

Antonio Garrigues Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/25/1966
Administrative Information

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Date of Interview: November 25, 1966
Place of Interview: Rome, Italy
Length: 16 pages

Biographical Note

Garrigues, (1904 - 2004), Spanish Ambassador to the United States (1962 - 1964), discusses Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. in Madrid during the Spanish Civil War, the Charles de Gaulle press conference, and negotiating Spanish-American agreements, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation

Antonio Garrigues, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, November 25, 1966,
(page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Oral History Interview

with

His Excellency Antonio Garrigues

November 25, 1966
Rome, Italy

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Ambassador, perhaps you could tell us when you first met the Kennedys, any member of the Kennedy family or the family as a whole.

GARRIGUES: Well, first of all you have to excuse my poor English. I will try to do my best. I have to say to start that probably I owe my life to the Kennedy family. That sounds a little strange, but you will see. During the Civil

[-1-]

War in Spain, I was living in Madrid. At that time my wife was alive. Now, I'm a widower since several years ago. My wife was American. She was born in Des Moines in Iowa. And during the Civil War probably she was the only American woman living in Madrid. Madrid was practically all the time during the Civil war.... How do you say that?

O'CONNOR: Surrounded.

GARRIGUES: ...surrounded by the national army. Then the conditions of life were very, very hard, as you can understand. At that time I was living in Madrid with my wife, and I was acting in the underground

organization. It was called the Falange Clandestina. The history was happening around February, 1939. This means at the end of our Civil War – our Civil War ended in March of the same year.

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And at that time the older of the Kennedys' brother...

O'CONNOR: Joseph Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.]...

GARRIGUES: Joseph Kennedy arrived to Madrid. I don't know – I cannot remember who sent him to my house. But probably somebody who knows that the only American living in Madrid at this moment was probably my wife. And then he came to my house and was in contact with us. He was sent, I don't remember exactly, either, by some newspaper. He was trying to do some report, some information about the condition of life or the developing of the Civil War. In that moment the situation of the Spanish Republic was very, very bad. Now, the Republican Army, or rather the Red Army, as we used to call it, was practically defeated. And the conditions of life

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in Madrid were very, very bad. And it had started among, I mean inside, the Republican Army a fight, a clash between the Republican side of the Army and the Communist – inside the Republican Army. Some, not kilometers, but some meters the National Army was just waiting to make the final push, the final movement.

And then the situation in Madrid was absolutely incredible because going through Madrid you were passing from one section dominated by the Communists to another section dominated by the Republicans. But you never knew in which section you were at each moment because the dominion of the sections was changing at any moment, as you can understand.

O'CONNOR: Surely.

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GARRIGUES: Well then it happens that Joe Kennedy was very, very interested in our underground work because underground work is very interesting; it is something that is risky. And then he used to accompany us – I mean the group that was very, very active in this moment inside the city in connection with several services that we had to do. One day Joe Kennedy came with us with a group of underground people to do something, to do some service. He came with us in the same car. And then going from the La Castellana, as we call one of the main streets in Madrid, to La Calle Serrano, that is only one of the important streets in Madrid through a street that is called "S" Street

[-5 -]

because of its shape, its form, we were stopped by a group of militiamen. Of course, we didn't know if they were Communists or they were Republicans because that was impossible, as you can understand. They put us out of the car, and we were put against a wall then. And then they asked us for our identity – documents. When you are in the underground, you have all kinds of documents because you produce them. And then you have absolutely any kind of documents you need. But you probably wish to know which kind of documents you have to present because it was very risky to present the wrong one. Well, finally we knew they were Communists, and we presented the documents that were more fitted for that. But these militiamen were rather suspicious – were very

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suspicious. But then they arrived to Joe Kennedy, and they asked him also for his document. Naturally he had only his American passport, he had no other. The militiamen, with the presence of an American and with the presentation of the American passport, were rather embarrassed. We noticed that – that they were rather embarrassed. Well, you know, in this moment life, during all the Spanish Revolution and Civil War, was of a very cheap price. When this situation happens in a country, then human life is very cheap always. In that moment, now, with such a fight inside the Red section of Spain, human life was worth absolutely nothing. To be killed in Madrid at that moment was the easiest thing in the world. We thought that our last moment had arrived.

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We were not able to explain what we were doing because it was very difficult to explain that. And then they were, the militia people there, this little group of Communists, they had a conference there, and we saw that they were discussing about the situation, probably what to do with us. We'd have to be killed immediately or something like that. But I am sure that finally because of the Joe Kennedy passport and his presence there and all, that I am sure that they decided to just liberate us and to let us to go our way. That was my first contact with the Kennedy family. Then, as you know, Joe Kennedy disappeared in a war action, and our contact with the Kennedy family was interrupted. That was the puntatas, as they say here in

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Italy, the first history.

O'CONNOR: When did you once again regain contact with the Kennedy family that was broken off at that point?

GARRIGUES: Then the contact was interrupted for several years because, as you remember, the World War started immediately after the termination of our Civil War. Our Civil War finished in April 1939, and in September of the same year the War started. And some months or one year after Joe Kennedy disappeared, then my contact with the Kennedy family was interrupted. Well then, some years later, in 1962, I was appointed as Ambassador of Spain in Washington. That was one year or two years after....

O'CONNOR: John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] took office.

GARRIGUES: John Kennedy election, no? He was elected in...

[-9-]

O'CONNOR: '60 the election was held.

GARRIGUES: ...in '60. I arrived in '62. Then he was the President of the United States, and I had to present to him my credentials. And in my first meeting with him, in the act of the presentation of my credentials, I related to him this first contact that I had with the family Kennedy and with his brother Joe.

O'CONNOR: Had he known about this before?

GARRIGUES: No, no, no, nothing at all, nothing at all. Then I have, with him as President, the normal relation of an Ambassador with the President of the United States. I have to say that at that time the relations between Spain and your country were good, but not very close because of the political problems and especially of the left liberal wing. In America there were many,

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many – how can I say? - many reactions.

O'CONNOR: Yes, they were antagonistic towards Spain?

GARRIGUES: Yes, yes, antagonistic with the Spanish regime. Then I have to overpass, I mean to sobre pasar, to, to....

O'CONNOR:to overcome....

GARRIGUES: Yes, that is exactly the word, to overcome this situation. And that took time. But finally I think that I arrived to gain the confidence of the President and to gain the confidence of the political milieu in Washington, and then the relation was becoming closer and closer. I remember that I was invited to have dinner in the White House the day in which the French President, I mean de

Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle], after the Bahamas Conference decided for the first time to start his policy, let us say,

[-11-]

against the cooperation in the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] – what had been until that time the policy that was built up by Foster Dulles [John Foster Dulles], you remember that. But you remember that this press conference of de Gaulle was the first step that started this new policy by de Gaulle in Europe.

O'CONNOR: Oh yes, oh yes.

GARRIGUES: And especially the position of France as a power independent between the two great powers – well, you know what I mean.

O'CONNOR: Surely.

GARRIGUES: That was the same day in which de Gaulle made his famous first press conference in that connection. I was invited. There were very few people. It was a rather familiar dinner, and I have to say the President was terribly angry...

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O'CONNOR: Oh, I can imagine.

GARRIGUES: ...with this new situation. The agreement for him, and now this reaction of the French President had irritated him tremendously. And I remember that probably because of that he was nervous and it was a rather – I don't know how I can say – but he was very, very much irritated, and we talked about that.

O'CONNOR: You talked about this de Gaulle press conference?

GARRIGUES: Yes, we talked about that. I tried to tranquilize him, you know, but he was so irritated that I did not succeed.

O'CONNOR: That's interesting because – let me interrupt you for a second – so many people have talked about John Kennedy as almost never becoming irritated that

[-13-]

it's interesting to hear you relate this episode.

GARRIGUES: My impression was that he was that day really very upset by this new situation. And then, for instance, during the negotiation of the Spanish-American agreements on the bases, you know, in Spain, we had all the, let us say, professional contacts during this negotiation that was very difficult, as all negotiations are. They are usually – not that we are right to do it until we reached the point of the agreement. They have many up and downs. That is quite normal, no? And they have occasion to see the President.

I remember also one day that was very special. I went to the White House to pick up the President that he was going to the press conference in

[-14-]

the – in the....Where did they used to have it?

O'CONNOR: State Department Auditorium?

GARRIGUES: ...in the State Department, yes. In the State Department Auditorium. And in going together through the garden from his desk to the car, I asked him which one was his feeling going to such a difficult meeting, not such a difficult performance, because you know how difficult was this press conference, and the marvelous way....It was really something marvelous the way he was capable to do that. For me it was one of the most outstanding things that I have ever seen – the way he could arrange to answer the different questions with such a precise language, with such grace, with such ability was something absolutely incredible. Then

[-15-]

I was asking him going from his desk to take the car about his feelings. And then he told me that, "Well, look, I think that it must be exactly the same feeling that a bull fighter has when he's going to the plaza." That was something that was very important because that was his last press conference. Ten days later he was killed.

And I think that that can be the resume of my relation with the Kennedy family.
Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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