

Sunset at Camelot

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“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

I had just turned 24 when I heard those words spoken on a cold winter morning by a young president who told us the torch had been passed “to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.”

Along with millions of others in the U.S., in Puerto Rico and other parts of the world, I was moved by the words of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. To me, they struck a chord with the transformation brought about in Puerto Rico by Luis Muñoz Marín. Politics was about principle and ideals that would shape the future. Politics wasn't about personal gain nor about ego, politics was about service; service to the people and especially to those in need. Politics was about using the talents God gave you for the greater good of all. Politics was an honorable calling. Inspired by this young president and Muñoz Marín, public service became a calling for me and, with sacrifice, to my family, I answered the call when it came from Muñoz Marín to serve in the Public Service Commission and, when it came from Sánchez Vilella, to serve as Justice secretary.

In his short and eventually tragic presidency, John Kennedy showed great respect for Puerto Rico and tied strong bonds with us: He named Teodoro Moscoso, the father of Operation Bootstrap, who had transformed our economy, to head the Alliance for Progress through which he intended to transform the economies in Latin America; he appointed Arturo Morales Carrión, our undersecretary of State, assistant secretary of State of the U.S. for Latin America; and José A. Benítez, the chairman of our local Committee of the Democratic Party, as deputy high commissioner for the islands of Micronesia. He commissioned top people in his administration to work with Muñoz for the enhancement of Commonwealth. On his tour to Latin America, he first visited Puerto Rico and stayed with Muñoz in La Fortaleza. Upon his return to the U.S., he held a major reception in the White House in honor of Muñoz. Pablo Casals performed on this occasion. Rafael Hernández, our most renowned composer, was one of the guests. When he stepped up in the receiving line, Kennedy greeted him by saying: “Hello Mr. Cumbanchero.”

The assassination of President Kennedy was deeply painful to us in Puerto Rico. Our sympathy poured out to the Kennedy family. We were shaken again by the assassination of his brother Robert who had taken up the torch left by the fallen president. We were again moved by the eulogy pronounced by Ted, the remaining brother, in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. “He saw wrong and tried to right it,” Ted said of Robert. “He saw suffering and tried to heal it: he saw war and tried to end it.” This was fire coming

from the heart; the fire that lighted the torch that had passed from John to Robert and then on to Ted. This was the fire that inspired us in Puerto Rico.

When I became president of the Puerto Rico Senate in 1969, the year of Chappaquiddick, I looked for Ted's leadership in federal affairs and promptly visited him in his Senate office. There was chemistry in our meeting and his office became a necessary stop every time I went to the Capitol. When the matter of the Navy's bombardment of Culebra came up in 1970 he was on our side. Our friendship deepened throughout the years and it spread to members of his family.

When he decided to challenge President Carter for the nomination of the Democratic Party for the U.S. presidency in 1980 I was at his side. I campaigned for him in the States with heavy Puerto Rican or Latino concentrations and, of course, in Puerto Rico. We waged a hard campaign against a sitting president and against Carlos Romero Barceló, Puerto Rico's governor at the time, who was supporting Carter. The members of his family were involved. Jackie Kennedy campaigned with me in La Perla in San Juan and in the *marqueta* in New York. The battle cry of Kennedy in Puerto Rico, "*a la Victoria*," still resounds in the rallies of the Popular Democratic Party.

Ted lost the race against Carter. This was a crossroads for him. He had been in the Senate for 20 years, more time than most senators, was financially independent and could retire into tranquility while making his contributions to the nation in other less excruciating ways. He chose to remain in the Senate and continue to fight for the causes he believed in: civil rights, healthcare for all Americans, education, in short a quest for justice and equality. A quest to right wrong and heal suffering. It was at the 1980 convention, when he made his concession speech to President Carter, that he spoke the words that he would repeat again in critical moments to inspire his followers and the nation: "The work begins anew, the hope rises again, the cause endures, and the dream shall never die."

Teddy Kennedy went on to become a towering figure in the U.S. Senate; the most influential Senator of the 20th century. He gained the respect and love of senators on both sides of the aisle because he was there not to enjoy power but to pursue in respectful and productive companionship justice and equality; because he fought the good fight without fear of humiliation in defeat. "Whether the odds are for me or against me," he once said, "I will continue to fight for the people who sent me." This is the stuff that great leaders are made of.

When the campaign for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. presidency broke out last year, I wasn't surprised when Ted came out strongly for Barack Obama instead of Hillary Clinton. I had felt in Barack Obama the same commitment to public service as an instrument for justice and equality as I had felt this commitment in John, Robert and Ted. Obama wasn't a candidate speaking from a teleprompter; he was a leader speaking from the heart, who saw wrong and tried to right it; saw suffering and tried to heal it; and saw war and tried to stop it. Obama was born the same year John Kennedy gave his inaugural speech. In 2008, he became the leader a new generation of Americans to whom the torch had to be passed. Ted Kennedy clearly saw this.

In May last year, I received a call from Ted. Obama had spoken to him about coming down to campaign in the Puerto Rican primary and Ted wanted me to do it with him. I, of course, was more than willing but it wasn't to be. Two weeks later, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor and sidelined from the campaign, but he found the strength to go to the convention in Denver to pass the torch to Obama and proclaim: "The dream lives on."

The sun has set on Camelot but the dream to right wrong and heal suffering through honorable public service lives on in the inspiration placed in our hearts by John, Robert and Teddy Kennedy.

