

Book Review

# "Counselor"

By Ted Sorensen

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# Table of Contents

Page 3: Why This Book?

Page 5: The Author and The Author's Thesis

Page 6: Does The Author Prove His Point?

Page 8: What Have You Learned? And How Will You Incorporate  
What You Have Learned Into Your Teaching Unit?

## I. Why this book?

"Counselor" is probably not a book I would read on my own. I have always thought that the administration of John F. Kennedy was too brief to judge or at least too short to compare to other presidencies and in my experience reading Ted Sorensen he tries to do both.

Having lived through (although at a young age) Kennedy's presidency I do remember the excitement of the election of a new, vibrant young president. Looking back I realize some of this excitement came from Kennedy being from Massachusetts (like me) and Irish Catholic (like me) but I remember other national and international signs back in the day that showed this president was different than the stodgy old guys who came before him. There was his young family with an attractive wife. His exciting inaugural address. His foreign trips to Ireland and Berlin. I remember the enthusiasm of the crowds wherever he went. The feeling this was something different than came before. Even a comedy album that was successful called "The First Family" never would have happened during the Eisenhower administration. If such a parody had occurred in the 1950's, Eisenhower never would have acknowledged it like JFK did ("I thought it sounded more like [Teddy](#) than it did me".) What I truly remember about the JFK presidency was that it seemed to be something different and our world may now be different.

But was it different? Beyond the superficial of a Boston accent and a comedy album was the Kennedy presidency different and did it have substantial impact? As I said above I have always thought it was too brief to judge. That is why I have always cringed when I read Op Ed pieces by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. or Ted Sorensen which speak of the glory and impact of those years. Even

more I resent how Schlesinger and Sorenson write about how things would have been if John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated. Their world is always one where there never would have been civil rights riots in the 1960's. The war in Vietnam would have ended with the "advisors" Kennedy sent to Southeast Asia. The economy never would have suffered and our neighbors all would have loved us. All in all the United States would have been a better place, a much better place. One might say a "perfect" place in the eyes of Kennedy's historians if JFK never was assassinated. In my eyes I believe you could make the case that if Kennedy had lived events would have been more or less the same, maybe worse but in truth none of us know. The president's body of work is just too short for anyone to say definitively how things may have been different.

That is why I was wary about the TAH trip to The Kennedy Library. I expected more revisionist Kennedy history such as Sorensen's. How surprised I was that day to hear Sheldon Stern take Sorensen to task for his recollection and writings about The Cuban Missile Crisis. I especially loved the story of how Stern and Sorensen met at a conference. Sorensen speaking to their disagreement on the discussions during the missile crisis pointed out that he was there. This remark came back to me when I read in "Counselor" one of the obstacles that Sorensen had in writing the book, "I increasingly recognized several major obstacles: 1) the hazards of memory, inevitably influenced by selectivity and hindsight." To paraphrase Stern's response to Sorensen at the conference "You might have been there but I have the tapes on what was said".

## II. and III. The Author and The Author's Thesis

The author of "Counselor" is Ted Sorensen. Born in Lincoln, Nebraska and graduate of University of Nebraska Law School Sorensen went to work for Senator John F. Kennedy in 1953 and continued to work for him as an advisor and speechwriter until his assassination as President in 1963. After 1963 Sorensen went on to become an international author and writer.

The thesis for writing "Counselor" is contained in the first 3 paragraphs of the Preface:

- 1) The first book that Sorensen wrote on Kennedy was too close in time (1965) to the assassination and "the passage of time has made a broader, more candid perspective possible."
- 2) The 1962 magazine headlined "Ted Sorensen: Administration Mystery Man" had never really been addressed. "Counselor" is an attempt to explain the background, values and ideas of Sorensen.
- 3) Today is a world of "cynicism and mistrust about presidential politics" and "it is possible to have a president who is honest, idealistic, and devoted to the best ideals of this country. It happened at least once – I was there". Sorensen's goal was to show "the sorry spectacle of today's leadership {is} deplorably different from that of JFK."

## IV. Does The Author Prove His Point

Yes and No (and I hate those types of answers, my students would be yelling "you always tell us to make a decision").

Yes, because I loved the stories of Sorensen's early life. The sort of stories that people were probably looking for in 1962 when they asked "who is this close advisor to the president who seems to have so much power?" Sorensen does a great job in reflecting on his upbringing by a Jewish mother who gives up writing to raise 5 children and a Unitarian father who was both a lawyer and a politician. One can see by the way Sorensen tells the story of the blending of family, religion (mostly Unitarian), education and tragedy. The tragedy being his mother's mental illness that struck her when he was fifteen. It is amazing that someone who has written and spoken as much as Sorensen could write in "Counselor", "This is the first time I have written or spoken about this part of my life". One gets the feeling that the writing of this book may have been a late in life catharsis for Sorensen. For the reader it takes someone who was one of a president's highest advisors during one of the most critical times in our history – and it makes him human. When Sorensen writes "it is difficult because I find myself, even though I now know better, unavoidably feeling the sense of shame and stigma that mental illness brought to our family back then" what reader cannot either empathize or sympathize.

Is "Counselor", "a broader, more candid perspective" than Sorensen wrote earlier? Without a doubt. But is it "a broader, more candid perspective **possible**". I don't think so. Sorensen devotes 7 1/2 pages to "My Perspective on JFK's Personal Life". It is a subject that had to be addressed by someone who was as close to Kennedy as Sorensen. It could not have been avoided. At least Sorensen does use the excuse of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "Questions which no one has the right to ask are not entitled to truthful answers". But it does seem that Sorensen does "pull his punches" a little

when it comes to Kennedy's known affairs. Sorensen will tell a story about "the Bachelor Senator", how Judith Exner's claims were "steadily refreshed as her agent solicited more money", a letter to Marilyn Monroe was a forgery and "hijinks in the White House swimming pool, long alleged, were perhaps inappropriate but not illegal". Sorensen does come down on JFK's "mistakes" with "It was self indulgent. It does not reflect well on his attitude toward public office, the sacred trust. It was wrong, and he knew it was wrong, which is why he went to great lengths to keep it hidden." I believe Sorensen keeps it mostly hidden too by not addressing more fully the character issue, the personal impact on his family and the potential for being a national security risk.

I also say "No" to "counselor" being a "a broader, more candid perspective" because of Sorensen's recollections of The Kennedy/Joseph McCarthy relationship. Early in the book Sorensen talks about his arrival in Washington "In those years, Washington was not wholly attractive to an idealistic twenty-three year old newcomer from the Midwest. Senator Joseph McCarthy was tarnishing the city, country, and Senate with his wild accusations. His association with the Republican Party was a major reason for my growing preference for the Democratic Party".

But when it came time to censure Joseph McCarthy in the United States Senate, Senator John F. Kennedy was the only senator to be unrecorded. Sorensen makes excuses such as Kennedy being in the hospital and could not be reached ("My guess is that if he had truly wanted to reach me from the hospital he could have") and there was a moderate censure speech written and ready for release but never saw the light of day. This is the sort of material that makes Sorensen's pronouncements on today's "cynicism and mistrust about presidential politics" and "it is possible to have a president who is honest, idealistic, and devoted to the best ideals of this country." sound like a man who really does not want to see the entire truth. This is why people have cynicism and mistrust about biographers who were on the inside with their subjects.

## V and VI. What Have You Learned? And How Will You Incorporate What You Have Learned Into Your Teaching Unit?

I learned a lot about Ted Sorensen and his upbringing. Especially the impact of his Unitarian background and how that meshed with JFK's Catholic upbringing. It is also evident how his religion impacted many of his political beliefs and ironic how the two religious men had serious issues when it came to marriage.

Also it was interesting to get Sorensen's view on the group David Halberstam called "The Best and the Brightest". The group could be any workplace with their divisions (Powers/Sorensen), gossip and backstabbing (Dick Goodwin). Whether it is a business, a school system, a non-profit or even The Peace Corps ( a friend of mine worked there and said it was the worst example she ever experienced) it is amazing how whenever human beings get together these things always happen. Even in The White House. I think I will pass this lesson on to my students.

One other interesting "insider" moment was the chapter "The Death of President Kennedy". Mary McGrory's description of Sorensen that day "looking white faced and stricken, unseeing and unhearing in the nightmarish light and noise" reflects Sorensen's recollection of that day. As much as I am critical of his selective remembrance of JFK I think he does a wonderful job writing about the day of Kennedy's death, the funeral and the following days. He truly shows his love and loyalty to his friend. I think that story is worth passing along to students.

I think a chapter that would be worthwhile to students would be "Speechwriting". Anyone with Sorensen's experience and background is worth listening to when it comes to writing. His six basic rules are as good as any writing program or criteria that I have seen in high school. I especially liked his rule "Less is almost always better than more". So I will end this review here.