

STANDARDS BLOG:

The Lion in Winter – or is it Spring? Ted Kennedy Addresses the Democratic Convention

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For those of us who are of a certain age, the 1960s were an era not to have been missed. Indeed, they were a time when idealism seemed to be a responsibility of citizenship, rather than an idle pursuit. As John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King spoke out in words that captured the heart as well as the mind, more and more fell in behind. Their goals

and ideals demanded to be your goals and ideals, and all of the lofty aims they espoused seemed to be as achievable as they were morally imperative.

And then, of course, the house of cards began to tumble in, through a succession of events that everyone that lived through them remembers all too well - not just remembers, but remembers frozen and captured in the amber of a terrible series of still images - where you were, and what you were doing. And then, after what seemed an endless moment, the numbing horror of what came next, as if the camera had begun rolling once again.

I was at school in fifth grade when John Kennedy was shot. Suddenly, all of the teachers disappeared from all of the class rooms, and stood whispering in the hall. Then, all of the children behind all of the windows in all of the classrooms of the parochial school across the alley were suddenly on their knees praying. And then we were sent home, without explanation, to be given the news by our parents in whatever way they thought best.

When I was in ninth grade the least surprising but perhaps the most unjust event occurred, with the assassination of one of the greatest and most courageous men of my time. The date was April 4, 1968, and the place, Memphis, Tennessee. I was

in London, England when I heard the news that the Reverend Martin Luther King had been assassinated. For days, the first four pages of every London paper were awash with news, pictures, and tales of anguish from the scores of American cities that went up in flames and rioting, borne of the outrage that spewed from this latest, outrageous injustice, of fears once again fulfilled fears, and dreams once more taken away. It seemed like the country must explode, or collapse.

And it almost did, but for the outreach of those that tried to bridge a chasm that threatened to yawn ever wider until it consumed everyone on either side.

One of those that reached the farthest that wrenching summer was Bobby Kennedy, at the time campaigning for the Democratic nomination for the presidency. On the day of King's assassination he landed in Indianapolis, Indiana, where he was scheduled to speak to a crowd gathered in a poor black neighborhood. His staff urged him not to speak, but he insisted. As he took the stage, he realized that his audience had not yet heard the news of King's assassination. But he rose to the occasion, speaking extemporaneously and saying in part:

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What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.

(Interrupted by applause)

...But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings that abide in our land.

(Interrupted by applause)

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.

An unusual man, to be sure. A Harvard graduate with rolled up sleeves that could break the news to a stunned black audience that a white man had just assassinated the greatest black leader of the century, and then quoted Aeschylus as if it was the most natural thing to do on such an occasion. And yet still he was able, through his simple eloquence and the shared experience of tragedy, to connect with a blue collar crowd dealing with emotions unimaginable to few that had not experienced such a sudden, terrible loss. All in six short minutes and 12 seconds of speaking

from the heart, while everywhere else in America cities were already beginning to burn.

Two months later, of course, it was his turn to fall. He had just given his victory speech in the dark, early hours of the morning to a room of joyous supporters after winning the California primary, a victory that seemed to guarantee him the Democratic nomination. As the cameras remained trained on him, you could see him being pulled in one direction by the Secret Service, anxious to escort him from the pressing crowd. But he turned to leave by a different door instead, stepping into the waiting gun sight of Sirhan Sirhan, out of the present, and into history.

I heard that news a few hours later, early on the morning of June 4, 1968 while getting ready for school. I rushed down to turn on the black and white TV, and saw that rock of mid-Twentieth century middle America, Walter Cronkite, visibly shaken and near tears, trying to put into words the shock and loss and outrage and injustice of what had, once again, been taken away from a family and a nation in an incomprehensible, irrational, momentary act of a single incomprehensible, irrational individual.

His brother, Edward Kennedy, the last of the four sons that had seemed destined for greatness, delivered his eulogy, unforgettably ending with these words, spoken in a quavering voice:

My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life; to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it.

Those of us who loved him and who take him to his rest today, pray that what he was to us and what he wished for others will some day come to pass for all the world.

As he said many times, in many parts of this nation, to those he touched and who sought to touch him:

"Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not."

Those times could be tragic, but they were also inspiring, and I would not have missed them. I was in London when Reverend King was shot because, together with my mother, brother and sister, we were reuniting with my father, who on his way home from Viet Nam. In tune with those same times, he had been serving as an unpaid volunteer physician for civilians, arriving in Saigon the night before the Tet Offensive exploded all around him. We didn't hear from him then for two weeks, until one night a volunteer ham radio operator, also in the service of others, searched the ether for another unknown volunteer, who in turn found another, in order to help someone separated from his family in a time of emergency reconnect with his loved ones and tell them that he was alive, and safe, and that he loved them. All via an ephemeral daisy chain of compassion stretching halfway around the globe.

For a few minutes we could speak, awkwardly trying to remember, but usually forgetting, to punctuate our hurried sentences with "over" and "out" to make the most of the short time available before the radio operators gently interrupted, so that they could connect another family across half a dark world of silent space.

It's been a long time now since those heady, troubled days. Idealism, it seems, too soon gave way to cynicism, and those that later preached similar messages almost always sounded as if they were only mouthing the words of ancient songs whose melody had been long forgotten. Lyndon Johnson made much of Bobby Kennedy's and King's civil rights dreams become law, but his presidency sank in the morass that was Viet Nam. Another morass, this time called "Watergate" took down his successor, and between the war and the scandal, idealism seemed to be at best a naive pursuit, and in Washington, a hollow joke.

Until this year, that is, when it seems as if the old cards of idealism are improbably but credibly being put in place once again, this time by a young black senator born in the first year of Jack Kennedy's unfinished presidency. And I, like many others (both in this country and abroad), feel like I am hearing from Barack Obama something real that I have been waiting for a very long time to hear again.

It is true that with the passage of time Obama has been revealed to be more political than pure idealists would prefer. But so, of course, were Jack, and Martin, and Bobby, each of whom had personal as well as public failings. But also, as with them, Obama's politics seem the servant to the ideals, rather than the other way around. Most importantly, there seems to be an innate decency and genuineness in the man that shines through with conviction.

When at last the welcoming cheers died down, the speech he delivered was brief - five minutes perhaps. It was heard by a crowd that seemed barely able to breathe once he began to speak, mindful that this opportunity would likely be their last to see the old lion in his element and feeling the fire of inspiration and a goal to be attained.

It was a long-delayed delight to hear Michele Obama and her brother tonight, articulate, self confident, engaging and inspiring, standing in front of thousands of cheering delegates on the way to nominating the first black to run for president as the candidate of a major party. Their words, and the crowds embracing response, made it seem as if we may well stand once again on the verge of bringing the dream of a just, equal and hopeful future closer to realization. What a luxury it would be after 45 years, and especially after the last 8, to feel as if we are enthusiastically dedicated again to something beyond national self interest, beyond individual self interest, beyond self interest for the sake of self interest.

But the highlight of the evening for most, I am sure, was the appearance of Senator Ted Kennedy. Until the last minute, it was uncertain whether he would be strong and well enough to speak. [*Update: It was later revealed that he had a serious kidney stone attack the night before requiring hospitalization.*] But when the appointed moment arrived, out he walked. Unbowed, almost undiminished, and clearly delighted to be there, he took the stage smiling and waving after a tribute by Caroline Kennedy, followed by a video tribute of family flashbacks and

footage of the Senator and grandchildren rejoicing in the vitality of a timeless day spent sailing on the home waters of Cape Cod Bay.

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The Senator spoke confidently and with evident pleasure, with the same familiar timbre that has resonated in the halls of the Senate for 45 years, albeit tonight with some hoarseness and an occasional quaver in his voice at the end of a sentence. But the famous energy, drive and spirit were clearly undiminished, if not taxed by too long a speech. And he looked bluff and beefy as ever, though it was hard to miss the furrowed neck of an old man, lost inside a collar several sizes too large. Only when he turned his head to the right could it be noticed that the familiar mane of white hair was a comb over, unsuccessfully attempting to conceal the half of his scalp that had been shaved clean for surgery only weeks before.

As he warmed to the task, the cameras, of course, focused not only on anonymous faces in the crowd, but also on those of family members present - Caroline, rejoicing in the present and her uncle's evident pleasure at being there; Maria Shriver, distraught and on the verge of tears, hanging on every triumphant word but clearly focusing on the uncertainties of the future.

The words were as wonderful and inspiring as ever, keeping faith over all the intervening years with the goals of those long-gone days of Camelot. But this year, they seem not a quaint echo of a half-forgotten past, but a credible bridge from that past to a future that can reaffirm the selfless idealism of the 1960s, giving power to a wave that this time may wash higher on the beach of social justice than last time, and carry on a tradition that for too long has lacked the famous vigor of his brother's presidency.

He said: *I'll be there in January* to see Obama sworn in, and few were willing to doubt it.

And he said: *For me, this is a season of hope. And that, I stand here in hope. And also that, If we set our compass true, we will reach our destination.* And if he could hope and believe such things, than surely, the crowd knew, they could, too, and that they would willingly once more hope and believe such things as well.

And he promised, this time echoing his brother Jack: *The torch has been passed once again to a new generation.* And that it had been passed, *for you and for me.*

And, finally, quoting the closing words of the speech he had made at another Democratic convention many years ago, conceding defeat and marking the end of his own presidential ambitions, he promised that, *The work begins anew, the hope rises again, the dream lives on.*

And so it does, for us. If we are willing to believe it, too.

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