

Bernhard, Prince of the Netherlands, Oral History Interview – 3/3/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Bernhard, Prince of the Netherlands

Interviewer: Ernst van der Beugel

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Biographical Note

Bernhard, Prince of the Netherlands from 1937 to 2004, discusses his impressions of John F. Kennedy's personality and importance in the world, among other issues.

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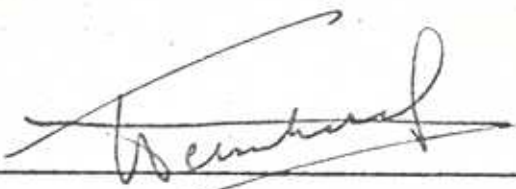
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Oral History Interview

with

Bernhard, Prince of the Netherlands

March 3, 1964

By Ernst van der Beugel

For the John F. Kennedy Library

VAN DER BEUGEL: Well, Your Royal Highness, you are in a rather unique position in this world because for more than twenty-five years now you have met practically all the leading statesmen in this world. You have met the late President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] several times. You know his reputation before his untimely death and after his death. What I should like to ask you, whether in meeting him you have sensed this extraordinary quality which he seemed to have possessed?

BERNHARD: I should think so. Very much so. Yes. I've been very much impressed every time that I had the chance to meet him and in many ways. It was for me a unique experience every time that I did talk with him. Therefore, I would answer fully, "Yes," in contrast to some other great statesmen that I have met, indeed.

VAN DER BEUGEL: One of the things which people tell about him, and about which you can always read, is that he had an extraordinary combination of mastering the details of a certain question while keeping, at the same time, the great lines of his concept. Is that one of the things that you have experienced, too?

BERNHARD: To that, also, the answer is in the affirmative. I found.... In fact, I've never yet talked to anybody in high position who was in

possession of so many details about any matter in question that we were going to discuss; that he knew that I might bring up. Sometimes they were questions that I had not announced before that I was going to talk about, and he had prepared himself in such a way that he was able to put, sometimes, very leading and embarrassing questions to me to which I had

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to think five times before I could give an answer that would satisfy him. Apart from that, he gave the impression of being a man who knew exactly what he wanted and being able to make up his mind very quickly on a particular problem. Then, I would say, he stuck to his opinion which, I have heard, was based on studies of the subject in question and advice from a number of people. For instance, he was a man who would never hesitate to get an outsider to give him advice or his opinion on certain subjects—not only the members of his Cabinet and his own entourage—would listen carefully, weigh whatever they had to say, and then make his decision and stick to it. That was the feeling he gave very strongly to those—at least to me when I talked to him, and it impressed me very much. He was self-assured; he knew what he wanted. At the present I find that every President of the United States is in a very difficult position anyway.

VAN DER BEUGEL: Yes, he certainly is. One of the other things I should like to ask you is this: American policy toward the world, certainly before 1940, always had a peculiar lack of sense of power. I think, certainly under President Kennedy, this sense of power, which is so essential for the conduct of foreign policy of a major country, was certainly restored. But there are people who have worked with the President and say that, in their opinion, this sense of power, as a kind of reaction to the lack of sense of power before was a little bit too strong. Was that your impression, too?

BERNHARD: I wouldn't say it was my impression. I'd rather say this: the lack of the sense of power was something that I, personally, deplored. So, from a personal point of view, I welcomed somebody who had this sense of power and was willing to use it if and when so needed or necessary. Therefore, it was something that was very much my own taste, and, if he had too much of it, it wouldn't have struck me as wrong, personally.

VAN DER BEUGEL: I agree with you. I think that, for a country like the United States, the sense of power is an extremely important element in the possibility of the conduct of foreign affairs. What always strikes us, and I am sure, Your Royal Highness, it strikes you as well, is the awful burden of the job. I don't think that there is any office in the world which is so practically inhumanly overburdened as the office of the President of the United States. Is that your feeling, too? Did you have the impression that he suffered under that burden, or was it more your impression that he liked the job; that he was on top of the job; and that he was really determined to use the

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power of the office? In my personal opinion, I think that the only way you can do this job is to use the power of the job and perhaps even enjoy the power of the job. The fact remains that the job itself is a terrible and awesome burden.

BERNHARD: I couldn't agree more. That's what I hinted at in the beginning after one of the first questions you asked me. I believe that it's an impossible job for any human being to hold the office of President of the United States inasmuch as he has to be prime minister, leader of his own party, and leader of the world—of the free world, at least. The three, as such, must sometimes come into conflict, and therefore, he can be faced with a decision that will be very good for the world and unacceptable at home for interior politics or unacceptable to his own party or vice versa. To make the right decision, then, seems to me one of the most difficult tasks any human being will ever be faced with. Therefore, I personally, as an outsider, would say the United States should change their Constitution in this respect. But that is not something we have any say in. However, as regard to your question about him, personally, I would say this: I have the definite feeling that he was a man who, realizing this dilemma and these difficulties, thought that he would be able to cope with it and still make the right decisions. He was also, in my opinion, a man who would take a certain risk in, let us say, alienating somebody's opinion—it may be public opinion; it may be his party's opinion; or, sometimes, world opinion—if he knew that ultimately his choice would turn out to be right; if he was convinced that he was making the right choice, he was willing to run that risk and to wield the power that he had to make his decision come true. In that respect, of course, there are drawbacks, again, in the Constitution of the United States. While it is impossible that a President can be a totalitarian ruler, at the same time I can well understand that he sometimes would wish to be one. As far as President Kennedy is concerned, he had so many high ideals, and he wanted to achieve so much in his time as President that I'm almost inclined to say that, for him personally, perhaps it was a blessing that God took him away at such a time because quite a few of his ideals, I'm certain, he would not have been able to realize even with the power he did wield and with the power the United States President has, for the reason that even a President is faced by Congress and the U.S. democratic system. Therefore, quite a few of those ideals I don't think would have been realized in his lifetime, very much to his sorrow. So, he could quite easily have become a very disappointed human being after his term of office inasmuch as human beings, being what they are, you cannot make them do—even if you are right—what they are not ready for yet. That's one of the things that I thought about when I went to his funeral. But then on the other hand,

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I must say that the people who have ideals, real ideals—I'm happy to be able to say that I am also one of those—will go on fighting for them in spite of all disillusion. I do think—in fact I am certain—that President Kennedy also was a realist. Therefore, I think he must have been

one of those fighters. That is one of the many reasons why I think that his death was, and is, a terrible blow for all of us in the free world.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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