



COMMENTARY

An Unexpected Find *Treasure from a Bygone Era*

by Paul Vitale

“Approach your work with a devoted spirit, strive to make your parents proud and hope for a collision with good fortune somewhere along the way.” The prominent voice conveying this guidance was quite generous with his time, straight-forward in his commentary, and, as was stated upon his passing, “A remarkable man who lived a remarkable life to the fullest extent imaginable, a life marked by grace, wit, wisdom, brilliance and integrity.” After sitting down with Theodore Sorensen prior to the noon hour on that late July day, I couldn’t help but be reminded of a declaration once shared by Sir Isaac Newton, “If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Never had the collective words that make up the meaning of this profound statement meant as much to me as they did that day after a series of events led me to a renewed belief in laudable people performing acts of giant proportion. Initially, when I began penning a letter to Mr. Sorensen respectfully asking for the opportunity to meet for a discussion, I was somewhat uncertain about the outcome. Not only was I writing to a man who was the brilliant wordsmith for the 35th President of the United States, but also the individual designated as John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s Special Counsel. Nonetheless, I felt strongly about the intentions of my request for I had been given a gift from a colleague months earlier that set me on this path, along with a firmly-held belief of my father’s that has served us both well—one generation to the next.

AN ERA OF HOPE

To hear my father talk about the man his generation called “Mr. President” is to understand why he was enormously influenced some five

decades ago. John Fitzgerald Kennedy sparked an interest so deep that it gave my dad enough courage to wrap his arms around an ideal and embrace it for life.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which the Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

If anyone was listening to the stirring phrases woven together by emotion in JFK’s 1961 Inaugural Address, it was my father. He was challenged and changed by a leader who took a deep interest in those individuals who weren’t always at the front of the line.

United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do...The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world...If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

The inspiration that rang out during those 14 minutes of arguably one of the most memorable speeches in our history was the lone spark that ignited my father’s zeal to “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” With his newfound calling in mind, coupled with other arduous

factors life had placed in front of him, my dad found himself in the trenches a few short years later waging a war against poverty serving as a VISTA volunteer.



Volunteers in Service to America was one of the many ideas envisioned by President Kennedy during his thousand days in the Oval Office. In the midst of tumultuous times—from the Cuban Missile Crisis to the Civil Rights Movement—Mr. Kennedy never lost focus on the importance of attacking poverty head-on, both international and domestic. Coming on the heels of the Peace Corps, highly motivated and trained VISTA volunteers were scattered throughout communities right here at home to assist and educate people through timely programs, while providing financial aid and helping to regulate discrimination in the workplace. From the Appalachian region to many of the poorest inner-city neighborhoods, my father was part of an organization of foot soldiers committed to not only helping their fellow man, but, more importantly, teaching those individuals how to help themselves.

To this day, when my dad and I find ourselves in a discussion about the mystique that surrounds the Kennedy legacy we don’t talk about the books that were written, the policies that

were made or even the numerous assassination conspiracies. Our conversation consists mainly of my father revisiting the narrative of how one President's beliefs relayed through his spoken words challenged my dad to always look toward the less fortunate, not away; serve his fellow man with humility; and, when the opportunity is presented, get up and do it all over again.

AN INCREDIBLE ACT OF GENEROSITY

When I first took the book in hand, I noticed the tattered edges of the hardback's jacket, yet the cloth cover was hardly worn. Reading the title, *The Strategy of Peace* and seeing beneath it a profile shot of President Kennedy, I was happy to receive a new addition to the collection of JFK books on my shelf. What a nice birthday gift from my colleague, I mused, especially since this particular manuscript was penned while Kennedy was a Senator. I had never come across this title before, so when I began thumbing through the yellowed pages, my interest was piqued. From back to front I flipped the pages, briefly scanning chapter titles, knowing my intentions were to become more immersed at a later time. My initial interest changed abruptly as my thumb paused on page 62.

Nestled tightly within the gutter between that page and the next was an ivory business card with the name "John Fitzgerald Kennedy" embossed on the center line; the words "United States Senate" in the bottom left hand corner with "Massachusetts" on the right; and displayed prominently in the upper left hand corner, the U.S. Senate Seal. With disbelief I sat idle for a moment and pondered what I saw. As I gently pulled the card from the book, the signature "Jack Kennedy," written in the ink of a dark blue fountain pen, jumped off the card and into my consciousness.

I will never forget that particular moment, but what came next will stick with me for many years to come.

As I conveyed to my colleague the significance of the gift and respectfully tried to return it, I was

met with an unyielding "No, it was meant for you." A trusted advisor and friend, my co-worker had purchased the volume online for a small sum and was as stunned as I when running across the card before wrapping the book. The knowledge of this incredible find did not deter her from the original objective.

"From our conversations over the years, I know the profound influence President Kennedy had on your father's life, and how that sequentially has been passed on to you." (With or without the signature, authentic or not, odds are Jack Kennedy held this card for at least one brief moment.) As my colleague poignantly said, "I know your dad never had the chance to shake the hand of his mentor, but maybe, in some small way, by holding this card himself a connection will be made."

A book written decades ago harboring a signature penned on the business card of its author—who happened to be the hero of the man I call dad—and a co-worker whose sincere act of unselfish kindness made something that seemed unlikely, probable...what an incredible act of generosity.

A WRITTEN REQUEST

For many weeks after receiving the autographed card, I was not sure how to proceed. My imagination was on the run and my curiosity not far behind. Due to the significance of the business card, there were very few people with whom I shared the story. Everything from framing it to tucking the signature away crossed my mind. Even though I knew I would never sell this historic item, I was very interested in learning if the signature was authentic. After several inquiries and dead ends on how to achieve this goal, I looked up at a framed picture of Kennedy on my office wall and suddenly recognized the answer in the man sitting alongside JFK in the black and white photograph. Who would know better than the Special Counsel to the President if the signature was real?

The first time I learned of the name Ted Sorensen was in my high school

Civics class during a friendly debate on the authorship of *Profiles in Courage* (1956); the next time was years later when I picked up the book *Kennedy* (1965) and began reading about the man behind the man.

Described by *Time* Magazine in 2010 "as the studious, star-struck aide and alter ego to President John F. Kennedy, whose crisp, poetic turns of phrase helped idealize and immortalize a tragically brief administration," Mr. Sorensen was more than a speechwriter or the special counsel and advisor to the President; he was a loyal friend.

That dependability was never needed more than in October 1962 when the United States and the Soviet Union were on the verge of nuclear destruction over the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Mr. Sorensen, with the help of JFK's brother, Robert, played a crucial role in drafting the President's correspondence to Nikita Khrushchev and defusing what could have been the ultimate disaster.

From Senate races to a Presidential administration, for 11 years Theodore Sorensen was at the heart of decision-making on key issues surrounding one of the most influential leaders of our time. His role in the life of John Fitzgerald Kennedy was of giant proportion; not only leading up to and during the time in the White House, but ever since.

In my one-page letter to Mr. Sorensen, I revealed the purpose of my correspondence: outlining the profound affect JFK's call to service has had on my father these many years as well as a brief account of how I came to be in possession of a signed business card of the late Senator's. In closing, I explained that there was no other person I respected more for his immense knowledge, perspective and background regarding the subject of President Kennedy.

When I received correspondence from his special assistant that my request had been accepted and Mr. Sorensen had agreed to meet with me, I was quite surprised. Perhaps it was the swiftness of the reply, or maybe it was the fact that a man of his notoriety and influence on leaders

throughout the world would take time to sit with me, that gave me pause. Whatever the reason, I was deeply humbled by his response and received a renewed hope in the fact that some letters can still be answered.

THE APPOINTMENT

As the elevator came to a complete stop and the doors quietly slid open, it was hard to suppress my anticipation. It was no different when approaching the doorway of his residence. In as much time as passed between my knock and the creak of the opening door, I found it quite hard to believe that I was about to witness firsthand my father meeting the man who collaborated with President Kennedy on most all of his memorable speeches; especially the 1961 Inaugural Address.

While hearing the doorknob turn and watching as Mr. Sorensen appeared, it was as though we were stepping back in time. As introductions were being made while we were passing through the foyer, it took a moment for me to collect my many thoughts. Just a few weeks earlier I sat down to pen Mr. Sorensen a letter; now we were standing face to face.

His mood was jovial and his quick wit welcoming as we stepped from the foyer into the living room. Seated next to a large window overlooking Central Park, the bright rays of light pouring through the pane were unobstructed and the panoramic view of the tranquil landscape served as a relaxed backdrop to an intriguing discussion consisting of a wide-range of topics.

From the beginning to the end there were few breaks in the conversation, particularly when conversing about the characteristics that made President Kennedy the man he was. Stories were shared about the reasons Mr. Sorensen decided to follow his life's path and sentiments exchanged about his most recent book, *Counselor*. My father had the

distinct opportunity to express his gratitude for one speech made decades ago that influenced him to serve his fellow man, while Mr. Sorensen conveyed his appreciation for my dad doing his part to answer the call. This counselor to the most powerful leader in the free world offered suggestions on how to infuse the current generation with the ideals of times gone by and effective tips on speech writing were touched upon as well.

The time spent with Mr. Sorensen on that midsummer morning was quite spontaneous and informative. Nothing seemed intrusive to the man



who spent a lifetime advising world leaders, and it was apparent that his level of energy and eagerness had not subsided. Never was that more evident than when I pulled the copy of *The Strategy of Peace* from my briefcase and began sharing the story of what I discovered between pages 62 and 63.

If there was ever an instance when I hoped time could come to a standstill, it was when I placed Senator John F. Kennedy's business card in Mr. Sorensen's hand. As he took the card and tilted it slowly toward the light, he became temporarily silent. When he read the signature out loud, "Jack...Jack Kennedy!" it was as though he had slipped back into a different era—a place where he was clearly most comfortable. Mr. Sorensen's face lit up and his level of excitement

increased as I continued explaining the detailed account of how the book and business card had come into my possession.

When my dad uttered the question, "Do you think the signature is real?" the response, "Absolutely" came without hesitation.

"No one could have forged this signature," Mr. Sorensen continued as he passed the card back to me. "You are a lucky man to have had such a find, but you're even more fortunate to have a colleague who showed such kindness."

It seemed as though sixty minutes had come and gone in a blink and it

was time to conclude our appointment. Mr. Sorensen had another obligation, and my dad and I had a flight to catch. As farewells were being expressed, something quite unexpected occurred. As my father reached out to shake his hand, Mr. Sorensen politely asked for a favor. "Lou," he said in a non-assuming voice, "Would you mind escorting me to the door?" Arm in arm they proceeded toward the entrance, still caught up in conversation.

As they walked together, I hung slightly back reflecting on the significance of the moment: *Here is a man who has walked in stride with many of the world's most influential leaders, and here I am observing a lifetime come full circle.*

"Let's do this in another ten years," Mr. Sorensen suggested as we reached the front door. My dad and I smiled in agreement as our time together drew to an end and the words, "Until then," were uttered in anticipation for our next encounter.

IN RETROSPECT

When I learned of the passing of Mr. Sorensen, I was deeply saddened. For his family, friends, countrymen and the many giants who stood squarely on his shoulders, a true American hero had gone before us. Knowing that when we met just three short months earlier he was vibrant, full of

ideas and extremely interested in the present political compass, I was reminded of the fact that things do change in an instant.

Amid my thoughts of sorrow I found a sense of comfort, accompanied by a great deal of gratitude. To have had the opportunity to meet such a man, during a season of life when he could have simply declined my request, was extremely reassuring. Additionally, for him to have been so generous with perspectives and insight that were clearly fashioned from living an extraordinary life—what more could I have hoped for?

Naturally, I would have enjoyed another mid-morning discussion somewhere down the line, but

how thankful I am for the one I experienced. Seeing the eagerness in my father's eyes as he and a comrade from a generation defined by resiliency were introduced; listening to the challenge set forth by Mr. Sorensen to continue telling the story of a time when living was more about doing for others rather than for oneself; and coming to the realization that even though, "Until then" won't take place again in this lifetime...meeting Theodore Sorensen left me with a greater sense of "Right now!"

For when I asked, "What is one thing I should share with others about what you believe?"

Mr. Sorensen stated with unabashed conviction:

"I still believe that the mildest and most obscure of Americans can be rescued from oblivion by good luck, sudden changes in fortune, sudden encounters with heroes. I believe it because I lived it."

Indeed he did. And because of it, we are all better, now and for generations to come.

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