

Edmund A. Gullion Oral History Interview – JFK#5, 08/21/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Edmund A. Gullion
Interviewer: Samuel E. Belk, III
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Biographical Note

Gullion was a United States Diplomat in Saigon from 1949 to 1952; the Deputy Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Administration from 1960 to 1961; and the United States Ambassador to the Republic of the Congo from 1961 to 1964. In this interview Gullion discusses John F. Kennedy's [JFK] concept of the American presidency; JFK's evolving relationships with different family members and friends; how history will treat JFK; how people venerated JFK after his death; and what Gullion considers JFK's greatest contributions, among other issues.

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Fifth Oral History Interview

With

EDMUND A. GULLION

August 21, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Samuel E. Belk, III

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, when we ended the last tape, we were in the middle of a catch-all question, in response to which you had commented on President Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] approach to culture and taste and his view of the presidency itself. What can you now say about his views of ways of handling his job, family, and finally, friends and enemies?

GULLION: I believe I may have touched on some of those questions already, especially with respect to his way of handling his job, his intensely personal approach to it, the way he would single out someone in the executive departments, and simply call them up and ask them about the situation with respect to some problem which he was interested. It does seem to me that he approached his job with first a tremendous respect for expertise. He knew where he could find possibly the greatest panel of experts in the country and certainly the panel best known to him, that is in the intellectual community in Massachusetts, and, of course, he made a great draft on their brains and time and goodwill. It seems to me that this was almost to the point of being a possible political liability. One of the few things of this sort I ever ventured to say to him was that I wish he would get more people from DePauw [DePauw University] and from Notre Dame [Notre Dame University]. I imagine there were some Notre Dame emissaries, nuncios. Still it seemed to me that in proving the point his respect for brains, his respect for intelligence. I think he's often been

compared with Theodore Roosevelt, in the way Theodore Roosevelt did the same kind of thing, the respect for brains, intelligence, also for performance and for publication. He seemed to me to want his people to have a brevet of performance and expert achievements in some particular field, attested by having held a job or having published something or by dredging up people known to him who might have been known to other people less well known. I put myself in that category. I'd say here that I don't think that I would range myself in either the second or even the, certainly not the first, possibly not even the third, ring of his intimates. I think it's possibly significant that I don't know who would be in the first ring. I think this may have been characteristic of the Kennedy personality. I don't know who would be the repository of all of Mr. Kennedy's confidences or of his uncertainties or of his aspirations. Indeed, if any one person was, I think it was rather characteristic of him that he did have that essential core of reserve. I did know him on some particular things in which he was under stress, and through that contact what I know about him or think I know about him was gained, certainly in handling his job.

Also we have talked upon that, his positive concept of the presidency, that the presidency was the principal pulpit in the nation. It was also the principal executive job, that it had to set the line and not follow. He may have looked extremely active because of his more passive concept which prevailed just before his presidency. His tendency to operate not on his adrenals but rather upon his association with people rather than through a sort of impersonal well-greased staff system. His idea that the presidency was being depersonalized through excessive proliferation of staff and of committees and his attempt to bring that back as the recognizable fount of decision and of inspiration. I don't know to what extent all of this was rationalized, of course, there were writers on the job whose views he liked, like those of Mr. Neustadt [Richard E. Neustadt] who wrote on the American presidency, and he definitely was in the Truman [Harry S. Truman] concept of the presidency in this respect, but to the extent to which this a formal doctrine or one that was congenial to his personality I just don't know. But it was certainly true that the impact of it was quite apparent.

With respect to his family, I think the thing that strikes people immediately, now I'm not talking about his immediate family, but as a member of that large and wonderful Irish family, the clannishness of this kind of thing which is something that you seldom have seen carried into this half of this century, more characteristic, of course, of Irish and Italian groups than others. I think it's rather interesting that he knew that and accepted that even there at the risk of being accused of nepotism or familial insularity. The President knew where he could get what was good advice that he could really trust, in his brother Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] and elsewhere and his loyalty to his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.]. I think it is a very interesting thing for someone to write on at great length is the relations between Joseph Kennedy and Robert Kennedy as the presidency came near for the President, the management of that really was exquisite. It isn't really sort of Irish impulsiveness. There was a great deal of tact and shrewdness and awfully fine public relations work in that thing.

It is a matter of wonderment, to know whether as Mr. Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] got older whether he would have operated so close to the family base as he did. I don't know. Most men, of course, tend to do less. Few men are that close to families when they are 45. As to his personal family, his marriage and his children, of course he was absolutely devoted to the children. I did not see a great deal of their family life after they got married. I am convinced that theirs was a real idyllic marriage. It may have been subject to some of the tribulations of any family, but I think that there was a real complementarity there of interests, and I think the aspect of the marriage that made Kennedy a public symbol, contributed so powerfully to that symbol.

His friends and enemies, Mr. Kennedy, I think, as I say I don't know how many very, very close intimates there were and who they were. Some were intimate to him on one side and not on another. Again, I think that this was a matter of growth. When Mr. Kennedy got older, I think that his style as a man might have become more affirmed. He never struck the public as a person who didn't know his own style. I think that he appeared as a man who was confident and whose modes of living and thought and outlook were established and crystallized, and yet I don't personally believe so. It seems to me that we were yet to be revealed, or yet to have revealed to us a Kennedy the man. By us I mean the American people as a whole, because I think he was in a long process of discovering. I don't know, I think that Mr. Kennedy could be a sharp and cold Irish hater. I never saw that side of him. I never saw him committed to revenge or anything of that sort. I don't think he was that kind of a man. But I do think that he certainly knew who his friends were and who were not his friends. I think that he was a man who would not allow enmities to grow up very easily, and he must have put quite a rein on himself. In his political life, of course, I suppose a great example of healing any kind of incipient breach must have been his application to Mr. Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] to share the ticket with him. This was a great stroke, really, of conciliation, however it may have estranged a great number of liberal supporters at that particular time. He also, I think we mentioned earlier, when he was crossed up in Congress or when some pet thing was not going through, he had this curious detachment about it and if, well, this is, just don't have the votes and there it is. Again, I think there was a calculation there on the latter part of his term and the latter part of his life as to what he would then produce and what he would be able to do. He was certainly a man who was generous to his friends in the sense of rewarding them in their chosen pursuits and careers. I think that he was probably in this intense absorption, ambition and dedication to his job, could often be forgetful. He was not a man who just, not the man who in other words is so weak in his powers that he has to be known as a man who is strong in friends. I believe that possibly more relevant things will come out in this next question, Sam.

BELK: Mr. Ambassador, as a final question, in your view how did President Kennedy measure up as a man and as a President? What do you as a critic, as an evaluator think his impact was on the international scene in Asia and in Africa in particular, and in addition, in your view what mark did he leave on our own country? This is, indeed, a large question, but you knew him well. What would you say by way of summing

up?

GULLION: Well, you have asked me an encyclopedically evocative question. What you've really asked me for is the verdict of history on Mr. Kennedy. I can only anticipate one man's verdict on this. I think that Mr. Kennedy will be classed among the great. I think that the sacrificial death, the nature of his death and the shortening of his life, will help to complete the cycle of greatness which possibly would have had to have waited upon completing his achievements as a President. It seems to me, particularly, that the role, what he stands for in Asia and Africa will come to be appreciated in this country somewhat later, and that this will add to an affirm his stature in history. In Asia and Africa he is and is bound to be classified among the very great American Presidents, but particularly as the American President who was conscious of Asia and Africa as none ever was before. I do not believe that this thing is known to the American people. This goes back to our very first colloquy, Sam, when I was talking about his early exposure to some of the world problems and the nexus of interests, conflicting interests on his visit to Indochina. This was in an Asian context. And then his death in the midst of the civil rights struggle in which his role was so well-known and so honored universally by Africans was bound to affirm his stature in Africa. There is no American President since Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln], the circumstances of whose death affords so many parallels to be as venerated in that continent as President Kennedy was.

Parenthetically, it's rather tragic that I do not believe that Africans will ever renounce their conviction that the President was assassinated by opponents of civil rights in this country by some kind of conspiracy, even if they do not know what the findings of the Warren [Earl Warren] Commission or the final end product of judicial proceedings in this country may be. But no matter what they are, I think that the myth of the man brought down when he was struggling to emancipate the African—by the African I mean the American Negro—will always be the one which has validity there rather than the slaying of Mr. Kennedy by the misfit. Even if this is the correct version that he was slain by a misfit, I believe that the African feeling is that this misfit was the product and the nourished in the soil of hatred, no matter on what side he stood or who nerved his arm when he shot, that he was the product of a sick kind of society, of which the main sickness was the line between the colored man and the white man. It's for this reason that I have suggested to Mr. Robert Kennedy that he—and I believe that he would like to go—that he go to Africa, partly because I do not think that enough public men of number-one stature have made the trip to that continent, but also because the President's brother on a mission to Africa could do a lot to make this understood.

As I say, the President was in the process of discovery, discovery of America and discovery of himself, discovery of his powers and perhaps of his limitations when he was brought down. We will never know, really, what he was, and he did not know what he was and then this is, of course, a great tragedy. It's one of the providential rewards of sacrifice, I suppose, that the sacrifice contributes to the accomplishment of a program. Of course, President Kennedy's death and the power and ability of President Johnson have made it

possible to complete Kennedy's program. I think that the legislative program is far more significant than contemporary critics have considered it to be. I think that it's more significant than the legislative program or the approach toward such things as increasing the growth or the rate of national growth or what President Kennedy stood for outside the legislative arena, that these things are coming to be appreciated. I said that this was a process of growth. Well, his life was cut short, his legislative program was cut short. I think that in his first term and before election he had confidently counted on the great hundred days of the Franklin D. Roosevelt type. I think he saw that hundred days deferred to the hundred days of his next Administration. I somehow doubt that he would have had the great consensus behind him that perhaps President Johnson may have behind him, but if President Johnson does have the advantage of that consensus it will be in no small measure due, of course, to President Kennedy's death.

Still standing in this country, it seems to me that some of the extraordinary veneration of the President and above all its duration, the fact that for years it's almost a cult, a kind of a worship of a lost figure is due to the American sense of an expiation in President Kennedy's death, an expiation of guilt feelings. It seems to me that the old in this country not only knew that President Kennedy was devoted to them, but other older people saw in President Kennedy a redeemer. They had grown old and ugly, if you will, grown old and, you know, the Shelley [Percy Bysshe Shelley] thing ["Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats"] about the, "in the elegy, from the contagion of the world, slow stain he is secure," and I can't quote it exactly, "heart can never mourn, head grown grey and vain, low the sparkles ashes and unlamented urn." I think that without pretending that people will formulate it in that way, that nevertheless this is something of what they felt. Before this man could be tarnished by all of the compromises of political life and the frustration of longer life that he was struck down, and in a way they saw him as still the innocent that they were not.

Younger people, I think, also saw in him an expiatory offering, not merely that they identified with him, which, of course, they did, but perhaps all of the younger people were not as committed to the striving for excellence as they saw in him, and I think that they honor him because he was carrying out the greater intentions, the better intentions of which they perhaps felt them incapable. Of course, the minorities and the Negro minority in this nation, that cause is too obvious, and I've already underlined it, to explain what that represented. It is, not trying to make a choice between American Presidents. There have been assassinations, there have been assassinated Presidents, but it's only the Lincoln assassination and the Kennedy assassination that have resulted in and been acceptable as the core of the kind of a cult that I see forming with President Kennedy.

Now the other great area, it seems to me, that of our time, probably the atomic revolution and the coming to maturity, prematurity perhaps, of African and Asians are the two great phenomena, and of these that second would probably be the greater. But it seems to me that it's the President's relation to both these two phenomena that really ultimately determine his place in history. I've already indicated that he's opened a new era for the colored man not

only in this country but everywhere in the world. But with respect to the implications of the nuclear age and the confrontation of the two great nuclear powers, President Kennedy has, I think, made it possible to open a dialogue there. Of course, things like the Sino-Soviet rivalry and its influence on Soviet decisions is contributory, but I think that the President's search for an understanding, his search for a dialogue with the Soviet leaders without in any way relinquishing American power is one thing that is responsible for what I believe is the breaking up of the hard and bitter molds that have confined these relationships. And the other is quite a different kind of thing, and that is the President's demonstration of American firmness in the Cuban Crisis. When you draw all the footnotes on it and the reservations and try to trace the efforts that were made to save face for the Russians and all the rest of it, people tend to lose sight of the big stark headline, outlines of this fact that I think that the Soviet Union was taught that we were firm and knew that we had the power and came to meditate upon the reflections of it, and this one act alone is the thing that will determine the place of the President.

His efforts to reconstitute the presidency, to demonstrate his concept of it, I believe, of course, were prematurely cut down. His legislative program, even circumscribed as it was, by the narrowness of his margin in his first election, was significant, but it would only have come to full fruition in the second term. Therefore I think that the two greater things were his contributions to the cause of peace and his contributions to the understanding and development of Asia and Africa, which are the two things that will mark his Administration.

The personal trace of the man will be rather curious to find, how his character and personality is assessed because I've indicated several that I think there was a kind of a shrinking from ostentation or display or from revealing himself or for letting go with his emotions that doesn't give the chronicler much to go on. I think that the fact that he began in his later years to let his wit and philosophy show through will provide the basis for some historian's estimate of his character, and certainly a project of this kind is very ideal, I think, for approaching this thing, because, as I've said, I don't think that there was any man who was a single intimate of the President's, but you get all of these firsthand testimonies like this and you will begin to get a kind of refracted but generally valid image of what he must have been like. Of course, it will be so hard in the aura of this sacrificial death to determine just what the man is, but I believe somehow that history and the populations who inherit history have a valid instinct for the personality much better than you can get out of daily newspapers. Now I believe, for example, that the myth of Lincoln is the true Lincoln. Maybe I'm just a romantic on this, but I believe that the myth that will be made of President Kennedy will be the true Kennedy, perhaps more of the truth about the President than President Kennedy himself knew.

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BELK: Thank you Ambassador Gullion. This is the fifth and final tape of an interview of Ambassador Edmund A. Gullion, former United States Ambassador to the Republic of the Congo, Leopoldville. The interviewer was Samuel E. Belk, National Security staff. The date is August 21, 1964. The place, the White House.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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