

Sorensen interview with Jenny and Sherry

February 2010

Q. Your relationship to Thompson and his to Kennedy

When John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960, one of the reasons he ran was because at the height of the Cold War he was fearful that the Eisenhower/Dulles foreign policy of massive retaliation might only lead to nuclear war.

Your father, Llewellyn Thompson, who had been US ambassador in Moscow during those late 50's years was I'm quite certain a career a foreign service officer who was appointed I'm not sure what his title was counselor or maybe Ambassador at Large in the State Department. When CMC broke, (and more details in my new book called *Councilor: Life at the Edge of History*) on Oct. 16 the first of 13 memorable days of 1962. Historians still call them the 13 most dangerous days in the history of mankind. Because a misstep a wrong move could have started a war which would have turned very quickly into a nuclear exchange. And if the first step were Soviets firing tactical nuclear weapons, The United States, would have responded *at least* with tactical nuclear weapons and once both sides were on that nuclear escalator, they would have moved up to strategic weapons and then to all-out warfare, and the scientists say that the explosion of so many large nuclear weapons in both eastern Europe and in North America would have produced, in addition to the bombardment of 100s of thousands and millions of people in both countries, would have resulted in radioactive poisoning of the atmosphere and in time of every dimension of our planet and would be speed via wind and water and even soil to the far reaches of the planet until that planet was uninhabitable: no plant life, no animal life, no human life, and we you and I would not be talking right now.

But fortunately, Kennedy, on that first day, October 16 decided *not* to convene the National Security Council whose members are designated by statute and included some people whom he didn't think could keep a secret, or were all that valuable in their advice anyway. He called together about a dozen or so men and one of them was Llewellyn Thompson. After all he knew Khrushchev and I was told he actually vacationed with the Khrushchevs and Jane, (chatter extremely nice lady). So there was a man who understood Khrushchev. During that 1st week until the president made his speech to the country which was delivered to Khrushchev as well as every other leader in the world, on the evening of October 22, we were sitting around the table, those of us in the so-called Excomm which means the executive committee of the National Security Council, but it was a made up name so we would have a name, there was no such thing called the Executive Committee of the NSC. And the path chosen by Kennedy ultimately was the prudent path of a blockade around Cuba, which we called a quarantine, because a blockade can be an act of war itself, and we were quarantining out, we said, not food or medicine or gasoline -- we weren't trying to destroy the Cuban economy. **We were quarantining out military equipment, offensive weapons and so-on. And there was a very, very tense week. Some communications and some attempt by the secretary general of the UN to get the two sides to stand still. And ultimately on Friday evening Oct 26, a long, somewhat rambling letter came in from Khrushchev. (And that was the Trollope ploy thing, right?) yes, that is the Trollope ploy of the next day because a second letter came in which was much tougher more direct that sounded like it had been written by the**

Central Committee instead of the 1st one that sounded like it had been written by Khrushchev himself. And so when a lot of other very dangerous and threatening things were going on Saturday the 27th we were sitting around the cabinet table in the cabinet room in the West Wing and wondering what could we do; what should we do? There were some glimmers of hope in that 1st letter, but they were pretty much dashed by the second. And it was your father [Thompson] who said "I suggest we ignore the second letter and answer the 1st." Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General and I [Sorensen] immediately said that we thought that was a good idea the best way to do it, and the President directed us [Sorensen and RFK] to draft that letter and we did and ignored the second letter except to say that once this crisis was settled, disarmament and other peace moves can be discussed. The next day, for a variety of reasons, Khrushchev decided to pull out the missiles under UN inspection. And the crisis ended, and I think your father [Thompson] deserves a great deal of the credit for that.

I remember him very well, a very wise, prudent man, just like the President of the United States was a wise prudent man who recognized it in others, and had it not been for that peaceful resolution that your father made possible, as I say, maybe none of us would be here today. I am told that today, the cabinet room has a reinforced concrete shelter, it wasn't then, and if the Soviets had so called smart missiles that were as smart as our smart missiles now, well they knew our address. And we wouldn't be sitting there much longer.

Q. You mention in your book that there was more than one blockade, or version of the blockade proposed. Do you remember what Thompson's was?

I think we misunderstand each other; I don't think I said there were different blockades.

Q. I mean different scenarios proposed before deciding which ones to have.

Oh yes. The initial scenario was a bombing attack by the US on the missiles. And in time during that first week, as other options and pros and cons were brought forth, we divided into two groups. One was the group that stuck with the original, harsh response, which would have been to bomb the missile sites. And we now know, which we didn't at the time, that the Soviets had tactical nuclear weapons on the island and if there had been any military attack by the United States from land, sea or air they would have responded by using those nuclear weapons. Khrushchev had even given them authority to use them on their own, in the event of an attack. So armed to the thing all this because the second group favored the blockade which evolved into the quarantine. The first group favored the air strike which was to be followed by an invasion. To the extent that we divided into two groups Tommy Thompson was clearly in the blockade/quarantine group, not in the strike group, not in the air strike group.

Q. In your book you talk about how you were developing the two different speeches, or asked to develop...

Oh yes, that's a different question. Because ... no no you're mixing that up with the movie. In the movie they asked me about the second speech and I said I couldn't write that one.

Q. In your book, Counselor, you said that it was very difficult or impossible to write the air strike speech but that to include everything that Executive Committee members wanted in it, and we were curious, that the Blockade speech it seemed as though it formed as you were writing it and asking questions about it

TS: True....

Q. Did the ExComm members also make requirements that they wanted included in it.

Well of course. As I started writing the blockade speech; a lot of questions came up. How is the blockade going help? How is the blockade going to get missiles out of there? How is it going to get the Soviets to the table? Etc. etc. I went back and the blockade group convened again, and I asked those questions and they were answered. I apologize that I don't remember specific questions or specific answers from members of our group. But I'm sure that Ambassador Thompson was one of the most helpful at that session also. But I never did write the second speech. What I did try to write earlier in the week was a message to Khrushchev to be delivered by a high level emissary, warning him that we were going to bomb the missile sites and that was a very difficult note to write. And somebody took that note and converted it into a second speech just in case Kennedy in the key decision making meeting of Saturday October 20 if he decided on the airstrike approach he'd need a speech, so they converted my note into a speech. Thank God that was never used.

Q. At one point in the decision making in the WH and also through the Hawk's Cay Conference several people and I think you were quoted as saying that Sovietologists were convinced that the Soviets would *not* put missiles outside of the Soviet Union. Did that include our father [Thompson]? and, if so we'd like to find that and be able to cite it.

TS: not to my knowledge it didn't. But the Soviets had never previously put nuclear weapons outside their own borders. They were very secret. They were very dangerous, so no one thought they ever would put missiles outside their borders and certainly not put them on Cuba which was defiantly close to the United States and run by a man who was to say the least, unpredictable. No one thought everyone was astonished and the secret was pretty well kept by Khrushchev and his people.

Q. You mention that Thompson was present in Oval office meeting before Bobby Kennedy went to see Dobrynin.

Oh, did I? I'd forgotten that. But I'm glad you reminded me. That's very, very important because after the letter had been finished and approved. JFK called only (are you sure? Did I say he was in that meeting?) Q. Yes, you said that Thompson was invaluable in preparing Bobby for that meeting and we were wondering what did he [Thompson] say; what did he do?

Again, my memory is not that clear. I remember that both the President and Secretary of State Rusk and Secretary of Defense McNamara were in that meeting, so were Bundy and I. I'd forgotten Thompson was in that meeting. Essentially Bobby was being told to be one hand to be flexible about the fact that our missiles in Turkey would not be there much longer for the reasons I've explained. They were still there in October '62 only because President Kennedy's decision a year earlier that they come out had been ignored by the defense department or maybe resistance by NATO or the Turk. And he was also urged to be very direct and everybody thought that Dobrynin would convey a message to Khrushchev which we hoped he would take seriously, but also some face saving in that kind of resolution and that's where the wisdom of Ambassador Thompson who knew Khrushchev and what was important to him would favorably respond.

Q. Leaving the Cuban Missile Crisis for a moment, in you other book, *Kennedy*, you wrote that Kennedy noted Khrushchev shared his own complaints of internal pressures from military, other

politicians and associate countries. And it struck us trying to understand the Cold War, as much as anyone can and we kept running into this theme ... Currents of obstruction. So that quote kind of struck us. Are we on the right track?

You mean Inside Kremlin?

Q. In our own government.

Oh I'll say they did. At that time I knew less about those obstructionists than I subsequently learned. Hope you've looked at the book called the White House Tapes by May and Zelikow. That was where for the first time I saw the transcript of the meeting with the Joint Chiefs and that's where you get a taste in that meeting of how bitterly opposed general LeMay and others were to any kind of peaceful resolution and even some of the leaders of congress whom Kennedy convened in that same meeting room just before he went on the air on the evening of October 22. And many leaders of both parties thought that the blockade was too soft a response and that we ought to as one leader of Congress said, go in there and hit them with everything we had.

Q. In the Kennedy tapes, in that book actually, we came upon a meeting Kennedy had with Thompson where he [Kennedy] asked him to come in and asked about the fallout from the U-2 affair and the failed Paris summit, Kennedy was wondering if the summit had been intentionally torpedoed. It happens to be a section we are currently working on and we are curious if you ever hear JFK speculate on what had gone wrong there.

No. I don't remember that I ever did but you're going to have a fascinating book.

Q. Could we go into the Vienna Summit?

Coincidentally only a week ago I received letter from [Boltzmann Institute] in Vienna. Next year they are going to commemorate 50th anniversary. They want me to speak and they also want me to write an essay with my recollections of the summit. And I am just in the process of finishing that essay now, and I have done zero additional research, just drawing on my own memory and books. And I assume that Thompson attended that summit? He might have still been Ambassador to Moscow.

Q Yes, that's right. He came to the meeting. As you know, people say that Kennedy was "devastated" by that summit. Thompson said not in his oral history...

I'm certainly glad to hear that because that's what I'm saying in my essay. I'm pointing out that others say that Kennedy was, humiliated, and bullied and that I actually read the transcript. (Where can we get ahold of that transcript?) Well I'll tell you a secret. In my book "Kennedy" I wrote what each side said about Berlin and. And just between you and me, I took out the quotation marks because I didn't think I'd get away with it. But that is the actual, most of that comes from the actual transcript. The Kennedy Library A. probably has the transcript and B. surely would make it available to the daughters of one of the key participants and tell them I said that. (Thank you!)

We are trying to get ourselves invited to the conference. (personal banter)

Q. did you notice have any dealings with Thompson there at the summit?

Not that I remember.

Q. Also at that meeting. Clearly the Vienna meeting was not a negotiating session.

No, it was not supposed to be a negotiating session. Therefore Kennedy did not bring any specific plans and proposals. But he had been very well briefed on Berlin because he did know in advance that that was at the top of Khrushchev's agenda. And I'm willing to bet you that in the archives somewhere there in are one or more cables from Moscow US Embassy to Kennedy at the White house where Thompson gave his advice on what Kennedy might expect.

You might also want to check out how to see if he was involved in the proposed debate between Kennedy and Khrushchev they had in mind for world Television. Pierre Salinger was one of our negotiators in that and might in his memoirs very well talk about it and if you father participated in that.

Q. That's a good lead. That never happened though. I guess the closest it got was the Adzubei interview. You brought up Berlin... Why not united Neutral Germany? Was that ever considered, or was that completely off the table, out of the question?

I think that it was an idea that was probably floating around but I think that given the Cold War attitudes on both sides at that time, neither the west nor the Soviets would have trusted such a solution. The West Germans would have considered it a sellout. Adenauer who was then the Chancellor of West Germany would have been outraged denounced the United States for being unwilling to stand up for freedom. So probably the probably the honest answer is that it was not seriously considered.

Q. I want to go back for a second to the Cuban Missile Crisis. You said that Acheson wanted Kennedy to declare a state of emergency. (Sorensen: No, no, now you're mixing them up; that was over the Berlin Crisis.) Ah, that was the Berlin Crisis. Oh, OK and that Kennedy said he received a cable from embassy Moscow saying that soviets were likely to be impressed by substantial quiet moves that didn't panic the allies. Was that from Thompson?

Yes, yes. ... That was Berlin. Correct. (back and forth on when Thompson was in Moscow) Sounds right. Therefore, if in fact that advice came from Moscow, I think that was Thompson. (Yes, it does sound like something he would say.) Yes it is... and I think another very important contribution he made.

Q. In Thompson's oral history, interviewer mentions that Thompson went to Hyannis port in '63 when Maxwell Taylor also happened to be there and Thompson was asked if this was just a social call or was he doing anything else. Thompson who never would talk about anything he didn't think should be talked about said that they were just discussing the budget and he wasn't involved. Do you have any idea what were he might have been discussing in Hyannis Port at that time?

I Do remember there was a very high-level meeting in Hyannis Port on several issues (you don't know the date in 1963, do you? Could have been the summer?) Bear in mind that the late summer of '63 and fall of '63 was when the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty which Kennedy had first talked about in his American University commencement address of June 10 and then Khrushchev had invited the negotiators to come to Moscow and work one out. And of course Kennedy had to figure out how to get the Joint Chiefs to testify in favor of it and before the Senate armed services committee and a few internal legislative political moves like that and that may very well have been one of the subjects. Although I think the budge may also have been a subject of that meeting at Hyannis port.

Q. Did you see him in Hyannis often?

Not that I recall.

(Talk about difficulty of negotiating.)

Q. Kennedy picked Harriman to go and do the signing?

Harriman chief of the delegation.

Q. Do you have any idea of why not Thompson?

None at all

Carl Kaysen who was deputy national security advisor was there as the White House representative and I know that Kennedy added a couple of Republican Senators to increase the bipartisan credibility of the delegation. But if you want me to tell you something very frankly (off the record. Don't quote me, not for attribution) [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I'm sure that Thompson met with Rusk and demonstrates Thompson was loyal bureaucrat and went through proper channels. But I'll also be frank to say that Thompson was a lot more valuable in the ExCom meetings than Rusk. Also you'll notice in one or more of my books, when Kennedy absented himself for a day on Wednesday, the 18th to make a campaign appearance. When he came back I said to him that I thought many of the participants in the Excomm were better and franker in their advice which might differ from their senior secretary's advice when the President wasn't there. I'm sure Thompson was one of those I had in mind when I told the president that and for that reason he absented himself deliberately from some of our planning meetings during that first week.

Q. You mentioned the American University speech. In Thompson's Oral history he thought you ? called him at one point to discuss that speech. Do you remember talking to him or what his input was?

Two possibilities of calls. One is that my first draft of speech, I ran by national security advisor McGeorge Bundy and he brought a couple of other people in to review it. But after I flew it out to Hawaii and President reviewed it on the long trip back from Hawaii. He said to Bundy and assume to me at the same time I don't want this speech cleared by the State Department and the Defense Department and the CIA. And knowing Kennedy's high regard he had for Thompson he might very well have said except Thompson because he knew he the one person in town who would agree with it. I might have called him from the plane. But I don't recall talking to him while it was in preparation and certainly had to time when we got back.

Q. Yes, he didn't make it sound as though it was in progress and how much he would have agreed with it.

I'm sure that he had *at least* an indirect influence on me and the President in the thinking about that speech.

Q. I suppose those ideas were knocked around for a while?

Not much. Not to be immodest but I was on my own when the president was on his trip to Hawaii. and that speech more than any other reflects my thinking and where we were at the time.

Q. too bad it all fell apart.

No, it didn't! We're still here aren't we? (looks scarier now than it did back then) Oh no! not scarier than the 13 days of October.

Q. We've come to the end of our questions.

Those are good questions and you ladies are on a very important project for history.

If you think of anything else we should include...

My two books I do mention other subjects I had less involvement in and don't know how much Thompson had to do with them. One is the Hot Line and the other is an agreement probably at the United Nations to keep WMDs out of outer space. Another which I did have some involvement in which was the sale of American wheat to Russia. These are all '63 and another was a Kennedy speech to the General Assembly in September of '63 in which he listed a number of areas in which he thought there were possible cooperation between the United State and the soviet union.

Q. Did you notice or witnessed any relationship between Thompson and Bobby Kennedy?

Clearly they were congenial and compatible during the Cuban Missile Crisis sitting around that table. Look at 13 days.

You might see if Bobby's oral history has anything like that.

Q. Did you have any relationship with Thompson outside 13 days.?

Not that I could remember off hand. Except that somewhere after I left the white house and now I'm talking about in late 64 or 65 there was a very, very fancy ball hosted by Kay Graham the publisher of Washington Post called the Black and White Ball or something like that in honor of Truman Capote in New York. I attended and I have a distinct recollection of dancing with your Mother! (She did like to dance!) Well she was a very pretty lady. (remember it. It must have been incredible party!) Very fancy for a kid from Nebraska, I'll tell you that!

Thank you so much ... etc.

This all stemmed somebody told me because after I'd spoken to a group of students from the University of Pennsylvania, David Eisenhower attended a dinner session and I don't remember whether your father's name came up because he asked me whether it came up in the Q&A after my speech but ultimately I was told that he was in touch with one of you and that's what led to the idea of the phone interview.

(Jenny relays David Eisenhower/jenny debate and subsequent reminiscence)

If you think of anything else.... Very grateful.

Small talk about T's former aides. See you in Vienna!

(sadly, he passed away just before the Vienna conference.)