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# Jeffrey Sachs: Gratitude for the Life of Ted Sorensen

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**T**he world lost one of its brightest lights today. Ted Sorensen, counselor to John F. Kennedy, has died at the age of 82. His genius as the greatest modern speechwriter is legendary. His role as a man of peace is less widely known but even greater. Together with Kennedy, Sorensen helped to save the world in the harrowing years of the Cold War, and to put into words the ideas that can preserve peace in our time and in the generations that will follow.

To know Sorensen was to be blessed with the company of a compassionate and cheerful genius. I first met Ted several years ago. His stroke a few years earlier had left him mostly blind. Yet the stroke had not in the slightest diminished Ted's clarity of mind, precision of speech, ready wit, and zest for life. In any gathering, he'd have the assembled guests roaring with laughter at his wit, and then pondering the deepest questions through his wisdom, gentle urging, and retelling of some fascinating episode of history. Until the end of his life, Ted was actively writing (including his marvelous memoirs), lecturing, and generally sharing his great wisdom and experience with each new generation of leaders and global statesmen.

Ted was our vital link to the hope, idealism, and vision of John Kennedy. With Ted's passing, we are cast adrift, and find ourselves even more dangerously at sea in a tempest of cynicism and pessimism. Sorensen stood for something else: the eternal hope for a better world, the belief that humanity, flawed and faltering, could yet find a way to survive and even to thrive. It is a spirit too often absent from our social life today. We must cling to it -- to Ted's great ideas and words -- if we are to survive.

I loved every opportunity that I had to be with Ted, including a dinner recently where he charmed a visiting high-level delegation from Bhutan, the mountain kingdom famed for its quest for happiness. The Prime Minister of Bhutan spoke movingly that evening about how Sorensen's words, in Kennedy's greatest speeches, had inspired Bhutan in its quest for democracy. The assembled dinner guests listened to a recording of Kennedy giving his wondrous speech to the Irish Parliament, recounting the great gifts of small countries to the world. Ted showed his delight, listening to some of his own words more than a half-century later. The Bhutanese were smitten with affection for Ted, as were all the guests. Ted resolved that evening to make his way to the Himalayan Kingdom during the coming year and plans were already in the works.

Sorensen's deepest belief was in the ability of humanity to solve its problems, and especially to find the way to peace. He never wavered in his faith in humanity, and that faith imbued some of the greatest phrases and actions of our age. Ted's belief in peace underpinned the wise counsel he gave during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when he expressed skepticism at the calls by the generals to bomb Cuba and risk nuclear Armageddon. We owe our very survival to the wisdom of John and Robert Kennedy, and Ted Sorensen, for their search for a peaceful resolution of the most dangerous crisis in the history of the world.

Kennedy's final year of life, from October 1962 to November 1963, in my estimation, displayed the most astounding leadership for peace in modern times. Sorensen's role was pivotal. The Cuban Missile Crisis had given Kennedy and Sorensen a harrowing glimpse into the ultimate abyss, and had provoked

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in them a history-bending determination to find a way out of the dance of death with the Soviet Union. Kennedy was determined to negotiate a nuclear test ban treaty as the first step away from the brink. Sorensen provided critical ideas and eloquence to bring that historic ambition to a successful end.

The decisive speech was Kennedy's commencement address at American University in June 1963, in which Kennedy and Sorensen took a step of astounding wisdom. This speech, known to history as Kennedy's Peace Speech, was addressed not to the Soviet people, but to Americans. It called on Americans to see the Soviet people as people of virtue, accomplishment, and heroism, even if the communist system itself was repugnant to Americans. By recognizing the humanity of the Soviet people, said Kennedy and Sorensen, we could locate our common interests and thereby find our way to peace.

That sentiment - brave, deep, and history changing - was a breakthrough, carrying the world beyond the dangerous bombast of the Cold War. Words - Sorensen's words - mattered, and mattered decisively. When Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev heard Kennedy's speech, he declared it to be the greatest of any President since Franklin Roosevelt, and he immediately summoned the US envoy, Averill Harriman, to express his interest in signing a treaty with the US. A few weeks later, the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed in Moscow.

The US and Soviet Union had stepped back from the nuclear brink. The Cold War would ease, and nuclear brinkmanship as in the Cuban Missile Crisis would never recur. Sorensen, a man of peace and eloquence, had with John Kennedy helped to turn the great arc of history towards peace by faith in the shared interests of humanity.

Let us remember today, with supreme gratitude, Sorensen's unrivalled eloquence and remarkable ideas:

*First examine our attitude towards peace itself. Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable, that mankind is doomed, that we are gripped by forces we cannot control. We need not accept that view. Our problems are manmade; therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable, and we believe they can do it again. I am not referring to the absolute, infinite concept of universal peace and good will of which some fantasies and fanatics dream. I do not deny the value of hopes and dreams but we merely invite discouragement and incredulity by making that our only and immediate goal.*

*Let us focus instead on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions -- on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements which are in the interest of all concerned. There is no single, simple key to this peace; no grand or magic formula to be adopted by one or two powers. Genuine peace must be the product of many nations, the sum of many acts. It must be dynamic, not static, changing to meet the challenge of each new generation. For peace is a process - a way of solving problems.*

Above all, Sorensen and Kennedy understood that humanity shares a common fate: that we will learn to survive and thrive together, or that we will risk losing all.

With love and conviction, Sorensen bade us to succeed and inspired us on our way. With deepest affection for his enduring contribution, let us recall

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how he bid us to recognize our shared humanity in a world of diversity:

*So let us not be blind to our differences, but let us also direct attention to our common interests and the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal.*

Like all of us, Ted Sorensen was mortal, but his ideas and words will endure and light the world.

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