

TED KENNEDY INTERVIEW  
THE INTERVIEW ARCHIVE

**Ted Kennedy, U.S. Senator**  
**September 2003**  
**Total Running Time: 29 minutes and 23 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

00:00:01

INTERVIEWER  
My sister's there.

00:00:02

TED KENNEDY  
Yeah, that's good.

00:00:03

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah. So, are we ready here?

00:00:05

PRODUCTION  
Whenever you're ready.

00:00:08

INTERVIEWER  
I'm gonna just read these to you straight. All right. Our documentary is about the Kennedy brothers. As brother to both President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, what can you tell us about the bond that existed between the two?

00:00:20

TED KENNEDY  
Well, they were very close right from the very beginning. They grew up in a large family, they had common values, common beliefs. They had become very close as their careers progressed. My brother Bob ran my brother Jack's



first campaign for Congress. He worked with them very closely during the McClellan hearings on labor racketeering. He managed the presidential campaign where they became even closer. It was an extraordinary close campaign, and a lot of very important decisions were made. And then the kind of bond and trust that was built during that period of time was incredibly important. And then after my brother was elected, he named my brother Bob as the attorney general. There were questions about that, I think, including my brother Bob and including my brother Jack, but it was clearly the right decision, and they were extraordinarily close during that period of time. And I think particularly the relationship which they developed was so important at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which is really probably the greatest crisis that this nation faced in the in the recent in recent years, and the ability for them to work together and to sound out different ideas and to challenge existing opinions was enormously important. They relied on each other, they were closest brothers, had a lot of respect and affection, and I think it made a very important difference to to President Kennedy.

00:01:59

INTERVIEWER

I agree. In his oral history, Robert Kennedy describes how he and the president communicated to each other encrypted half sentences that they each understood. Do you recall that they seemed to intuitively know what the other was thinking?

00:02:15

TED KENNEDY

Oh, absolutely. I mean, they had this long pathway of of which they traveled together with incredible common interests, fundamental interests. And they knew what was in each other's minds, just with the the nod or a glance and the half sentences which they both all of us had been said to use. I think they came into the half sentences because they grew up in a large family, and that's about as much as you could get out before someone else was talking at the the table. But in a serious way, they understood each other intuitively and words were almost useless or meaningless because they already knew what



the other was was thinking and it was a very, very close and important relationship.

00:03:13

INTERVIEWER

You knew your brothers better than anyone. In what ways were they similar?

00:03:18

TED KENNEDY Well, first of all, they had common values, common interests, love of a family, deeply caring about their own family and their own children. Both were very curious people. Both read history, they valued books, they learned from people, they liked to listen, they challenged ideas, they were interested in places, they were interested in people, they were interested in in history. They had a deep love of country, deep sense of patriotism. They both had I think extraordinary moral and and physical courage. They both were hard workers. They both both believed in in preparation. I think I'd say that my brother Jack was probably more reserved than my brother Bob. I think he was able to sort of look at the world and with some amusement about the follies of mankind. But he had gone through World War II, I'd seen enormous suffering and the the ravages of war. He was fundamentally unflappable. I think my brother Bob had this burning sense of injustice and the— he was very emotional about it, spoke about it. He had a great sense of compassion and a a great sense of empathy. He was able to identify with with children or the dispossessed in with great facility. I think they were both obviously strongly committed to making the country a better country and the world a better world.

00:05:10

INTERVIEWER

I'm going to quote from Robert Kennedy's Oral History. He says, "By 63, in my judgment, the fact that I was Attorney General caused him," meaning the president, "many more problems than if I hadn't been his brother. Instead of talking about Robert Kennedy, they started talking about the Kennedy Brothers, which he used to point out to me frequently, that it was no longer the Attorney General, but the Kennedy brothers. And that caused a lot of problems politically as we got ready for the election in 1964. In fact, it got to



such an extent that in 1963, I discussed with him about trying to get out of there."

00:05:47

TED KENNEDY

Well, I don't think my brother Jack would have ever let him get out of there. I think because of the relationship and the really the indispensable role that he had played not only in the Cuban Missile Crisis, where Bob's you know, judgment and the ability to develop sort of a command and and control situation, be able to use information effectively, and also the work that he did in the areas of civil rights, which is the central challenge of this nation. And at the most critical time, you could say the Civil War certainly was the the— the decision time might have been from the founding fathers when they put slavery into the Constitution, but then it was the Civil War. And then it was the early 1960s, which was the real crisis for this country. And I don't think there was anyone, I know there wasn't anyone, that President Kennedy admired more in terms of judgment. And so, I don't think he ever would have let him let him go. But I think there was talk about Bob being the the most second powerful person in Washington. I suppose he he was because he was the person to see the president and talk with him and it was able to have influence him not only the matters that were before the Justice Department, but also in terms of domestic and foreign policy. But having said all that, my brother Jack was his own man on this situation and he he made the calls, he was the one that made the decisions, but he got good advice from someone that he knew would give him the unvarnished truth, which was so important, is always important in decision making, but so important as a president of the United States.

00:07:46

INTERVIEWER

I'll tell you something interesting about that at the end, so I don't want to distract you about how effective he was at giving your brother the unvarnished truth. I think that was a really indispensable quality that he had. Robert Kennedy talks extensively in his oral history about the impact your father had on his sons. Can you characterize this influence and perhaps talk



about how his relationship with you, Robert, and John, might have differed from one another?

00:08:18

TED KENNEDY

First of all, my father took an enormous personal interest in all of his children. And he was very much involved in each of the child's own development. But he had sort of a different, he had an overall standard, which was when you got your report card, he always looked at the effort grade before he looked at the other grade. And he always read the comments from the teachers about whether you were working hard before he looked at the final grade. And he always was— had a common attitude about the if you hadn't prepared or you hadn't practiced, and it was a contest of some kind. He'd point this out about the needs of being— improving yourself. But he always had a word of encouragement too, which was important. And he involved my older brothers in the aspects of public life at a very early time, when he was ambassador to England, he involved Joe and Jack at the time of the sinking of ships and the movement of refugees. These were young people 19, 20 years old, and gave them both responsibility. They saw the the ravages of both war, the impact on people, and they became involved and engaged. And so, this was very profound. And he also wrote to each of us. I have some wonderful letters that he wrote to to me even when he— I was eight years old about what was happening in terms of London and the war, and that he would hope when I grew up that I would be understand what the ravages of war were really about and worked to try to make a more peaceful country. And he did that with each of the of the the children. So, it was a very important and and powerful and substantive influence. And he always you know, he could always find, as I said, a word of encouragement, particularly when you're facing some challenges or when you're you're running into some rough spots over the course of life.

00:10:33

INTERVIEWER

How would you talk about his relationship— how with you, Robert and John, might have differed from one another?



00:10:41

TED KENNEDY

Each of us was a different personality and the and each of us needed the the sort of the blowtorch at different times of our lives and the encouragement at other times of our lives. And he was able to do this very at different aspects of our life. Our older brother was very highly motivated, and he'd get to three A's and one B and say, I'm really gonna make sure I get that up, that B up to an A, or whatever it is. My brother Jack was not quite as good a student at that time, and my father had to give him a little more encouragement to get his grades up to C's and B's, although after a while he he moved up into all A's. So, at different aspects of our lives, he was he was able to understand when it was important to encourage and when it was important to also to point out the fact that we weren't giving our our best. He always said, you do the best that you can and after that the devil with it. And he felt that very strongly. And he always said that home holds no fears for me. So, I mean, as we got older involved in political life, he always felt that we ought to do what was right and we could always come home and be assured of the kind of support that we'd always received when we grew up.

00:12:12

INTERVIEWER

[Unclear]. That's great. What about your mother's influence? Could you see your mother and your brothers...

00:12:18

TED KENNEDY

Well, she had a great love of of history and and a very deep and abiding faith that was an inspiration of her and which I my brothers really reflected in different ways, but very deeply. They both had very deeply rooted faiths. And she had a also... She was really what we call Honey Fitz's granddaughter. Honey Fitz, the great mayor of the city of Boston, was the first son of immigrants that got elected in Boston, was a very colorful political figure, and he was very close with my mother. And she had this sense of being able communication with people that was just extraordinary. And she was a terrific politician. My mother would, during the primary season, she was a



great walker, and and she knew what the what the primary states were. So, if someone came walking by the neighborhood and asked where the Kennedys lived, she looked at the license plate, and if they were from a primary state, she would invite them back to the house and give them a tour of the house. And if from a non-primary state, she'd say over there somewhere. I mean, she had this real sense of people and the importance of people, and that I think so much of what my brothers received and being able to connect, which is— the word they used today, was really received from from my mother. She also made the very powerful impression in terms of the discrimination against the Irish in Boston, which was very real, and it made a very powerful impression upon her. She was there when it was such an issue at the time of my grandfather's time. And this I think made a very powerful impact on both of my brothers later and the great challenges that we faced in areas not only in discrimination on immigration, but also on the discrimination of civil rights. They were able to to attach to this, and President Kennedy was the one that called it the the greatest moral issue that we faced, the first president to do so. And I think that that really goes back to the time of my mother's sort of teaching and and the lessons that she was able to give to us.

00:14:43

INTERVIEWER

Robert Kennedy states in his oral history that President Kennedy's decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis were the outstanding accomplishment of his administration.

00:14:53

TED KENNEDY

Well, I I believe that that's true and I think it's sustained historically. I think there's no question that we were on the very brink of nuclear war, which would have been absolute disastrous, obviously, for the United States, the Soviet Union, for the world, when you know that there were active nuclear weapons in in Cuba, 90 miles off our coast, that could have hit a great part of the United States. And there were also nuclear-tipped torpedoes that were on Soviet submarines. I think most of us have seen the documentaries about the Cuban Missile Crisis. I remember the the time myself. I was not in



Washington but a candidate for the United States Senate at that time, but I was in contact with my family during that period of time. But I think what's been most important is what's come out from the Soviet Union and from Cuba from that time and the willingness of Soviet generals and admirals and KGB to be willing to talk about exactly where they were on this crisis and also the Cubans to be willing to talk. And in looking at the three different forces that were out there, you could see how close we really did come to a nuclear conflict. And also, how important it was that we didn't misunderstand each other. It was very easy for some of those, particularly at the time. The joint chiefs of staff, some leading members of the Senate had rather simplistic and very hawkish recommendations, which if followed would have been an absolute disaster. The willingness to take the time and to work the process through with a very important kind of command-and-control crisis was just very, very essential in terms of the positive outcome. The country's grateful that we didn't involve get involved in nuclear war, and I certainly am too.

00:17:11

INTERVIEWER

You and Robert Kennedy were both asked to climb Mount Kennedy in 1965 as a tribute to President Kennedy. You couldn't do it because you were recuperating from a plane accident. Do you remember your brother making the climb?

00:17:26

TED KENNEDY

Oh, very much so. I remember when he mentioned to me that the Canadian government had, in honor of President Kennedy, had named this wonderful peak in the western part of the Canada after President Kennedy and he was the one who sort of thought, wouldn't it be good to try and climb the climb it. And I had just had a a serious plane crash, which gave me the out on it. And what do you know, he had a friend, Jim Whittaker, the first American of Mount Everest, and just one of the great, great mountain climbers and a very close personal friend to Bob who said he'd sign on. And the the complexity and the difficulty in getting into that region was just unbelievable. And the





brief window that happened to be open at the time when my brother Bob could do it and the kind of skepticism that other climbers had about the conditioning of my brother just raised the serious questions whether he'd be able to get up. But he he got up and surprised a lot of mountaineer climbers and as well as Jim Whitaker, who was enormously complimentary about his performance on the the mountain, and he kept that flag that... He had two flags; one he left up there and one he brought back on his desk. Very, very important personally to my brother Bob. I think in a rather extraordinary way that had a enormous amount in terms of his own sort of recovery from the loss of my brother. It's it was a very extensive sort of physical challenge, but it it was enormously meaningful to him. And I think I think after that he was able to sort of smile and laugh a lot easier than he had been before.

00:19:22

INTERVIEWER

Both your brothers had strong senses of humor. Can you describe them? Did they use humor to relieve tension?

00:19:29

TED KENNEDY

Oh, very, very much so. I mean they both were were quick. It wasn't the the jokes or... But it was sort of the quick one-liners and wry humor, dry humor, and they remember the time when President Kennedy announced Bobby was going to be attorney general, and he said, I think I'll do it at midnight and open the door and whisper it's Bobby, when people were wondering who the Attorney General was going to be, and when asked about it, he was gonna say, Well, I think I'd give him a little legal experience before he goes into practice. I mean, these— this was a disarming way to try to to deal with the the issue of at that time of naming his brother as attorney general. But I saw it and have wonderful little vignettes on my walls of different little stories and comments that my brothers made during my whole life, and I think everyone that was associated with him they could, they could identify. I can remember the night that President Kennedy took the full and complete blame for the Bay of Pigs, the Bay of Pigs. And this just was one of the great mistakes that



would have been made by any president. And he felt it was very, very important to accept full and complete responsibility. And my brother Bob agreed with this. And as they were walking back, and my brother was discouraged, he thought it was the end of the presidency. He actually, my brother Bob, said to Jack, well, let's call Dad; he always has something good to say when things are bad. So, they called him up, my father said, this is the best thing that you've done. He said the American people understand responsibility and the willingness to accept it. And, you know, the polls just went right up for about ten or twelve points on that. That just it reflected, you know, sort of what my father had said on that part. And I remember that my brothers going back and say, can you believe that dad found something good out of this whole kind of disaster? But it was just something that changed the mood and the atmosphere and turned out to be right.

00:21:46

INTERVIEWER

In his oral history, Robert Kennedy said that John F. Kennedy intended to, quote, "Change the direction of the country and of the world, change the expectations of people, their speed of life, their fundamental beliefs. But he expected to do this over an eight-year period," end quote. Obviously, that eight-year period was cut short. What is your sense of the legacy of the Kennedy administration and the work of both of your brothers?

00:22:12

TED KENNEDY

Well, President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy thought that politics was an honorable profession. And they were inspired by the the the number of people that actually involved themselves and were willing to do work in trying to make both the country a better country and communities a better—better communities... The people that left comfortable positions in industry or academics or whatever and were willing to come on into to government and to serve. So, they saw this as something enormously important, and they believed in it, believed in it. And they were inspired by the those that came into it, and they challenged this country. They both believed that we as individuals and the country do better when they were challenged. President



Kennedy challenged the nation to go to the moon. Then he challenged young people to go into the Peace Corps and to try to give something back to the country. And they really appealed to the the the nobler aspects of our humanity and the selflessness of our individual characters. And that I think was something that the American people began to get a sense of and to appreciate, and they began to think about how they could do something in their community, whether they were nurses or firefighters or police officers or whoever their parents, everyone began to begin to believe that they could do something to make the country a better country. That was really an overwhelming kind of a sense that they felt very, very deeply and that they took some satisfaction. It was a brief period of time. And then I think it was about trying to do something about the dealing with the overarching issue of the civil rights issues here at home, which they felt was such an important moral issue. I think that was enormously important. And also in the world, the President Kennedy understood a very important concept, and that is that if you make peaceful change impossible in countries, you're gonna make violent change inevitable. And his struggle was in a very difficult world at that time, that the real challenge for the United States was to make the world safe for diversity. We're not going to have everyone looking at [unclear] our way, but we are going to have a world that is going to be safe for diversity. And we have to find out, see what are going to be the limitations of power and how we can use our power in ways that can help advance our common sense of humanity and decency in in in the world. And that I think they had a real fundamental commitment to and and I think they made a difference in the time that they were there and also in terms of giving us some guideposts in terms of the future about how the country ought to perform

00:25:24

INTERVIEWER

Both you and Robert Kennedy put a lot of time and effort into your oral histories. Your brother must have felt it was a very important thing to do. Can you describe the passion he felt to record the legacy of his brother's life and work while it was still fresh in his memory?

00:25:42



TED KENNEDY

Well, my brother Bob as as my brother Jack had a great sense of of history and I think had a... Bob believed that— understood that, having read history and understood history, that there were had been some very important and significant moments over the course of President Kennedy's presidency and the whether it was the challenge of dealing with the Russians and the the Berlin Wall or the Cuban Missile Crisis or the civil rights issues, going to the moon or trying to bring restore our economy. And he thought that those the lessons that they had been learned from that period of time were important for future political leaders, and particularly for presidents, because often you read history, countries make the same mistakes again and again and again. And if you're able to try and read history and understand where those mistakes were made and where the progress was made, that this would be useful and helpful in terms of the future to guide political leadership. And the best way to do that, since we are not now a nation of diary writers, was through an oral history from those that were part of those decision-making procedures, and those that were very much a part of of the the life of of those those decisions. And therefore, he set up this oral history project and followed it through. And I think in his own mind, he was thinking that this is something that President Kennedy would have wanted. President Kennedy would have wanted a, you know, history preserved during that period of time as an historian and as a scholar and as a writer. And so, it was something that he was strongly committed to, both emotionally and spent a good deal of time at it, and I think that'll be a real service for our country and for future students and for political leaders in the future.

00:27:53

INTERVIEWER One Okay. That's good.

00:28:00

TED KENNEDY

No, I'm not going.

00:28:01

PRODUCTION

Would you like a moment to just stretch yourself?



00:28:04

TED KENNEDY

No, this is this is okay.

00:28:08

INTERVIEWER

We located this wonderful piece of footage that we have of you shaking hands with your brother Bob as he becomes the junior senator. Do you remember that day?

00:28:20

TED KENNEDY

Well, there were yes, they— on my wall is a wonderful picture, sort of a drawing, pencil drawing of the Justice Department. And underneath it it said, dear Eddie, it's out of this building into yours; move over. To let me know he was coming. The older brother was arriving in in town. And so, it was a lot of jostling as obviously looked up to my brothers and older brothers and my brother Bob, and then suddenly he was coming into a place where I had a little more seniority and around, although not very long, but I'd been around at least a few years. So, it was kind of a role reversal. So, there were a lot of a lot of jokes about it and and good-natured ribbing about it.

END TC: 00:29:23

