

Alastair Granville Forbes Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 10/31/1966
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Biographical Note

Forbes, (1908 - 2001) Justice, Federal Supreme Court of Rhodesia and Nyasaland 1963; President, Court of Appeal: Seychelles 1965 – 1976, discusses RFK's character and organizational skills, JFK's attraction and charisma, and Forbes's quarrel with Prince Radziwill, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

of

Alastair Granville Forbes

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Alastair Granville Forbes – JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

Alastair Granville Forbes

October 31, 1966
London, England

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

FORBES: For your own amusement - this is a pure digression - but it is a characteristic of very rich people, that they seldom assume lack of wealth in others. And the president was no exception in that respect. Although he understood....

[Tape dies out—resumes]

I think that the question about Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] is an interesting one for historians. The Kennedy family were very curious. I would say that probably these matters are genetic. It opens up wide questions. They were certainly oversexed, or highly sexed - highly sexed, let's put it that way. The family, for purposes of the Vatican I would say, divided themselves up into two groups, one of which could be called the Irish group and the other the Italian group. I'd say that Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] and Jack [John F. Kennedy] and Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] arranged their mores after the fashion of the ordinary Italian bourgeois in their relations to the Church. The girls and Bobby followed the more traditional Irish pattern. The young Irishman, faced with the problem of being highly sexed, is able because of the economy to resolve it in one of two ways: He can marry very young and have a very large number of children, or he can be promiscuous with ignorant heathens like the English. Bobby resolved the problem by being probably the most uxorious [Laughter] politician who's ever been and thus gratified his desires and helped disperse them all at the same time. Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] is certainly a most remarkable girl who seems to get younger and prettier with each new pregnancy, so he's very well placed. I don't think that in his case he required the

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stimulation of change. Also there's a very strong pruitanical streak in Bobby which goes with his liking for - what was for certainly many years of his life his liking for order and orderliness which does make one either into a fascist or a communist in the sense of the general direction which things take. I mean, if people asked one what you thought of Bobby, you thought he was a bloody little fascist really I think.

O'CONNOR: When he was very young?

FORBES: Yes. And he was bossy, priggish and censorious. And one couldn't say that about his brother. I don't think that, I mean, the question of a leader of men or of a man in high public life who has been promiscuous in his youth and who finds it hard to break the habits of promiscuity is a very, very relevant one. I mean, even if the American public, which it never did, had some inkling of President Kennedy's not particularly private, private life - it didn't because the American press is, contrary to what's displayed on this side of the Atlantic, immensely discreet and immensely respectful of a public person's privacy, and most people on this side of the Atlantic greatly envy the protection which is afforded to people. But even if they had, I mean, there was a very respectable American tradition. You remember that when people interrupted meetings for Grover Cleveland and everybody screamed. "What about Maria Halpin [Maria Crofts Halpin]?" and the character who was running the meeting who got up and said, "I'm very glad you asked that question. I want to make it quite clear we're not running our man in this race as a gelding." This was greeted with great cheers and a very sizeable majority for President Cleveland. I think that Americans wouldn't actually have boggled at that anymore than they would have boggled at knowing that President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] had a longish affair with his quite pretty driver during the war in Europe, you know. I think it's irrelevant. I mean, Lloyd George [David Lloyd George] was a notoriously promiscuous man, and no woman was safe. The stories of what happened to people who sat next to him at a Downing Street lunch, you know, are legion. [Laughter] Nothing like that. But I think that it may well be that Bobby, when he was young, felt himself to be more serious than any of his other... But he was very diffident and wanted to prove himself in each particular stage. With whatever he did he wanted to do very thoroughly. When he was counsel to the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] committee he wanted to do that to the best of his ability and did so, assistant counsel he was. He got very caught up in it, and when later on he started really his political life by managing Jack's campaign against Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge], which, let's face it, looked like a very tough battle...

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O'CONNOR: Oh yes.

FORBES: And was an extraordinarily tough battle, and it was won not really by great political gifts of Congressman Kennedy, certainly not by anything in his record as a congressman. It was done by fabulous organization down toward heeling level, and Bobby did show that he had a natural gift for organization and no distaste, such as his brother had, for getting down to those details. On top of that, of course, there was a limitless budget. I may have told you this already, last time.

There was an amusing sidelight. When the campaign was being planned, old Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] was drawn on a great deal because he had an enormous number of Massachusetts connections. However much his son might disagree with his political views, it was absurd if you have this golden asset of experience down toward level, the Irish and Italian community, not to make use of it and full use was made. But still the budget - it was very like the making of a movie about which the father knew a good bit, he had been in the movie industry. The budget began to go up by leaps and bounds. I recall, quite by accident, the president... I mean, old Joe had got used to me being around so there wasn't any great discretion, and then he said that he had been revising the figures of expenditure on the campaign and that he'd thought it right to earmark certain sections of the children's income towards the campaign and indeed of their capital. Little Jean [Jean Kennedy Smith], who was then the youngest and hadn't in fact come into her money I don't think - it was a long cry from the day when she was to find a husband who was going to look after all the finances - when old Joe said, "And I've decided, if necessary, to take a quarter of a million dollars off each of you for Jack's campaign fund," there was sort of a squeal from the end of the table, from Jean who said, "Gee, Daddy, I didn't even know I had that amount," you know.

That was Bobby's baptism of fire. I think at that stage Jack was immensely grateful to his younger brother and began to let him in on far more than he ever had. But I don't think that Bobby saw himself as more than an organizational figure. I think that he was extremely diffident about taking on the post of attorney general in a perfectly genuine way. I think

he felt that (a) it would harm his brother's image, and (b) that he wasn't really up to that kind of thing. But I think the result of seeing the adaptability of his brother in dealing with the great issues of the day showed that, well, you know,

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anything he can do I can have a stab at, not necessarily do it better. He's an extraordinary mixture, I think, of diffidence and arrogance, and his brother Jack was a mixture of diffidence and self confidence. Bobby's inferiority or diffidence expresses itself very often in arrogance. That's to say there's nothing in between. He wants to ride roughshod and use the sanctions of power. I think that, I'm sure there has been a great, you see, change in Bobby, but it's difficult, in spite of his having had so much more experience while the president was in, not to think that this type of impatience and riding roughshod would be worrying if he possessed great power. Still, I think in the years that intervene it will be all right.

O'CONNOR: Because I think the diffidence has begun to disappear in Robert Kennedy, particularly since his brother died. You say he was content to be an organizer, and I think that's probably so, but I don't think it's so any longer. I don't think it would be so after his brother died, in the same way perhaps that...

FORBES: No, I think there was a phase, perhaps, in which he was very shocked by his brother's death, and he had put all his eggs into that particular basket. I think that the time lag in between his philosophical acceptance.... They are very, very different men. There's no doubt about it. They're as different as possible for two brothers to be. Mrs. Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] is the only one who is at all like the president. I don't think that we have to worry too much because Bobby's eye on the main chance is a fault, perhaps, if you look at people objectively, but it isn't wholly a fault in public life. Bobby's a very devout Catholic and nevertheless his public life does show that he is, without knowing it, a Marxist or neo-Marxist in the sense that he is apt to put his finger in his mouth and hold it up to the prevailing currents of history and having obtained information as to which direction the wind was blowing from, he does set the helm in that direction. On the whole - I'm more of a determinist than a Marxist myself - the currents of history which are blowing Bobby along are concerned with racial discrimination, social legislation or finding a role for the United States other than the exercise of power which it no longer has a monopoly on, are the correct ones so it doesn't really matter too much having an opportunity. And then he's had time also to get, from picking people's brains, some inkling of where he wants the United States to be going.

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I think that one of the troubles with the late president was that he didn't quite know until he got to the White House where he wanted his country to be going. The first thing, first sort of spur, was waking up to discovering that there was a great power that didn't really want the United States to be going anywhere and was going to try and stop it in its tracks. He dealt with that successfully and only then began to deal with the other. And Bobby's role will be much easier. I mean, Bobby will have to deal with the Russo -American alliance for stopping the Chinese from blowing the world to smithereens. He has certain points of contact, comparison between his own ways of doing things and the Russian ways of doing things which ought to make it really very easy for him to. And if the Chinese balloon doesn't go up in President Johnson's [Lyndon B. Johnson] second term, I think Bobby might very well be a most useful president at a time of increasing Russia-American rapprochement. I don't think that that would worry one. I think his brother would be much more alarmed about the bed-fellow that history had assigned to him than Bobby.

But all this arose out of the question about private promiscuity which I think is largely irrelevant. Behavior patterns are set up in youth. I think that the historians with a psychological bent when they come to deal with your material in seventy-five years' time may look at the family pattern of the Kennedys, the too patriarchal-matriarchal setup which.... I mean, the Kennedy family was run as a sort of concours with a very remote father figure. When one talks about promiscuity and the mother's attitude, one has to remember also that Rose [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] was inured to the absence of her husband, with Miss Swanson [Gloria Swanson] and other people in Hollywood over a number of years. He was a person that was not enormously

present. I mean, he was unlikely except by finagling to have secured an award from Rome for the best Catholic father or something like that. I think that insofar as Bobby responded to his father, as all the rest of them, that he just saw that Jack, like Joe, followed a rather promiscuous pattern. I was talking to Mrs. Bridge [Dinah Bridge] about this this morning because she said that you had asked about the president's marriage and one thing or another. I had given my theories, although I wasn't there to see them, that the last two years had kind of settled down to a more Bobby-like pattern. She said, "Well, surely not as Bobby as all that." [Laughter] Well, I said, "Well, it's very

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difficult to break all your habits." And she said, "Well, I agree." The thing about Jack was he was very, very highly sexed, and he required.... He got something from brief couplings which was necessary to his metabolism and his peace of mind. I know that people say that there must be some marked failing in men who show the symptoms of what's called the Don Giovanni syndrome, that it is, that either you're mother-fixated or that you are so uncertain of yourself that you find it necessary to obtain some kind of reassurance with each promiscuous contact. I doubt whether this is a theory which can be applied to President Kennedy.

O'CONNOR: But you yourself said the last time we were together that one of the most immature, irresponsible actions was promiscuity.

FORBES: Well, I say it's a sign of immaturity. I accept that. But I think that when you have become mature in other respects, it may be very difficult when you're pushing toward middle age to alter habits. Let's face it, there have been moments in history when it was considered very normal for men to be fools for pretty faces and nothing more was attached to it than that. I think it's also terribly difficult if you have a nice kind nature, as well as a highly sexed body, to resist what are after all practically the passes made at you by other people. He was an immensely attractive man, and I never took him into any circle of my acquaintanceship without finding at least two girls in the room who would fall madly in love with him at first sight. The converse was true. He had an immensely quick eye for girls who looked interesting or different and also a very, very catholic taste in women - catholic with a small "c."

O'CONNOR: [Laughter] Yes, I gathered as much.

FORBES: You couldn't say that he had a type. He saw the point in people. I think what was rather nice about it and made him less objectionable and un-Rubiroso-like [Porfirio Rubirosa] was that very often he'd see the point in somebody who wasn't what one would call a pinup girl. It wasn't necessary for her to have a wonderful figure. It would be simply a question of whether she had some spark of life or humor in her that would make him notice her. I think that in his case too it was a very valuable anchor. It stopped him brooding too much and gave him a certain lightness of touch. I don't think that ever.... I've never heard of a case where any girl who had fallen in love with him or had some brief passage had any feeling of resentment against him or any feeling that he was a cad...

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[Begin Side II, Tape 1]

... so that he must have had a certain consistency in his human relationships so as that even when they were brief encounters, he didn't do anything which demeaned them in their own eyes. Whether he demeaned himself in his own eyes is another matter. I'm not competent to make any judgment about this extraordinary habit of showering all the time - some vestigial remnant of boyhood confessional or something of the sort. I dare say somebody might but...

O'CONNOR: When did you first notice that habit by the way? Was that something that was with him when he was very, very young or was it something he just picked up...

FORBES: I certainly noticed it almost as soon as I knew him. I certainly noticed it when I went to live in the same house in Washington because it was absolutely continual. And any time I visited in a hotel, it was the same business, continual changes of linen accompanied by a shower. But, you know, it's so easy to make too much of...

O'CONNOR: Oh sure, but I'm sure psychologists will play around with that a great deal.

FORBES: Yes, I think they probably will. Whether it comes from too strict toilet training by Rose... I have no idea what it's all about, but I daresay it does indicate that at some early stage that he confused the sexual act with an elementary function which appeared necessary to him, and this must have robbed it of a little of its glamor and mystery that other people are more fortunate to continue to associate with it to the end of their day.

It reminds me a little of - I think it's in Michael Astor [Michael Langhorne Astor] is the only one of the family who wrote a book about his childhood and about Lady Astor [Viscountess Nancy Witcher Langhorne Astor], the Virginian lady. I don't think he put it in his book, but I can remember at the time he was writing his book that he was trying to find out whether his mother, who had been greatly loved for many, many years by Lord Lothian [Philip Henry Kerr, Marquis of Lothian] who was the ambassador to Washington and whom she turned to Christian Science from being Catholic, which was no mean achievement [Laughter]... But his Christian Science was very rarified. I mean, he said

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that Mrs. Eddy's [Mary Baker Eddy] book was like the Koran because they interpret it in many different ways. So the son was trying to discover whether his mother had in fact slept with Lord Lothian and found some rather roundabout way of putting the question to his mother and she said, "Oh, you mean number three." And of course there are people who simply see it all as rather a horrifying passing natural function, like Swift [Jonathan Swift] you know, who wrote the poem. Well, that's quite irrelevant to this historical conversation but...

O'CONNOR: Well, I'm not sure it's irrelevant.

FORBES: You know that Swift has a poem somewhere in which the envoi to every poem is "Celia, Celia, Celia, Celia shits." Certainly he was obsessed, as many people have been, by the propinquity of the two orifices and was depressed by that. I think this is conceivable that somewhere along the line people - I don't know whether American collegiate habits and petting plus guilt wrongly aroused by a clumsy confessor or something like that may have put this slightly out of kilter but maybe not. Maybe it's just straight Italian self-expression, you know. I don't think that it's immensely relevant except that it does bring us back to the point of immaturity and therefore there are great areas of experience, of cultural appreciation of the written word, all of which were connected with his lack of sentimentality about relations between men and women.

Yet there were never - he was really very un-coarse. I say this as one of his less highly sexed friends, more likely to be embarrassed by a request to have a jolly evening with girls, you know, and to find some other engagement. But he didn't have a coarse approach to the matter, although his behavior, as I think I told you once, did remind me a little bit of the early films of Harpo Marx who used to sort of go rushing off after pretty girls, you know, off screen, honking the horn, you know. It wasn't boastful. It was just that - I think I said that he reminded me very much of somebody in the middle of a way who felt that every minute was his last and that one oughtn't to waste time.

O'CONNOR: Well, in the maturing that took place after he became president did this continue or did this slow down? You commented earlier that his marriage improved considerably after he became president.

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FORBES: Well, this I have no direct experience of because, in effect, our relationship ended, or arrived at a temporary halt because I quarreled with his brother-in-law Radziwill [Anthony Stanislas Albert Radziwill], who had become his brother-in-law, about some matters I thought good and sufficient. And it was borne in upon me that part of the rapprochement with his wife involved a very strong rapprochement with her family. There were two considerations. One was that Jackie had behaved extremely well, and had proved herself to be an asset, and had not in any way impeded his political career, and that the debt of gratitude to her was both in his mind and in his heart, and that one of the things which made her happy was to allow her sister to enjoy as much as possible the trappings of being involved with the White House. Although this struck me as ironic because when I first - I told you I met both girls first on the day their engagement was announced. Mrs. Canfield [Laura Spencer-Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough] - and I think you should talk to Michael Canfield. I told him you were around, and his wife said that you ought to go and talk to him. He was his brother-in-law for some time. She then took up with Radziwill, and Radziwill went to help with the polls in Cook County, Illinois. Figures in Cook County, Illinois, were so marginal that it was impossible to say that Radziwill was not right in that his sort of addressing the Pulaski parade in Polish might not have been just enough to turn the tide, plus the stuffing of a ballot box here or there, [Laughter] which was, after all, what was also the difference between being president and not being president.

If you take those two factors together, it was clearly very, very important to keep in with them, and so I wrote to Jack and said that it so happened that this awkwardness had arisen between myself and Stash, and I was not prepared to unsay anything I had said about Stash, whom I had known for twenty years and thought he'd behaved very, very bad about something, and that I had had the opportunity of seeing the inside of the White House during my remote cousin's presidency, FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt], and that I hoped that our friendship would resume exactly where it left off when Lee [Lee Bouvier Radziwill] had had a bellyfull of the two terms I hoped he would get in the White House, and not to worry, and I would keep in touch, as occasionally I used to do. He was very wordy about the matter, in the very best sense of the word. And so we remained in touch through third parties completely after that. So all my information on the marriage is from third parties, but third parties very intimately placed, I mean as intimately as possible.

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So much did I love him and want him to be untroubled by any kind of awkwardness that when David and Cissy [William David Ormsby-Gore Harlech, Sylvia Lloyd Thomas Harlech] used to ask me to come and stay at the embassy, I never went because I thought that it would only cause Lee to start saying to Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], "I think it's very mean to Stash that Ali should go and..." I thought, "To hell with it. Life is far too short. What's important is that the United States should have a good president and enough of that." That was my view. But still...

O'CONNOR: I'm amazed that the irritation would have remained and remained and remained.

FORBES: Well, it didn't. I mean, it remained simply because.... Well, you can talk to Michael Canfield. He's a publisher and he's the adopted son of Cass Canfield of Harper's. He used to be a bit of a lush. That's how Jack introduced him to me. But he's now happily married. He saw a great deal of Jackie and Jack firsthand. If you can get him in an articulate mood, he might do quite royally. I told him, I said, "There's this guy going around. Why don't you put a big stop on it. I told him all good stuff. And you believe in helping your historians."

O'CONNOR: Well, I will get in touch with him.

FORBES: And he said, "I might, I might." His wife said, "You certainly should." But it gave an interesting sidelight actually on the hardheadedness of Jackie because when their marriage wasn't going very well, Michael was very fond of Lee, and he went to her and said, "Can you give any advice as to how I can make your sister happier?" She said, "Well, Michael, I think the best thing is for you to get her some real money." He said, "But listen, kiddo, I mean, I make a perfectly good living. I mean, I've got a certain amount of money of my own, and Harpers [Harper & Row, Publishers,

Inc] pays me quite well. I'm going to England, and I can live practically tax free." And Jackie said, "I mean real money, Michael, real money." And of course she showed absolutely correct understanding of her sister, who had now contrived to get into real money as far as I can make out. Well, you see her sometimes when her husband's not around, and you see these people like Onassis [Aristole Onassis] and Mr. Clore [Charles Clore] and all that. Pretty goddamn boring life, President Kennedy would find it so. I can't give you chapter and verse about that. People like Henry Brandon could. Certainly Mrs.

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Astor [Ana Inez "Chiquital" Astor] could if she wanted to. I'm awfully surprised that the Harlechs didn't give you something on that. Lady Harlech was the best friend of Kathleen Kennedy's [Kathleen Kennedy Cavendish] and is rather a devout Catholic. She must have viewed the presidency with a sort of, a very complete eye really. You know, she had lost any of her shockable feelings.

But she certainly has described to me the enormous changes in his personality. I believe that the children must be held largely responsible for the change. Nothing alters a man more, I think, than this added ingredient to life, you know, the children you make, and the fact that he discovered his real love of children; he loved being in their company. I think he must have felt that the time he would have been taking out from his duties if he had been a bachelor president was so much better spent in the nursery than going on to.... His wife also fell in love with him and power at the same time, and it's not for us to say which was the catalyst, which came first. It doesn't seem to matter so long as there's a happy outcome. I'm quite sure though that this new facet of his life gave him the kind of secure emotional launching pad without which it's almost impossible to come to decisions in other matters. It's more than doubly hard for a man to come to a very difficult decision if nagging at the back of his mind is the knowledge that all is not well on the home front and that you are not returning to a very, very safe basis. Just like unhappy childhoods have bad effects on you, so I think that.... It can go both ways, of course. I mean, I suppose you could say that a man could be very unhappy in his home life and, therefore, spend more time in the office and go back later and do more work. But I think that in his case a whole new dimension of life opened up and gave him much greater rapport and I think made the decisions of peace and war which came onto his desk terribly quickly much more agonizing to take in one way because he made this kind of transference to the children you know, but also easier because if you know that you are being a parent to the best of your ability, it somehow makes almost everything else fit into shape. We must get to Mrs. Astor.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I think it might be a good idea to call her.

FORBES: Yes, I'd call her right now. It's just the time now.

O'CONNOR: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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