

Habib Bourguiba, Oral History Statement – 11/24/1963
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Bourguiba, President of Tunisia from 1957 to 1987, eulogizes President John F. Kennedy's and discusses Kennedy's legacy, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Habib Bourguiba

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Oral History Statement

by

Habib Bourguiba

November 24, 1963

For the John F. Kennedy Library

Mr. Ambassador. I wanted to be present myself at this memorial service, to repeat to you what the Tunisian delegation expressed in Washington to President Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]; to express to you all our sympathy in the terrible catastrophe that has plunged not only the American people but all the peoples of the earth, and in particular the Tunisian, people into a state of shock, indignation, and anxiety.

President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] is known in the world for what he accomplished during his less than three years as head of the government of the United States of America. He drew the attention of the world as a serious, honest, and determined man with a firm belief in certain principles. He is at once an idealist and a man of action who seeks to turn into realities the most generous principles of contemporary civilization. He is known in the world for the determined and earnest struggle he led for racial equality for all Americans whatever their color. This he did sincerely, honestly, and effectively, and I believe that his days as leader of the United States of America will have had great influence in bringing about the eventual victory of racial integration in the United States.

He is known in the world for the help he gave—help not always necessarily spectacular but always effective—to the colonized peoples, the peoples of the Third World, the peoples of Africa and Asia, in their struggle for independence and for dignity. Finally, he is known in the world for the way he helped these newly independent and underdeveloped peoples to bring about

the conditions of a decent and dignified life, of real freedom and true independence.

No one has forgotten the battles he fought, the speeches he made to bring those who opposed him to share his way of thinking. In Tunisia—I speak especially for myself and those who work with me—we knew President Kennedy as a person, as a man. We were impressed by the scope of his intelligence as a statesman carrying the responsibilities of the greatest nation on earth, and at the same time we were charmed by this simplicity, his modesty, and his spontaneity. He is a man one cannot forget.

For all these reasons we have been almost traumatized by the brutal news of his death. More important is the fact that almost all the peoples of the earth have felt the same reaction of shock, sadness, and anxiety. Because in the space of a few years this man came to be recognized as the leader who held in his strong hands the peace of the world: not peace at any price but peace with dignity, peace not afraid to prepare for war in order to prevent war, peace that will not admit aggression and servitude, peace with freedom and dignity for all men.

So, mankind has reacted with a sense of deep anxiety. Because this man at the helm of the American government, when grave decisions involving total risk had to be made, did not

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hesitate to make them—and in so doing, pushed back the threat of war. Men are anxiously wondering if the destiny of the world will remain in strong hands and if peace will continue to be safeguarded.

If in such a tragedy there can be any reason for consolation, I believe there is one aspect that cannot help but impress the American people and those who bear the heavy responsibility of continuing President Kennedy's work. The unanimity of grief, of anxiety, of deep respect among all the peoples and statesmen of the world is a good sign that augurs well for the future, because it convinces us that the forces of peace and respect for the individual will win out over the force of domination and servitude.

President Kennedy's death has shown us this phenomenon of unanimity, even among those who did not always agree with him and who sometimes fought against him. It is comforting to know that at certain painful and difficult times all humanity shares together the sacrament of suffering. If all men have come together in grief for this man, it is because he represented a human ideal shared by all men of good will, the ideal of peace with justice and freedom for all men.

I believe that this will strengthen the determination of the American people to continue President Kennedy's work, and so to bring us indeed closer to this ideal for which he

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fought and for which all men of good will, all who deserve to be called men, have struggled and still struggle and will always continue to struggle: for the dignity of man. Life is not worth living except in a climate of freedom and dignity with a decent minimum level of material well-being.

This is what I wanted to say in the name of the Tunisian people. Let me close by conveying once more to the American people, to the Kennedy family, to Mrs. Kennedy, and to Ambassador Russell [Francis H. Russell] our deeply felt condolences and our warm sympathy.

[End of Interview]

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