HENRY KISSINGER
THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

HENRY KISSINGER
Former United States Secretary of State
April 06, 2017
Interviewed by: John Maggio
Total Running Time: 22 minutes and 23 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Henry Kissinger

Former United States Secretary of State

First impressions of Ben Bradlee

00:00:14:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

My major interaction with Ben Bradlee was in the late 60's and through the seventies. Washington was a different town from what it is today. *The Washington Post* frequently criticized the administration in which I served, which is an understatement. At the same time, there were social events practically every weekend in Washington where Democrats and Republicans were meeting at dinner and meeting in a way, as colleagues. So, Ben and I

were in the same circle and some of the arguments that were in the newspaper were repeated over the dinner table, but it did not affect or diminish the respect I had for him on a social level, and also on a personal level.

00:01:33:00

HENRY KISSINGER:
I thought of Ben as intelligent, charming, interesting, worth talking to. I knew I would not drive him off his convictions, and he knew the same about me. But it did not affect the way we dealt with each other on a day-to-day basis. I never had to deal with Ben in an editorial capacity. So, if I had some concern about some article that *The Post* was writing I would call the editor or Kay Graham. But, Ben and I met privately for lunch, occasionally. But, that was—but, he was not changing fundamentally, our views, and we were not changing, fundamentally, his views.

Ben Bradlee's friendship with JFK

00:03:00:00

HENRY KISSINGER:
Yes, I was aware of it, but of course I knew the Kennedys also, so, uh, many of Ben's normal friends like Arthur Schlesinger were also my friends, so it was not too totally different worlds clashing.

The importance of *The Washington Post*

00:03:27:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

The Post was not only an important news source—when you are a security advisor, as I was, you don't need news. You're overwhelmed with it, but it—*The Post* had a group of analytical writers, um, for example, Murrey Marder, who really knew their subject very well and they occasionally came up with interpretations, which were interesting and even important. And that part of *The Post*, we considered extremely fair. You can't say there was a unified White House position in foreign policy. I read the editor- not the editorial writers so much as the columnists, quite regularly for two— for really three reasons. Uh, I might learn something or I might get an– an angle. Uh, I might find out what the pressures in the bureaucracy were, and which agency was leaking, for what reason. And so it was a way to understand the world in which we had to make decisions.

The Pentagon Papers

00:05:13:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

Well, when I became security advisor, I had not ever had an administrative position. I had had advisory positions. And—but, when you are, sort of, responsible for the overall organization of foreign policy, then you, uh, become more aware of the interaction, and of the relationship between credibility of the American position and the substance and so, the media in any administration, not just the Nixon administration, have a different perspective because it's not the media's responsibility to deal with the intangible aspects of foreign policy, except as a news story.

00:06:16:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

But, if you take, for example, the Pentagon Papers— I was in Washington in— on the West coast, when that story broke. And when I saw the headlines, I thought at first that this is a convention bureaucratic maneuver in Washington, and that since they were all Pentagon Papers, as that title implies, I thought that the Pentagon had leaked them as part of some internal Washington feud, and I called up my deputy general Hank who was in Washington and I said, “Al, you call Mel,” who was Mel Laird, the Secretary of Defense, “and say what they've done here is totally intolerable. That cannot be accepted that secret papers get, uh, uh, put into news stories.” And he said, "Well, how many documents do you think they have?" I said, "I don't know, I've seen ten." He said, "How would 10,000 grab you?"

00:07:29:00

HENRY KISSINGER:
Now, for—we were conducting secret negotiations at the time with Vietnam. We were beginning the opening to China and we had begun to exchange, uh, messages and feelers towards them, and some of those were secret because we thought that if they became part of the public debate immediately, they would be killed by the controversy that would result. So, of course, to know that 10,000 secret documents are floating around and that journalists take the position, anything that they can acquire they can publish, no matter how they got it was, of course, offensive. Uh, and so, but, on the other hand, we had never dealt with anything like, like this before. So then the question of how it was resisted is another issue. And, uh, but the fact that it, it ... a point had to be made, seemed to me, incontrovertible.

Ben Bradlee’s relationship with Kay Graham

00:08:55:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

Now Kay was a very good friend of mine. Even better, I mean, I was closer with Kay. And that relationship, paradoxically, had been initiated in part by Nixon when I came to Washington. He called Kay in and introduced me. Uh, I don't– don't think I ever tried to interfere with the publication of– of a story except when it concerned things that were done in my shop, and then I would do it in the form of correcting, uh, the facts. I don't think I ever went to Ben about any of this, but I could be wrong. It could be that there was something in the style section about my social life that I, uh, preferred not to be there. I know whenever I made such an appeal it was totally unsuccessful so, uh, the fact that something might be not fully enjoyable by me did not seem to cut any ice with Ben or any of the others. But, I very, very rarely talked to Ben about that, if, maybe once or twice.

How the Pentagon Papers affected foreign relations

00:10:44:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

It certainly affected the—with relation to the Chinese, I do not believe it hurt the negotiation. With relation to the Vietnamese, I believe it hurt the negotiations in the sense that the Vietnamese really had turned the relationship into an endurance contest, that they put forth certain propositions and that we felt that we could not honorably meet, and they were trying to wear us down. And so, to the extent that they expected a leading newspaper was attacking either the merit or the credibility of our policy, and the extent—and that, we have to accept.

00:11:40:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

We had to accept that was part of the process and there's no conceivable criticism to attach to our, to our position in that sense. But when 10,000 secret papers get published, you—it's possible that it was part of that process that enables them to string, to string it along, to string the conflict along. But there's also another thing to remember. Uh, for any of– of your viewers, which is this: none of these papers damaged the Nixon administration.

00:12:21:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

The—because every one of them referred to events that had occurred in the Johnson or Kennedy administrations, and if Nixon had wanted to played politics, he could've endorsed the papers and said, "See what I inherited, and why it's so difficult." But our concern was that whatever the administration in which it happened, if the White House could not safeguard 10,000 papers, classified, secret, and they could wander around the journalistic world, that this meant that the position of the administration, with respect to foreign policy, was weakening. That was my principal concern in this.

Ben Bradlee's persona

00:13:23:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

Ben was tough. He was supple. He was, as I said, intelligent. But you couldn't think of Ben as a pushover, and you shouldn't. But he was an interesting man no matter what his positions were. I thought that Ben had a conviction that it was the press's obligation to bring out what he knew, and that it was not the

press's obligation to protect the government or to worry about embarrassment to an individual. But he was not looking for embarrassment as such. So I thought he had a rigorous pursuit of the presidency, of the—journalism, which I respected.

00:14:33:00

HENRY KISSINGER:
I think as a general proposition, given the interconnection between the media and government, in reality the press needs to be aware of the national interest in the deepest sense, not in the sense of– of a day-to-day basis. And, perhaps, Ben and I disagreed on that in the nature of our jobs. But, it would—but, you're not—I'm not talking to you of an adversary relationship. I liked him and he usually treated me with respect and teaching me and joking. But he was always—there was always a serious element and there was always an irreverent element in Ben and they were part of his personality.

Ben Bradlee's philosophy on life

00:15:48:00

HENRY KISSINGER:
Well, my—Of course, I was not part of the Brahmin world, but I knew many of the people in the Brahmin group. So, to Nixon, many of the people in the Brahmin world were strangers and he had not lived in that world. I had not lived in it, but I had associated with it at Harvard and– and in the consulting government positions that I had, had. I looked at foreign policy as a historian and I had worked with Democrats and Republicans from the point of view of national interest. And on the general—if I would say, if we talked about

history, Ben and I would look at it the same way. If we talked about what each of us had to do in history, we'd have a different view.

The nature of truth

00:17:04:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

Well, it's the question that Pontius Pilate asked when Jesus was being tried, so it's an elemental question. "What is the nature of truth?" Each of us had different things to–to accomplish, and it could be that therefore our criteria were not identical, but you shouldn't present this as if, here are two permanent enemies. The essence is that we were people who lived in the same general world, who occasionally disagreed on major issues, and that's the big difference between the Washington today and the Washington then. That now the divisions seem to be so absolute uh, that, uh, it's very hard to think of how parties could come together. Even when we disagreed, I would never have been surprised if Ben and I came together on some other issues in a parallel way.

The style section

00:18:41:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

I preferred not to be in the style section and so I—and there I do remember when … were occasions when Maxine Cheshire wrote something that I would've preferred not to see published. But I would appeal, I don't know, usually to Kay, but it's possible that I might have gone to Ben. Anyway, it was flagrantly unsuccessful. I– I never had—I never had any attention paid to

complaints about the coverage, socially. Now, decades after the event, I bear no grudge.

00:19:39:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

I was unmarried at the time, so they covered my social life more intensely than I thought the national interest required. They did, um, that's—they clearly did their job. These were social columnists and, uh, I didn't have a leg to stand on, and I never prevailed, so it's—and it's –I don't believe it ever came up between Ben and me, but it might have. Did I enjoy the social life? Yes, but I didn't enjoy the coverage of it. And it was not, it—only—it was, it was nothing particularly notable about it, other than the identification of people with whom I was having dinner.

Ben Bradlee's lasting legacy

00:20:38:00

HENRY KISSINGER:

Ben was a combination one doesn't see much today anymore, of a Brahmin who would, at the same time, be able to operate with extremely insistent methods, who stood by his principles, but who was also, personally, very entertaining. So, whether one agreed with him or not, he made dealing with him, either as an adversary or as a friend, uh, as enjoyable as it could be, and—even today I would think that if some of that spirit could be reintroduced in Washington. However much pain he imposed on the administration in which I served, and however much I think that– that Nixon had, uh, very good reasons for his concerns. Still, it was a more— it was a

style of—style that could bring the country together eventually, and we're losing that now.

END TC: 00:22:23:00