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# The Loss of a Good Man

By BOB HERBERT

It was like reading fiction. Scott Stossel, in his book, “Sarge: The Life and Times of Sargent Shriver,” described a harrowing World War II sea battle that erupted off Guadalcanal on the night of Nov. 14, 1942:

“The foremast was hit. Electrical fires erupted continuously, all around Shriver. Whole gun crews were killed by flying shells. The ship began to slow down, and more Japanese rounds ripped across the deck, killing an officer in the radar plotting room. Three rounds exploded in another battle station, killing a half dozen more men. Steam lines were severed, and the hot, hissing steam scalded numerous sailors. Ladders between decks got knocked out, making putting out fires and attending to the growing scores of wounded much more difficult. Shriver himself was wounded when metal shrapnel from an explosion lodged itself in his shoulder, a wound for which he was later to be awarded a Purple Heart.”

It was such a different time, an era when it was considered shameful for men to run and hide when their nation was at war. Now we send other people’s children off to war willy-nilly, and the rest of us go shopping. (At least until someone steeped in the business philosophy of Neutron Jack Welch takes our jobs away.)

R. Sargent Shriver, one of America’s great good men, died this week at the age of 95. He was best

known as the brother-in-law of John F. Kennedy. Married for 56 years to Kennedy's sister, Eunice, who died in 2009, he was also the father of Maria Shriver, the former television personality who is married to Arnold Schwarzenegger. That Mr. Shriver was not better known for his own extraordinary accomplishments, and for his rock-solid commitment to the ideals that this nation ought to stand for, is not just unfortunate, but discouraging.

He was the founding director of the Peace Corps, the signature success of Kennedy's New Frontier. He founded Head Start, created the Job Corps and Legal Services for the Poor, and gave us Volunteers in Service to America, which was the domestic version of the Peace Corps. He served as president and chairman of the Special Olympics, which was founded by Eunice Shriver. Indefatigable and unrepentantly idealistic, Mr. Shriver may have directly affected more people in a positive way than any American since Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

He was the flip side of the cruelty and ugliness that has come to dominate so much of American public life. The U.S. has once again fallen into the hands of the forces who, rather than trying to help, would relieve the middle class and the poor of every last shred of economic security. Not only have millions been thrown out of work, but the squeeze is on to prevent them from getting the safety net assistance that might cushion the awful blow of joblessness.

Public services are being dismantled throughout the republic in the name of austerity — school systems, libraries, police forces, transportation services, and so on. Any talk of raising taxes on the rich is verboten. Shared sacrifice? Not if you're wealthy.

Sargent Shriver had a different view of America — warmer, richer and more humane. A young Bill Moyers, who joined Mr. Shriver at the Peace Corps and eventually became its deputy director, said a crucial component of the corps was Mr. Shriver's deep commitment to the idea of America "as a social enterprise ... of caring and cooperative people."

Here's an example: In 1964, as leader of the Office of Economic Opportunity in the Johnson administration, Mr. Shriver came across studies that showed connections between poor nutrition,

lower I.Q. scores and arrested social and emotional development. He wondered whether early childhood intervention “could have a beneficial effect on the children of poor people.” Head Start followed in incredibly short order.

Mr. Shriver was the point man, the driving force of Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty. Between 1964 and 1968, nearly one of every three poor Americans left the poverty rolls, the largest drop in a four-year period ever recorded. Mr. Shriver’s idealism was not of the dreamy sort. It was geared toward concrete results.

He was also a fighter for the rights and dignity of black people and other ethnic minorities. It was Mr. Shriver who suggested that John Kennedy, during his campaign for the presidency, make a phone call to Coretta Scott King, expressing his concern and offering assistance at a time when her husband, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., had been sentenced to a four-month prison term at hard labor for a bogus traffic-related arrest in Georgia.

Real courage, idealism, a commitment to service and a willingness to sacrifice — Sargent Shriver had all of that and more. In an interview several years ago, he told me, “We made an effort during that time to find out what was true, and what was needed by way of improvement.”



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