

By Theodore C. Sorensen



Ten years? Sometimes it seems like only yesterday that I ran out the back door of the mansion to hand him some papers as he boarded his helicopter on the trip that would take him to Dallas. The time has been too short to suppress the chill that still overtakes me when someone's question brings back that awful memory of word coming to those of us huddled by an open Secret Service line in the White House that he was gone.

Fortunately, as we regained our stride over the years, happier memories crowded in—the candid conversations he and I would hold at day's end in the Oval Office, his spontaneous wit in the midst of solemn planning sessions, the qualities of his disciplined and analytical mind.

Sometimes it seems that was another century. The Presidency was a noble instrument of progress then. Politics was a proud profession. "Idealism without illusions" was alike in Washington, and Americans had confidence in the system and in themselves. Young people volunteered for the Peace Corps and Government service. Blacks sensed someone cared and was trying. The citizens of other countries felt affection for our President and hope for our future.

The White House was a different place then. It was filled with confidence and humor, not paranoia; with selfless dedication and respect for our laws, not corruption and a hunger for vengeance and power. We felt no need

to organize our own secret police, or misuse, the I.R.S., the F.B.I. and the C.I.A., or wear rubber gloves and red wigs. We, too, were intensely loyal—but this was because we had a chief who listened as well as ordered, and who we knew would no more consider authorizing illegalities than we would consider complying. That President paid his taxes in full, sought no Treasury-financed improvements on his homes, abhorred the thought of private gain from public service, and expected the same from us.

To be sure, that Administration had its critics. The President was bitterly assailed for his civil rights program, his "no-win" foreign policy, his crack-down on Big Steel, and his willingness to appoint or honor several targets of the radical right like Bowles, Oppenheimer and Murrow. He faced tensions over Berlin, Cuba and Laos abroad and over racial demonstrations at home.

But he responded not by going into seclusion but by communicating with his critics and with the Congress, the press and the public, placing problems in perspective, viewing complaints with detachment. When mistakes were made—such as the Bay of Pigs—he publicly took responsibility without blaming others and sought not to cover up his Administration's errors but to find out and root out their causes.

When a peace group marched before the White House in the cold, he arranged for them to be served coffee, not hustled off. When Linus Pauling picketed the White House, he was smilingly greeted within, not placed on an enemies list. Presidential power was not used to keep the people in line but to steer the country away from the kind of external and internal violence and economic fluctuations that have so divided us after his removal from the scene.

Ten years. Too brief and turbulent a period for history to render its final judgment. But long enough, sad to say, for much of his legacy to erode. Not entirely. The path away from nuclear war began not at the Moscow summit in 1972 but in the peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, "hot line" and other building blocks of détente in 1963. Domestically, many of the concerns that touch

our lives today—to conserve the environment, to protect the consumer, to assure equality for minorities and women, to reform campaign financing, to obtain health care for all—can be traced to his initiatives.

Those who would beatify him, however, forget his own preference for avoiding the hyperbole that has characterized the remarks of his successors. He termed the Test Ban Treaty not the most historic act since Creation but a single step on a journey of a thousand miles. The defusion of the Cuban missile crisis, he warned us, could be better assured if it were not treated as a U. S. victory but as a statesmanlike decision by the Soviets. "The United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient," he said in 1961; "... we cannot impose our will upon the other 94 per cent of mankind."

I have given up hope that his legislative achievements, though far more extensive than realized, would have much lasting importance. The Peace Corps has been bureaucratized, trade expansion neglected, the Alliance for Progress abandoned, the civil rights laws only half-heartedly enforced, the child health and mental retardation programs inadequately funded, and other social measures financially starved or outmoded.

Thus the principal legacy, after ten years, consists of the high standards he set, the ideals he proclaimed, the goals he gave us. His latter-day critics charge that these raised expectations that were never fulfilled. They are absolutely right. "A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for," reads a favorite quotation of Adlai Stevenson. How much better it is for a President to uplift the people, to give them high hopes and aims for which to strive, than to regard them as children and to demean the office and the country.

The radical revisionists term him a naive stumbler regarding Vietnam. How wise they are in their hindsight! If only he had known then what they know now, in contrast to what they were writing then. The times, the issues, the perspective were very different. But the course his brothers later took, his own determination to avoid in Cuba, Laos, Berlin or anywhere else a choice between massive intervention and unacceptable humiliation, his skepticism toward military

solutions after the Bay of Pigs, and his refusal to give blank checks to the Pentagon or to request them from the Congress, all indicate that he would not have poured this nation's life blood into that hell-hole.

I can't prove it; for he did make mistakes on Vietnam and elsewhere. But the attempt of hindsight historians to portray him as an unrelenting cold warrior is handicapped by the facts. Had he accepted the repeated recommendations that he send combat troop divisions to South Vietnam and bomb the North, or had he actually precipitated a war over the Cuban missile crisis, or had he left Skybolt, the B-70 and other needless weapons in the defense budget, they would have a case. But he did not; and on the day he died, compared with the present "peacetime" levels, there were only half as many U. S. servicemen in Southeast Asia and the entire defense budget (in constant dollars) was less.

While the revisionists of the left try to blacken his name with forged history, Richard Nixon tried it with forged cables. How is it that Mr. Nixon so detests the man but constantly invokes his name? Having authorized the burglarizing of private offices, spent millions of the taxpayers' money on his private residences, taped all of his telephone conversations, and tapped the telephones of White House correspondents and officials, Mr. Nixon has implied that President Kennedy did all of these. That, of course, is untrue. He has also claimed that prosperity in the Kennedy years depended upon war and inflation, when in fact we had neither.

But this is not the week to dwell on the petty critics of a man who towered above them. It is not even a week deserving commemorative emphasis. We should honor the date of his birth, not the date of his assassination. We should remember his life, not his death. For if this country has hopes today of ending the cold war and avoiding nuclear war, if we have hopes today for an end to racial and religious barriers to the fulfillment of the American dream, the seeds of those hopes were planted by John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

*Theodore C. Sorensen, former special counsel to President Kennedy, practices law in New York City.*