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Biographical Note
Berlin, a professor of social and political theory at Oxford University from 1957 to 1967, discusses conversations he had with John F. Kennedy (JFK) about political theory and Russian politics, and compares JFK to other political leaders throughout history, among other issues.

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Isaiah Berlin
Sir Isaiah Berlin

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Sir Isaiah Berlin

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Oral History Interview

with

Sir Isaiah Berlin

April 12, 1965
Washington, D.C.

By Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SCHLESINGER: Isaiah, when did you first meet President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

BERLIN: I met President Kennedy at dinner with Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop]. Joe Alsop is one of my oldest friends, and telephoned to me when I was at Harvard. Let me see, when was it? In about 1962 or 1963.

SCHLESINGER: Oh, you had not met him before the Presidency then?

BERLIN: No. When was it?

SCHLESINGER: 1962.

BERLIN: Autumn, 1962?

SCHLESINGER: Yes.

BERLIN: He telephoned and asked me to dinner in honor of Charles Bohlen [Charles E. Bohlen], who was just leaving to be United States Ambassador in Paris. At this dinner, President Kennedy was scheduled to be present. I remember the slight stiffness of the atmosphere, which always occurs when

royalty attends. People tend to be keyed up to meet them, and, at the same time, there is always a slight air of stiffness and embarrassment. They [the Kennedys] went around the circle, shook hands with everybody, and we then sat down to dinner. He was very amiable, in a jolly mood, which was very extraordinary, considering that that was the morning on which he had been shown the photographs of the Soviet installations on Cuba. And I must say the sangfroid which he displayed, an extraordinary capacity for self control on a day on which he must have been extraordinarily preoccupied, was one of the most astonishing exhibitions of self-restraint and strength of will which I think I've ever seen exhibited. During dinner he was very

jolly, and a certain amount of mutual chaff occurred across the table, and that kind of thing. Nothing serious was said. Present also, were, I think, the French Ambassador [Herve Alphand] and Madame Alphand [Nicole Alphand], as well as other people.

SCHLESINGER: A small dinner?

BERLIN: Oh yes. And Phil Graham [Philip Leslie Graham] was there. I can't remember if Kay Graham [Katherine Meyer Graham] was there or not; I think she must have been. A small dinner. Then, I remember, when the men were left alone, I was put next to the President. It was obvious that I was represented to him as a kind of Soviet expert, which I'm very far from being. Then he asked a number of questions about Russia, which I didn't answer particularly well.

SCHLESINGER: What sort of questions were these?

BERLIN: Well, about why the Russians were not making more trouble in Berlin than they were doing at that particular moment; what the Russian motive was for various of their acts. He listened with extreme intentness. One of the things which struck me most forcibly was that I've never known a man who listened to every single word that was uttered more attentively. His eyes protruded slightly, he leaned forward towards one, and one was made to feel nervous and responsible by the fact that obviously every word registered. He replied always very relevantly. He didn't advance various ideas in his own mind, which he wanted to expound, ideas for which he simply used one's own talk as an occasion, as a sort of launching pad for expressing. He really listened to what one said and answered *that*. The only other person I had ever heard of who displayed a similar kind of attentiveness was Lenin [Vladimir Ilyich Lenin], I think, who used to exhaust people simply by listening to them. A particular kind of remorseless attention. He talked about Stalin [Joseph Stalin] and what people around the table supposed were Stalin's fundamental motives; what differences there were between Stalin and Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev] and what the Russian intentions were. From time to time he said things which puzzled me, and still puzzle me, as when he said, "Someone ought to write a book on Stalin's philosophy." Well, he knew I was a professor of the subject, more or less, and I suppose he thought this was the thing to say. I said, "In what

sense do you mean philosophy?" And he explained, "Well, every great political leader must have some kind of theoretical structure to his thought," and he had no doubt that Stalin had a most fascinating and important set of principles which he followed. This I rather doubted, but I don't think I expressed my doubts very forcibly on this occasion.

SCHLESINGER: Did you get much of a sense of his own conception of Soviet society? For example, Chip [Charles E. Bohlen] believes that President Kennedy had an inadequate appreciation of the role of ideology in the Soviet Union. He tended to see it too much in the practical aspect.

BERLIN: I think that was so. I don't think he did really give expression to that. I think this business about Stalin's philosophy must have been a concession in the other direction.

SCHLESINGER: Yes.

BERLIN: But I don't know whether he meant that. He knew very clearly what he meant, really.

SCHLESINGER: I think he must have meant something implicit, rather than Stalin…

BERLIN: I suppose so, but anyhow something which he thought a person who occupies the kinds of jobs that I occupy ought to interest themselves in. I think this was very clear. The thing that struck me about him then, and struck me about him later, was that he was on the job all the time. That is to say, I don't know how much interest he really had in fields of study for their own sake, I mean in history or in politics, government, that kind of thing. But it seemed to me that he was absolutely intent on what he was doing, and asked questions, listened to answers, read books, conveyed impressions which were directly geared onto the conduct of his own particular office. He was determined to utilize and concentrate everything that came his way towards actual practical realization. Not especially with any given policy—I don't mean in the short run—but of some coherent, general attitude toward life, policy, and so on, so that everything was grist to his mill, so to speak. I don't think he allowed himself to be distracted very much, at least as far as intellectual topics were concerned, by idle curiosity roaming here and there. He was really devoted to the idea of great men. There was no doubt that when he talked about Churchill [Winston Churchill], whom he obviously admired vastly, when he talked about Stalin, he talked about Napoleon [Napoleon, I], of whom we talked a little bit, about Lenin, and two or three other world leaders, his eyes shone with a particular glitter, and it was quite clear that he thought in terms of great men and what they were able to do, not at all of impersonal forces. A very, very personalized view of history, as you might say.

SCHLESINGER: Was Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] mentioned?

BERLIN: No. Roosevelt was not on this occasion mentioned. I'm trying to think what was mentioned. I remember his interest particularly whenever, as I say, great men came up. Bismarck [Otto Edward Leopold von Bismarck], I think, he mentioned. That he asked ____ questions about.

SCHLESINGER: He had a great admiration for Bismarck. I had never heard him mention Napoleon.

BERLIN: Napoleon came up, I think, in the course of some comparison with Stalin or Lenin or something of that kind. I'm trying

to think who the other great men were. I remember on a later occasion, I told him a rather frivolous story about Lenin's personal life; about the fact that somebody had published a piece on some kind of personal affair of Lenin's, some curious, still uninvestigated connection which Lenin had with a lady somewhere in 1911 or 1912. He was very displeased.

SCHLESINGER: Oh really?

BERLIN: Very. He thought this was no way to treat him. He thought this was not at all the way to treat a great man. I felt he thought this was in some way debunking, or anyhow a contemptuous attitude toward a man who ought to be treated with a greater degree of solemnity, at least by me. And at least in his presence. I dare say with more intimate persons, he would ____ about the subject. But in this particular case, I had the feeling that he felt one mustn't talk about the private affairs of great heads of states in quite that tone of voice. I felt put in my place. I went on. There was one of those moments in which I realized quite fully that the talk wasn't going on very well. He sank into total silence. And I carried on in the most reckless fashion until I finished my story. He didn't snub me in any way. He frowned. We changed the subject.

SCHLESINGER: On this first night, in retrospect, did any of his questions bear upon what was happening in Cuba?

BERLIN: Yes. Well, to the extent that he couldn't understand why, given the general disturbed situation then, the Russians didn't make more trouble in Berlin, in order to make more trouble for the United States. Various hypotheses were then advanced by Bohlen, by Phil Graham, by Joe Alsop, and myself. This was, generally speaking, discussed around the table. My point is that he gave one the air of luminous intelligence and extreme rationality, and cutting through a lot of deadwood. He didn't accept loose statements, or vague statements, or the kind of general statements people make who haven't very such to say but feel they ought to make some contribution to the conversation, simply as a form of registering the fact that they are present and had some views. Whenever that kind of statement was made by any of us, he stopped us

short, asked us exactly what these words meant, and brought it all down to extremely clear, shining, brass tacks. All this seemed to me very good. As a cross-examiner, he was absolutely superb; no doubt about that. But I had the impression of an extremely concentrated figure, very uneasy to talk to, not at all cozy, not at all comfortable. On the contrary, self-conscious, and no doubt on that evening, worried—in general, withdrawn, rather than outgoing, so to speak. But all the jokes and the jollity during dinner and afterwards, and all these things, I took for self-control. Enormous sense of unsureness of some sort. Maybe simply because he felt newer among intellectuals, or something of that sort. He wasn't quite sure what he ought to talk about, or what he was expected to do. A curious lack of self-confidence on the part of the President of the United States. He wasn't at all an easily dominant presence. He was like a very important person, a terribly important young man, who was in charge of enormous things, constantly,

in some sense, leaping over hurdles. I had the sort of sense that—I may be wrong about this—except the times when he really relaxed, no doubt among his intimates and people he knew very well, that he thought of life as a series of hurdles which had to be overcome, resistances which had to be overcome. He had to screw himself to it each time; he didn't do it in the easy, jaunty fashion which obviously Roosevelt must have done, or with the natural sense of public life and its proper style which Winston Churchill had. I think in some way he had to screw himself each time and expend nervous energy upon obstacle after obstacle, hurdle after hurdle, into the....

The other thing I felt, and this was not so much on this occasion but later, when he very kindly invited my wife [Aline Berlin] and myself to the White House, at which you were present, that he had a curious, almost mystical sense of dedication, fatalism. It was as if he didn't have very long to live and was called upon to perform a great many acts within the few years that were left to him. I was told afterwards that he thought that illness would, in fact, carry him off before he reached old age, and that he particularly believed something of the sort. But he spoke like a man with a mission, or some kind of calling. At any rate, as if there was not much time, and great things had to be done. There is a story about Saint-Simon [Henri, comte de Saint-Simon], the utopian socialist, who was awoken every morning by a servant who said, "Levez-vous, M. le Comte. Vous avez de grandes choses a faire aujourd'hui." Even if nobody did that to Mr. Kennedy in the mornings, this was the mood in which he operated. But I expect he was very easily relaxed with people with whom he felt comfortable and safe. But in my presence, it never quite.... On this occasion the Soviet Union was being discussed, and he chatted. And then he took Charles Bohlen out into the garden and no doubt talked about Cuba to him.

SCHLESINGER: He did, that is right.

BERLIN: That evening, yes. Nobody else evidently knew. He then came back and chaffed people and was generally rather jolly, and then he said to me, "You must go and sit next to Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]. She wants to bring you out." I felt stiff and rather uncomfortable with him on the

whole, but I felt greatly honored and rather excited. Then I talked to Mrs. Kennedy, who was infinitely easier to talk to. We had common friends, and that was all much easier and gayer. Then after dinner when they left—they left before anyone else, about half past ten I suppose—everything seemed easier at once, as it always does. Nobody talked about anything else except them. But the thing which struck me the most, when I learned about it afterwards, was this astonishing feat of self-control, in the course of which he talked exactly like a very normal person might without the slightest sense of anxiety, without the slightest obvious worry, as if there were not a cloud upon his brain.

SCHLESINGER: Did anything surprise you about him that night? I mean anything that was different from what expectations you might have had?

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BERLIN: Yes. I think I must have conceived of him as being rather more ordinary in a certain sense. Rather like an amiable, gay, successful, ambitious young Irish-American, with a great deal of blarney. Not at all. He was serious and glowed with a kind of electric energy. A rather inspiring figure to work for. I could see that he was a natural leader. That is to say, he communicated some kind of electric charge to the people around him, with which he was always to ____ upon himself. And was going somewhere. And there was this mysterious charismatic quality, certainly. I could see that he was driving somewhere, and people who liked this sort of thing would be delighted to follow him, to be driven by him, to cooperate with him, and so on. He was a natural leader with a great deal of energy and absolutely serious. Absolutely intent. There was something deeply concentrated and directed, fully under control. If ever there was a man who directed his own life in a conscious way—it seemed to me that he didn't drift or float in any respect at all. Some kind of embodied will…. This was very, very impressive.

I met Mr. Churchill late in life, and he was by this time a famous sacred monster. He, therefore, behaved in what must have become a kind of second nature. He behaved exactly like a person permanently on the stage, saying these marvelous things in a splendid voice and delighting the company with it. They weren't the natural utterances of a normal human being. They were the grand utterances of somebody on the great historic stage. Whereas, with Kennedy, you felt that words cost him some effort. But probably the Emperor Augustus [Augustus, Emperor of Rome] was rather like that, who had suddenly inherited an enormous empire, was frightfully serious, ruthless, perhaps, but determined to carry the whole enormous load, to carry the whole thing to an enormous success, cost what it might. This, anyway, was terrifying but rather marvelous. I was deeply impressed; I really was. Frightened, rather, but impressed.

SCHLESINGER: After he left, what did Phil and Joe say? That he was himself, or better, or worse?

BERLIN: No, no. They didn't notice any change. Nor, do I think, did they say anything of very great significance. No, they just said how much they

liked him. Phil went on and on and on. He almost spoke like a man in love—I've never known a man more obviously and completely devoted, dedicated, and excited. He was completely immersed. It is difficult to describe his and Joe's absolute devotion to the President. It was almost as if their lives had been completely transformed by him. They felt like young men, which they no longer were in the technical sense, about to march to an enormous, dreaded ____ to conquer new lands under a great new leader, so to speak, who would be bound to transform them and the world. This had never happened to them before. It certainly wasn't the case with them in the Roosevelt days, although they both had supported him. And I don't think that it will ever be the case again. So, I felt that I was in a new atmosphere. I felt that there was a new leader, and people were glowing with some kind of genuine drive and genuine direction, people whom I knew very well and respected very much. Chip Bohlen was more

collected, more calm in this respect. He got on with him, and he liked, him. But he's a man who is less easily disturbed and not emotionally quite so susceptible, whereas both Phil and Joe, who, as you know, are naturally emotional characters, had obviously been wound up and galvanized to a most unnatural degree of incandescence. And so remained, I think.

SCHLESINGER: When was the next?

BERLIN: The next meeting was in the White House. Well, you remember that. You were present. Nothing very significant occurred on that occasion. The atmosphere was much easier. This, of course, was after Cuba #2 had occurred. And he was in a glow of absolute happiness; there was no doubt of that. He said, more or less, that he had thought before that Cuba #1 would remain a stain upon his reputation, no matter what he achieved later, no matter how glorious and splendid his Presidency would be, that there would always be this fearful stigma which historians would always note. And I then felt that he really was thinking about history. He was thinking about this—not so much about his reputation in a small sense, as a personal reputation, but of the figure he would cut in history and his particular relationship to other historic figures. He saw a panorama. There is no doubt that it was all very self-conscious, in that sense. He was unspontaneous to the highest degree. This, I think, would make conversation with him to strangers at least a little difficult. Interesting, but difficult.

Then he obviously, quite naturally, was in a state of triumph at the reception, after the Second Cuba crisis. He, again, talked about the Russians, but this time in a much more relaxed fashion. He wondered what he was going to do; he wondered how he would now get on with Khrushchev; he wondered if this humiliation cost Khrushchev too much; he wondered if something ought to be done to save his face and what, if so, he could do. And this was discussed. I don't remember the details of this.

He talked about British statesmen on this occasion. He said that he liked Macmillan [M. Harold MacMillan] very much. He got on very well with him. Although he found him difficult in some respects, he found his company delightful and his wit unexpected. He personally, it was clear, really liked Hugh Gaitskell; there was no doubt of that. He said he

liked them both and couldn't understand why they detested each other. I tried to furnish some explanation in political terms, but he rightly brushed this side and said that he thought that the hostility was beyond the call of ordinary British rivalry, which I am sure is true.

Gaitskell said about him to me that he thought he was a wholly rational man, that what was so admirable about him was that he was moved by rational motives. And after Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], whom he regarded as moved by emotional prejudice to a high degree, he regarded President Kennedy as a man who had motives which were intelligible and with whom one could, so to speak, do business at the highest level. One could do business with a highly mature figure who understood exactly what one said, without having to adjust one's words or one's thoughts—not one to some degree obsessed by some particular pattern of emotion, a particular outlook to which one would have to adjust oneself in some particular way. And I could see that Gaitskell liked

him very, very much indeed. And really was delighted by his meeting….

This was, as often the case, reciprocated, because he talked with Gaitskell in very warm terms but wondered why he was being so intolerable about Europe. It struck him that Gaitskell was being highly unreasonable about not wishing to enter the European community. He knew that the Labour Party was divided on this issue, and he understood the political motives, which might have made Gaitskell careful in this respect. But he could not persuade himself that Gaitskell didn't see absolutely clearly that entrance into Europe was right. In fact, he was convinced that when Gaitskell put up objections to entering Europe, he wasn't very sincere. Or at any rate, was acting politically and would, presently, do something else on this issue. He hoped he would and asked me whether I thought that he would. I can't remember what I answered. I think I agreed with him. I think I thought that Gaitskell was immensely pro-European, even though he might object to this or to that aspect of the particular terms on which England had been asked to come in. I didn't think it a short-time proposition. But he kept on harping back to this topic. He kept harping back and saying, "Gaitskell is the most reasonable, intelligent Englishman I've ever met." He very much hoped to see him in office, in spite of liking Macmillan, because he really thought that there would be someone in England who'd be both wise and energetic and with whom he, in particular, would have an ideal relationship.

The next occasion, I think, was…

SCHLESINGER: On that evening, the evening came about because Jackie called me and said that now that the missile crisis was over, we should have an evening of gaiety to relax the President. She suggested getting hold of you, and I suggested getting hold of Sam Behrman [S. N. Behrman] because I thought this might…

BERLIN: She suggested this, really? Or did you?

SCHLESINGER: I think she suggested you.

BERLIN: I see.

SCHIESINGER: I'm sure she suggested you. And I suggested Behrman whom we brought in from Detroit. But the evening did not evolve in that way because...

BERLIN: No, the President wasn't at all gay; and I wasn't particularly gay. It wasn't really easy. Sam Behrman told some stories, if I remember rightly, which went quite well. But, on the whole it didn't.... And who else was there? Let me see, Joe Alsop was there, wasn't he?

SCHLESINGER: Joe Alsop brought Cy Sulzberger [Cyrus L. Sultzberger].

BERLIN: Cy Sulzberger, yes, who was rather grave…

SCHLESINGER: Inevitably.

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BERLIN: On that occasion, as I remember, Cy talked, to the President after dinner about his father's [Joseph P. Kennedy] health and that kind of thing. I remember that.

SCHLESINGER: That supports your earlier point about...

BERLIN: No, there was no gaiety. There was no gaiety. And I didn't think, on the whole, that this particular company was conducive to gaiety as far as he was concerned. I think he only wanted to be gay in relaxed company of some sort. He talked about politics to me on that evening as well. Certainly, oh yes. Mrs. Kennedy came in after him. She had looked, if you remember, through some kind of glass partition at a meeting of the—no, it wasn't the Cabinet; it was—what is the committee which looks after security?

SCHESINGER: National Security Council.

BERLIN: I think so, yes, at which, I think, Mr. Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] must have been present and at which she conveyed the fact that he was speaking with the most fearful indignation about the treatment that had been meted out to him. There was then a fairly recent article, I think, published in the *Saturday Evening Post* by Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett.

SCHLESINGER: Yes, I think that was later.

BERLIN: At any rate, I think the point was that he had been accused of weakness on Cuba. Wasn't that in the article?

SCHLESINGER: That was in the article. I think the article came out in December. I think this was in November.

BERLIN: Well, then something else must have come out—a column, perhaps.

SCHLESINGER: A column. Yes, probably.

BERLIN: At any rate, he was accused of softness about Cuba and felt that the White House had not supported him sufficiently in this respect, and hadn't exonerated him from this fearful charge or hadn't made out, anyhow, that he'd behaved in a manner for which he thought he ought to have been—not actually congratulated—but, at any rate, respected more than he turned out to be. And he was obviously in a rather indignant mood. The President did make one or two ironical remarks about this. It is difficult to recollect. Soft music, I remember, was played throughout—I can't remember if they played it during dinner; they certainly played it in the drawing room afterwards. Continuously. And Mrs. Kennedy sang a particular song, which I think had to do with the P.T. boat...

SCHLESINGER: P.T. 109.

BERLIN: P.T. 109. That went on very well, yes, That I remember towards the end of the evening, certainly.

SCHLESINGER: Yes.

BERLIN: Certainly. After the President left. So long as he was there, tension prevailed. There's no doubt about that. It was a rather exciting tension. It was a tension, nonetheless. I think perhaps I felt it more strongly than my wife did, who found him very easy and amiable, indeed, quite easy to talk to. But every time he turned to me, I felt a little bit under examination—not grilled, but cross-examined about something about which I was conceived to know. And I had a feeling, although I may be wrong, that he always, with strangers at least, docketed and labeled them as being experts on this or that, likely to provide interesting or important or, at any rate, stimulating information about this or that subject and wished, in some way, to exploit them—I mean in the best sense of the word. To make use of them, intellectually, at least, to the highest advantage, not just to let the conversation ramble in some undirected fashion. And I had the general feeling, also, that he looked at the world in this way, as a kind of orange to be squeezed. There were a lot of facts in the world, a lot of persons, a lot of events. The great thing was not to allow himself to drift along or to allow himself, even, to be passive in the face of them. One hadn't many years to live, and one must do what one can with what one could. One must make use of everything, and direct everything and, generally speaking, not relax. I think his ambition was to leave his own impress upon life. The idea was to act. To

act! Always act. Never relax. Always act. Strive for something. Try for something. Build something. Make something. Fail. Try again. Endless drive. Endless, remorseless, forward movement, which may come from his parents' education. People have said so. On this particular occasion, on the occasion we're talking about here, I think his brother, the Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy], was present. No, perhaps he wasn't.

SCHLESINGER: But I think he came in after dinner.

BERLIN: He came after dinner and then left again. I can't quite remember. I think something of the sort. I can't quite remember. The rapport between the brothers was absolutely astonishing. On the third occasion on which I met him when, again, I had the honor of dining in the White House, they sat quite far away from each other at the table. When either spoke to the other across a distance the understanding was complete, and they agreed with each other, and they smiled at each other, and they laughed at each other's jokes, and they behaved as if nobody else was present. One suddenly felt this absolutely unique rapport, so to speak, such as is very uncommon, even among relations. They hardly had to speak to each other. They understood each other from a half-word. There was a kind of constant telepathic contact between them.

Always, always there was this atmosphere of high tension, and a sense that he wanted to get things done on the basis of the best factual evidence, the best intellectual judgment available. He didn't believe in off-the-cuff conduct at all. I felt that he was a tremendous non-improviser, that everything cost him a lot of effort, that he really did expend a lot of himself in the course of doing these things; and he was like an artist who suffered in the course of creating his work of art. I may be quite wrong about this. This may be just a subjective impression. He didn't do anything with ease, facility, panache, a sense of throwing it off, in the sense that Roosevelt did. There was a certain sense in which, although his ambition was genuine and his energy was genuine and his understanding of politics was genuine, it all cost him effort. It didn't come naturally to him. It was acquired and directed. And if he relaxed, he would relax in a total manner, so to speak. Talking was either business or not. Nothing in between.

I may be quite wrong, but I had the general impression, also, when I met him, that he switched from gear to gear. Either he was talking seriously, in which case his whole attention was concentrated and directed upon what he was talking about. Nothing was alien; everything was grist to the mill: any book he might have read, any article he might have read, any conversation he might have had, and personal impression he might have sustained. All of this was brought together and brought to bear upon the subject in question. He used very penetrating and drilling questions. Drilling questions he would address to one. Every answer he would listen to, as I said, with the most disturbing degree of attention. Either that, or he decided not to do this, in which case he leant back and behaved in a kind of jolly fashion of any rich, young man enjoying himself in a highly convivial, ordinary, conventional, quite easy, quite agreeable manner. Nothing in between. But about that you would know more than I would of him. Perhaps this is oversimplified.

SCHLESINGER: I think that with people whom he knew very, very well, there was much more of a quick change of tone back and forth than on formal occasions. You've mentioned, a couple of times, a sense you had that Kennedy felt that his time was short. Is this retrospective? Or did you feel that at the time?

BERLIN: He didn't say it in so many words, but I think I felt it at the time, yes. I don't think that it's entirely retrospective. I think he spoke with a kind of fatalism. I mean, he said that no President could be counted upon for more than two terms of office. A very great deal remained to be done, although he didn't specify what it was. Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps it's just a piece of romantic, retrospective imagination. A peculiar glitter used to come into his eyes when he used to talk about the task in hand, so to speak.

I asked him questions about Europe. I did ask him about defense matters or something of the sort—whether he really believed that the British ought to contribute more to conventional armies in Germany, conventional weapons in Germany, that kind of thing. And whenever he gave these particular answers, he kept on saying, "Something is bound to happen. The Russians will not sit still." Or, "Great cataclysms are coming—I don't believe that I'm

going to have a quiet term of office," and so forth. Rather like a man who, in a sense, certainly didn't anticipate and, perhaps, almost didn't want too peaceful and too uneventful a reign. And so, I had a sense of a kind of quiet, slightly suppressed dramatization, which, nevertheless, went on in his mind on almost everything. I don't know what you felt.

SCHLESINGER: Well, I think that he would have been terribly disappointed if he had presided over a tranquil time of the world in his life. And I think he also had a great sense of the amount of violence under the membrane of civilization.

BERLIN: Yes, yes. But I don't know how he felt on domestic policies. We didn't talk about that at all; oh perhaps we did a little, I think, yes. I can't remember. I remember a moment when there was a question of housing, I think, that came up. You would remember. It was a question of something to do with refusing federal subsidies to states, I suppose except on the condition that Negroes and so on were allowed to live in various districts from which they had been kept out.

SCHLESINGER: Yes.

BERLIN: What was that?

SCHESINGER: That was an order saying that federal housing must be integrated.

BERLIN: That's it.

SCHLESINGER: Federal money could not be given for segregated housing projects.

BERLIN: Yes. He didn't want to do that before senatorial elections of some sort. He didn't want to play politics, I remember, although it would have brought him in quite a lot of votes if he had done that. He was quite conscious of that, and he was determined not to commit acts of overt political vulgarity, so to speak, a clear vote catching device and so forth. And that also gave me the impression of some kind of dramatic sense of his position in history and about the necessity of behaving in a noble and dignified manner, instead of sheer appetite for politics in whatever form they might offer themselves, without any thought, so to speak, of how it might look or what it was or might be. It was not for him a step-by-step development.

When he talked about foreign policy, my impression was that he thought he was a duelist, with Khrushchev at the other end. There was a tremendous world duel being carried on by these two gigantic figures. An enormous rapier had been thrust against him, and he was always on a *qui vive* of some sort. This was what kept him going, and this was what excited him, what he had to worry about. Ever since Vienna, I think, he had a sense of being pitted against Professor Moriarty at the other end somewhere. He was the

man who was going to rescue civilization and Khrushchev was the man who was going, in some way, to shoot it down, unless he could teach him a lesson, unless he could show him that these methods didn't work, in which case some kind of uneasy, but nevertheless, perhaps, semi-permanent truce could be developed. But he felt the whole weight of what he conceived of as the ideal of the western culture was resting on his shoulders, and this somehow excited him.

SCHLESINGER: Did he talk about China to you?

BERLIN: Not at all. Not a word.

SCHLESINGER: What was the next occasion?

BERLIN: The next occasion was when I was invited, and somewhat reluctantly accepted an invitation, to talk to Hickory Hill, if you remember. That is to say, an informal seminar which normally met, I think, in Robert Kennedy's house, but, on this occasion was summoned to the White House. We again had dinner in the White House before it. That was a small dinner party. I can't recollect who was there. You must have been there.

SCHLESINGER : I was there, yes.

BERLIN: Yes. And I think, perhaps, Robert Kennedy was there. And I don't

remember anyone else.

SCHLESINGER: I think that was all.

BERLIN: That was my impression.

SCHLESINGER: Yes.

BERLIN: I think that was when I must have told my story about Lenin which went on so badly. I was in a very nervous state, because I always am before any lecture, and particularly before lecturing to such very eminent and critical personages as I was about to face. So, I don't remember anything about that. My wife, who sat next to the President, said he was wonderfully easy to talk to, most charming, very exhilarating. She thought him absolutely delightful, fell under his charm completely and thought that he was one of the most excitingly agreeable persons she had ever met in her life. Then, I delivered my talk and he attended this—sat in a sort of a rocking chair. He asked me one question, I think, at the end of it, which I did my best to answer, and then left.

SCHLESINGER: Do you remember the question?

BERLIN: Yes, I think—I'm not absolutely sure. I think what he said—the talk was really about Russia in the nineteenth century,

about Russian literature and thought and that sort of thing. He wanted to know what had happened to all the poets, writers, painters, musicians, artists, intellectuals, and general persons of eminence after 1917. How far they were absorbed into the Soviet system; how far they had emigrated; whether there was a sudden change of front, a sudden collapse; whether suddenly after 1918 the whole picture was transformed so very dramatically. What kind of persons collaborated, what kind of persons resisted, and what differences this in general made. So it became clear that he thought that intellectuals, artists, persons who in some sense could be regarded as bearers of culture, played a central part in the life of a community. He expected to gain some sort of light about the development of the Soviet system from that. I think he was perhaps a little over-impressed with my talk; he very complimentary about it, and I thought, on the whole, he probably gave me more than my due.

That was not the last occasion on which I saw him. The very last occasion occurred rather casually in the Carlyle Hotel in New York in which we were, at that time, living as guests of my mother-in-law. I arrived with my friend, Professor Hampshire [Stuart Hampshire], who was at that time a professor in London, and is now at Princeton. He was staying the night with us. We arrived at the Carlyle Hotel and were not allowed to go up in the elevator because the President was about to come down. I think he was going to address a dinner of businessmen in New York that evening. For reasons of security, it was thought undesirable that the elevator should be used by anyone until he came down. So, we remained

downstairs in the hotel hall waiting with a certain number of hotel servants, managers, and I suppose Secret Service men, that kind of thing. There were some policemen outside. The whole building was heavily guarded.

I began talking to Professor Hampshire, and, indeed, my wife came down. I think you were allowed to come down in the elevator, but not to go up. She came down and talked to us also, and we stood talking next to a flower pot, half concealed by it, at a distance of about fifty yards away from the door. Quite far—more than that perhaps. The whole hall stretched between us. I was absorbed in conversation with Professor Hampshire and had forgotten why we were there. Suddenly my wife said, "There he comes!" I turned around, and suddenly the hall was filled with Secret Service men; men in uniform, men not in uniform, policewomen, all kinds of security ladies. Extraordinary it was. Then behind them he walked through with a rapid step, tossed a sharp look around, suddenly saw us and to my intense astonishment crossed the hall with a firm step, greeted me with great warmth, and asked me what I was doing there. I said I was just a fan who was there at that time in order to do him honor. He then complimented me on my performance at the White House, said he was very glad to see me and hoped to see me again. He was very affable, extremely light and easy, much more so than he had been at the White House itself. He chatted in an exhilarated and agreeable fashion for about three minutes, and then swung off towards his dinner. I was naturally immediately surrounded by reporters, photographers, everybody in the world, who said, "Do you know the President well? How long have you known him? He appeared very affable; he appeared to like you very much. What are the relations between you? Have you any special connection

with him?" All this I found extremely embarrassing to answer, and escaped to my room as early as I possibly could. Fortunately, there was a newspaper strike on in New York, so nothing about this appeared. It was the very last occasion on which I saw him alive.

SCHLESINGER: When did you hear the news of his murder?

BERLIN: I heard the news of his murder in Sussex University. I was just about to go in and deliver a lecture on, I think, Machiavelli [Niccolò Machiavelli], when a young lecturer, whom I hardly knew, a young Canadian, came up to me and said, "Isn't it terrible?" I thought he meant wasn't it terrible that I should have to deliver a lecture, and agreed with him enthusiastically. He said, "No, no. I don't think you quite understand what I mean. President Kennedy has been killed." I couldn't believe the news. I asked him how he knew, and he said it was on the radio. I really felt I couldn't lecture at all; I was stunned by this news and fearfully crushed. I had to ask them to wait for about five or ten minutes. I did deliver my lecture, and I said nothing about it at the time. I didn't think it was a suitable occasion to deliver a funeral oration, at the University of Sussex, nor did I know the President well enough. But the extraordinary thing was I was really unable to speak for about ten minutes. I had to collect myself and rearrange my thoughts and feelings in order to be able to deliver this lecture at all. It seemed to me the

most appalling disaster for the Western world. And I still think so, despite the exceptional man who succeeded him.

SCHLESINGER: There was a considerable change in the British conception of Kennedy, wasn't there, in this period?

BERLIN: I can't tell you about that. I'm not very good on that. He was very much admired, and not only admired but he was regarded as an exciting figure, so young, bold, humane, et cetera. He was a hero to the left, not to the right. The right was suspicious and thought he was just a young, vigorous, vulgar, unscrupulous, and a rather ruthless young American out for American interests, who would be much more difficult to work with than previous American presidents, and who would be terribly tough. People suspected him of inheriting some of the ideas of his father, who was thought to be not very friendly at any rate, to have sold England short in 1940, and there was a general suspicion of him in these circles.

The young, on the other hand, and particularly the left wing, saw him as a man who had in some way put forward economic and political policies with enlightened courage and who in some way had inherited the mental resources of his father—no doubt about that—and went on with his goals until the end. He was, in some sense, their leader more than anyone in England. It seems a harsh thing to say, but the Labour Party was divided; I suppose the left wing really did dislike and suspect Gaitskell, and the right wing disliked and suspected the left wing. There was a very deep split in the Labour Party, and I think Kennedy in some sense was more attractive to both these wings than either of the alternative leaders or

assistant leaders who were in England, and so he really played a considerable part. It was rather like Roosevelt in the thirties, almost. Yes, I think they had high hopes of him. In spite of his past, in spite of the things that had been said, that he had been a friend of Senator McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] in spite of his being his father's son, nevertheless all these things were felt.

I had a feeling, funnily enough, when he talked about Churchill (this suddenly comes into my mind) whom he praised in the most unreserved fashion, whom he regarded as the greatest man he ever met—that's what he said, at any rate—that his father's performance really for him was something of a deterrent in his thought, so to speak. That is to say, I have an hypothesis which I wish to offer—for this I really have no concrete evidence—that obviously he didn't judge his father as the English judged him. He didn't just think that he was rather feeble in front of Hitler [Adolf Hitler] or class-conscious to a degree, which made him more sympathetic to the forces of the right, even in their fascist forms, than to any forces of progress on the left, which is what people suspected him of in England, of course ____ theory ____ certainly in 1940 and 1941, with the…. But that somehow his father must have.... His father was unpopular in England; he didn't have much of a career when he came back to the United States, and it obviously was a crisis in his career which must have affected the rest the family in some way. His father, I think, must have taken the line with him that it was all right to resist Hitler effectively, but that once Chamberlain [Neville Chamberlain] had

done the things which he had done, and once no real rearmament had occurred and appeasement was in full swing, by 1939 it was too late; that Munich was a correct move, that the guarantee to Poland was absurd, and that, in fact, the Germans would win the war and there was no reason why the United States should "pull English chestnuts out of the fire" and be involved in the war themselves. In fact, he simply thought that England misplayed its cards and this made it impossible for the United States to act as an effective ally, at least from the point of national interest. Something which is at any rate more palatable than the sort of picture which was held of Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy] in England at that time, which was just of a reactionary, a cowardly Anglophobe.

If President Kennedy believed all these things, then I think what must have eaten into his soul was the notion that one must never appease; that if one begins by appeasing, one always ends up in some kind of humiliating and terrible position. This, of course, probably emerged in his book, which I didn't read. At any rate, I think he rationalized the position of his father as somebody who, perhaps mistakenly, diagnosed the position of England as hopeless when it wasn't really hopeless. Therefore, his particular reaction took the form of saying that this must never occur to any great country again, that as soon as the faintest little danger appeared in the sky, as soon as a cloud which was as big as your hand appeared, immediate steps must be taken, because once one allows oneself to drift along some kind of comfortable path of compromise and appeasement, one will end up in some hideously dangerous and, indeed, humiliating position.

This determined his whole attitude to politics and his whole attitude toward Russia, for example. He was prepared to be reasonable, he was prepared to use judgment, he was prepared not to allow his passions to dominate

him, but he thought that resistance must be offered at once. At no point must one allow the enemy to get away with it, otherwise the terrible 1939 situation would come upon us again. This he had in common with people like Eden [Anthony Eden], with people like Lord Salisbury, with people like Macmillan**,** whose entire political outlook after the war was certainly shaped and determined by the violent opposition to Chamberlain and to Munich. In fact, for these men, this was certainly the worst moral crisis which England faced at that time, in which the decision which had been taken by the government was plainly morally among and politically disastrous. I think he was with them, so to speak. I think his sympathies lay with the anti-appeasers of the late thirties, which he applied to the world situation in the sixties.

SCHLESINGER: No, I think it was tempered in the case of Kennedy and Macmillan by a great sense of the horror of nuclear war. They distinguished very sharply. I know Kennedy distinguished very sharply between Berlin, on the one hand, and Laos on the other, as to where you hold the line. Kennedy never felt that Laos was worthy of the attention of great powers.

BERLIN: No. I see that. But what I was meaning was that the anti-appeasers in England, like Macmillan, Eden, Lord Salisbury, and all these people,

felt that war could have been averted. Not that war should have occurred sooner. There were people, of course, who thought that, too. There were people who thought that we should have fought in 1936, if the need arose, when the Germans occupied the Rhineland, and if they then refused to budge after due warnings were issued, then perhaps a war at that stage would have been less costly or more avoidable than later. I think that the people I speak of generally thought that Hitler could have been restrained from going to war, and I should have thought that that was Kennedy's view, too. Not so much that it is better to fight than to give in, which he also believed, but that if you are prepared to fight at a critical phase, it is possible to avoid a war, and that the English statesmen and that section of public opinion which thought that in the thirties was absolutely right. He didn't think, you see, that the fight in the thirties was a fight between men who wanted to fight for honor and men who held war in such horror that they preferred to sacrifice even honor and even liberty to it. I don't think that was how it presented itself to him. And he was quite rigid in supposing that it didn't. A picture of bellicose men fighting for their honor and their flag and their liberties in the middle thirties, as against people who thought that war was the worst of all evils, was, I think, a myth generated by the appeasers, Chamberlain and the conservatives, not by the opposition—I mean by the more generous minded, those who were willing to concede that Winston Churchill and his followers, perhaps, were stirred by noble and patriotic and chivalrous motives, but that these things were out of date in the twentieth century and, in any case, immoral if the outcome was war. This was what might be called a position of idealistic pacifism or idealistic socialism, for that matter, which was against any kind of war in any circumstances, of either absolute pacifists or of supporters of the New Statesman line, of making concessions to avoid war.

SCHLESINGER: How would you distinguish Kennedy from the two other great American liberal heroes of this period, Roosevelt and Stevenson?

BERLIN: Well, I never, of course, even set eyes on Roosevelt.

SCHLESINGER: But you were here in Washington?

BERLIN: I was here during those years, yes. Roosevelt was, I think, a very different figure altogether. I think Roosevelt was a mentally optimistic, happy, charming man with the tremendous natural sense of ease of a person who was born in a socially superior position, and who held, at the same time, views well to the left of his environment and his class. He was, in fact, an aristocratic radical, which is a very different thing. Nothing is more attractive than the combination of old world manners and new world convictions, and this proved absolutely irresistible. He found by the use of charm and by general optimism and *bonhomie* and by, so to speak, displaying great, large generous personality and jollying people along, and general affability all around, and not thinking things out too clearly, and not being over-concerned about precise details of policy, and by injecting a great deal of vitality and optimism into whatever happened, he managed to roll this enormous force along towards objectives which I think he did have.

Unlike people who think that he was a pure improviser and that he had no philosophy at all, I think there was a pattern in the world which he wished to create. I think he really was in favor of curing poverty and ignorance and doing something for the underprivileged of the world, so to speak. I think this was a kind of general aristocratic dream found in English nineteenth-century thought. I dare say, people like Lord John Russell probably had it in perhaps not quite so exuberant and abundant a fashion. The point about Roosevelt was that he was easy-going and thought, "Let the future come; it is all grist to the mill. We will manage it when it comes." I don't think he liked laying precise plans, and I don't think he liked distributing precise responsibilities. The whole atmosphere was easy, relaxed, optimistic, and maddening for those who liked tidiness and order, and wanted to know precisely where they were, and who believed in balanced budgets and exact formulations. That is what gave him the reputation of being not altogether a man of honor, capable of letting people down, with an easy smile and a laugh, transforming one policy into another, and not really being over scrupulous about who he happened to drown in the process.

I think Kennedy was absolutely different from this. I think he had a concentrated intellect, he believed in technology, he believed in precise formulations, he believed in the use of sharpest intellectual, technical resources that could possibly be assembled, and he believed in verifying and checking every step. He wasn't at all a gay cavalry rider, riding over hedges and ditches, which I think is what Roosevelt in fact was, whether he saw himself in that light or not. I don't think he was a sort of "Constitutional King;" he didn't like all the jesters with whom Roosevelt, to some degree, tended to surround himself. I may be wrong about this, but the point about Roosevelt was that he was one of those people who liked to be amused; I think one of the things he wanted most was to be amused. It didn't matter

whom he saw, provided they delighted him, stimulated him, made him laugh. I think Kennedy very carefully distinguished between working hours and nonworking hours in that sense.

I think people he wanted to meet and people he wanted to use were people who gave him the impression of understanding the new techniques and the new situations brought about in the sixties. He had a tremendous sense of *soyons de notre temps*: we ought to be men of our time. We ought to be up to and fully conversant, abreast of every single development—scientific, economic, and political and so forth. Although he didn't believe in the mechanical use of experts, he had some sense—the "New Frontier" was correct—he had some sense of constantly going forward into unknown country which one could only go into with a maximum degree of guidance provided by imaginative and gifted experts, something of that kind. And with that, he was never wholly easy.

I go back to my original thesis, that he wasn't the gay cavalry rider. The horse he was riding was an uncomfortable horse, and he was riding it with courage and care. With care. It was unspontaneous. Every step was calculated. It seemed to me that he was, in the best sense of the word, an extremely calculating and deliberate man, whereas, Roosevelt, in the best sense, was a very uncalculating and an essentially easy-going man, deeply easy-going because he trusted in his own charm; he trusted in his own power. And above all, the point about Roosevelt was that one felt that he was deeply…. And no matter how terrible the

disaster. It might be Pearl Harbor, it might be some fearful, hidden, economic strain upon the system, or a huge strike which might be difficult to settle, or some frightful act of butchery committed by some enemy, or something of that kind. No matter how terrible, he slept his nine hours or whatever it was, in perfect peace and contentment, got up the next morning with great gaiety, abandon, aplomb, energy, and intelligence, set himself for the next day; whereas, Kennedy, I think, tended to be pursued by great anxieties in some sense. His life was a much more continuous performance than these marvelous, brilliant improvisations of genius by Roosevelt.

The other thing is I think that Roosevelt had a much more natural rapport so to speak, with the feelings and the wishes of the average American voter. He was one of those politicians who, I think, was someone who was a natural politician. I think Kennedy, oddly enough, was not; it seems to me he was politically made, not born. Roosevelt had the kind of antenna which oscillate delicately to the slightest political breeze in any quarter, which registered in this infinitely sensitive system. In this respect he was different from Churchill who, I think, didn't oscillate at all. He imposed his own obsessive personality, in a sense, on other people, but didn't, in a sense, get anything from them at all; certainly _____ wasn't a seismograph ____ in any sense; whereas Roosevelt was the most delicate seismograph possible every little tremor registered. When Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] would report to him what her friends felt, and what various liberal groups or underprivileged groups in the United States wanted, and so on, he understood this perfectly. Whether he satisfied their wishes or not, he understood exactly the position they occupied in society, how many of them there were, what they wanted, what the effect of such discontent was, what the possibility of satisfying them eras, at what cost, and with what effect on certain other sections of the

population. He was delighted by the mosaic itself, was delighted by the variety of life, by the fact that there were reactionaries and there were progressives, that there were bad men and there were good men, that there were stupid men and there were clever men, and that there were lots of countries, all differently colored. The whole thing was not, in effect, a fantasy, but a splendid kaleidoscopic spectacle which he thought, and perhaps rightly, that he knew almost better than anyone else how to understand and how to manage.

Kennedy, I don't think, was the least like that. I think he wanted as many people as possible to believe what he believed and as many people as possible to be intelligent, progressive, and aware of the findings of modern science, and rational. I'm talking without any knowledge at all, but I should have thought he wasn't naturally reactive to every tremor in the political atmosphere, that it would have to be reported to him. When it was reported by experts he trusted—not necessarily by experts on the polls, but by whoever there might be whom he regarded as a careful political observer—then putting these things together and looking at them steadily and seeing them whole and reflecting about them in the light of all his knowledge, he would then arrive at a judgment. It might or might not be correct, and probably most often was correct. At any rate, it was again an unspontaneous, deliberate process which he taught himself to perform. Politics was some kind of expertise which he acquired, which he was naturally in favor of, and which he would naturally have a certain

talent for, perhaps even a genius for, but which, nevertheless, could only be obtained by careful attention to detail and mature reflection upon the multifarious data which he was offered, and careful consideration of what it all amounted to.

This seems to me quite a different temperamental reaction from Roosevelt's. And that is why he was, I think, capable of making large mistakes, probably, which Roosevelt wouldn't have made once his judgment had been wrong. Supposing he took wrong advice, or supposing he made the wrong judgment, as he probably did over Cuba #l, let us say. Roosevelt would have stopped half-way and somehow managed to have seventeen days out, all of which it would have been possible for him to follow. Kennedy had to go right through with it in a rather heavy fashion and then retreat in an equally tragic and deliberate way. In a way, this was more sympathetic. I think, oddly enough, in spite of his hardness and in spite of his political nature and so on, I would say that Kennedy cared more about human feelings, about distressing loyal servants who worked for the state, about dropping people who had been simply useful or whom he regarded as disinterested or even noble, than did Roosevelt. Roosevelt, I think, cast people about and shied them about, so to speak, and flung them in the air and let them fall into all kinds of peculiar and comical positions with the greatest possible gusto and without the slightest tremor of the heart.

Stevenson, I don't know very well, but I should have thought he was totally unlike either. I think he was much more tremulous and scrupulous a figure in some ways, who I think perhaps is even less instinctively a politician than either of the other two. I should have thought that he was a man of such sweetness of character, in a sense, and concern about right and wrong, about equity and inequity, and of such naturally, ethically,

sensitive feelings, that caught in some ambiguous situation as politicians are bound to be, he would on the whole tend to worry and be anxious lest what he did was, in some way, morally damaging or wasn't what was good and right and upright and proper in a given situation. And he behaved much more like one would oneself; he behaved much more like an ordinary, nice person who couldn't bear the thought of having to sacrifice worthy and virtuous persons just because the machinery of politics required it or because of some huge, impersonal forces, or the wheels of history clamored for that particular sacrifice. For that reason, I think he was not in the least like either. He was, on the whole, too easily horrified, too easily disgusted by what is inevitably cruel and squalid in the public life of democracies.

SCHLESINGER: I think that is very good.

BERLIN: It may seem by now a very commonplace analogy, but there was something Bonapartist about the Kennedy reign. It wasn't a monarchy, but neither exactly was it a republic. The origin of Mr. John F. Kennedy, and the fact that the Kennedy family, as it were, represented some kind of huge, financial, commercial success had some kind of Bonapartist flavor about it, whether of Napoleon I or Napoleon III. That is to say, he stood between the old aristocracy which rejected him and the left wing which distrusted him to some extent, which was precisely Napoleon's position. He got into power by marvelous organization of technical and

intellectual means, which was exactly what Napoleon believed in. The old aristocracy of Washington, so to speak, or of Boston or the South or wherever it may be, was frightfully suspicious and regarded him obviously as an adventurer or an upstart. But some of them were sucked into the government, nevertheless, either for personal ambition or because they were charmed, fascinated by this electric personality. They came back very much as certain members of the French upper class who nevertheless did work for Napoleon I. And then there were these kings, the brothers, whom he appointed or wished to appoint to responsible positions; and his father was the sort of Letizia [Letizia Bonaparte], more I think than his mother [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] in some ways—someone in the background who had bred all these persons, and somehow looked with delight and pride upon this extraordinary generation to which she had given rise. And then there were the marshals who served him, devoted, dedicated marshals who like nothing better than to have their ears tweaked by Napoleon. He had something, it seemed to me, of that relation to the marshals. And it is very clear who the marshals were—there were people who were marshals; and people who were mere generals, colonels, captains, or perhaps just faithful ministers who were nevertheless not quite in the position of these glowing, new military, technical, intellectual elite who served him. Plainly, McGeorge Bundy was a marshal. I would say that Chip Bohlen probably had become a marshal by the time I arrived. Perhaps you could suggest other names. I dare say Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] was perhaps a marshal.

SCHLESINGER: McNamara [Robert S. McNamara].

BERLIN: McNamara was top marshal. Absolute *Pere la Victoire*. McNamara was in exactly the position of *Carnot*. There were

people who, although they weren't in the government, were intimates and, as it were, carried marshals' batons hidden in their knapsacks although they hadn't yet the chance to use them. Like Phil Graham, who, I think, stood rather close to the President, who was essentially made of marshal-like material.

SCHLESINGER: Yes.

BERLIN: I've never met Dean Rusk, but I had the impression that he was not a marshal.

SCHLESINGER: You are right.

BERLIN: Although he had a responsible position, he was not close.

SCHLESINGER: Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon] yes, Rusk no.

BERLIN: Dillon was a marshal, was he? It was very clear there was an elite, there, a group of people who basked in the light of and reflected the

light of President Kennedy, with whom he was happy. People with a great deal of energy and ambition who really were marching forward in some very exciting and dramatic fashion. This really was a new phenomenon, certainly in American politics. There is nothing like it in European politics either. The nearest to marshals we have in Europe is, I suppose, de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle] in that sense. But he really wasn't surrounded by other marshals much. A solitary figure. But Kennedy had a sense of the team, and those who were in the team and those who were not were carefully demarcated. It was absolutely clear who was and who wasn't. This was not so much a matter of ability or competence or even trustworthiness, as a matter of responsive personal temperament, which some people had and other people didn't. I remember he felt that there was a kind of vigorous response—the word "vigorous" was, of course, much use in Kennedy speeches and Kennedy conversation—whenever there was some kind of "oough" whenever he thought there was imagination and ambition and forward thrust and the sort of intellectual gaiety I think a marshal had to have.

Above all, I think what President Kennedy hated, and I may be unjust to him in this respect, but I think he hated dimness. I think he liked personality; I think he liked vitality; and I think anybody who was dim, no matter how virtuous, how wise, how valuable in all kinds of ways—and a great many very noble, very saintly, very learned, and indeed very gifted people have a dim personality—were no good to him. Perhaps he was prepared to recognize them, but they were of no use to him. Somehow I'm sure he felt the sheen of life, the light of life, went out in their presence. Roosevelt had something of the same, but Roosevelt just plainly wanted to be amused; whereas Kennedy wanted to be not only stimulated but to march at the head of a small, dedicated band of men with a passion and shining eyes. Wouldn't you say?

SCHLESINGER: I think that is right.

BERLIN: This was a romantic concept. I don't know where it came from.

Psychologically, it is most interesting to note. I suppose it was part of his education by his father who always drove his children in this absolutely remorseless fashion, and was always alleged to have said that you must always come first in everything; being second was not good. Being second was like being a hundred and second; it didn't count. First or nothing. And there was something of that about him, and that communicated itself. The whole Washington atmosphere was very different from what it had been when I was here during the war. Although it was exciting enough then, under President Kennedy it was terribly taut; everyone was walking some kind of tightrope and was very excited to do so. People were always terrified of snapping in some sort of way. The whole thing was stretched frightfully tight, and the whole thing had a kind of dedicated and slightly desperate air, which I see would have distressed and annoyed and even depressed the sort of old radicals, the idealistic but rather loose-spun left wing, among whom Roosevelt chose his earlier supporters. They felt the whole thing was too glittering, too much like the American century which Mr. Luce [Henry R. Luce] used to support, too many men in shining

armor, too heartless, too violent, too crusading, not enough humanity, not enough vagueness, not enough coziness.

SCHLESINGER: Too stylish.

BERLIN: Not only too stylish, but also too driven. Knights in shining armor sitting on purebred horses, galloping. What they liked was gnarled old stick and slow, cross-country progress—across plots of grass with a lot of rather incoherent conversation of a deeply earnest and sincere kind. It is a very different picture.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Sir Isaiah Berlin
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