Sorensen, Theodore Chaikin (8 May 1928–31 Oct. 2010), lawyer, presidential advisor, and speechwriter, was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, to Christian A. Sorensen, a lawyer who also served as attorney general for the state of Nebraska from 1929 to 1933, and Annis Chaikin, a social worker. Christian Sorensen was influenced by the progressive wing of the Republican Party and named his son after President Theodore Roosevelt. Annis, a pacifist and feminist who did not like Roosevelt's tendency toward war, said her son's name came from its Greek meaning, “gift from God.” Sorensen’s mother was Jewish, but he was raised Unitarian, which played role in his political beliefs.

Sorensen said in his 2008 book Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History that growing up in Lincoln, Nebraska, was a “simple and largely contented life.” He went to public schools where he was president of the Lincoln High writers’ club and editor of the literary magazine, the Scribe. He credited the debate club as a major contributor to the “clarity, quality and color” of his writing. While in high school he also published a monthly column with the Voice, a newspaper of the National Urban League, of which he was a member. In his column he frequently challenged segregation laws as unjust, an early indicator of his support for civil rights. He graduated in 1945. Upon turning eighteen in 1946 Sorensen registered for the draft as a conscientious objector, citing his Unitarian beliefs. He hoped for non-combatant service. This pacifist philosophy and his commitment to civil rights remained as some of his most cherished beliefs.

Sorensen married his first wife, Camilla Parker, on 8 September 1949. They met while serving as staff members at a summer institute devoted to the causes of peace and nonviolence. Parker was raised a Quaker and had strong feelings about pacifism, which influenced Sorensen. They had three children.

Sorensen attended the University of Nebraska, where he worked on a six-year combined undergraduate and law degree. He served as editor-in-chief of the law review. One of his articles from that post entitled “Can’t Teachers Be Citizens Too” was published in the Progressive in March 1951. He graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1949 with a bachelor’s degree in law and in 1951 with a juris doctor.
After two lawyers from Washington, DC visited his law school, Sorensen became interested in public law. He decided his best opportunity to get a job in that field was to leave Nebraska and pursue a job in DC. He arrived in Washington’s Union Station on 3 July 1951. “I had never drunk a cup of coffee, set foot in a bar, written a check, or owned a car,” he recalled in his memoir. He found a job with the Federal Security Administration (FSA), a precursor to the Department of Health and Human Services. After the FSA Sorensen worked with the Joint Senate House Committee on Railroad Retirement as a researcher. By the end of 1952 his work with the committee was over, and he was looking for a job again.

From his work on the committee Sorensen was introduced to newly elected Senator John F. Kennedy from Massachusetts and Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson from Washington. Both senators were impressed with Sorensen and offered him work. He took a job with Kennedy with the prospect of working on a legislative program to revive the New England economy. Kennedy was an Irish Catholic from New England, while Sorensen was a Unitarian from the Midwest, yet the two men forged an unshakable alliance.

Sorensen’s first major project for Kennedy was to draft speeches on the economic revival of New England. Those speeches, which were Kennedy’s debut in the Senate, were compiled with supplements and distributed as the “The New England Economic Report.” Sorensen emerged as Kennedy’s main speechwriter. From 1954 to 1956 Kennedy and Sorensen collaborated on the book Profiles of Courage (1956). Sorensen was a “research associate” and helped with some of the chapters. The book went on to be a bestseller, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1957.

After Kennedy was defeated for a place on the Democratic ticket as vice president at the 1956 Democratic National Convention, he wanted to gain support for a 1960 presidential bid. Sorensen became his chief speechwriter. They traveled across the country over the next four years, making appearances and meeting with party leaders. On those trips the two men came to know each other well. Sorensen became a better writer and Kennedy a better speaker.

After Kennedy won, Sorensen and Kennedy collaborated on the 1961 inaugural address, which featured such notable rhetoric as “the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans” and “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Kennedy appointed Sorensen Special Counsel to the President. The press called Sorensen Kennedy’s “intellectual alter ego.”

Sorensen continued to write for President Kennedy as well as advise him on major matters, including the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Sorensen drafted the address to the nation and helped craft Kennedy’s response to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, which contributed to a resolution to the crisis. Sorensen understood that
the response could have grave implications. He took care in the language he used to convey a message of strength but also a willingness to find a peaceful outcome.

Sorensen was a strong advocate for civil rights legislation and advised Kennedy to speak out on the issue in the summer of 1963. He saw that summer as a “hot streak” for the Kennedy–Sorensen speechwriting team, as he wrote three speeches that represented the pinnacle of their collaboration. On 10 June Kennedy spoke from American University stressing a “strategy of peace,” which many historians have seen as his vision for ending the Cold War. The next day Kennedy addressed the nation on civil rights from the oval office. Finally Kennedy gave a speech on 26 June in Berlin that has been lauded by historians as one of his greatest speeches on the Cold War. After Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 Sorensen worked for a brief time with President Lyndon Johnson on his legislative agenda. He resigned on 29 February 1964.

After a divorce from Camilla Parker, Sorensen married Sara Elbery on 4 June 1964. Their marriage also ended in a divorce. Sorensen met Gillian Martin at the home of Robert and Ethel Kennedy in 1968. Martin was a television producer and a part of the 1968 campaign team for Robert Kennedy. Sorensen and Martin were married on 28 June 1969. They had a daughter and remained married until his death.

Sorensen published the book *Kennedy* (1965), which highlighted his eleven years with Kennedy from his time in the Senate through the presidency. On 20 January 1966 Sorensen joined the New York law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison, where he practiced law for forty years. He specialized in government regulations and relations and was involved in dealings with several foreign leaders. He counseled Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1976 regarding the publication of his memoirs. Traveling to Cuba in 1977, on behalf of several clients, he met Cuban President Fidel Castro. In 1994 he assisted the African National Congress, led by Nelson Mandela, in their first free elections.

All the while Sorensen continued his role in government affairs while practicing law. He advised Robert F. Kennedy who had been elected a senator from New York in 1964. Sorensen took time from writing his book *Kennedy* to campaign for Robert Kennedy in New York. Although Sorensen advised Kennedy that entering the presidential race in 1968 was a mistake, he stayed on for the campaign as an advisor. Sorensen collaborated with Kennedy on his speech the day after Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, which had been characterized by one biographer as “RFK’s own epitaph.” When Robert Kennedy was shot on 5 June 1968 Sorensen was present at the Ambassador Hotel. Sorensen continued as a close advisor of the Kennedy family, urging Senator Edward Kennedy not to challenge Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election.

In the aftermath of Robert Kennedy’s assassination Sorensen attempted to run for the New York Senate seat in 1970 but lost in the primaries. In 1977 President Jimmy Carter nominated him to be
the director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Sorensen’s position as a conscientious objector when he entered the draft in 1946 was an issue during the confirmation process. The Senate also expressed concerns over his alleged involvement in CIA operations when he advised President Kennedy, his insistence in an affidavit that the release of the Pentagon Papers by The New York Times was “harmless,” and his use of classified documents when writing his book Kennedy. Sorensen withdrew his candidacy on 17 January 1977.

In 2007 Sorensen came out in support of presidential nominee Senator Barack Obama, saying that the candidate had many similarities to John F. Kennedy. Despite growing health concerns due to a stroke in 2001, that left him partially blind, Sorensen campaigned for Obama and helped with his inaugural address in 2009. When Sorensen died on 31 October 2010 at New York-Presbyterian Hospital after suffering a stroke a week earlier, Obama released a statement saying, “I know his legacy will live on in the words he wrote, the causes he advanced, and the hearts of anyone who is inspired by the promise of a new frontier.”

Bibliography

See also


King, Martin Luther, Jr. (1929-1968), Baptist minister and civil rights leader <http://anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-1500382>