

Norman W. Manley Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 08/07/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Norman W. Manley (1893-1969) was the Premier of Jamaica from 1959-1962. This interview focuses on the United States' relations with Jamaica, the influence of the Cold War on United States international relations, and John F. Kennedy's legacy, among other topics.

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By Norman W. Manley

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TRANSCRIPT: Interview with Mr. Norman W. Manley

Frank Hill: This tape contains a record of an interview given by Mr. Norman Manley, Leader of the Opposition in the Jamaican Parliament, on the significance of the life and ideas of the late President Kennedy. The questions are being asked by Frank Hill, journalist and broadcaster, a stenographic note of this record is being taken by Mrs. Sybil Thompson of the Hansard staff of the Daily Gleaner. The tape is being made in the offices of the American Ambassador to Jamaica on Duke Street, Kingston, at 4:25 p.m. on Friday, August 7, 1964, and the broadcast begins in ten seconds from now.

Now, Mr. Manley, most historians tend to compare the late President Kennedy with an earlier Democratic President, Franklin Roosevelt, if only because both men used their high office to make a tremendous impact upon the modern world. Now, looking at these two Presidents through Jamaican eyes and in terms of our own history, would you care to comment on their significance to us, first as a colony during Roosevelt's time and as an independent nation in Kennedy's time.

Norman Manley: Well, both Presidents played a very important role in Jamaica's history. It happened that President Roosevelt was in charge of America when the self-government movement started in Jamaica in 1938. Roosevelt made a major contribution during the war to the idea that the empire ^{1/} must come to an end. Our struggle for self-government in Jamaica reached a climax between 1941 and 1942 and our friends in America, particularly among the Negro peoples, were insistent over there and made representations to Roosevelt about our position, and we are convinced in Jamaica that at the crucial moment in that struggle, President Roosevelt's direct intervention in London helped our cause tremendously and made it possible for us to start in 1944, during the war, with a completely new constitution which paved the way towards self-government for Jamaica. His name should be honored in our history because of the role he played in that part of world history, not only in Jamaica but in the whole world.

Frank Hill: And now to a comparison with President Kennedy, Mr. Manley.

^{1/} Manley suggests changing "the empire" to "empires".

N. W. Manley

Frank Hill

Norman Manley: Well, President Kennedy became President of America really in what was virtually the last year of my being Premier of Jamaica, and what we were then concerned with was the sort of help America would give to the developing peoples in the Western Hemisphere. I am convinced that he well understood our problems, well understood our needs, and was sincerely anxious to make a contribution to the possibilities of Jamaica becoming a viable independent nation. Mark you, I must qualify that with this statement. President Kennedy was a firm believer in the Federation of the West Indies. During 1961 I know that it was his hope that federation would become a reality, but I'm quite certain that he stood ready to help us whether we were part of a larger nation or whether we stood on our own.

Frank Hill: Now, Mr. Manley, standing backwards from the recent picture and taking an objective look, how would you evaluate President Kennedy -- bearing in mind that he had only less than three years in his high office -- now, how would you evaluate his significance looking at it through our eyes, in the general international picture.

Norman Manley: I would say this. President Kennedy was essentially a modern man. He understood fully the forces that were shaping the world of today. I think he understood them to a far greater extent than any other -- but I can't say than any other President because he was the first President that had to deal with that issue. But I think he understood them with complete clarity, and what is more important, I think he understood America's role in that modern world as a modern man would understand it, completely free from the old tendencies to isolationism and withdrawal that had confounded American history for so many decades.

Frank Hill: Would you care to give me some examples of his sweeping comprehension of the modern world.

Norman Manley: I'll give you two. One was his desire to build up a program of aid for the Caribbean and Latin America -- what is now known as the, what is it, the Alliance for Progress, in which he realized completely that if that program was fully to succeed it would have to be based on modern ideas of planning. His first, his very first message

to Congress on the subject insisted on the need to have authority to formulate five-year loans and to give aid on that basis. He failed with Congress to persuade them because they insisted on their annual right of governing expenditure, and I suppose one could have forecast the failure. But that was something quite new in the thinking about how help should be given to developing nations. And then, he was the person who first completely formulated the conditions which should exist if that aid was to succeed. The need for radical reform in those countries as to taxation, financial measurement, popular participation and understanding of government, and above all, the need for agrarian reform. Now turn to another part of the world. I think he very well understood the importance of the emerging African nations. I don't think he did very much in the way of direct intervention there, I don't think he had the opportunity. But I think the idea of the Peace Corps was a definite attempt to expose young Americans to the influences of these countries and to expose those countries to America as a nation trying to play a real part in the modern world.

Frank Hill: Now, I think we all remember that shortly after you paid your visit to the White House to see President Kennedy, there was a significant visit paid by your West Indian colleague, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, to the White House. Now, the background is that at the end of the Eisenhower regime, the prevailing attitude in America, official America, was that neutralism was a dirty word, an immoral thing. And you will remember, I'm sure, President Kennedy's advice to Dr. Jagan that he wasn't concerned with what kind of social relations were built up in a small country but what he was concerned with was how that small country fitted into the Communist power bloc -- power structure. Now, would you care to say something about President Kennedy's reversal of the attitude to neutralism developing today to the point where the largest number of nations in the world are in fact neutral or non-aligned.

Norman Manley: Well, if I recall it, President Kennedy did not so much object to what Jagan might choose to do inside British Guiana, what sort of social and economic system he might set up provided he did not allow European communism to influence his programs or in any way to take control of what he was doing. But I think, more or less, we can be

perfectly frank to say this: President Kennedy was naturally unable to liberate himself from the prevailing American attitude towards world communism. He had to, at any rate say that he saw it as part of a great world conspiracy which was the American destiny to repel. Europeans don't see it in those terms at all, as you know. They see it as atrocious^{2/} a development which itself will be shaped and changed by the forces of history, and they don't really believe that the world is going to remain divided into two camps for ever and ever. But I'm afraid from a political point of view, that not even the most modern of American Presidents can see communism in terms of intelligent modern thinking.

Frank Hill: Well, now, do you think that that dilemma that President Kennedy found himself in, the fact that he was, I suppose, schizophrenic in seeing the modern world per se in his own integrity but yet being a creature of the whole political system in America and not being able to act freely. Now, do you think that that was shown up in the attitude towards Castro's Cuba, that he displayed in 1960.

Norman Manley: Not 1960, surely, 1962.

Frank Hill: I'm thinking of the Bay of Pigs.

Norman Manley: That was 1961...1961.

Frank Hill: Well, in that time.

Norman Manley: Of course, President Kennedy was a legatee as far as that is concerned. Those plans had been laid before he got into power but that he shared in the concept which formulated them was made quite clear afterwards, and I have no doubt that he just went with the political stream in America. Indeed, he went so far as to go to Miami and announce to the remnants of the army from the Bay of Pigs that returned, that he looked forward to the day when they would set out again for Cuba, and conquer Cuba, and restore Cuba to the civilized world. But the odd thing about all that is that because of that very attitude he was forced by history in 1962 to a final confrontation with Russia about

^{2/} Hill thinks "atrocious" should be "historic". Manley questions "atrocious" and would delete.

her intervention in the Western Hemisphere. And when that great crisis arose, when he demanded the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Cuba, and announced that he would blockade Cuba as far as the entry of any further weapons from Russia to Cuba would go, when that crisis arose, it had the result of creating a completely new dimension in modern history, because it brought to the very brink of total war with nuclear weapons. Both major blocs realized, and certainly the Russian bloc realized that nuclear war was impossible. And I think one can say fairly that since then there has been a complete change in the trends of modern history so far as war is concerned.

Frank Hill: Now, I'm going to come back to the Cuban situation, to the Bay of Pigs invasion, which you just mentioned in passing. Some people tend to draw comparison between Roosevelt's liquidating of the Mexican expropriation of the oil industry, somewhere in 1938 I think, with Kennedy's attitude to Cuba in 1961 at a time when the issue was largely, I think, a question of nationalization of American property. Now, would you care to draw a comparison between the two situations?

Norman Manley: I'm not at all sure that it would be fair, because both men were operating, so to speak, from a different base. It is quite true that Roosevelt was faced with the fact that big business in America was intensely hostile to the whole Mexican program of development. There had been bitter conflicts about agrarian reform program and there was, of course, tremendous anger about the expropriations of the oil industry. But the difference, of course, was this: that Mexico had a complete justification for what she did because American big business had behaved abominably to Mexico in refusing even to accept the judgments of their Supreme Court on issues affecting the oil industry. Roosevelt was big enough and wise enough to see that there was just no point at all in America taking her strength to crush a movement in Mexico which, given a chance, could work out completely satisfactorily. There was no Russia then, there was nobody outside of Mexico supporting Mexico. It was just a question whether the big nation would use the big stick with the little nation trying to develop itself. And Roosevelt was a big enough man, aided by Stimson, to say no, that's not the way to play the hand. And look how history has justified him. A completely different situation

in Cuba where Kennedy was facing a Russia in alignment with Cuba and where American policy towards Cuba made it inevitable that there would be a confrontation with Russia herself. I think myself that long before Kennedy got into power, if the Cuban situation had been handled differently the Cuban development would have been different.

Frank Hill: I see. Thank you for drawing the distinction. Now, I'm going to come back to the Bay of Pigs invasion because I think you enjoy a unique place in history as being the only foreign statesman to whom President Kennedy spoke on the morning when the news reached the White House of the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Now, would you care to give us a description of your hour-long interview with him that day.

Norman Manley: Indeed, with pleasure, because from the point of view of the purpose of this whole exercise -- it is recording what foreign statesmen have to say about President Kennedy -- my chief claim of right to be in the picture is the fact mentioned by you that I'm the only foreign statesman that saw President Kennedy on the morning^{3/} when the battle of the Bay of Pigs had ended in disaster. You will remember the circumstances. It was quite early in his presidency. It was his first big test. They had been very confident, so it appears, that Castro could be overthrown because of lack of local support. Certainly, Dulles completely misunderstood the situation as it existed. My position was interesting. I had gone there to discuss such things as aid for Jamaica in terms of the planning that President Kennedy was then making for giving aid on a five-year basis. I was going to the State Department on that very day. I was to have an interview with Mr. Dulles himself.

Frank Hill: That's Allan Dulles, the CIA...

Norman Manley: Allen Dulles, was the CIA man. I woke up that morning to hear about the invasion of Cuba and its apparent defeat. I discovered that the man in the street in Washington thought America had nothing to do with it at all, and was most indignant when one had suggested that

^{3/} Manley changed "morning" to "day", but Hill regards "morning" as correct.

America had done this thing. Then, with Mr. Allen Dulles, I learned the fact that the President had been up all night getting the news of what was happening. He had summoned his Cabinet, almost at dawn; the Cabinet was still at the White House, and he had been engaged in constant consultations with Dulles and all the other persons concerned, including the Chiefs of Staff, all day long. And it was in those circumstances that I went to my interview about an hour late in the afternoon of that day, somewhere between 4:00 and 5:00 o'clock, and met the President for the first time.

Frank Hill: How did he behave? What recollection do you carry now of his attitude and behavior under the stress of that disaster, as it were.

Norman Manley: Well, I thought it was most remarkable. No one meeting him could possibly have told that he was going through the first great crisis of his life as a President, and perhaps the greatest crisis that any man in such a position could be faced with. I found him relaxed and charming. I found him completely briefed on everything that I wanted to talk about. I found him penetrating in his questions and showing the most detailed interest in the many matters I wanted to talk about. I was profoundly impressed with the self-control and inner strength of character that he showed. And not merely in the fact of how he treated me interviewing him, but in all sorts of significant little surrounding details. He saw his brother, the Attorney General, passing by, and he called him in to have a little chat with me. Two or three minutes later, he spied his wife way out on the lawn of the White House with Caroline and said, "Hello, there's Jackie, let's go have a chat with her. She knows your Jamaica quite well." And I went off and enjoyed tremendously meeting her and that charming little daughter of theirs. And from there we came back and he took me into the Cabinet room where all his Cabinet and Chiefs of the Army and the Navy were all in there, everybody was there. And he must have spent ten minutes taking me around and chatting about Jamaica, introducing me to them and talking about all sorts of common interests which we might have. I thought that was a remarkable man.

Frank Hill: A man who had confidence in himself and a grasp of his own abilities to meet a situation.

Norman Manley: A man who was capable of rallying the total part of his personality to meet a situation and indeed next day he came out, as you will recall, with a devastating statement justifying what they had done, assuring the world that if need be they would fight alone if anybody, if any forces from the other side of the world dared to try to intervene in Cuba, they would fight, if need be, alone. I remember how that statement startled the whole world. But I was in America and saw how it matched exactly the mood of the Americans. It was a masterpiece of politics at the moment.

Frank Hill: Now, was that your only meeting with President Kennedy? Did you ever meet him when he came down here before he was President?

Norman Manley: No. No.

Frank Hill: He used to come down to Montego Bay.

Norman Manley: I never met him at all.

Frank Hill: Was this the only meeting you had with him?

Norman Manley: That's right, the only meeting.

Frank Hill: Now, you refer to President Kennedy as a modern man. I think that was the statement you made right after his assassination. You described him as a very modern man. I'm sure you're of the same opinion today. So what exactly do you mean by that phrase -- a very modern man.

Norman Manley: I mean a man who can project the present into the future and understand the sort of way you should go to make the sort of future you envision as possible become real. I mean a man who has freed himself from old attitudes and preconceptions, who has accepted the shape of the world as he finds it and who is eager about the forward movement in that world. That is a modern man.

Frank Hill: Would you agree that part of his modernity lay in two things: the fact that he captured the youth of America and, in fact, the whole world; and secondly, the care and attention that he paid to the development of art and culture in America.

Norman Manley: I think both those things are good tests of what I mean when I say he was a modern man. The young people in America, like young people most everywhere in the world, have got thoroughly sick of the old shibboleths and what they've heard of struggles about nothing and unreal conflicts. And I think President Kennedy in a most unique way gave them the feeling of belonging to a world which belonged to young people, in which young people and their thinking and action could contribute something to its future. Now, it takes a quite remarkable person to allow young people to feel like that and to act in such a way as to give significance and life to that feeling in young people. That is why President Kennedy had a tremendous effect upon the young people of America because he saw the world in terms of something new. His whole idea of new frontiers was just a slogan for expressing that concept of America picking herself and going out into the modern world and accepting leadership in a new way. When it comes to the arts, I don't myself know how much of that is the President's and how much of that is Mrs. Kennedy's. She is, as you know, a real lover of the arts. A large part of her life is shared with modern artists. And one must remember that President Kennedy is the only President that ever brought a poet to recite something significant at his inauguration.

Frank Hill: Yes, Robert Frost.

Norman Manley: Robert Frost. And himself made an outstanding speech about the significance of art in a nation and the contribution of a poet to life in the nation when he appeared with Archibald McLeish at the inauguration of a library which he dedicated to the memory of Robert Frost as a memorial.

Frank Hill: Well, now, what you have said so far, Mr. Manley, seems to lead us logically, I think, to your own criteria of what it is that makes for greatness. Kennedy only walked the world's stage for less than three years. He had hardly any opportunity to do anything significant and effective. Some people think, I've heard the point of view, a point of view with which I entirely disagree, that Kennedy was made great by the very fact of his assassination. Do you share that view?

Norman Manley: No. I think that the assassination only forms a vivid background against which his greatness can be understood. I think he was great in the sense in which a politician or a statesman can be great because I do not believe that identical criteria apply to all forms of greatness. I'm talking about greatness in a political leader, and I think the essence of greatness is that you comprehend the forces of history that are shaping the modern world and making the modern world; that you are able to see the patterns of the future that those forces may result in; and that you can have yourself a perspective about that future which enables you to shape those forces to useful and purposeful and valuable ends. That is the essence of political greatness.

Frank Hill: And that seems a very satisfactory definition. Now, that would lead us right into the last important activity in President Kennedy's life as President. And that was the new civil rights bill. He didn't live to see it come into law. We can look back. Now, would you care to evaluate President Kennedy's work in the field of civil rights, and the relationship of the Negro issue, on which the civil rights struggle is based, in the world at large in which racialism has become an important evil in this world.

end of tape 1

Norman Manley: I think President Kennedy realized two things. I think he saw, quicker than most people did, that the tensions which were developing in America because of the racial issue could not be allowed to grow greater without disastrous effects upon America herself. I think he saw that with tremendous clarity and was able to meet it with considerable integrity and almost passion. I think also that he must have understood that America's role in the world was being severely damaged by the fact that right there in her own homeland she was not able even to come to terms with, much less solve, so critical a problem. He was far too intelligent a man and far too sound a judge of modern trends not to realize that aside from the possibility of nuclear war there is no more important issue in the world than this problem of color and people of different races learning how to live with toleration and affection with each other. And I think those two things combined to make him take so decisive and positive a stand on the issue

as he did. Certainly, not since Lincoln, has any President ever expressed himself so forcefully about it. And in a sense he too, like Lincoln, was forced by an understanding of history to take that stand rather than ^{be} govern^{ed} by humanitarian feelings or moral feelings about it.

Frank Hill: Thank you very much, Mr. Manley, for your evaluation of a very great President whose death we all mourned last year. Thank you very much.

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h. w. manley
Frank Hill

4/ Manley changed "govern" to "governed".