

Introducing Lloyd Bentsen to a new generation



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The seed for the withering putdown of then-vice presidential candidate Dan Quayle that would become the signature line of former U.S. Sen. Lloyd Bentsen of Texas was actually planted 40 years before it was delivered.

“Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine,” Bentsen, then the Democratic nominee for vice president, said after his opponent had just likened himself to the nation’s 35th president on the debate stage in Omaha on Oct. 5, 1988. “Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy.”

The line drew loud cheers from Democrats in the auditorium and was replayed countless in the news cycles that followed. But it had little effect on the outcome of the presidential election between Republican George H.W. Bush of Texas and Democrat Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts. Bentsen, as it turned out, was on the losing side.

But that takedown of Quayle, which Bentsen delivered in his trademark calm manner and would become the moment for which the late senator would be best remembered, never did sit well with his son, Lan Bentsen. That’s why he and others in his family decided to turn a trove of recently discovered recorded interviews and public remarks into a six-part podcast that would introduce Lloyd Millard Bentsen Jr. to a new generation of Texans almost 19 years after his death.

“Where are the Lloyd Bentsens of today, now that we need one?” the younger Bentsen asked the American-Statesman in an interview last week when he reminisced about the war hero and business titan who, after 22 years in the Senate, became secretary of the treasury under President Bill Clinton.

But first, let’s revisit the JFK connection. In the second episode of the pod-

cast, which launched in late February, Bentsen recalls in a scratchy audio about his decision to run for Congress at age 27 in 1948 just two years after being elected Hidalgo County judge, a post he won after his service in World War II had ended.

While trying to develop an effective message that would turn his youth into an advantage, Bentsen came upon the campaign flyers that helped propel Kennedy to Congress at age 29 in 1946. They touted his wartime service in the Navy, especially his heroism as commander of PT-109.

Bentsen said he “borrowed” Kennedy’s message but substituted his own bona fides for the young congressman’s. Navy service became Army Air Force service. The PT boat became the bomber squadron of 15 bombers and their crews that Bentsen commanded at age 23. And Bentsen noted that he had flown more than 30 combat missions and had earned him the Distinguished Flying Cross Air Medal.

The campaign pitch worked on the voters along the Rio Grande in South Texas just as well as it did for those on the Massachusetts seaboard. He and Kennedy would go on to serve together for six years in Congress. Lan Bentsen said his father and the future president were friends, though not best friends.

Years later, Bentsen would host what would be one of the last fundraising events of Kennedy’s life. It happened in Houston on Nov. 21, 1963, the day before the president was fatally gunned down in Dallas.

Elise Hu was a political reporter in Austin for ABC affiliate KVUE nearly 20 years ago when she and Bentsen’s granddaughter, Skyler Bentsen Stewart, forged their bond out of common personal interests as up-and-coming professional women, and later as young mothers, Hu told the Statesman. Political discussions were rare, if they occurred at all, Hu said.

Fast-forward two decades, when Hu moved to Washington, then to South Korea and to California as her journalism career flourished, she and Bentsen Stewart did talk politics. And the subjects were the old recordings. By then, Hu had

formed a media production company, and she helped launch the podcast called The Bentsen Blueprint.

Because Bentsen, part of the Texas Democratic Party’s conservative, business-minded wing, had never written a memoir and no author had ever penned a biography of him, the old recordings contained anecdotes and recollections that might have been buried by history, Hu and Lan Bentsen said.

Among them were Bentsen’s early commitments to racial equality as a county judge in the heavily Hispanic Rio Grande Valley. Later, as a businessman in the early 1960s, Bentsen voluntarily desegregated the hotel property in Houston that he owned. It was the first major hotel to desegregate before the Civil Rights Act was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The recordings also contain what would be some embarrassing moments, like the time when, as a young congressman, Bentsen called for a widespread nuclear attack on North Korea before the end of the Korean War. A more mature Bentsen in the recordings admits that his idea was a profound mistake and that military leaders were wise to have dismissed it.

As chairman of the Senate Finance Committee in the 1980s and early ’90s, Bentsen was instrumental in establishing the legislative framework for 401(k) pension plans and individual retirement accounts.

As treasury secretary under Clinton — who would later award him the Presidential Medal of Freedom — Bentsen helped frame the economic and deficit reduction policies credited with the boom that would last for much of the 1990s.

“He was in large part motivated by the war experience and patriotism,” Lan Bentsen, now 77, said of his father. “These days and times, people get stuck in cultural issues, what I call 1% issues.

“He was from a time when people put country ahead of party. We need a lot more of that today. We are encouraging people to hear the whole podcast. But in particular, forward the links to the younger folks.”