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Biographical Note

Bilodeau, a roommate of Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. at Harvard Law School and a Kennedy family friend and associate, discusses his friendship with Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., and John F. Kennedy, compares the two brothers, and tells humorous anecdotes about the Kennedy family, among other issues.

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Thomas Bilodeau

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Oral History Interview

with

Thomas Bilodeau

May 12, 1964
Boston, Massachusetts

By James Murray

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MURRAY: Tom, will you please tell us how you became acquainted with the late President [John F. Kennedy]?

BILODEAU: Back in the '30's when I was in Harvard College, Joe Kennedy, Jr. [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] lived in Winthrop House, the dormitory in which I lived. I was a year ahead of him in college. When I was going through college, Joe and I became very friendly and on occasions in the summer I went to the Cape with Joe to spend weekends and to compete in the racing program they had at the Cape. And at that time, naturally, I ran into all the Kennedy family including Jack, who was several years younger, but was still competing very actively in the sailing program. Subsequently, I roomed with Joe Kennedy, Jr., at law school when I was in my third year and he was in his first year at the law school. During that period while we were rooming together, I became very close to Jack, who came over to our apartment on numerous occasions socially and to discuss various matters with Joe, Jr.

MURRAY: When in your association, Tom, did the President show the best indication of his going far in political life?

BILODEAU: Well, it's very difficult to look back and to say that. At the time as a young man, I couldn't even evaluate thoughts of going far in political life for any of the Kennedys. But I can say this, that I knew that one of the Kennedys would always give of himself to the public, and Joe, Jr. had given every indication that he was going to do just that, even while he was in college. I think that when I heard of Joe's untimely death in the war, it became very evident to me that Jack would step right up and take over the obligations that the Kennedy family, I knew, felt toward the public and the United States of America.

MURRAY: Well, Tom, from your association with Joe as a fellow student and with your visits to the Cape, you found the Kennedy family to be an exceptionally knit family, a close family, above exception?

BILODEAU: I would say yes. And I think the thing that impressed me most about the Kennedy family was the great affection that they had for each other and which was shown outwardly. Many, many times I've seen Joe, Jr. or Jack pick up Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] or Teddy [Edward Moore Kennedy] and hug them just like a father would hug a youngster. And I also noted the great affection and outward display of it that they had for their sisters, especially of Kick [Kathleen Kennedy Cavendish], as we knew Kathleen in those days, and Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver]. This was evidenced even in law school when Eunice came regularly to the apartment. The outward show of affection that Joe would evidence when she came into the apartment was amazing.

MURRAY: The President went into the political field. You went into the law field. Did you have any close association between your two endeavors?

BILODEAU: Well, I had always made up my mind that if I was to practice law I was not going to become involved in the political arena, so to speak.

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I felt that the practice of law should be divorced from politics as far as possible. This is probably because of my own experience, my father having been both a lawyer and in politics. And I think the Kennedy boys, especially Jack, who went into politics after the war, recognized this fact and never imposed one bit on my desire to stay out of politics. I think this is best evidenced by the fact that when Jack was elected to the Senate, I met with him in Washington and he said to me, "if you ever have a good case, Tom, in Washington you don't need me. And if you have a bad one, you shouldn't come to me anyway." Well, that was the relationship between us. Oh, sure, on occasion he would call and we'd discuss policy matters but just from the standpoint of friendship rather than from any political desires on my part or on his part to involve me in politics.

MURRAY: Well, Tom, you remained socially friendly with the Kennedy families after the death of Joe?

BILODEAU: Yes, I remained friendly with them. On many occasions when Jack was speaking in Boston he would come out to the house to dinner. I can remember one occasion when he had spoken at the Catholic Alumni Sodality in Boston, he came out on Sunday, to Sunday dinner. And it's an occasion for a humorous incident. He came into the house. I had two young children at the time, my daughter being five or six or seven years old, somewhere in that area. After he had been in the house for a few minutes, my little girl ran over to him and she said, "Jack, Jack, your blue underwear are showing through the seat of your pants." And that was the fact. His pants were split right down the back and his underwear was showing through. With that, my mother-in-law, an elderly Irish lady, treating Jack just like her own son, I guess, said, "Jack, take your pants right off and I'll fix them." And right there in the living room, Jack took his pants off. My mother-in-law got out a needle and thread and sewed them, and off he went to his next speaking engagement. As a result of that, when he was elected to the Presidency he sent

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an invitation to my mother-in-law addressed to his seamstress, which we now have framed and hanging in our library.

MURRAY: Tom, the President was shown great affection by women. He was probably one of the most popular figures in the United States, as far as women were concerned, in any endeavor.

BILODEAU: Well, as far as my relationship with Jack was concerned, I always found him a man's man. He was always more interested in, at least in my experience, in associating with men than he was with women. He liked to play touch football, he liked to go out sailing with a group of men. He was a man's man. But I must admit that the women thought very highly of him. I suppose you can attribute it partially to the fact that over a long period of his life, he looked as though he needed a woman. His hair was roughly groomed, he always looked as though his tie needed straightening. The women wanted to mother him more or less, I thought. And also, he was physically an attractive man in that he was big, strong looking and had a very whimsical expression most of the time on his face, which was very attractive. And above all, I think the women respected him. No scandal, that I knew of, was ever attached to him in the public eye.

MURRAY: Tom, to get back to your days at Harvard, you were a star at Harvard. Was Joe Kennedy a good football player at that time?

BILODEAU: In my opinion, Joe Kennedy was a very fine football player. He was exceptionally able in catching forward passes and he had that well recognized Kennedy competitive spirit, which made him a very fine blocker. I don't think he achieved the success which his abilities warranted. I could give you a number of reasons for this, but I hesitate to do so.

MURRAY: Tom, do you remember the President as a football player at Harvard?

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BILODEAU: He was a freshman when I was a senior. And although I didn't watch him play football, I heard that he was a tough nut, again, as all Kennedys are in any competitive endeavor. But I can tell you one story about his experience as a freshman which he told to me and to my boy only a couple of years ago. He invited my Tommy and myself down to the Army-Navy game to go with him. And when we arrived at the White House on Friday evening before the game and went in to see him, he asked my Tommy [Thomas H. Bilodeau, Jr.] where he was playing football and Tommy told him he was a freshman at Harvard. He asked him who was the coach and Tommy told him Henry LaMar. And then Jack told a story of how when he was a freshman and in the Yale game, he had not played until the game was almost over and he walked up to Henry LaMar and tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Coach, what about putting me in?" And as Jack put it, after six weeks of working out there as a freshman, the coach turned to me and said, "Who the H are you?" So it proves to you that even though you're coaching you better be careful, because one of your players may become President of the United States some day.

MURRAY: Tom, to continue in the vein of football at Harvard, the last time the President was in Boston before his assassination, he attended the Harvard-Columbia game in which your son, Tommy, was playing.

BILODEAU: Yes, he did. He came in after the game had started and there was great excitement surrounding his entrance into the stadium. I was sitting with my wife and daughter and both of them got up and went where the President was to say hello to him. In the meantime, and before they reached his side, my son had come off the field having been substituted for, and looking up into the stands to see what the commotion was, he saw that the President of the United States had arrived. And with that, the President, looking down, waved his hand to him, and Tommy waved back to the President. You can well imagine what the other players on the field must have thought if they recognized the fact that here was a left halfback waving to the President of the United States.

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MURRAY: Well, of course, Tommy must have been proud with that and it also showed how humble the President was.

BILODEAU: The President was a remarkable man as far as being humble. The day we went to the Army-Navy game with him or the evening before that game, again when we went to the White House, he took a look at my son and he said to him, "You got a date tonight?" And Tommy said, "Yes, Mr. President, I have." And he said, "You look like a ragbag without a tiepin." And with that he pulled his own tiepin off and went over and tucked it onto Tommy's shirt with his tie. Well, that was a remarkable gesture to a young boy.

MURRAY: Tom, from the time the President was here for the Harvard-Columbia game until the assassination, had you talked to him at any time?

BILODEAU: Oh, many times I talked to him. On almost every occasion when I went to Washington on business, I would drop in to see Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.] who is a close friend of mine and while there, Ted would say, "Come in and talk to the boss." And in we'd go and chat times, mostly social talk. However, on occasions, he would give me a call if some pressing problem was on and we'd chat about it. He felt that I had no axe to grind, because I was in no way interested in any political aspects of advising him. I was not interested in any appointment in Washington, and I would just give him my own opinion whether it coincided with his or not. And I think that he had a number of people who were in this status with him who were just close personal friends who loved him.

MURRAY: Tom, do you recall where you were or what you were doing at the time that you heard of his death?

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BILODEAU: Yes. I had just left a luncheon at Mory's down in New Haven. A group of old football players of Harvard and Yale always gathered to have lunch at Mory's before the game in New Haven. It was on a Friday noontime. We then proceeded from Mory's by bus down to the playing fields at Yale to witness the Harvard Freshman and Yale Freshman game. When we arrived at the field, a renowned lawyer named Dick Smith, who is a trustee of the New Haven Railroad, rushed over to me and he just couldn't speak. He finally ejaculated that the President had been shot. We immediately went over to turn on the radio in an automobile nearby and listened to that that radio rather than going to the game. I did go over to the game at the end of the first half, and as I recall it, the players, the Harvard Freshmen, were informed at that time. So I was at New Haven when it occurred. I immediately called Ted Reardon, whom I couldn't reach, and my wife and I left and went home.

MURRAY: And did you go to Washington for the funeral?

BILODEAU: No, I did not go to Washington for the funeral. Both my wife and I felt that we could not contribute to an affair in Washington of that nature, so I wrote Mrs. Kennedy, Sr. [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy], and sent a telegram to Mr. Kennedy, Sr. [Joseph P. Kennedy] and my wife and I went to Mass here in Boston.

MURRAY: Tom, going back to Joe and your days at Harvard, was Joe interested in politics during his undergraduate years?

BILODEAU: Yes, he was interested in politics, naturally because his grandfather [John Francis Fitzgerald] was very active in politics in Boston for many years

and Joe was very fond of his grandfather. They spent much time together. Also, his father was very prominent. He was Ambassador to England at that time, I believe. And through the connections that Joe had through his grandfather and his father, he was constantly mingling with very important

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people and his thinking was all along the line of statesmanship, foreign service, all those things which you can intimately connect with a person thinking of a political career. But at the same time, there was no question in my mind. He was dedicated to the fact that the Kennedys were going to perform obligations that he felt they had for the United States of America by contributing of themselves.

MURRAY: And, of course, Joe's aspirations were interrupted by World War II. Did you serve in the Navy with him during World War II?

BILODEAU: I didn't serve with Joe. I was on carriers most of the time. Joe was in a P boat squadron. Tom Killifer who was another friend of Joe's at law school, was in a fighter squadron and peculiarly enough, he had just been detached from the carrier that I was on before I arrived on the carrier. But Joe was in a patrol bomber squadron located in England while I was at sea. So I did not officially participate with him in the war, although we were in the same branch of the Service.

MURRAY: Tom, did you ever serve in the Navy with the President?

BILODEAU: No, I did not. Jack went into PT boats and, as I said, before I was on carriers during the war.

MURRAY: Well, of course, you served a lot of time in the Cape Cod Navy, as it were, at Hyannis Port. Can you give us some illustrations of some of the great experiences you had down there?

BILODEAU: Well, I was the most sought-after crew in heavy weather that they had, weighing about 215 pounds. When the wind was heavy, both Joe and Jack vied for my affections. I can't say the same when the wind was light. On those days I generally went on the power boat with Mr. Kennedy, Sr. But several times Jack won

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me on a heavy day and on one occasion, I recall, we were coming down to finish line, and the winds let up and we were on a run, the boat was slowing down with my weight, and Jack turned to me and said, "Over the side, boy. We've got to relieve ourselves of some weight." So right out there in open water, I proceeded to just go over the side and he ran on to win the race.

I think this illustrates a bit what was one of the great characteristics of the President. He was able to take a set of facts, evaluate them immediately, weigh the risks, and make a decision. And in making the decision he oftentimes took the risk after exercising an informed judgment on the amount of it. And when he put me out of the boat, although there was a slight risk involved, he had weighed all the factors and concluded that the slight risk was worth the effort. Now, I think this is what made him so able in answering questions in public, in making decisions on affairs of state. He would evaluate the facts, concentrate on them, and do it very quickly, weigh the decision and the risks involved and then make it. Many people can't evaluate facts, or if they can evaluate facts, they refuse to act, or even after they know the way they should act, they are so conservative that they will not take any risk. A man in this day and age must be able to weigh the facts and make a decision, which decision may involve taking calculated risks. And the President did just that in everything he did.

MURRAY: Tom, I would presume that you played a lot of touch football at Cape Cod. Was the President a strategist at that time?

BILODEAU: The touch football was not a matter of strategy with the Kennedy family. It was a matter of blood and thunder. As a matter of fact, you played touch football with them as though it was a scrimmage. They just delighted in the physical contact and the competition. It is not the usual touch football game that you see where people tag with one hand. There was blocking and roughhousing all through those games. So when you

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got into one of those forays, you usually looked or tried to get on the side that had the most weight or else you'd get killed and, well, they were exciting touch football games, a lot of fun and great competition. Both the boys could never be on the same team. Whichever one Joe was on, Jack would always take the opposite team. There was great competitive spirit between the two boys.

MURRAY: Tom, you attended family dinners at Hyannis Port many times. Can you give us a few anecdotes of those instances?

BILODEAU: Well, there are anecdotes involved about a dinner with the Kennedy family. Mr. Kennedy was, in those days, a vital figure. When he was in the room, everything centered around him. He was interesting, he had many stories to tell, his life was very exciting to people such as myself. And the Kennedy boys, at least the two older boys at that time, worshipped Mr. Kennedy and their every thought was upon what he was talking about. The Kennedy family, in my opinion, were set in sort of a hierarchy. When the father was present, he ran the show. Then on down the line. Joe was next in command and although Jack might compete with him and the other boys who were young might argue with him, when Joe finally made a decision, the rest of the family underneath him followed that decision. And when Joe wasn't present, Jack took command. And so on down the line. I think that's typical of what happened when poor Joe was killed.

Jack just took over command of the ship and proceeded along the line that the Kennedy family would have taken in public life if Joe had been alive.

MURRAY: It has been said that Joe Kennedy might have aspired to the Presidency had he lived. Tom, can you give us a comparison of the two Kennedy boys, compared to their aspirations politically, their personalities, and so forth?

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BILODEAU: Well, I can't say how far Joe would have aspired to. I don't imagine when Jack started, he had aspirations for the Presidency. He was just trying to do a good job in the job that he had. Success flowed from the accomplishments that he obtained while he was representing the United States in the Senate and the Congress. What would have happened if Joe had proceeded along the same course, I don't know. I can, however, say that there were certain differences between the two boys. Joe was quick. He would not put up in any way with intellectual stupidity, he could not stand people who could not understand problems quickly, he couldn't put up with mediocrity in any way. On the other hand, although Jack may have had the same feelings, he was a much more flexible person. He seemed to be somewhat more understanding of mediocrity. And it seems to me that he was able with his personality to have won a great many people whom he couldn't have won if he had been at all quick to flare up at stupidity. Now, whether Joe would have achieved that same flexibility as he progressed through political life, I can't say. But I do know that when Jack was running for the Senate and for the Presidency, there were many occasions when he had to become very flexible as far as the desires and wishes of his constituents were concerned. However, I can't—it's very difficult for me to think of Jack or Joe in political life. I still think of them as the boys at the Cape. Or I think of Jack as a close personal friend, probably with his blue underwear showing through his pants as he came to my house for dinner.

MURRAY: Thank you very much, Tom. This has been an interview with Attorney Thomas Bilodeau, long-time friend of the Kennedy family. The interviewer was Jim Murray of the *Record-American*. The place is Boston. The date is May 12, 1964.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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