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The Press of Freedom:

Liberalism, Sorensen Style: The Politics of Yesterday

by Jeff Greenfield

Early this month I ran into a famous news commentator who has covered national politics since the Presidency of John Kennedy. He asked how the Senatorial campaign was going, and I told him I thought Richard Ottinger had a good chance to beat Theodore Sorensen.

"God, I hope so," he said.

About a month ago, Jack Newfield was preparing a critical piece on Sorensen. To his surprise, he found a raft of people who had worked with John and Robert Kennedy willing—even eager—to speak publicly of their reservations about Sorensen. Richard Goodwin, Fred Dutton, Dun Gifford, all of whom worked closely with John, Robert, and Edward Kennedy, spoke for the record. In the fraternity of men behind the scenes, this kind of openness is like the Papal Nuncio acknowledging, well, yes, Pope Paul *is* a bit of a stuffed shirt.

As someone working to help nominate Ottinger, and as someone who shares these reservations about Sorensen, I found myself wondering why—why this curious pattern of opposition emerging from men who worked for the same men, and who in a general sense espouse the same policies as Sorensen? The answer, I think, tells us something about the political upheaval that has so shaken America in this last decade.

Sorensen went to work for John Kennedy, then a newly elected senator, in 1953. He was with JFK in his journey to the Presidency all through the 1950s—a time when liberalism in America had a specific, optimistic notion of what it meant to "move America ahead." Eisenhower, the argument went, had been a passive President. He had failed to act while the Soviets seized the initiative from us around the world. He had failed to help under-developed nations which were turning to Communism because we had not proven what democracy could do. He had not developed enough new domestic programs to give

federal money for schools and housing.

The kind of approach implicit among liberal Democrats was revealed in this appeal to 1960 Democratic convention delegates from the Stevenson forces: "Had we listened (to Stevenson) we wouldn't be in a position where we'd have to react to new Russian moves: *they'd* be reacting to *ours.*"

There was, moreover, a sense that divisive ideological arguments were misplaced, old-fashioned, out of date. It was time for the technicians to move in and set things right with a spate of new programs. In his famous 1962 commencement address at Yale University, JFK argued that our dilemmas were *not* political, they were *managerial* in nature. A dispassionate scholar could do more to help people than futile disputes over who controlled what power in America.

It is not too much to say that this optimism—or arrogance—was a central mistake of the liberal vision. The whole premise that a small group of highly qualified men could set American policy right has been trampled to death by a brutal mob of facts. That was how we invaded Cuba. That was how we steadily, continuously broadened our involvement in and commitment to South Vietnam. That was how a raft of domestic programs—from the War on Poverty to aid to education—was established, to spend a great deal of money accomplishing very little.

It *does* matter, in other words, who controls decisions about the spending of public money and the shape of public policy. Corporations can take all the ads they want in Newsweek to proclaim their love of the environment; but they will not stop polluting the air unless there is a check on their power to use land and air and water as they see fit. Generals will always recommend military solutions to conflict, because that is the power they know and understand; and there will be military battles unless there is a check on that power. Those who have investments in institutions which have decayed—whether teachers or civil servants or building trades officials or liberal academics—will feed off that decay unless there is an alternative source of power to push for something better.

Indeed, some of us who wanted Robert Kennedy to be President were for him because we believed he had become skeptical about established power; that he had seen, behind the official papers and speeches and conferences, that peoples' lives were being destroyed by a failure to distribute power equitably in this country. And many who came to public prominence as manipulators of power also learned this lesson—men like Richard Goodwin and Fred Dutton.

For them—certainly for me—Sorensen stands as a man who has not seen what has happened in America these last 10 years. There is about his public life a sense that public policy is a dilemma for skilled, educated, middle-class people to resolve. His Senate campaign—relying on the dying Democratic machines and speeches on Israel in the Catskills—is symbolic of that.

He believes, based on his performance, that if a candidate asserts something clearly enough, it will be believed irrespective of the facts. In replying to Newfield's charges, he proclaims

that he "went to bat" for a small African nation's right to control its mineral resources. He doesn't mention that the nation was Katanga—that the whole secession there was financed by Union Haut Miniere, the white Belgian mining combine—and that his law firm had this mining company for a client.

Further, when Sorensen went on local television and was asked about his critics, he called them "left-wing journalists"—a charge specifically applied both to Newfield and David Halberstam, a contributing editor to Harper's and a former Pulitzer Prize winner for the New York Times.

It is this sense of Sorensen as essentially a manipulator of words and facts, in my judgment, that has turned so many of his former associates against him. For example, Sorensen took out a full-page ad in the Times about narcotics, a reasonable issue on which to make a comment. But what the ad said was that Sorensen was "the *only* candidate" who was making a major effort to stop heroin addiction. What was the proof of this? Where was the evidence, either for that extraordinary claim of achievement, or for the implication that Paul O'Dwyer, Richard McCarthy, and Ottinger didn't really care about narcotics? There was none. Like so many other wordsmiths, Sorensen assumed that to state the assertion somehow proved it.

It is possible, of course, that electoral politics itself demands some distance between rhetoric and truth. But within the arena of politics, judgments have to be made about which men are seeking power for its own sake, and which men have some sense of how to disperse power among the groups that now lack it; which men are willing to anger people in power, whether they call themselves liberal or moderate or vegetarian. For many who are now testing whether straight politics in America can really re-distribute power, Sorensen is symbolic of a man who does not seem to know that the problem even exists.