

“Face to Face With John F. Kennedy”

- Michael “Hawkeye” Herman

A cherished memory: I shook hands with John F. Kennedy in 1960.

During the 1960 presidential campaign, I (age 15) shook his hands & I exchanged greetings with JFK backstage amongst a small group of staff & security as he was preparing to give a speech at my high school/Rock Island Senior High School, in Rock Island, IL.

JFK cordially and enthusiastically grabbed and shook my hand firmly while we exchanged pleasant greetings.

Me, while shaking his hand: “Good Luck, Senator Kennedy! I hope you win!”

JFK smiling: “Thank you, son. I really appreciate your support.”

I then got to sit with the press photographers on the floor down in front of the podium with my Kodak “Brownie Hawkeye” camera, all because I snuck into the high school to the ‘backstage’ hallway area of the sports arena two hours before the scheduled speech time where I patiently waited alone in an empty classroom directly across the hallway from the interior ‘backstage’ arena doors. I didn’t dare come out from my ‘hiding place’ into the hallway until I heard the hubbub of people outside the door to the classroom where I had secreted myself. Presidential security in those days was certainly not what it is nowadays, and after shaking his hand and exchanging greetings I simply followed along with his entourage into the auditorium and I took a seat on the floor in the front-center ‘press only’ section near the dais at the center of the stage. (I still have the snapshots I took of him during his speech somewhere in my photo ‘archives.)

I do well remember JFK’s striking charisma and appearance/dress. Another detail that comes to mind: as I stood at the foot of the stairs that ran from the 2nd floor to the 1st floor of our high school, JFK was coming down the flight of stairs from the 2nd floor a few steps ahead of his small entourage as he’d just come from a 2nd floor classroom for a private pre-speech meeting with his staff. As he came down the stairs he reached into his inside suit jacket pocket and he took out a long black barber-type comb and quickly ran the comb through his “extremely thick and well trimmed hair” with a few quick strokes of the comb from one side to the other, front to back, and he then he replaced the comb in his inside suit coat chest pocket just before he reached the bottom of the stairs where I was waiting with my camera and an outstretched hand to greet him.

Funny thing about such greatly charismatic people is that in my memory it was all JFK and me, as if we were alone at that moment, and the others around us were not present/totally disappeared. Of course, there were others present, but in my memory the others are not there, and it’s just me and JFK face-to-face shaking hands and exchanging greetings/pleasantries.

It remains a cherished memory.

- Michael “Hawkeye” Herman

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