

Leopold Sedar Senghor Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 06/13/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Leopold Sedar Senghor (1906 - 2001) was a Senegalese intellectual and politician who served as the first President of the Senegal Republic from 1960 to 1980. This interview focuses on Senghor's relationship with John F. Kennedy (JFK), the admiration felt by the Senegalese people for President Kennedy, and the lasting legacy that JFK created on both the national and the global scale, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Leopold Sedar Senghor

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Oral History Interview

with

LEOPOLD SEDAR SENGHOR

June 13, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Bruce Oudes

For the John F. Kennedy Library

OUDES: Mr. President, could you tell us something about the conversations and the personal meetings you had with President Kennedy?

SENGHOR: To begin with, I met President Kennedy for the first time in November 1961, if my recollection is correct. As soon as I had sat down -- he was sitting in his rocking chair, as usual -- he asked me: "What is meant by 'negritude?'" Naturally, I gave him the best answer I could. Then came the next question: "What is the African road to Socialism?" Third question: "What do you think about segregation in the United States?" This last question I answered approximately as follows: "Of course, I cannot approve of segregation, but in my country, Senegal, we are aware of the efforts being made by the Federal Government to fight it. Racism is as old as mankind, and the essential thing is that the governments fight against it and set a good example."

As for comments on our interview, or any special incidents which occurred, I can say that we had an interpreter in his office (if my memory is correct), but he did not turn out to be very useful, since Mr. Kennedy would make a gesture when I had finished talking to indicate that he understood well enough, and I, in turn, understood him well enough since he had a slight Oxford accent (here there is a touch of humor in Senghor's voice.) And this is surprising, since, when I come to the United States, I don't understand much for the first week because of the American accent.

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As I just said, I think this discussion took place in November, 1961. After our talk I had the opportunity to meet Mrs. Kennedy. He took me to the floor where Mrs. Kennedy was, and we had the... we made a tour of the rooms and had a talk with Mrs. Kennedy which ranged over a number of topics. At one point, when I was talking about French culture, since I am French by culture, he replied: "We have this, we have this, ah! But we don't have the French culture..." And I said to him: "You can't have everything... You have a wife of French origin." Those are my recollections of the discussion which I had the honor to have with President Kennedy.

OUDES: In the second place, Mr. President, can you tell me what indirect relationships you may have had with President Kennedy, by letters or through is personal representative in Senegal, the U.S. Ambassador?

SENGHOR: President Kennedy and I had a rather voluminous correspondence. It can, by the way, be found in the archives. You know how much the presidency of John F. Kennedy contributed to strengthening the cooperation between my country, Senegal, and the United States of America. The most important agreements between the United States of America and Senegal were signed while he was President. The Peace Corps agreement, the "Food for Peace" agreement, and, in particular, the agreement which enables us, at this very moment, to build three high schools in Senegal: the Kaolack High School named after Gaston Berger who is, as you know, the great Franco-Senegalese philosopher; the Thiès High School, to be named after Malixy -- a great religious leader and a great scholar, and finally, I was going to say the principal high school, the one for girls in Dakar, which is to be named after John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

I should mention that, naturally, the Ambassador has sent me President Kennedy's major work, *Strategy for Peace* in, I believe, both French and English. If I remember correctly, it was perhaps President Kennedy himself who gave me this book in English, and, if my

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memory still serves me alright, I replied: "Ah! That will enable me to improve my English, especially in view of the excellence of your style... your book will be rather easy to read. Besides, I have here in my library several books about President Kennedy. He was truly... a great man... who held my attention completely.

OUDES: In the third place, Mr. President, besides your relations with President Kennedy, can you recall any opinions, evaluations, or observations expressed by other persons about President Kennedy, which might be of interest?

SENGHOR: You know, it is above all when a great man dies that one can measure most precisely his aura, his influence. As you know, I learned of his death in the

middle of the electoral campaign. This was a very heavy blow for me. And you know that the Senegalese people considered John Kennedy's death an occasion for national mourning. We had not forgotten his campaign for equal rights for the Negroes of the United States of America. On that occasion I received a great many letters of condolence, as though he had been a member of my family. I remember especially how one stalwart of my party sent a letter of condolence and signed it "so-and-so known as Kennedy." You know that this is one of the idiosyncrasies of the Senegalese -- they take the names of great men, for example, "Anaboudiane known as Clemenceau", and my correspondent called himself "so-and-so known as Kennedy." Let me just say once more that we felt the death of President Kennedy to be a national loss since we had the feeling that his death meant the end of a page in world history.

OUDES: Mr. President how was he regarded by the African heads of state and by the Africans in general? Why?

SENGHOR: You know, I can say that all the African chiefs of state had a feeling of great esteem, I can even say, great admiration, for President Kennedy. If I had not been in the midst of an electoral campaign, I would have come to his funeral in person; and you know

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that most of the African heads of state, had they not been fearful of inconveniencing the United States government, would all have come in person to President Kennedy's funeral -- which is the highest mark of esteem.

OUDES: Could you, Mr. President, give us your impressions of President Kennedy's policy, -- its achievements, its mistakes, its failures.

SENGHOR: I followed President Kennedy's policy from the time he was a Senator and made the remarkable speeches which you know about -- on the principal international problems and, in particular, on the problem of decolonization. I do not want to get involved in United States domestic politics, but I followed the presidential campaign day by day and, privately (since I did not have the right to do it publicly) I prayed that he might win.

I really cannot find very many errors in President Kennedy's policy. *He* was the one who began the *détente*, as you know. I am sure that, despite his misunderstandings with General de Gaulle... I had the impression that they would ultimately reach an understanding. As you know, each of these men had a strong personality, and basically, they admired each other. And I think that President Kennedy's death has been a great misfortune from the standpoint of improved relations between the United States and France. I think, thus, that he did not make any serious errors, which is difficult in politics, since, alas, we are only human. Politics is not a science; it is an art. And, in general, even the greatest heads of state make mistakes. He doubtless made some small mistakes. I do not think he made any major one.

OUDES: Could you say something about his small mistakes, please?

SENGHOR: I said: "I suppose (here Senghor laughs) he made some small mistakes," only I could not, I really could not tell you what they were, though perhaps, perhaps... he could perhaps have been more patient with France, more delicate -- although actually he was patient and delicate and did try to understand General de Gaulle. Basically, although he did not support it, I think he understood General de Gaulle's policy.

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OUDES: And, for instance, as for an evaluation of the various matters between Cuban and the United States -- what can I ask you about that?

SENGHOR: I think that his policy with Cuba in general, I think that President Kennedy could not have had a different policy because he had to take American opinion into account. He had to take into account the world balance, objectively, did he not? Politicians are not choir boys, not young girls. The interest and the security of the United States were involved, and the world balance as well. I think that President Kennedy would have even found a positive solution to the Cuban problem. This is my profound conviction. Of course, I could not base this on any precise facts, but it is my conviction.

OUDES: Mr. President, how would you evaluate him in comparison with other twentieth-century leaders?

SENGHOR: I think that President Kennedy was one of the greatest men of the twentieth century, along with Khrushchev, Mao Tse-Tung, and General de Gaulle. I think that President Kennedy will measure up to one of his democratic predecessors, to the author of the "New Deal," President Roosevelt, only with more youth, perhaps more dynamism, more idealism. We should not forget that he was of Irish origin; with more mysticism, more poetry, I would say.

OUDES: One last question, Mr. President. In your opinions, what was President Kennedy's influence on world affairs, on the course of history?

SENGHOR: You know that the two principal problems of this second part of the twentieth century are essentially the continuation of peaceful coexistence, the strengthening of peace, to be more precise, and, on the other hand, decolonization -- which is one of the conditions of peaceful coexistence and the preservation of peace. And I think that in this respect, it was perhaps President Kennedy who did the most to preserve peace. As for decolonization, while America had decolonized before President Kennedy, I think it was President Kennedy and

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General de Gaulle who have done the most to solve the problem of decolonization. To recapitulate, I think that in the history of the twentieth century, President Kennedy will be one of the great figures of our times, and he will be one of the two or three statesmen who will leave their mark on this second half of the twentieth century. And this is why the Senegalese people and government will not forget him soon; and that is why the John Kennedy High School is for us a kind of memorial.

OUDES: Thank you, Mr. President.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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