

Theodore C. Sorensen

interviewed by DIE REDNER

SPEECH WRITER AND AVISOR (1953 – 1963)

April 4, 2008

DR You were at American University when JFK delivered what many think of as the finest speech of his presidency. What are your memories of that situation?

TCS Let me begin by saying that the previous day JFK had spoken on civil rights (far from Washington, in Honolulu) to the United States Conference of Mayors. He was asking the mayors of our major cities to help him address the problem of continuing discrimination against our black citizens, and the civil rights issue was the major domestic issue facing the country. We flew back from Honolulu and worked on the final revisions in his address for American University commencement the next day enroute. He liked the draft, he made some changes in it, he telephoned from the plane to his national security advisor George Bundy, who also approved of the speech, and he asked Bundy not to circulate it among the usual national security chieftains in the departments of state, defense, and otherwise, because he did not want them *a)* to change and weaken the speech, or *b)* to leak it in advance to those on the right who might prepare for the speech by building opposition in advance. We reached Andrews Airforce Base outside Washington on the morning of June 10, which was a Monday, and if I recall correctly, I went straight from the airport to American University. The President, being President, got to go home and change his clothes and take a bath and shave, who knows, maybe even had time for a few moments of closing his eyes. Then he came out to American University. If I recall correctly, the speech was being delivered outdoors, perhaps on a playing field or a stadium of some kind, and a special platform and seating had been prepared, and I sat in the back, a little weary, as I knew he must be, from the long journey we had just completed out to Hawaii and back.

But I knew that the speech was a good one. It was the speech of all his speeches in which I poured my own heart and conviction. Intuit,

I was satisfied that it had his complete support and conviction, I also knew that it was unprecedented. No president had ever called for a reexamination of the Cold War between East and West, between the forces of democracy led by the United States and the forces of communism led by the Soviet Union.

DR So this is clearly more than a commencement speech. Why did the two of you choose this rather unusual channel for international communication?

TCS The President often used his major speeches as the opportunities to communicate to Americans, but sometimes to the world, the principles of the United States, the values of the United States in which he believed. We had been talking ever since the Cuban missile crisis the previous November about the need for a speech on peace. Kennedy and Soviet chairman Chrushev had in effect peered down a nuclear gun barrel at each other during those thirteen days that historians now describe as the most dangerous thirteen days in the history of mankind, and I believe both of them came to the conclusion that there must be some better way to resolve their differences than to risk nuclear war, which in turn would risk the incineration of the world. And so we had talked about the need to find an opportunity to make a speech on peace.

And at university commencement in Washington, which would have the attention of not only the US government, but diplomats from many governments, seemed a very logical location, particularly a university which had some traditional interest in international relations. And the timing was also affected by a report we heard that the Soviets were reconsidering their own situation as a result of the Cuban missile crisis, in which without firing a shot Kennedy had induced the Soviets to withdraw their nuclear missiles from Cuba. Chrushev was receiving some criticism from hardliners from within his own government, and from the Chinese commu-

nists, for looking like a so-called paper tiger once the US imposed a quarantine or blockade to prevent further Soviet missiles or nuclear equipment from reaching the island of Cuba. And so one would be intermediary told us the Soviets either had to show that there was some gain from taking a policy of accommodation and non-belligerence toward the United States and the West, or they would have to go back to their more belligerent ways. And they hoped the United States would make a move before the Soviet Central Committee Presidium or other decision-making bodies had a showdown on this policy issue. And that was all the more reason why early June seemed like a logical time for Kennedy to make that speech.

DR One of the sentences that stands out is “we are all mortal”, it turns that speech into a statement about the human condition rather than the particular political situation. Was that really your sense at the time, that the future of humanity was at stake in this conflict?

TCS Well, of course the so-called Cold War engendered a nuclear arms race in which weapons of mass destruction were as never before being stockpiled in both the West and the Soviet Union, and those weapons had a capacity to destroy the world many times over. The world came dangerously close to a nuclear exchange during the Cuban missile crisis. It was only thanks to Kennedy’s cool head and cautious restraint that no such explosion occurred but the world, as he says in the speech, knows that one cannot drive the other side into a corner in which it has no choice except humiliating retreat or a dangerous escalation. So the theme of danger to the entire world can also be found in Kennedy’s inaugural address two-and-a-half years earlier, and it can be found in other statements that he had made both before and particularly after the Cuban missile crisis.

DR That particular speech was received and translated across the globe. How did you assess its impact, both at the time and in retrospect?

TCS Interestingly, it received comparatively little attention in the United States. The country was so accustomed to the Cold War, the opposition party and even the conservatives and more hawkish members of Kennedy’s own party were so accustomed to the insistence on a tough, harsh, unyielding stand that they didn’t quite grasp the fact at first that the President of the

United States had gone in a totally different direction. No president had ever done that before, calling for a reexamination of the Cold War, calling for a reexamination of our relations with the Soviet Union, even expressing some sympathy for the Soviet Union’s losses during World War Two, which no outsider had previously done, and then calling for an examination of what we mean by peace itself — not a *Pax Americana* forced on the rest of the world by American arms, which had been essentially the American policy since the beginning of the Cold War almost eighteen years earlier. So Kennedy was pleased that Chrushev responded to the speech, permitted it to be read and heard throughout Moscow and other parts of the Soviet Union, and subsequently issued an invitation to negotiations in Moscow for a new treaty limiting or banning the testing of nuclear weapons.

DR Today we think of JFK as a very charismatic figure. Did he have as much charisma as we like to think, and if so, where did it come from?

TCS Well, I suppose a sociologist or psychologist may be required to analyze where JFK’s charisma arose — it had a lot to do with his extraordinarily good looks, a young, smiling, slender figure, always full of energy; it came from his sense of humor, his ability to articulate deep thoughts, strong convictions and principles; his ability to reach out to almost every crowd, to build bridges to almost every individual or group of individuals or even nations and states in the world. So it was natural, as I have often said, that the secret was that he had no secret, he was an ordinary human being who had a bad back and a sick father and a little child and a beautiful wife, and he clearly enjoyed life.

DR As advisor and special counsel to JFK, you were part of the inner circle, doing much to shield him from anti-Catholic prejudice, for instance. Yet the two of you were so different — what brought you together? Did you consider yourself a friend of JFK?

TCS My relationship with him for eleven years was professional, political, but in many ways it was not social — it was personal, of course, because for four of those years we went to every one of the fifty states together, we worked together, we planned together, we build his presidential campaign together. The answers to all these questions, I must tell you, and a great many more, including the background of this

speech, are contained in a book which is being published on May 6th, only a few weeks away now, my memoirs, a book called COUNSELOR.

DR The AU speech was delivered both before and after another one of JFK's civil rights addresses. How were those two issues — peace and civil rights — related? Did the two of you see in the advancement of civil rights also another way to demonstrate his commitment to peace to the Soviet Union?

TCS An active, responsible president of the United States is not able to choose which crises and challenges arise, much less the days on which they arise. The speech on the Cold War at American University I have explained was delivered on that particular day because it seemed an appropriate time and place. But the domestic crisis of civil rights arose in part because Kennedy's inaugural had stirred passions among many people in the United States who thought that human rights could be preserved at home as well as around the world, that justice could be secured, that difficult tasks should be taken on, and one of those areas of spontaneous generation was the civil rights area, the rights for America's black citizens who had for decades, if not centuries been forced to live in a second-class status. Organizations, mobilization, demonstrations on that issue were beginning and increasing in 1963, and there was fear of violence on both sides. It was a national issue and the President felt that he as President had an obligation to respond to it, and as a result we had begun work on comprehensive legislation to send it to Congress, as well as executive orders to be signed by the President. He had spoken on the issue, as I said, the previous day, on June 9th in Honolulu, to the nation's mayors, asking for their help. But it turns out that on the day following the American University speech, the civil rights crisis came to a head at the University of Alabama, where the court had ordered the admission of two very qualified black students, and the governor of California (Alabama), George Wallace, was determined to prevent their admission. After a highly televised, somewhat sensationalized but behind-the-scenes choreographed confrontation, the President decided that the evening of June 11th was also an appropriate evening for a nationally televised address ... on that issue. And that was his second-greatest speech as President, and it is an extraordinary coincidence that those two speeches, the June 10 American University speech on

peace and the June 11 national television speech on civil rights came within roughly thirty hours of each other. And both represented complete reversals of US policy under the ... young President.

DR What was JFK's relationship to Brandt and his foreign policy agenda?

TCS Bear in mind that ... it was in many ways that period in June represented not only two of JFK's greatest speeches (and two of the greatest speeches ever made by an American president since Lincoln), it was also a period of other outstanding decisions, actions, programs, promulgations by President Kennedy. ... June 10 and 11 we have talked about, but less than two weeks later he was in Berlin, speaking from the steps of the city hall, as it as it was ... called, and that was one of his most famous speeches, which he concluded with the words, *"As a free man I take great pride in describing myself as a citizen of Berlin, Ich bin ein Berliner."*

Willy Brandt was the mayor of West Berlin at that time, and met with Kennedy and with me on that trip. He was in many ways the West Germans' Kennedy. Kennedy had in America succeeded to the presidency after eight years of President Eisenhower, who was a much older man and provided a very different kind of, shall we say, standard, cautious leadership. At the time of the Kennedy trip to Germany, one of his reasons was to assure the continued support of Germany in the Western alliance, because the chancellor of West Germany at that time, Konrad Adenauer, was a good deal older than Kennedy, and to some extent suspicious that Kennedy's talk about East-West peace and reconciliation, and reexamination of the Cold War might mean some kind of deal between East and West in which he, Adenauer, in particular, and Germany in general might not have their interests fully represented, and Kennedy was trying to demonstrate by his trip through ... West Germany at that time that there was support for his foreign policy views in general and for his leadership in particular, and Willy Brandt I don't believe needed a lot of persuading, I think he felt Kennedy was on the right track all along.

DR Let me conclude with a question that relates to us and what we are trying to do, which is to refocus attention onto the creative power of the spoken word. You have said elsewhere that campaigns have to offer more than a new agenda, they also have to give new life to the very

idea of politics and democracy. So where do you think artists come in?

TCS Artists are essentially communicators. They communicate not necessarily through the same kinds of language that a political speaker does, but they can communicate through art, and that art can be enhanced if words and music are put together. Since the earliest times the nations' songs and of music, particularly when put to words, have been the means of enhancing the power and meaning and memorableness, the impact of those words.



So my hope is that your work will not only serve to remind people in Germany and elsewhere of the Kennedy message of June 10, 1963, but make more people study, think about, and remember those words even more than they might otherwise do so.

I should tell you that during this past year an American professor of economics and the environment has been the annual BBC lecturer, and he has stated in his lecture that he believes Kennedy's American University speech is

the answer to today's global problems.