

Introduction

Bobby Kennedy and Me

Reliable memories fade like old polish, as time and distance remove us from events in our past. And yet for me one particular memory is as striking and vivid as when it occurred, nearly 38 years ago to the day, in the spring of 1968. I was a young boy of 10 years, and more concerned with fitting in at school, horsing around with my friends the Burrows brothers, narrowly avoiding being pegged for chores by my mother, and trying in vain to catch the eye of a certain girl with curly blonde hair who lived on our block. My parents were immigrants to this country, having moved here in 1957. I was born shortly thereafter, in Dallas, Texas. My father was a geologist and a physicist, and our family spent the early years here moving to different college towns with teaching opportunities. These included stints in Champaign-Urbana, Palo Alto, and later a small San Joaquin Valley town in California called Turlock.

I had two brothers, one older and one younger. We were all separated by nearly six years. Originally, I assumed this was careful planning by my mother—a highly educated woman in her own right—but was later chagrined to learn this had only been the product of “dumb” (her words—said with a smile) luck.

From an early age, I noticed my parents’ fascination and eventual involvement with American campaign politics. The ability to participate and voice one’s opinion was undoubtedly a primary reason my father wanted to come to this country in the first place; his view was shared by my mother. Both of my parents became Democrats, and eventually were active in the small valley chapter of the party. My brothers and I were inspired and influenced by my father’s passion for politics, and in different state and local elections became precinct walkers and suburban “political

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guerrillas”—the latter calling for us to plant signs for Democratic candidates in the yards of sleeping, unsuspecting Republican families, or plant Democratic bumper stickers on the large cars in their driveways.

The town we lived in, however, was an awfully lonely place for Democrats. Turlock was and is primarily an agricultural town, with the anomaly of a small liberal arts university being planted in its center. The town is besieged with cold temperatures and wisps of tule fog in the winter and dry scorching heat in the summer. In 1968, many of the faculty members where my father taught were Democrats, but the surrounding population of ranchers, farmers, and businesspeople were most assuredly Republican, and like the consistency of the weather, regular and predictable in their views of politics in general and Democrats in specific. They didn't mix.

The Turlock city council in that year was Republican, as was the mayor and all other prominent government and city officials. Thus, when Senator Robert Kennedy's campaign officials decided to stage a whistle-stop tour on a train from Sacramento, through the valley and on to Los Angeles in that spring, shortly before the California presidential primary, they had a difficult time finding any elected representatives from some of the small valley towns who might be willing to ride with Kennedy.

The mayor of our town was a man named Enoch Christofferson. He had made his money in poultry, and in his later years seemed intent on being elected and reelected to the mayor's office as many times as possible. I also carry clear memories of him visiting people at the county fair, or coming to junior high school events and passing out pens with his name on them, reminding potential voters that "a vote for Enoch was a vote for prosperity." He provided me with my first personal connection to campaign advertising and demonstrated (even obvious for me as a child) that the first job of an incumbent is to make sure to be reelected. I don't think he ever realized that his first name was difficult to pronounce, and often served as the source of many jokes among the students at our school.

When Bobby Kennedy's advance team asked if anyone from the mayor's office or the city council would be willing to ride with the Democratic presidential contender, they encountered stiff, unbending resistance. No one wanted to ride with Kennedy—in spite of the fact that he *was a Kennedy*. Or maybe, because of it.

Desperate, the Kennedy team searched for other people to ride on the train. They were looking for someone akin to a famous or high-profile local, who also happened to be a Democrat. Being an elected official would be a plus, although at this point that was not likely to happen.

I have mentioned that my father was a geologist and a physicist—or as he liked to joke: a *geopizzaicist*. Well known in his circle for his research on black holes and gravitational radiation, he was mostly known in Turlock as the guy the newspaper or local radio station called whenever there was an earthquake. Indeed, my father's background in geology qualified him as one of the early spin doctors of plate tectonics! Or to put it more simply, he was the man the papers quoted as declaring the earthquake at a certain reading on the Richter scale.

In this, the smallest of ways, my father qualified as a low-level celebrity. Someone with an occasional media profile. But enough, apparently, that coupled with his membership in the Democratic Party, he was selected to ride on the train with Bobby. By virtue of marriage and the fact they needed extra bodies for the train ride, my mother was invited to tag along.

All of which left me and my two brothers to fend for ourselves. Armed with a newly minted driver's license, my older brother piled my younger brother and myself in my mother's pistachio green 1964 Ford Falcon and drove to the train station in town. The station consisted of a small office building, accompanied by a loading dock platform with scales. I had been there with my friends on different occasions, since the station was rarely manned—all of which meant that we could horse around and watch the trains unsupervised. Occasionally, we left pennies on the tracks and later inspected to see how the copper had smeared and spread beneath the might of the trains.

Given the paucity and rareness of Democrats in Turlock (why else, after all, had my father been invited?), I had fully expected to find only three people at the train station to meet Senator Kennedy—those three including my two brothers and myself. Parking near the station proved a challenge, however, and as we neared the tracks we saw that a very large crowd—perhaps numbering in the thousands—had turned out for the event. Had they come to bury Caesar or praise him?

My brothers and I made little progress getting toward the loading platform, the part of the station where we would have the best spot for seeing the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee. I remember asking my older brother if all these other people were Democrats like our parents, and my brother shooting me a look as if I had asked a very stupid question.

A man spotted us in the crowd and introduced himself as the nephew of the Democrat who had arranged for my parents to ride on the train. He explained that my father had asked him to find us and bring us as close to Kennedy's train car as possible. My older brother rested my younger

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brother on his shoulders, and we made our way through the crowd of people whose political allegiance was still a mystery to me.

The man parked us at the end of the platform, a great place to spot trains coming from a northerly direction, and in all likelihood, the best place to watch anyone speaking from the back of the train if the speech was not too long. And there we stood. And eventually sat. And waited.

Some time past noon my younger brother—who was barely four years old—perked up and began pointing wildly. He was only echoing the murmur already running through the crowd on both sides of the tracks. In the distance we could see a large headlight, visible even in bright sunshine. As it grew bigger in the horizon, we heard the blaring of the train horn, followed by the deafening sound of its engine.

Kennedy's train was close. My younger brother squirmed back and forth on my older brother's shoulders, and began to make a loud, soulful *woooooooooooo woooooooo* sound, mimicking the horn of the train.

As the train grew closer, I could see that many in the crowd were now on their feet, and more were cheering and waving. Some held Kennedy signs, but more held signs with *Nixon for President* emblazoned across the front.

A few feet away I could hear a large man growling loudly at no one in particular, speaking while he gritted an aging cigar in his mouth. I heard him use the words, "God damn hippy" and "Kennedy" in the same breath. My older brother shot me another look that said: *told you so*.

All at once the train thundered into the station. By most standards, it was not a very long train, being only an engine with four individual cars behind it. The last three were commuter cars, and the last of these came to a stop right beside us on the platform.

By now many people in the crowd were cheering—but not surprisingly, many more were waving their Nixon signs and starting to yell their insults.

I had a sense that things would rapidly escalate from bad to worse, and that there was little anyone could do to prevent it. The back of the last car had a small platform of its own, like a balcony with a roof. Two men in rolled up shirt sleeves were already there, working with wires and adjusting a microphone. One fussed and fidgeted with speaker wire while the other kept tapping the large bulbous metallic microphone, as if willing it to life.

After five minutes, the back doors opened and more people poured onto the area at the rear of the train. I spotted my father in this crowd, excited and nervously unsure of his place. My mother, for whatever reason, was still in the cab car.

A young man with long hair and an untucked white shirt made his way to the still defective microphone, carrying a guitar. He slid a leather strap over his shoulder and began strumming a melody and singing a pop song I vaguely recognized. His voice was loud enough to be heard if we were all quiet, and I noticed he had changed the lyrics to occasionally insert the name “Kennedy” in places where it hadn’t been before. The crowd listened for a time, but after a few minutes began talking again. Soon their noise was louder than his song.

Suddenly a man moved through the crowd at the back of the train, forcing himself to the edge, just beside the microphone. He had been dressed in a dark blazer with a red tie, but in one swift motion, he loosened his tie and removed his jacket. I recognized him from television and all the newspaper photos I had seen.

Bobby Kennedy in the flesh.

He brushed back a youthful lock of his famous hair and tried tapping the microphone like the other man had done. He even spoke into it. But even as close as we were, we heard nothing. He glanced back at the two sound men, and one of them shrugged nervously.

The crowd around us was louder now, equal parts cheering and booing. I wondered if someone was going to throw something at the rear of the train.

Kennedy stepped to one side, and the man who had invited my parents stepped to the fore, raising his arms for the crowd to quiet. He introduced himself and then acknowledged (much to my surprise) that not everyone in the crowd was happy to be there, but all were welcome by the Kennedy campaign nevertheless.

This seemed to have an unusually settling effect on the boisterous throngs, and many began to lower their voices and their signs long enough to listen. The man raised his voice like a bad imitation of a Baptist preacher and began stressing some points about honor and leadership and destiny. He spoke eloquent, almost elegant words about John F. Kennedy, and then slowly came back to the man he had brought to our town. Robert Kennedy was there to ask for our support for the presidency. He would fulfill the promise of John F. Kennedy and improve on the path Lyndon Johnson had taken the country in Southeast Asia. Because I was a boy of 10, most of these references were lost on me. Instead, I focused on Senator Kennedy himself, who had now rolled up his shirt sleeves, as if he was about to weed in the backyard or wash dishes in the sink. He never stopped smiling.

At last the words of introduction had passed, and the man stepped to one side, allowing Bobby to step briefly and yet permanently into my life. As he made his way to the microphone, the crowd immediately around

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him extended hands, hoping to be touched by a political star or to shake hands with a future president. When the crowd moved, my brothers and I were pushed forward, almost against the outer railing of the rear of the train car. I noticed that my father's shyness had abated, and he moved closer to Kennedy, pointing to the three of us.

My younger brother—John—was first up. Kennedy reached over and squeezed his tiny hand, and in the same motion caught my older brother Lu, who had only raised a hand to steady John lest he slide off the shoulder. And then there was me. My arm barely reached the railing, but Kennedy bent down and grabbed it. I squinted up at him in the sunlight, and noticed that up close he seemed to possess an awful lot of teeth in that giant smile.

Once he had finished with the brothers Tuman, he shook a few more hands and then steadied himself against the microphone. In the same Boston voice I had heard him use in speeches on television, he began by thanking the crowd for turning out in such record numbers. When some in the crowd booed and jeered him, he added that his thanks were meant for everyone, and that he was also grateful to his political opponents for making this rally so well attended. He said it all with a smile. The crowd began to quiet.

He then began to tell a story of riding on this train. He explained that they had boarded north of Sacramento and would be riding all the way through the central valley and on to southern California and Los Angeles. He mentioned that doing all these whistle-stop tours could be very draining and that lots of energy was required to get through a day like this. For this reason, he tried to eat a small meal every few hours.

When he had asked his wife Ethyl about the daily menu, she had informed him that they would be enjoying eggs and sausage for the early morning meal. He then winked at the crowd and used inflection in his voice to say “turkey sausages.”

At this last reference, the crowd laughed—and so did my brothers and I.

Sensing momentum, he then deadpanned that just before the train arrived in Turlock, his wife informed him there would be sandwiches for lunch, along with some chips and a soda. He liked sandwiches, but stressed that he was particularly grateful when his wife explained that these would be “turkey breast sandwiches.”

The crowd around us laughed with more energy than before. For the first time, I noticed that some of the Nixon people were smiling too. A few of them had lowered their signs. The observation registered with me.

I knew something was happening, but at that age I couldn't yet identify it.

Kennedy did not miss a beat. According to his wife, they might have another meal once the train neared Bakersfield, later in the afternoon. On the menu were mashed potatoes, steamed broccoli, and “baked turkey.”

He said he couldn’t wait for the midnight snack.

The crowd was laughing and cheering wildly. Even his detractors were screaming and smiling and waving. The man who would be president had dropped into our small town, encountering a crowd that was probably filled with more political foes than friends—and yet somehow managed to make everybody happy.

To this day I remember looking at Lu and leaning close to him to ask: “How did he know?”

Outside of the small university in town, Turlock was best known for its poultry and, really, for its copious production of turkeys. But Bobby Kennedy was from the East Coast; how could he have known that about us?

My parents rode with Kennedy as far as Fresno and then got a ride back to town. I waited for my father on our front porch and badgered him with questions about Kennedy and turkeys the moment he was out of the car.

“How did Kennedy know about turkeys and Turlock? How did he know he should do that for us?”

My father smiled and explained that Kennedy had been on the train, sitting near him and my mother just after it left Modesto (directly north of Turlock). He overheard a reporter near him making fun of something he had read in the local newspapers. An advertisement for turkeys. The reporter then sang a jingle that had (unfortunately) been popular on the radio: “Turkeys from Turlock, Turkeys from Turlock!”

According to my father, Kennedy was amused and intrigued by the ad jingle, and asked more questions about turkeys and poultry and the political make-up of this area. On the spot, he jotted a few notes on a pad.

The result was the introduction to the speech we heard at the train platform. It was my introduction in a meaningful way to Bobby Kennedy and other political candidates whose rhetoric I would come to study and analyze.

Although I didn’t know it at the time, it was also my introduction to the concept of crafting rhetorical messages for a specific audience, something that for the next three-plus decades I would study and even participate in as a speechwriter and later as a media analyst for political campaigns.

In undertaking the writing of this book during the 2004 presidential campaign and the Fall 2006 midterm elections, I am mindful of the

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role that individuals like my parents played in nurturing my interest in politics, as well as the contribution of people (however briefly) who jumpstarted my interest in rhetoric and audience. That Bobby Kennedy would be murdered only four days later (just after he had cinched the California primary and all but claimed the Democratic nomination) was another introduction for me. An introduction to the reality of politics and power—and both the stakes *and* the consequences of using rhetoric in the pursuit of political power.

—JST