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ANTHONY LEWIS INTERVIEW
THE INTERVIEW ARCHIVE

Anthony Lewis, Journalist
Total Running Time: 54 minutes and 42 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

00:00:04

INTERVIEWER
So, we're gonna have a little conversation. Thank you for doing this, Tony. I appreciate it so much.

00:00:08

ANTHONY LEWIS
I've given you quite a bit of Sturm und Drang today.

00:00:11

INTERVIEWER
No, not at all. I you've made up for it immensely. And I hope we will. But let me ask you, how did you first meet John Kennedy? Do you remember that? And can you describe him for me as you saw him?

00:00:25

ANTHONY LEWIS
I think the first time I met John Kennedy was in roughly May or June, probably early June of 1960, when I was desirous of meeting him. He was an overseer of Harvard University, and he was flying up from Washington to Boston on the family plane, the Caroline. And I hitched a ride. And he talked very interestingly about politics, said he didn't think he was suitable for academic life because he wasn't that political, ho-ho. The only other thing I remember about that trip was that Joe Alsop, the conservative columnist dean of his day, was reading a book during the entire flight and paid no attention whatever to Kennedy. And I was struck by that when it was all over.

I said timidly, Mr. Alsop, what book are you reading? It must be very interesting. And he he held it up to me, didn't say a word, he held it up, and it was Patan Art. I thought, well, that's really impressive.

00:01:29

INTERVIEWER
Sexually ambiguous.

00:01:31

INTERVIEWER
That's right, that's right. Stewart— there was a John Alsop too, but I don't remember whose father...

00:01:36

ANTHONY LEWIS
I was the third brother. He was a political figure in Connecticut.

00:01:42

INTERVIEWER
All right, are we rolling? Okay, let me ask you how you first met Robert Kennedy.

00:01:49

ANTHONY LEWIS
I met him fleetingly at Harvard College. We were members of the same class but did not do the same things. He played football. I worked on the college newspaper and never the twain did meet. But at the time I thought of him as a rather a rough neck and a tough guy and then he went to work for Joe McCarthy and my opinion of him didn't improve.

00:02:16

INTERVIEWER
Would you say he was quite different in the— in those early days than he became later?

00:02:22

ANTHONY LEWIS
I think it's probably more accurate to say that I didn't understand the side of him that became more apparent later. I'm not a believer, as many are, in the sudden transformation of Robert Kennedy after his brother's death into a

more poetic, sympathetic, kindly, heartfelt figure. I thought that was in him all the time that I knew him. But it certainly was well concealed during during the college and McCarthy years. Maybe it wasn't there, but I I rather think it was always there. He was this, you know, he was the smallest of of the brothers. He was always having to struggle to keep up, and I think it was always there.

00:03:03

INTERVIEWER
Now, if you were to compare the two brothers, John and Robert, how would you do that? And what what ways did they differ from one another?

00:03:16

ANTHONY LEWIS
Well, the president, John Kennedy, was had a much more ironic view of life. And he could never have been... Let's put it this way, he could never have been anyone's campaign manager as Robert Kennedy was his campaign manager. He didn't like to do the dirty deals. He didn't like to go to Dick Daly and say, Dick, you're going to do it my way, or your head will be cut off, and you'll just wake up and you won't be able to nod. Not in those words, but that was the lesson beneath the Velvet Glove. Robert Kennedy could do the tough things, and he didn't mind doing them. I repeat that he also had this very tender heart. You only had to see him with children. I remember very early on when he was attorney general and he took a trip around the world in 19— winter of 1961. And in Tokyo, he was at the someplace or other, I forget where. And he lost the press. I was hanging around. He had a smoke, but maybe half a dozen people from the press, one television crew from CBS. And everybody went away, and he went out in the backyard— it might have been the American Embassy— and there are a whole bunch of little Japanese kids. And he— I mean, small, like four years old, five years old— and he went out there and threw a ball with them and had balloons and spent half an hour or an hour just playing with these children who didn't speak his language, and he just liked it. That's what he liked to do.

00:04:50

INTERVIEWER

Interesting. That's an interesting picture. Let's let's talk about his decision to accept the job of Attorney General. Do you think that was a a hard decision for him to make?

00:05:04

ANTHONY LEWIS
In thinking about the origins of his job as attorney general, I never thought of it as a choice for him. I always assumed that he would do whatever his brother wanted him to do, and in this case what his father wanted him to do. There's the story in in Clark Clifford's book, how Clifford went to the father, Joseph P. Kennedy, and explained to him at length why Bobby should not be attorney general, because it was bad to have the president's brother as attorney general, especially one who hadn't been in law practice very much, and you should have a distinguished older figure. And when it was all over, Joe Kennedy said, oh, Mr. Clifford, it's been so interesting to listen to you; you talk wonderfully and make a wonderful case. Of course, Bobby is going to be attorney general, but I did enjoy listening to you. So, I don't I didn't really think that Bobby had much choice.

00:05:55

INTERVIEWER
Well, you initially didn't think it was a good appointment, did you? You— I think I read somewhere that you remember him being a bit of a lout from Harvard, you didn't think he had the experience. Weren't you critical of the choice?

00:06:06

ANTHONY LEWIS
I was certainly against the idea, both because I thought the Attorney General should have a certain distance from the president and be able to tell him when he does wrong or when he's tempted to do the wrong thing, legally speaking, and because I thought Robert Kennedy was not an appropriate choice, had very little, if any, legal experience and had been associated with Joe McCarthy until, we have to, in fairness to say, and I went through this myself, I should say it, until McCarthy really went over the edge when Bobby became counsel to the Democrats on the committee and was counsel of the

Army Mc— the opposition council, the Democratic Council in the Army McCarthy hearings, which really destroyed Joe McCarthy and, you know, there was a real enmity then between Bobby and McCarthy's lawyer, Joe Roy Cohn, and that I think marked a point of change in Bobby and his seeing how bad Joe McCarthy was and beginning to understand that. But in any event, I didn't think he was an appropriate choice for attorney general. I rather changed my mind, shall we say.

00:07:18

INTERVIEWER
Well let's— let me ask you what things led you to change your mind.

00:07:24

ANTHONY LEWIS
I changed my mind about his appropriateness as attorney general very early on for a simple reason: the choices he made for his assistants. He chose people, on the whole, with whom he had no personal connection. And the only one who had any political connection was Byron White, who had been the head, I think, of the nonpolitical group for Kennedy in the campaign. I've forgotten the name. And he was a great football star, Whizzer White, and an honor student at the Yale Law School. And he certainly was qualified. There's no doubt about that. Rhodes Scholar. But he— that was Bobby's choice for Deputy Attorney General. But apart from that, he chose Archibald Cox, a law professor at Harvard, whom I knew and who had the highest reputation as Solicitor General, Nicholas Katzenbach as head of the Office of Legal Counsel, Burke Marshall for Civil Rights, whom I also knew and had the highest regard to for, and so on and so on. People who were non-political, absolutely non-political, and top notch, every one of them. And I thought that, I thought it took a bit of courage for somebody with very little legal experience or reputation as a lawyer to pick these people who would generally be regarded as overawing him. They didn't, in fact, overawe him. They all respected him, came to respect him rather quickly. But I thought that was very, very important.

00:08:50

INTERVIEWER

Interesting. On the oral tapes in the interviews, Robert Kennedy says at one point that the Bay of Pigs was the best thing ever to happen to the administration. What do you think he might have meant by that? Do you care about the plane?

00:09:07

PRODUCTION
Let's wait two seconds for that to pass. Just one.

00:09:13

INTERVIEWER
That better now?

00:09:15

ANTHONY LEWIS
Now, what was the question?

00:09:16

INTERVIEWER
Asked you, well that kind of interesting comment that he makes on the tapes that the bay of pigs was the best thing ever to happen to them. What did he mean by that, do you think?

00:09:28

ANTHONY LEWIS
If Bobby says on the tapes that Bay of Pigs was the best thing that ever happened to him, I'd say he must have forgotten the immediate trauma, because it was very tough on the president, his brother, and on all of them, this disastrous mistake, for which he personally felt quite guilty, quite... It wasn't his decision; it had started, it had all been planned in the Eisenhower administration, and then his brother, the president, approved it. But he always felt a real guilt toward those who were captured, the soldiers who were captured, and he and that led him to make later this to do this transaction in which supplies were given to— relief supplies, food and medicine and so on— to Cuba in return for the release of the people who were captured at the Bay of Pigs. That was a matter of honor for Bobby, so he certainly didn't feel any too cheerful about the physical result. What he may have meant is simply that it awoke the whole administration, and especially

his brother and himself, to the danger of relying on others with a reputation. We better listen to so and so because he's the head of the CIA instead of making an independent judgment. And you know, you found out that these people with impeccable reputations weren't all that smart.

00:10:42

INTERVIEWER
And Robert Kennedy and his brother became much closer in the administration after the Bay of Pigs, did they not?

00:10:49

ANTHONY LEWIS
After the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy obviously relied on Bobby to a much greater degree to sort of clean up the aftermath, to figure out what to do so that nothing like that would ever happen again. And there was that reliance, which it's very hard for outsiders to understand how intimate they were, much more than I ever was with the one sister I had, or than I think my children have with each other. I once asked if he talked with his brother about some subject to do with civil rights, I think. And he said, oh, we don't have to talk. We don't have to say things out loud, as if there was a kind of identity that absolutely made speech unnecessary. I was very struck by that.

00:11:37

INTERVIEWER
That's that's great. Unusual for an attorney general to get so involved in foreign affairs, I think?

00:11:48

ANTHONY LEWIS
It was unusual for an attorney general to be involved in foreign affairs, and a lot of people in the administration thought it wasn't such a good idea. You can— I mean they had no choice really. It was the president's brother, and he had lots of moxie, and they were gonna have to get used to it. But you can see why people in the State Department and Defense Department and the CIA would feel a bit funny about it, although he was always respectful. I saw him with Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara. He had a very high regard for Robert McNamara and deferred to him. There wasn't anything like, you know, sort of

do this because I'm the president's brother. It wasn't like that. But yes, he he got into foreign affairs much more, and I guess it developed from the Bay of Pigs.

00:12:32

INTERVIEWER
So that by the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis he was actually playing a very central role in that in those thirteen days.

00:12:39

ANTHONY LEWIS
Well in the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was, I suppose, the decisive figure after his brother. He was the one who made the speech and made the argument that defeated the hawks, those who wanted to bomb Cuba or use nuclear weapons, whatever. He was the one who made the patriotic speech, Fourth of July speech, as it was called, saying, I don't want my country to be known for using weapons against a poor little island like Cuba and all that. I wonder what he'd have thought about unilateral wars and well, I better not say it. I think I know what he would have said.

00:13:20

INTERVIEWER
When I was speaking to Bob McNamara, he he's he drifted into his into Don Rumsfeld a little bit.

00:13:28

ANTHONY LEWIS
Yeah, I dare say.

00:13:30

INTERVIEWER
Who he knows very well but disagrees with him quite a bit. In the tapes, Robert Kennedy, I mean, one is struck by this. That again and again he talks about Lyndon Johnson in highly disparaging terms. This is 1964. Why do you think he disliked Lyndon Johnson so much? And what what was the genesis of that hatred?

00:13:59

ANTHONY LEWIS

I never knew the origins of the... You'd have to call it a kind of profound, almost blood dispute, Capulets and Montagues whatever. Johnson was personally the opposite of the Kennedys in Mannerism: he was a very vulgar man, as you know. I don't want to tell stories, but we, you know, the stories have all been told. Johnson sitting on the toilet while he talks to the Secretary of the Treasury, all that stuff that any member of the Kennedy family would have regarded as simply unthinkable. And I think they found him deceitful and so on. The part that was surprising to me at the time, and I never really understood how off base I was in this, was that on civil rights he seemed to be at one with Robert Kennedy, deeply committed to equal rights for Black Americans. And he certainly carried on the, we could say not the John Kennedy, but the Robert Kennedy program for civil rights, and his first great speech to Congress was the one saying we must overcome, we shall overcome. But there was something so deep that made them skeptical even about that, as if there was some other. Thing that they knew about that we didn't know about.

00:15:35

INTERVIEWER
Do you think that the Kennedys misunderstood Johnson then? That he wasn't as bad as as as Robert thought he was?

00:15:45

ANTHONY LEWIS
I think Lyndon Johnson was better than the Kennedys thought he was, and he also was what they thought he was. You know, you can read Robert Caro's biography. Caro obviously detests a lot of Lyndon Johnson, and he writes these really appalling descriptions of Johnson at his worst. But then he steps back and says, but he did do these wonderful things for civil rights. So, he was a chameleon. He was he was both things, there's no doubt about it.

00:16:15

INTERVIEWER
Well, there's the there's that moment in I think it was June of '64 when Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of '64. Robert Kennedy was there, present in the room. There's a photograph showing him hovering

in the background with a scowling face and looking just miserable during the signing ceremony. And later and on the tapes, he talks about he's furious because it should have been known as the Kennedy Civil Rights Act. And in fact, it was now being called the Johnson Civil Rights Act. That ring a bell to you?

00:16:47

ANTHONY LEWIS
I wasn't present at that, but I've seen the picture. Sorry. I wasn't present at the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but I've seen the famous picture, which certainly does have Robert Kennedy looking disaffected. I think, you know, if you put it at its simplest, it must have been an occasion that made him feel again the unfairness, the tragedy of his brother's death. Because, you know, I feel quite strongly that John Kennedy was coming into his own when he was killed. He had just seized the peace issue. His speech at American University showed that he had come to understand the danger of nuclear weapons and was moving to do something about that. Really with treaties and everything. He had come to understand the civil rights issue with his speech at the time of Birmingham in June. So, he was getting, really getting a hold of the two great issues of his presidency, mastering them and taking the right direction. And at that point he was killed. And I, you know, anybody can understand how awful, quite apart from the human, the brother and everything, to see the things that he had grasped and understood now taken as the work of his successor. I guess we didn't succeed.

00:18:05

INTERVIEWER
We'll take a pause. How many how many minutes do we have left on this tape?

00:18:09

PRODUCTION
Ten.

00:18:09

INTERVIEWER

Good. I'm gonna just ask you briefly about the relationship between the Kennedys and Martin Luther King in the period of 1961 to '63. It's curious to me that they were— they didn't seem to be that close allies. I would have expected them to be closer, but there was a a distance between them. How do you understand that?

00:18:35

ANTHONY LEWIS
I really didn't understand why relations between Robert Kennedy, especially, Kennedy administration and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were so frayed at the beginning. I think fundamentally it was because they had different interests. Dr. King was the man who said we can't wait. His famous letter from a Birmingham jail to the White ministers in Birmingham who were supposed to be sympathetic, but said, you know, you're rocking the boat, just wait, everything will be fine, there'll be pie in the sky by and by. He said, you know, we can't wait. We've been waiting a long time, and nothing ever happens. Whereas the Kennedy administration saw that there was violence, and when they tested anything, there was really... People forget what it was like in those early years of the Kennedy administration. People were being butchered, they were being killed over the civil rights issue. And a group of, you know, the Freedom Riders, so-called, a nondescript little group of people who took a bus were beaten within an inch of their lives in Alabama and Mississippi. So, the Kennedy administration had a profound interest in avoiding provocation.

00:19:46

INTERVIEWER
Well, I'm about to play you— we're gonna play you a piece of tape in just a second. And it actually comes out of that freedom riding period in 1961. And you may remember the incident. Actually Dr. King went to Montgomery to be part of the scene, and he was he was inside a church that then became surrounded by a mob. And during the course of the night, Robert Kennedy and he were on the telephone together and and they were sending in federal marshals to try to disperse the crowds and and and let's listen to a little bit, this is your interview with Robert Kennedy about that incident. You know, make it nice and loud so we can hear it.

00:20:29

ANTHONY LEWIS (ARCHIVAL)
[unclear] Dr. King and his band were in the church, and the crowd was outside and they were talking to you on the telephone.

00:20:30

ROBERT KENNEDY
Yes.

00:20:30

ANTHONY LEWIS (ARCHIVAL)
Now what can you tell us about that?

00:20:32

ROBERT KENNEDY
Well, I talked to Martin Luther King, I guess, several times, and I talked to Governor Patterson Sunday night, Sunday night. And Martin Luther King was concerned about whether he's gonna live. And whether his people were gonna live, and I was concerned about the whether the place was going to be burned down. He kept getting these reports that the crowds were moving in and that they were gonna burn the church down and shoot the Negroes as they ran out of the church.

00:21:03

ANTHONY LEWIS (ARCHIVAL)
Did burn a car right in front of the church.

00:21:06

ROBERT KENNEDY
I said that we were— our people were down here, and that as long as he was in church, he might say a prayer for us. He didn't think that was very humorous, and that I— he rather berated me for what was happening to him at the time. And I said to him that I didn't think he'd be alive when it wasn't for us, and that we were gonna keep him alive, and that the marshals would keep the church from burning down and that...

00:21:42

ANTHONY LEWIS (ARCHIVAL)
Berated you for what?

00:21:44

ROBERT KENNEDY
I don't remember why he was so mad at it. I think that was later. I think that was later. But he was exercised anyway about about whether he was gonna live, I guess.

00:21:57

INTERVIEWER
That's enough of that. Does that come back to you?

00:22:04

ANTHONY LEWIS
Well, the voice comes back to me very strongly, and it sounds so much like Bobby, as I still call him in my mind. Those cryptic half jocular phrases, you know. He was worried about whether he was going to live. Well, he was worried about whether he was gonna live, Dr. King, and that was the truth. And yet you can sort of hear a tone, maybe I'm wrong, but I think you can hear a tone in Attorney General Kennedy's voice of, you know, that wasn't very courageous. Why was he worried about himself? I think you hear that. And maybe he was just— he didn't know enough yet about the danger and how how, you know, what it was like to be Dr. King. He came to know that. I mean, after all, his people then were involved in Mississippi and Alabama, and they— it was a damn close run thing, as the Duke of Wellington said, when it got to the University of Mississippi, and maybe he then understood it better that you were dealing with very, very angry, menacing people who wouldn't mind killing you.

00:23:10

INTERVIEWER
But in Montgomery in '61, he was cracking a joke to King about why don't you say a prayer for me?

00:23:17

ANTHONY LEWIS
That was amazing.

00:23:19

INTERVIEWER

Talk about that for a second.

00:23:20

ANTHONY LEWIS
Well, that's— I should have used that as the example, the the the crack, why don't you say a prayer for me now that you're in church? I mean, looking back on it, they really were menaced. You know, people were killed. The little girls in the church in Birmingham were killed, were bombed. And to crack a joke about, say a prayer for me, shows, I think, an an underlying lack of sympathy for Dr. King. And it's very hard to understand that. It changed, it changed, but why it was so at the time I don't know.

00:23:54

INTERVIEWER
Do you think that the Kennedys, at this point, failed to grasp the importance of the social revolution that King was at the center of?

00:24:05

ANTHONY LEWIS
I think there were people in the Kennedy administration who certainly understood it. Harris Wofford understood it in his job. Burke Marshall understood that this was a revolution that was starting and couldn't be stopped. That Dr. King didn't want to call it off and wasn't going to call it off and couldn't if he wanted to. You had young people sitting in at lunch counters. You had you know, bus riders wanting to be treated equally with everybody else, and it wasn't going to stop. And I think Robert Kennedy probably still believed that this was an unnecessary, unnecessary haste, unnecessary provocation, and that the Kennedys were entitled to a quiet life.

00:24:50

INTERVIEWER
Now you've already mentioned Oxford, Mississippi, which I agree with you seems to be a crucial turning point in the presidency. Do you think it was hard for the Kennedys to send federal marshals into the South, and eventually federal troops, I think? And do you think Robert Kennedy was— kind of led his brother in in the area of civil rights? Was he the first to kind of get it and then convince his brother this is this was important?

00:25:18

ANTHONY LEWIS
There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that Robert Kennedy understood the moral and legal and political significance of the civil rights issue before his brother, the president. And then he brought his president along. And it was the the first time you really knew that John Kennedy understood it was his speech. The June— June twelfth, was it?

00:25:42

INTERVIEWER
Eleven.

00:25:43

ANTHONY LEWIS
June eleventh.

00:25:44

INTERVIEWER
Say to start again: the first time.

00:25:45

ANTHONY LEWIS
The first time that the president, I felt, could be seen to understand it was in his June 11th speech, which said equal treatment to people of different races was a moral issue. We have to understand that it's a moral issue. No president had said that before, and he laid it on the line. I I happened to listen to that speech with McGeorge Bundy, who was the president's national security advisor, just by accident. We were having dinner together and our wives. And what and he had left the office. He had left the White House, I mean, to come home for dinner, McGeorge Bundy. And the speech wasn't finished. And he listened to the speech wondering what Kennedy was going to do when he came to the unfinished part. And he said he's extemporizing. I don't know if that's true, but that's what Bundy thought. And so, it was very impressive to me as an expression of the president's real feeling, real understanding.

00:26:41

INTERVIEWER

Well and it there— I don't know if you've read since then that that's in fact the case. It was only partially written. Ted Sorensen didn't have time to get it done and he had to wing the ending of it.

00:26:50

ANTHONY LEWIS
Oh, so it was true. Sorry.

00:26:55

INTERVIEWER
I just say that. How are we doing with time? Because I've...

00:26:57

PRODUCTION
Seven thirty, one more.

00:26:59

INTERVIEWER
We have time for another?

00:27:00

PRODUCTION
Mm-hmm.

00:27:00

INTERVIEWER
Well, except I wanted to...

00:27:01

PRODUCTION
Okay.

00:27:02

INTERVIEWER
Well, let's just talk a tiny bit more about that June eleventh speech. I've even heard it compared to the Gettysburg Address. Do you think that's going too far?

00:27:12

ANTHONY LEWIS
I don't think it was— that speech was as eloquent as the Gettysburg Address. It wasn't concise. You couldn't put it all on one sheet of paper the way Lincoln

did. But it was very eloquent in what it said. It said, you know, which one of us, meaning White people, would want to trade if we were going to be treated this way. And that was the right way to look at it. I always thought that was the right way to look at it. So, I, as I say, I think it was a turning point for John F. Kennedy and the country.

00:27:47

INTERVIEWER
We we've been talking about the evolution of the Kennedys in the area of civil rights. And early on at one point in the tapes Robert talks about how he served as a kind of lightning rod for his brother so that he would take the flak in the south and the President Kennedy would come out looking clean.

00:28:05

ANTHONY LEWIS
Mm-hmm.

00:28:06

INTERVIEWER
That changed by 1963 and that's what this clip is gonna... Let's listen to this one. It's short.

00:28:12

PRODUCTION
The third clip.

00:28:13

INTERVIEWER
The third one, yeah.

00:28:15

ROBERT KENNEDY
By ‘63, in my judgment, the fact that I was Attorney General caused him 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. It's no longer that Robert, Kennedy's younger brother, now they're talking about the Kennedy Brothers. Before, up to ‘61, ‘62, it was focused on me, and he wasn't such a bad fellow. By 1963, it was focused on both of us. 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 in 1963 I discussed with him about trying to get out of...

00:28:58

ANTHONY LEWIS (ARCHIVAL)
That would have been very hard for you, also.

00:29:01

ROBERT KENNEDY
Well, it wasn't that important. The important thing really was that he got elected. And that this was causing a lot of problems.

00:29:12

INTERVIEWER
Do you remember that period? Did you do did you understand that he was— do you remember him thinking about leaving the administration to help his brother's reelection attempt?

00:29:24

ANTHONY LEWIS
Vaguely, I don't think I ever talked to him about it. But, you know, my memory of— Oh I didn't I answered your question. Sorry. I wasn't really aware of his thinking about leaving the administration, presumably to be campaign manager in 1964, as he had been in 60. Never talked to him about it, but it was in the air. There's a possibility. I don't know that it would have lessened the Southern backlash. To the contrary, I don't think so at all. By then the president was fully committed to civil rights. It's an interesting thing, I might mention. I once asked him, in fact, I think it was on the way to the first speech he made in the South on civil rights at the University of Georgia, don't remember exactly when it was, but it was early on, and I said, was this an issue in your family, race? Did you? He said, oh no, we never talked about it. Didn't know a thing about it. Wasn't aware that there was a racial issue. Amazing statement, but I guess in Joe Kennedy's house, that just wasn't the thing they worried about.

00:30:30

INTERVIEWER

I've read that too. I've though I've also read that there was there was an ethos in the house that one should care about the underprivileged. You remember that? Is that...

00:30:39

ANTHONY LEWIS
Absolutely. Care about the underprivileged. That's true, that was a Joe Kennedy thing, but you know, the Black Americans were pretty underprivileged. Why didn't they count? They just weren't part of the scene.

00:30:51

INTERVIEWER
Outside of the radar. Now we talk about race. Bobby Kennedy met with a bunch of Black entertainers in New York City. Do you remember that incident?

00:31:00

ANTHONY LEWIS
Oh yes.

00:31:01

INTERVIEWER
And they were kind of expressing a more you know impatient and angrier view and and even the the admitting to the possibility of the use of violence in the pursuit of of civil rights at goals. Let's listen to this last take and and hear what how Kennedy reacted to that.

00:31:25

ROBERT KENNEDY
It's obviously a revolution within a revolution in the Negro leadership. And we could see the direction of Martin Luther King sending away from him to many of these younger people who were— had no belief or confidence in the the system of government that we had [unclear] and thought the way to deal with the problem is to start arming the young Negroes and sending them into the street. Which I don't think was very satisfying to me. Because I explained to them there were more White people than the Negroes, and although it might be bloody except that White people would...

00:32:01

ANTHONY LEWIS
We'll win.

00:32:04

INTERVIEWER
Sort of odd exchange. Do you remember that?

00:32:09

ANTHONY LEWIS
I remember talking with Robert Kennedy rather soon after his famous meeting in New York at that time. I think I talked with him before it became a public thing, or around the same time. And he was genuinely shocked by it. It was news to him. And maybe you have to think back and say that his feelings about Dr. King undertook, underwent, rather, underwent a change when he realized that Dr. King was a moderate. Dr. King, who he thought of as a provocative fellow who was always trying to hurry things along instead of waiting and calmly and just being happy and content, as the early Kennedy administration wanted, was wanting change right away. Well, you know, Robert Kennedy understood that there were some people who weren't willing to wait even five seconds. They didn't have any belief in the government. They didn't think Dr. King was tough enough. And he was, I think, of course they were very outrageous toward him personally. They treated him with contempt at that meeting, and he didn't like that any too well. It's rather characteristic of him that he explained to them that there were more Whites than Blacks so they might not win. There's this sort of deadpan logic to it, you know.

00:33:34

INTERVIEWER
That strikes you as a Robert-ism.

00:33:37

ANTHONY LEWIS
That was a Robert Kennedy thing, yeah. You know

00:33:41

INTERVIEWER

Now on the tapes Robert Kennedy I mentioned is talking about LBJ, but he talks a lot also about J. Edgar Hoover. How would you summarize that relationship?

00:33:53

ANTHONY LEWIS
I think the relationship between Bobby and Hoover could be summarized in a word, blackmail. I think essentially Robert Kennedy was afraid that Hoover was going to do bad things with behind his back with Congress, with leaks to the press. If he didn't do exactly what Hoover wanted on this and that, and famously on tapping Dr. King. Hoover insisted on this wiretap and eavesdropping of Dr. King. And Kennedy and Burke Marshall agreed. I always felt and still feel that they agreed under the implicit pressure that if they didn't agree, leaks would start occurring, and the leaks would be that Kennedy, that Dr. King was a communist and that he was being coddled by the Kennedys. And after all, Hoover did use— did leak tapes of Dr. King later for his own purposes, and he was certainly not shy about doing so when he wanted to destroy somebody. And Kennedy and Burke Marshall were well aware of that possibility.

00:34:58

INTERVIEWER
He also had taped phone conversations and proof of womanizing going on in both Congress and in the executive branch, going all the way up to the president, I believe. Is this part of what you talk about the blackmail?

00:35:14

ANTHONY LEWIS
By blackmail, when I say blackmail, I had in mind also Hoover's knowledge of President Kennedy's trysts, shall we say. And he, I think, made it very plain to Robert Kennedy that he knew all about it. And Kennedy knew that Hoover would not hesitate to use it against his brother. And you know, Hoover was a very malign influence for many, many years, and people didn't understand how, you know, how dark a figure he was.

00:35:49

INTERVIEWER

How do you think Robert Kennedy reconciled his brother's trysts, as you put them, with his own more sort of puritanical background? I mean, did he he he obviously was devoted to his brother? Do you think he approved of this behavior?

00:36:04

ANTHONY LEWIS
Well Robert Kennedy did come on as a Puritan. But I don't think he particularly disapproved of sex outside of marriage. After all, his father was famous for having encounters with people like Gloria Swanson. That's a famous Joe Kennedy, Gloria Swanson. So, I don't think that he was puritanical really about such matters.

00:36:33

INTERVIEWER
Didn't bother him.

00:36:35

ANTHONY LEWIS
Well, I don't know.

00:36:38

INTERVIEWER
There was one [unclear] he as an attorney general, he helped cover up that Ellen Rometsch situation where he had to get her out of the country actually. So, he was his brother's protector when it came to these scandals.

00:36:49

ANTHONY LEWIS
Yes, he did certainly help his brother conceal at least the Ellen Rometsch matter. He he must have known all about it and figured what was true. This was part of John Kennedy's character, along with many good things, and it was you know, you pay as your money, and you get what you get.

00:37:11

INTERVIEWER
And one— I'd like to ask you if you can remember RFK in mourning after November 22nd, 1963. Did you see him any time soon after that horrible day?

00:37:29

ANTHONY LEWIS
It was a long time before I saw Robert Kennedy, a long time after November 22nd, 1963. I can't remember the day, but I certainly didn't rush into seeing him. I was covering the Department of Justice, and I suppose it was my function as a reporter to try to see him, but I didn't. I thought he just... And he he didn't hardly come into the office for months. It was a long time until he could face up to the responsibilities of Attorney General again, and then he quit. So no, I don't remember exactly when I renewed the acquaintance.

00:38:04

INTERVIEWER
I've read that you actually helped write the speech that he was going to give to the Democratic National Convention in 1964. And he was gonna— he was gonna introduce a film about his brother. What— before you speak, we'll wait for another plane to go over.

00:38:20

ANTHONY LEWIS
It's not true.

00:38:20

INTERVIEWER
Is that not true?

00:38:21

ANTHONY LEWIS
No.

00:38:21

INTERVIEWER
Somebody in one of the biographies made that point. Okay. Well, there you go. People make up all kinds of things, don't they?

00:38:31

ANTHONY LEWIS
It was news to me; I watched it on television. No actually I was in the...

00:38:32

INTERVIEWER
Were you there?

00:38:34

ANTHONY LEWIS
In '64...

00:38:35

INTERVIEWER
In '64. This is a Democratic Convention. This is an Atlantic City.

00:38:37

ANTHONY LEWIS
Yeah, I was there, sure I was there. Yeah. I watched him give the speech, but I didn't...

00:38:41

INTERVIEWER
You had you didn't have any hand in...

00:38:42

ANTHONY LEWIS
No. It was news to me.

00:38:44

INTERVIEWER
It struck me as a little odd that you would have, but.

00:38:46

ANTHONY LEWIS
Yeah, I mean, the truth is that I wasn't always as pure as I might have been, but on this occasion, I was a hundred percent pure. Nothing to do with it.

00:38:54

INTERVIEWER
Well, you you were there. Evidently, he was— his arrival, his role in the convention was placed to the very end after the VP choice had been announced and and it wasn't obviously wasn't to be Kennedy. But when he arrived at the convention there was a huge standing ovation, and it it lasted for something like 22 minutes. And then he spoke to the people and and was gave a quite moving address, I gather. You remember being there and what that was like?

00:39:24

ANTHONY LEWIS
I was at the 1964 convention, and of course the reaction of the delegates and the audience to Robert Kennedy was perfectly amazing. It was like love pouring out from this audience to this rather slight, he was a small man, a slight figure at the microphone. And with a rather diffident manner of speaking. He wasn't your, you know, friends, Romans, countrymen. We didn't talk like that. And and yet they just overwhelmed him. It didn't matter what he said, just the memory of his brother and of, you know, just and of him. It just came roaring out of this crowd. It was an amazing moment. Moments went on a long time.

00:40:06

INTERVIEWER
And then he— didn't he quote from Romeo and Juliet from Shakespeare?

00:40:11

ANTHONY LEWIS
Yes, pick out the stars. I've forgotten. I should remember my Shakespeare, but there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

00:40:20

INTERVIEWER
The stars were John F. Kennedy and the garish sun, they referred to...

00:40:25

ANTHONY LEWIS The garish sun, yes, the garish sun would have been of course Lyndon Johnson, who I'm sure didn't miss the analogy.

00:40:35

INTERVIEWER
Let's change the focus a little bit for a few minutes and talk about the oral history project. I know you told me you don't remember a lot of details about how how it happened, but can you say a few things about how you got involved in it and maybe who who asked you to be involved with it if you can remember... Or you don't remember that.

00:40:55

ANTHONY LEWIS

You know, I don't really remember anything about how I got involved in the Oral History Project. It could have been Ed Guthman, who was Bobby's press man very close to him and a wonderful man, or John Seigenthaler. Could have been the Attorney General himself who asked me. I just don't remember.

00:41:21

INTERVIEWER
Well, you you conducted two extremely important, I mean, parts of this interview each lasting many hours. And do you think it was difficult for for Robert Kennedy to sit down so close to the assassination and remember all this these details?

00:41:38

ANTHONY LEWIS
I felt then and feel now that it was very difficult for him to be talking about the Kennedy administration when underneath it all he must always have been thinking, and it should have gone on. And it's not right that it ended as it did. And and I— that affected the way I asked the questions. I feel sure that I was more diffident than I might have been, because I was quite conscious of his sense of— unending sense of bereavement. I think maybe that sense of bereavement didn't end until he ran for the Senate on his own and just had to be himself.

00:42:16

INTERVIEWER
Well, let me remind you that the first two interviews took place in February and March of '64, when he was just literally three months after the assassination. When you were brought in, it was already December. He had just he had just won the Senate seat. And and I can tell, listening to them, a changed, a change in his tone of voice. He is— there's a more confidence. There's more jokes. He just seems more relaxed than he did in the earlier interviews. Maybe you could just set that to time frame for us in your own words.

00:42:46

ANTHONY LEWIS

Well, I guess I'm having to be reminded that I guess that my interviews with him began after he was elected to the Senate. And yet listening to him talk about Dr. King and Montgomery and Birmingham and all of those things, I still feel the somberness that was in him. And maybe it didn't relate to his brother's death, but just to all of the disasters that took place. There were people killed, you know, Medgar Evers and the little girls in the church and so on, which he was conscious of. But certainly, he did become much more confident about himself when he was elected senator, and when he later went to South Africa, he was himself.

00:43:30

INTERVIEWER
Your your interviews took place at in in New York City at the Carlisle Hotel. Do you— does that bring back memory? No. And then your second one was at Hickory Hill. Do you remember sitting with him at Hickory Hill, perhaps in the living room? No. Okay.

00:43:44

ANTHONY LEWIS
I remember talking to him at Hickory Hill numerous times, but not on this occasion.

00:43:48

INTERVIEWER
You don't remember the big reel-to-reel tape recorder that they used?

00:43:53

ANTHONY LEWIS
Nope.

00:43:53

INTERVIEWER
Very clunk clunky big tape recorder. Well, I guess they all were back then. Okay, that's fine. I'm struck in listening to these. I've listened to all what, 25 hours or whatever it is of them. But on one hand, he RFK speaks very candidly, almost like he's he's not concerned with who's gonna hear him or what... He uses quite, you know, just quite nasty language at times in referring to John F. Kennedy, referring to Lyndon Johnson or J. Edgar Hoover, for

example, very openly maligning them. On the other hand, do you think there were places in the oral history where he may have misrepresented, where he may have been cautious about his remarks, where he may have tried to put a spin on the history? Or was he just trying to tell it like it was, knowing that these tapes would be out of the public consumption for many years?

00:44:52

ANTHONY LEWIS
I think he was trying to lay it all out. I don't— I didn't— I wasn't conscious of his spinning because, you know, even putting aside the turns of fate which in fact overtook him, he had no notion that he would still be active in politics when these tapes came out, or that the people he was talking about would be active in politics, or that the situation would be the same. Of course, anybody tries to put a favorable slant on things, but I think he was— you know, he believed, for example, that he had done the right thing about race in the South. That was genuine. And if he didn't agree with J. Edgar Hoover, that was out of his belief, not not something he said just to be unpleasant.

00:45:37

INTERVIEWER
Well, not to beat a dead horse because we and this is not a show about sex affairs, but when he was asked by you about the Ellen Rometsch affair, he said it didn't never took place; the president didn't even know her.

00:45:52

ANTHONY LEWIS
I didn't remember that. Is that really so? Amazing. Well, that's a spin, all right.

00:45:59

INTERVIEWER
Well, I think he in the role of brother protector, he's not going to point out the flaws of his own brother in this oral history, you wouldn't think?

00:46:06

ANTHONY LEWIS
No, certainly he would be still protective of his brother because his brother's reputation was really profoundly important to him. So no, I'd have to say that

you couldn't expect searing candor about any flaws in his brother's presidency or character.

00:46:25

INTERVIEWER
How how do you think, and I'm coming close to the end, believe it or not...

00:46:29

ANTHONY LEWIS
Are we gonna say anything about South Africa?

00:46:31

INTERVIEWER
Well, I'd like to, and I was I was going to talk to your wife about that, but if she doesn't want to, that's fine.

00:46:36

ANTHONY LEWIS
No, she doesn't want to.

00:46:37

INTERVIEWER
Fine. Then we'll then I'd like you to be the person to talk about that.

00:46:40

ANTHONY LEWIS
Oh, just a little bit.

00:46:41

INTERVIEWER
Yeah, I— because, you know, I'm struck by this unfolding life of Robert Kennedy's that was then so cruelly ended itself in '68. But the steppingstones along the way, one of them is this amazing trip in in summer of '66 to South Africa for a week, I guess, visit. Could you describe what he encountered there and what he meant to the people there and how it may have changed him?

00:47:09

ANTHONY LEWIS
I'm first going to say one thing about just before the trip to South Africa in 1966, he stopped off in London on the way, where I was, and he asked me to

get together a group of people who knew about South Africa who could advise him on, you know, what it was like and what he might say and so on. And he said to those people, as the meeting started, don't give me advice that will be good for me and bad for the people I talked to in South Africa. I don't want to make trouble for anybody. Just give me advice that might be helpful there. I thought that was rather characteristic of him and counters the notion that the trip was somehow political in, you know, entirely political in its purpose. When he got there, I think like all of us, he knew in the abstract that Blacks were being segregated and deprived of the right to vote and, you know, treated in the most brutal way. But the reality was always much more striking, is always more striking and was for him on that occasion. And as he began to talk to people, he found his voice, and he really stepped up to the plate, you could say, when he got to the University of Cape Town, where he spoke. He delivers what his friends used to call only partly ironically the ripple speech, because in that speech he comes to saying that he understands how people may feel powerless and hopeless against the entrenched power of brutality and hatred and so on. But if somebody's courageous enough to throw a pebble in the water, and then somebody else throws a pebble and another pebble, and then all the ripples come together and create a whirlpool that will knock over the most appalling, I'm of course giving a bad parallel to the actual words. Ripples of hope. And people came out of that speech; I've so been told... It happens that my wife was the president of the South African National Union of South African students at the time and was in fact his host. I didn't know her then, she came to the United States later, and I met her years later. It's all just an accident. But she's described to me how the speech had the most stunning effect in South Africa. People began following his car and shouting and reaching out to grab him and take pieces of his clothing and because he was the first person, the first White person who'd ever spoke to them in in terms like that.

00:49:52

INTERVIEWER

Amazing speech. In the sense of that that an individual's actions could make a difference in history, that you didn't need to feel this impotence of being unable to make any change that could help.

00:50:06

ANTHONY LEWIS
I must say I've often thought about that speech and the idea behind it in recent years, because we all from time to time feel politically impotent. There's nothing we can do to change something that we think is really bad for our country or doing devastating harm to individuals or whatever it is. Of course, we feel frustration and impotence even in a democratic society.

00:50:31

INTERVIEWER
Sorry to interrupt you. We have another plane. We can start that thought again because... You want to try to pick that up where you left off? The the the impotence of the individual.

00:50:43

ANTHONY LEWIS
I think all of us, even in this democratic society, feel impotent, frustrated at times, I certainly have, about being unable to change things in our society or our government that we think are brutal, cruel, unjust, unconstitutional, bad for the country. You know, we may all think those things. I certainly have felt them. I had the luxury for many years of writing a newspaper column in which I could say that they were wrong. But even then, newspaper columnists don't generally get their way. Life goes on unchanged after their screams. So, the fact that Robert Kennedy could say and inspire people to believe that you shouldn't give up hope, that you can change, that you can resist prejudice and hatred and beat it in the end, which happened after all in South Africa. Who would have predicted it then, 1968? Twenty-one years before it happened, but you know, I couldn't have predicted it then.

00:51:52

INTERVIEWER

Do you think some of this this fire of his then translated into his presidential campaign in '68? Part of his this appeal was this this message that he gave that people could change the world, make it better?

00:52:07

ANTHONY LEWIS
I was in England during his presidential campaign, presidential nominating campaign, so I didn't see it firsthand. But I read a lot about it, and I've heard a lot about it from the reporters who were there, and I've listened to speeches. And there's no doubt that Robert Kennedy did give people the sense of possibility. I think that's what you have to say, the sense of possibility. And famously, it was a sense of identification that transcended race. He could talk to Blacks and Whites in Indianapolis, he could tell the blacks on the night after Dr. King was assassinated that he understood them and they believed it, and that he grieved with them, and he asked them, along with Aeschylus, not to give up hope in the midst of despair, and read them from Greek tragedy. I mean, who else could nobody else, nobody else would have read to this downtown Indianapolis audience the words of Aeschylus.

00:53:05

INTERVIEWER
What about looking back from from now, forty years later at the John Kennedy administration? Does is there a sense of lost promises there as well?

00:53:17

ANTHONY LEWIS
Try to look back from today at the Kennedy administration is a bit like, you know, it feels a bit like looking at the Peloponnesian Wars. It's long ago, far away, it was all different. But yes, I felt that we we lost a lot of promise. I feel myself that we lost the promise for good with the death of Robert Kennedy. I think that Robert Kennedy embodied that promise even more than his brother. I felt that much more. Because he really did identify with the what the Bible, the New Testament calls the despised and rejected in life. And people understood that, and he was ready to do his utmost to bring people up and provide justice for society. I believe that. I mean, he wasn't a soft-headed, sentimental person, not at all. We all know how tough he could be, but he

really believed in equality and justice and decency and humanity in politics. And if he would sometimes use, you know, hard-boiled efforts to get there, his his message was what I've said: we can be better.

00:54:34

INTERVIEWER
Thank you very much, Mr. Lewis. It was great.

END TC: 00:54:42