

William R. Hearst, Jr. Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/25/1971
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Hearst was the owner and Editor-in-Chief of Hearst Newspapers. In this interview Hearst discusses his long history with the Kennedy family; early interactions with a young John F. Kennedy [JFK] and later interactions with him as President; JFK and the press, including Hearst's newspapers; and Hearst's opinion of JFK's image as a liberal, among other issues.

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William R. Hearst, Jr.

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William R. Hearst, Jr. – JFK #1
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Hearst's long history with the Kennedy family
2	Early interactions with a young John F. Kennedy [JFK]
3	Interacting with President JFK
4	President JFK in Hearst's newspapers
5	Hearst and Robert F. Kennedy
6	Visiting the White House
7	Was JFK a liberal?
8	President JFK and the press
9	Comparing JFK to other U.S. Presidents



Name Index

WILLIAM R. HEARST, JR.

Agnew, Spiro 8
Berlin, Richard E. 7
Castro, Fidel 4
Churchill, Winston S. 3
Conniff, Frank 3, 4
Diem, Ngo Dinh 4
Ellington, Edward Kennedy 7
Hearst, Austine 2, 3, 6, 7
Kefauver, Estes 5
Kennedy, Edward M. 2
Kennedy, Robert F. 2, 5, 6
Kennedy, Joseph P. 1
Kennedy, Joseph P., Jr. 2
Kennedy, Kathleen 2
Kennedy, Rose Fitzgerald 1
Kern, Harold G. 7
Khrushchev, Nikita S. 4, 5
Lawford, Patricia Kennedy 2, 3
Lodge, Henry Cabot 4
Nixon, Richard M. 3
Roosevelt, Franklin D. 3, 7
Shriver, Eunice Kennedy 2
Smith, Jean Kennedy 2
Stevenson, Adlai E. 5

Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM R. HEARST, JR.

March 25, 1971
New York, New York

By James A. Oesterle

For the John F. Kennedy Library

OESTERLE: Your recollection of the Kennedy family goes back beyond John Kennedy.

HEARST: Yes, indeed, our families were friends for what must be going back fifty years now--perhaps more. I remember Rose Kennedy telling me that she met Mom shortly after she was married (at which time I think Mom had at least two of the five of us boys) and they became friends right away and have remained so ever since.

For my own part, I met Joe Sr. with my father in California and then here back East too. They both had movie interests and had many friends in common. Also, they had a sort of mutual admiration society going. Pop always regarded Joe as being very knowledgeable about money matters, and I know he consulted him frequently when our show got in trouble in the late 30's.

OESTERLE: When was your first contact with the younger generation?

HEARST: My first contact with the younger generation was with young Joe about the middle 30's. We met here in New York, and I asked him to stop off that summer when he said he and a friend planned to be traveling out in California. I think they were both either seniors at Harvard or just out. Anyway, they were both a couple of healthy, husky, handsome young fellows, and they visited us up at a place my grandmother originally had on the McCloud River at the foot of Mt. Shasta. I remember it principally

because the river there is really just melted snow and literally as cold as ice. Ever since my brothers and I could remember, we were warned to stay out of it, as it was so cold you could get a numb feeling in your fingers just by sticking them in the water for a minute. This didn't seem to faze these two, because the next thing I knew, they had swum across it. I guess the fact that they were swimming like blazes the whole time kept them a little warmer than my test finger I mentioned above. But the fact is that they did it only once and allowed as how it was pretty damn cold all right.

Again during the war, Joe and I met frequently in London. I was a war correspondent and he was attached to the Coastal Command of the Royal Air Force. We knew the same people and traveled with the same bunch over there--Englishmen and their wives and girls. That would be about '43. Later on, Kick, his sister, came over. I believe she was attached to the Red Cross. She was very popular and lovely, and after the war married a titled Englishman and was killed in an airplane crash.

That, as I recall, was after Joe was killed. He had finished his tour with Coastal Command. There was a bit of mystery attached to his death at first, but I made a point of finding out how it happened. My information was to the effect that he had volunteered to dive a big B-24 bomber into a V1 or 2 site on the French or Dutch coast, and somehow or other got caught or tangled up and never managed to free himself of the plane and went right into the ground with it. It was certainly a job over and beyond the call of duty, although I don't think he got the Congressional Medal for it. I was unable to write about it because it was censored at the time. The fact was the whole "exercise" was very hush-hush.

OESTERLE: When did you first get to know JFK?

HEARST: I didn't really get to know Jack or the rest of the family until after the war. I met them all about the same time, Jack and Bobby and Pat and Jean and Teddy were playing their favorite game of touch football on the lawn of the Kennedy place at Palm Beach--I skipped one, I'm afraid, Eunice. She and my wife, Austine, had been friends in Washington, and I think I must have met her during the war in Washington. Anyway, to get back to Jack, he, at that time, was, I think, in rather ill health. He was--unlike the rest of the family--on the frail side, and my first recollection of him was, I think, spending a good deal of time in bed at Palm Beach writing that great book of his, Profiles In Courage.

Incidentally, he had written something for us after he was discharged from the navy, I think, and returned from the Pacific. He was in London and wrote some pieces for our International News Service at the suggestion of my father. I remember, too, that he predicted that Winston Churchill would be thrown out by the British voters and the Labor Party would come in. That the British would do this to their World War II hero sounded so improbable that I believe he came in for a bit of criticism and sarcasm--but that's the way things turned out just the same. I didn't meet Jack during that period, as I was recalled in the spring of '45 by my father, and before I could fully recoup from the effects of some blood poisoning I had acquired over there, President Roosevelt died, our troops were daily moving closer to Berlin, and the first thing I knew the show was over.

I remember seeing Jack again, covering the beginning of the United Nations in San Francisco later that year--'45. I don't remember when he was elected to Congress, but I remember that he and Dick Nixon were congressmen at the same time, both about the same age, and both friends of my wife and mine. It is not clear in my mind whether "VJ" Day came while the United Nations were in San Francisco, but I think it did, and I know that Jack and my wife, Austine, whom he had beamed around a little before we were married, and I knocked around San Francisco generally with some girl friend of Jack's. He was very popular and very handsome and very high-spirited and very much sought after by the girls, I can tell you that.

OESTERLE: Did you support him when he ran for the presidency?

HEARST: It was because of knowing him in the role of a young man, unmarried, and full of beans that I guess I did not support him when he ran for the presidency. I just didn't think he had enough experience in life to qualify for the job. On the other hand, Dick Nixon had been vice president for eight years and had just that experience. Besides, I felt that as the Democrats had been in before Ike for twenty years, the Republicans would do for another four years at least--so I editorially supported Dick.

Jack, the president, never once in any way mentioned it in a critical way. Our friendship went on just as closely as ever, I remember one time visiting him in the White House with Frank Conniff, who was a close friend of mine and a close friend of his. He had been a suitor for the hand of Pat Kennedy during the Korean War--

and we sat chewing the fat for the better part of a half an hour. I made the following faux pas as we were leaving: I said to this slim young friend of mine something to the effect that he was doing very well, that it was a mean job, that people would criticize him no matter what he did and not to let that get him down and, as parting words, used the expression, "Keep up the good work, kid." This was immediately followed by "goodbyes" and "see you later" etc., and when we got outside, Frank said, "That beats everything. I'll bet that is the first time a president has been told to "keep up the good work, kid!!"

I said, of course, I didn't realize I had said it. But, on second thought, I guess I had--and Frank was positive of it. The point of it was Jack with his good manners and in the light of our relationship didn't bat an eye, or if he did get a laugh out of it, he was polite enough to wait until we got out of that big oval room of the president.

OESTERLE: Did your papers support him?

HEARST: Our papers supported Jack in just about everything he did, including the showdown over Cuba. I am sorry, and I guess he would be too if he were alive, that we did not devise a way of giving the abortive attempt of the Cuban Nationalists to overcome Castro, sufficient air and naval support to insure their getting a foothold on the island. I think that was all they wanted--expecting as they did the native population to rise against Castro. Whether they would have done so is obviously hypothetical or academic or whatever you say when nobody can tell for sure. Unquestionably he did the right thing in facing up to and forcing Khrushchev to back down, and I think also that he did the right thing in helping the Cuban exiles in the first place. His mistake was not helping them enough. I know a lot of Latin Americans who say just that--that if we were to become involved at all, we should have seen it through. They were not mad at us siding with the insurgents. They were critical of us letting the insurgents lose once we had become entangled. That's the way I felt too.

I again stuck with him when he was accused of knowing in advance about the assassination of Diem in South Vietnam. He wasn't part of that plot. It is true that Cabot Lodge and others in the American government knew that there was a plot to remove Diem. The political-military coup was in the offing, and we warned Diem about it and suggested he step down. But the important point is that we did not participate in it. Nor did we know in advance that they would assassinate him. There never was a need for that, and

certainly Jack Kennedy was no assassin. They were both Catholics and anti-communists, and it was never possible that Jack Kennedy would enter into a plot to kill the leader of a foreign country allied with us.

OESTERLE: Do you have any particular memory of the 1956 convention when Jack was prominently mentioned as a vice presidential running mate with Adlai Stevenson?

HEARST: Just vaguely. I guess I thought so little of Stevenson's chances that the vice presidency made little or no impression, though I do remember--now that you've mentioned it--that Jack was mentioned and Kefauver got it.

OESTERLE: Did your papers support him, including his showdown over Cuba?

HEARST: Looking back, I think that when Jack first met Khrushchev in Vienna, shortly after he was elected, Khrushchev miscalculated and must have thought he was dealing with a kid that he could push around. Our handling of the Bay of Pigs episode probably contributed to that, which is why he could then put missiles into Cuba and bluff our president into keeping his hands off. I am sorry and I guess he would be too.

OESTERLE: Do you recall the criticism John Kennedy received for his Algiers speech prior to his running for the presidency?

HEARST: Yes, I do, and will admit I thought it was rather impertinent of him advising France that they should give up Algeria, although deGaulle did the same thing to Canada about Quebec some years later.

Jack was right in feeling that they were holding Algeria against the will of a vociferous nationalistic segment of Algerians. After all, many French people, both in France and Algeria, regarded Algeria as an integral part of France. It would be as if somebody suggested we give up Alaska or Hawaii. For this reason and because I thought he was butting into another country's affairs, I felt disappointed with him, though he turned out to be right, and I was wrong. The result, though, I think, has been something less than what he anticipated--namely a communist Algeria.

OESTERLE: Was it during this period you met Robert Kennedy as one of the touch football players?

HEARST: I never knew Bobby Kennedy very well at all. He was more introspective than the other Kennedys and, under the circumstances, knowing all the rest of them so well and easily, I didn't make the effort, and neither did he. However, we were on good terms, if only because of my fondness for his entire family. As an example, when he ran for senator in New York, he called me about it and asked me what my feeling was. I told him that while I didn't think too much of the idea of a non-resident being a senator of a state, if the Democratic party nominated him, I certainly would not bore anybody with my own views. It would then become a question of who we thought would make a better senator --the Democrat or the Republican. Frankly, I don't remember who ran against him or who we supported.

OESTERLE: What do you think of Jack Kennedy?

HEARST: I swear to God I only wish I'd known him better. When I was old enough to appreciate him--and should have appreciated him sooner--he always struck me as a gay young lad, really true, you know, and I didn't give him any. . . . I like that--serious people scare the hell out of me. He was always light and gay and fun and we always liked one another. Then when he ran for the presidency I just thought he'd overreached himself, that was all, and didn't think he'd make it at all. I wished he'd waited four years, that kind of thing; nothing personal against him, just thought he was kidding himself.

OESTERLE: I'm sure you weren't alone in that.

HEARST: No, I don't think so. Anyway, I didn't have to sell this, nor was it actually sold to me. I just thought it was so. How old was he, do you remember, when he was elected? Do you have that offhand at your fingertips? I think he was in his late thirties, wasn't he, or was he forty? Got to be over thirty-five, but he didn't look it either, you know. Whatever the hell he was he looked younger.

OESTERLE: Forty-three.

HEARST: As I say, I never bother a guy in office. He's got much more important things than seeing me or knocking around. We used to see him in the presidential room, the Gridiron dinner, you know, the couple of years that he was in office. And we used to see each other in the White House some. We went down to one or two things, I guess; I think (Austine Hearst) Bootsie did.

OESTERLE: Do any of these . . .

HEARST: Dates?

OESTERLE: Do dates on the White House appointment list bring anything to mind that . . .

HEARST: Dinner at the White House--the vice president as speaker, I remember that, and the Chief Justice. Mrs. Hearst and I were there, that's right. And I think that may have been the only time we were at any formal thing there, although it seems to me--maybe it was this one--a good show afterwards and I think Duke Ellington or somebody like that, his band. But the board of directors of the Hearst newspaper corporation--I'll be darned if I remember that. I'm trying to think who I could call right now in the building. (R. E.) Berlin's down in there. What year was this?

OESTERLE: That was '63.

HEARST: '63--that's eight years ago. (H. G.) "Hap" Kern was there. I'd have to call him up in Boston. And I don't remember. Well he must have been. Maybe we had a meeting in Baltimore. That's the nearest paper we've got. And I think he just must have done this gracious thing, that's about all. What's his name. They're easier to get along with, as I said before. Go ahead.

OESTERLE: Well, just in summation, I wonder if you considered John Kennedy as a liberal.

HEARST: Yeah, but it's a funny thing. See, liberal is undefinable to me. They range--they cover such a broad spectrum, you know. I have no use for all-out liberals because I don't think they have an original thought. They have a few leaders and they follow around and they're a pain in the ass to me, anyway. I like to think of guys raised in the church, the son in a rich family like that who cares for the poor, and cares for the problems of others as a liberal. He is a liberal in his area, and in that respect, in that regard, I used to have to fight people who were against Jack for being a liberal when he was my type of liberal completely. He was what I could understand. He couldn't be a nut liberal in my estimation, you see. He couldn't be. His bringing-up, his education, his religion, his family, everything, couldn't make him, couldn't let him be a real southpaw as far as (Franklin D.) Roosevelt even, because Roosevelt I don't think was a--anyway. So that I never feared that from Jack at all. It was just really that I wished he'd waited four years and then we'd have jumped in with him.

OESTERLE: Well, would you then maybe . . .

HEARST: Got to be a liberal. The whole world turns to the left.

OESTERLE: Would you then consider that John F. Kennedy's nomination campaign was a departure in American politics in that it was based in large part on the selling of an image?

HEARST: Yeah. I think money had a lot to do with it. I don't think he could have done it if he didn't have any money, or didn't have as much money.

OESTERLE: And this image as a concerned liberal?

HEARST: Yeah. I think that. As I recall, it was one of the things that was a little distasteful to me, this running around in airplanes, the family's planes and so on. I wish there were rules, there were regulations; that there were limits to the amount of money the candidates could spend like there is in England. It just isn't right for Rockefellers and Kennedys to use their own private jets when another guy--it just isn't available to him, you know. Now when the party buys them, when they become the candidates, then it becomes a question of how much each party can spend. But in the primaries I think we've got some improvements to make in that area. Otherwise, some day it won't be necessarily a rich guy, but it might be Mafia dough, it might be anybody's dough, you don't know. If dough is going to decide the thing, that's bad.

OESTERLE: Yes. Let me ask you just one, two more very quick questions. Do you recall ever being criticized by the president or his staff for particular articles that appeared in Hearst papers?

HEARST: No, never by any president. We don't necessarily agree with them all, agree with their policies or anything, but there's never been anything, and if there were, we wouldn't mind. God knows, we dish it out; we ought to be able to take it. This is why I can't get myself in a lather about (Spiro T.) Agnew.

OESTERLE: Well, there was a lot of talk at one point that the president was very sensitive to press criticism.

HEARST: They all. . . . You know, it's the worst job in the world. It's not worth a goddam, if you ask me. No executive in any business has to face, has to be confronted with all this "ap-cray". If his own board of knowledgeable directors

don't want him they may put him out, you know. But to have a lot of misinformed, half-assed informed, misguided, or misled, or normally antagonistic to that particular party or religion or age group or anything just constantly bay at them, it isn't worth it. You couldn't pay me enough. Not that anybody's asked me, mind you, except you, just now, in an indirect way.

I think it's a terrible job and for the most part it seems to me that the information and the dedication of the people around the president make him better equipped to make decisions that he has to make than anybody else. Critics, generally, are only half-informed, relatively. They're not as fully informed. And you add in, you throw politics in, and personal animosity and prejudice, and the president has to make his decisions on an objective basis. I mean, he can't be subjective, except patriotic.

OESTERLE: How would you compare President Kennedy's understanding of the powers and, if you will, limitations of the presidency with that of his predecessors or his successor?

HEARST: How he handled the job, you mean, like? Well, I guess in retrospect he handled it like he could have been expected to handle it, I'm afraid, like the son of a rich father, who was able to tell, not rudely, but to command a household, you know what I mean? Who'd be able to say, "I tell you what I want you to do." Now he runs up against the Senate, he runs up against an elective body there, and I think not even his personality was - obviously able to do as much as Johnson was, who knew all these guys much, much better. I don't think he meant to be snobbish about it ever.

I don't think I can add anything to the record or contribute in any way anything worthwhile after that and would personally like to see it end there.