing" words quoted in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Pierre Salinger, on a visit to Moscow, was badgered ferociously by Khrushchev, who asked him whether "this warmonger Alsop is now your Secretary of State?"

The White House poured a few dollops of oil on these troubled waters. A soothing statement was issued to the effect that there had been no change in American policy—but there was no suggestion that the President had been incorrectly quoted. Inquiring reporters, who of course knew that the article had been cleared by the White House, were fully informed that somehow the significance of the key sentences had been overlooked.

Maybe so. The President read at the rate of 600 words a minute, and no one can read that fast without skipping. But could all three—Bundy, Salinger, the President himself, all brilliant men—have missed what would have leaped to the eye of a cub reporter?

Again, maybe so. The White House is a busy place, and there are lots of magazine articles about the President. This is not a subject on which Bundy or Salinger can be expected to be candid, even now. But it seems likely that President Kennedy quite consciously used the *Post* article to convey a warning to Khrushchev—an unofficial and indirect warning, but one whose significance would not be lost on the Russians. The substance of the warning: "Don't think you can make a grab for Berlin without risking a nuclear strike."

The grab for Berlin, despite dire predictions, was never made. And if President Kennedy did use the *Post* article as an oblique and easily disclaimed warning, that was not at all inconsistent with his character. There is a tendency nowadays to portray the late President as a little tin god, fully equipped with halo. In fact, like all the most effective occupants of the White House, John Kennedy was quite capable of guile and indirection.

Sorensen's second reference involving this reporter concerns another article in this magazine, written in collaboration with Charles Bartlett. The article, which recapitulated the Cuban missile crisis, reported that the late Adlai Stevenson had proposed abandoning the U.S. Naval Base in Guantánamo, plus the Turkish and Italian missile bases, in return for the neutralization of Soviet missiles in Cuba. This report made an unholy row at the time, to the amazement of the writers of the article. Sorensen writes of this episode that President Kennedy "was unwilling to repudiate his friends or to cause more damage by specifying where they erred."

No doubt there were minor errors in the piece—in this kind of reportorial reconstruction immediately after a great event, minor errors are difficult to avoid. For example, Sorensen's own name was incorrectly omitted from the list of "doves"—the President's more cautious advisers. But as for the main point—the report that caused the unholy row—Bartlett and this reporter are quite willing to rest their case with the historians. For in this respect the real reason President Kennedy "was unwilling to specify" where we "erred" was that he knew very well that we hadn't.

Stewart Alsop



Theodore Sorensen