

David K.E. Bruce, Written Statement
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Bruce, United States Ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1961 to 1969, discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) relationship with Prime Minister Harold M. Macmillan and JFK's skill at foreign affairs, among other issues.

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Written Statement

Of

David K.E. Bruce

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Written Statement

by

David K.E. Bruce

For the John F. Kennedy Library

I do not believe I could comment usefully on specific questions about President Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] Administration. During the whole of it, I was stationed abroad as American Ambassador to Great Britain.

Consequently, I was uninformed, except through reading, of his programs and activities in the field of domestic politics.

Nor had I the advantage of prior personal friendship with him. During my occupancy of previous posts in the American Diplomatic Service, I had testified before Committees of which he was a member, first during his tenure in the House of Representatives and, later, in the United States Senate. On these occasions, I had been impressed by the close attention he had directed to such occasions, and, also, by the exhaustive import of the questions he had posed to witnesses.

After he became President, and I had gone to London, I saw him intermittently. Not only did he make intelligent use of his Ambassadors, but he gave them, in unusual degree, a sense of participation in decisions affecting the Governments to which they were accredited.

Whenever I came to Washington, whether on Consultation, or as a participant in conferences between the President and the British Prime Minister [M. Harold Macmillan] and Foreign Minister [Alec Douglas-Home, Home of the Hirsell], I was asked by the President, in advance of such meetings, to expose my views to him personally on the subjects likely to be discussed.

In my own case, the relationship between the President and the British Government was unique in respect to negotiations between two

great powers, because (1) of President Kennedy's intimate friendship with the British Ambassador in Washington, Sir David Ormsby Gore (now Lord Harlech) [William David Ormsby-Gore Harlech]; and (2) the understanding based on mutual esteem and trust quickly established between President Kennedy and Prime Minister Macmillan.

I was delighted that matters took such a course. The President's confidence in David Gore was fully justified by the transcendent qualities and unimpeachable character of the British Ambassador. As regards Mr. Macmillan, the frequency and frankness of their interchanges had few parallels modern in diplomatic intercourse.

Concomitantly, I was kept meticulously informed through the State Department and sometimes directly from the White House, or the Prime Minister's office, of all transactions between these heads of Governments. Moreover, the confidence reposed by the Prime Minister in his Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Home, and by President Kennedy in his Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and, as respects the White House, in McGeorge Bundy, was such that the resultant team work was exceptionally satisfactory.

My observations, therefore, on President Kennedy are necessarily somewhat limited. In the Cuban crisis, for example, the secrets of American policy were safeguarded, and appropriately so, to a point where American Ambassadors were brought into play only at the ultimate moment when foreign governments were to be informed and consulted about our national intentions.

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In age, I was separated from the President by a span of twenty years, an entire generation. Yet, when with him, I never felt conscious of this disparity, for his interests were dateless. Physically, and actually, he was young; psychologically, he was without age.

The impression made on me by the President was one of convinced admiration.

In foreign affairs, he possessed, in highest degree, the advantage of what I can only call an individual and remarkable style. The sense in which I use this word has little to do with its social implications, although, even there, its manifestation, through his extra ordinary courtesy of manner, and sensitivity to the reactions of others, was of great importance.

He never sought to over-persuade a friendly nation, or to impose on an adversary terms which would subject a hostile government to an unaccountable loss of face. His intuition was acute. He had a true politician's gift for practicing the art of the possible; equally, he was quick to coat a disagreeable pill.

His omnivorous curiosity about all subjects, sacred or profane, was a stimulant to those brought into contact with him. He never departed entirely irrelevantly from the matter at issue, but even the most serious topic was likely to be peripherally illuminated by flashes of wit or humor.

He was intolerant of discursiveness, pomposity, pretension and bombast though a patient listener to one who espoused with passion and conscientious a point of view with which he was partial or complete disagreement.

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He was endowed with personal grace in every aspect, attractive to men, women, and children. He commanded loyalty, and inspired romantic sentiments.

Those serving him abroad were buoyed by pride in him. No foreign visitor to the White House returned home without having formed a favorable impression of him and his charming wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy].

The White House had become, under the aegis of President and Mrs. Kennedy, not alone, as it already had been, the power centre of the world, but a place radiating civilizing impulses.

Those who worked for him everywhere felt their own lives diminished by his death. Gone was the electric excitement that he generated, along with the bright hopes for his future leadership.

[END OF STATEMENT]

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