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**ILLUSTRATION: TOM BACHTELL**

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*Gloria Sitrin*

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On January 20th, the fiftieth anniversary of President Kennedy’s Inauguration, a group of fifteen staffers who had worked in the Kennedy White House held a reunion at a local D.C. steak house. One of them was a secretary named Gloria Sitrin, whose boss had been Kennedy’s aide and speechwriter, Ted Sorensen. Sorensen had been my boss, too, when I helped him with his memoir, “Counselor,” in the years before I became a speechwriter for Barack Obama. So I tracked down Sitrin and invited her and her husband, Dave, to lunch at the White House mess.

In anticipation of the lunch, Sitrin, who is eighty-one and lives in Springfield, Virginia, had decided to poke through the box in her garage where she had stashed her Kennedy mementos, back in 1964. She brought along a couple of manila folders, the first of which contained crumbling news clips and old photographs: one of Sorensen at Sitrin’s wedding, one of Sitrin and J.F.K.

The second folder contained six yellowing sheets of typescript, held together by a rusted staple, and covered with Sorensen’s unmistakable handwriting. At the top of the first page were the words “The Inaugural—Draft 2” and, in the corner, the initials “TCS” and the date “January 14, 1961”—six days before Kennedy was sworn in. It appeared to be the earliest surviving draft of Kennedy’s Inaugural Address, a speech that inspired generations to take up public service and that set the standard for every inaugural since. Its authorship is still debated.

Until the Sitrins went through the box, there were three known early drafts of the speech. There is also a transcript of dictation that Evelyn Lincoln, J.F.K.’s secretary, took on board his private plane, the Caroline, on January 10th, en route to Palm Beach. And there are nine pages of yellow legal paper on which J.F.K. wrote passages from the inaugural on the flight back from Palm Beach, on January 17th.

The earliest fragments of the speech appeared in Sorensen’s book “Kennedy,” published in 1965, in which he briefly quoted from a first draft. Forty-three years later, in “Counselor,” he confessed that when he completed “Kennedy” he tore up this draft, written in his own hand, after consulting with Mrs. Kennedy, lest future historians get the wrong idea about the speech’s true author.

Most scholars believe that Kennedy and Sorensen each worked on the speech separately, talking occasionally by phone, until Sorensen joined the President-elect in Palm Beach on January 15th, the day after the draft found in Gloria Sitrin’s garage was produced. This, then, may be the copy that Sorensen took to Florida.

The draft allows us to see, in a new way, the evolution of the speech. In “Kennedy,” Sorensen wrote that J.F.K. thought his early drafts focussed too heavily on domestic issues: “We must begin by facing the fact that history’s most abundant economy has slackened its growth to a virtual halt. That the world’s most productive farmers have only suffered for their success. . . . That too many of our cities are sinking into squalor.” This and other passages from the January 14th version also give the impression that Kennedy and Sorensen were still writing in the language of the campaign.

Also cut were lines that failed to meet the soaring standard of later drafts: “Our strength, like our dream, must be a seamless web,” and “risking while resisting a Walpurgis Night dance of hideous destruction and death.”

Perhaps the most significant deletion was a reference to civil rights. The January 14th draft reads, “Our nation’s most precious resource, our youth, are developed according to their race or funds, instead of their own capability.”

Still, a number of lines that sing in the final version are first heard here: “Civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is subject to proof ”; “For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed”; “All this will not be finished in the first hundred days. . . . But let us begin.”

It is unclear whether this draft contained a version of the inaugural’s best-known line. Its concluding paragraphs, where “ask not” would be, are missing. We may never know the answer, at least not until another former Kennedy staffer discovers a box of treasures in the garage.

After lunch, I asked the Sitrins if I could make a copy of the draft. I took it upstairs, thinking that the President might be interested in seeing it. He was standing in the outer Oval Office when I entered. I handed him the draft, explaining how Sorensen had torn up the first one, and how Sitrin had kept this one in a box for fifty years.

“This is unbelievable,” he said, sitting down with it in a chair by his secretary’s desk. He then went downstairs to meet Gloria Sitrin. “Hello, Mr. President,” she said, a phrase she hadn’t uttered in fifty years. ♦