

Alastair Granville Forbes Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 10/19/1966
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Biographical Note

Forbes, (1908 - 2001) Justice, Federal Supreme Court of Rhodesia and Nyasaland 1963; President, Court of Appeal: Seychelles 1965 – 1976, discusses JFK's political development and maturation, his marriage to Jacqueline Kennedy, and his friendship with William David Ormsby-Gore Harlech, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

of

Alastair Granville Forbes

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Alastair Granville Forbes – JFK #1

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First Oral History Interview

with

Alastair Granville Forbes

October 19, 1966
London, England

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

FORBES: I didn't know him until the end of the war probably. I was a very great friend of his sister, Kathleen [Kathleen Hartington Kennedy], whom I loved. At one moment, we both of us in a sort of second best way thought that we might get married, then we both subsequently fell in love with married people, and didn't. But we were very great friends and I loved her, and she brought Jack [John F. Kennedy] closely into my life at the end of the war. I was then running for Parliament as a Liberal. He came up to listen to speeches. He was, as you remember, writing about the election in those days. That was the first time we really seriously began talking about politics together.

What struck me then was that he was more intellectual than any other member of the family. He read more, but nevertheless I don't believe to the day of his death he was what is not normally described as an intellectual. He had a fantastically good instinct, once his attention was aroused in a problem, for getting the gist of it and coming to a mature judgment about it. He had that tension always that the number of problems which an ordinary intellectual would in fact have looked at in the world around him which he had never even considered up to the day he went into the White House. The catalyst in his life was that the problems of the world which a more aware, mature intellectual man would have been considering every day hit him with a great rush because they were the world's business upon

the desk of the most powerful office in the world. I think, to give him credit, he hoisted them in fairly rapidly and fairly well. But this is germane to what you were saying

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about the myth because the myth of the liberal, radical president - I mean, he was not a liberal, radical man but by his instincts and his instinct for seeing how problems have to be solved within the context of the time, he did come to solutions which were liberal because those were the correct solutions. But he came to them more from a kind of common sense, instinctive way rather than from a conviction which he had been carrying inside him and waiting for office to have the chance to carry them out.

One of the great paradoxes that everybody's well aware of-today, I suppose, which is, Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] as a man who had thought all his life to some extent about the racial problem because he'd had the kind of traumatic experience teaching "wetbacks" in school, and he had made up his mind that there was not in fact...It was not too difficult a jump to make from seeing that wetbacks are the same as poor white Texans and probably better and brighter pupils and more respectable human beings, to seeing that Negroes were, also. But I think it's fair to say that the president - in fact, I can recall it from my own experience because naturally living outside the United States the colored problem struck me as being both immediate and urgent when he was dismissing it as being unlikely to have to bother him.

O'CONNOR: When do you say he was saying this?

FORBES: Up to '56 he certainly was saying that it was from my liberal preoccupations that I saw this as being much more urgent than it was, and it was not so. I think it is an interesting thing in politics, and the politicians I've seen who have to judge. It's very much like driving a car; you have to know what is oncoming, and you also have to drive very carefully with your eye on the mirror. One of the most important things to judge is the speed of the thing which is coming up behind you and which is about to overtake you. You must have both instincts. I think the adaptive instinct of knowing about what was coming up behind you was absent in him until experience taught it to him in office.

Of course, the Bay of Pigs to some extent also is the fruit of not quite having known what was coming from behind. You might put it down to saying that he was a man who had not done his homework in a way that some people who had wanted to be president or prime minister might have, but he could do

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his homework. He was very much like a newspaperman who doesn't bother to do anything until the deadline is practically around the corner, and then they think, "God, I've got two thousand words to write before my deadline." They write it and they get it done and they do it well. He needed the pressure of office to think about them, but I never considered him to be a

man who had reflected about the great issues of the day and of his time, but I always was struck by how good he was at making kind of Solomon-like quick judgment about any of those issues when it was presented to him as being something one wanted his opinion about. This, I think, was his great gift which stood him in very good stead when he got into office.

O'CONNOR: Do you think this was true of him when he was younger? You knew him when he was younger. People have said this about him when he became president, that he had this ability to make a Solomon-like decision you'd say. Is this something that really he acquired after maturing, after '58, perhaps, or '56?

FORBES: I think he potentially did have that way, and it was to do with his method of being instinctive and also being lazy. One of the reasons why one didn't notice the gift in him so much was because he preferred not to have to deal with something rather than to deal with it. Only this thing of knowing that he was going to be for eight years.... He was not a decisive man by nature. He would prefer to postpone matters. He would prefer the matters to settle themselves by the interplay of conflicting forces. But when he saw that decision was necessary, he could take it, and I think that once he found that the one great decision he did make, the Cuban decision, I think that his second term would undoubtedly have shown a completely different president. He got into the way. He got his self-confidence. He did have self-confidence in his own powers of judgment, but I suppose he must have thought less about the matters on his desk than most people have said since he died.

O'CONNOR: This is a rather unusual estimate of John Kennedy, frankly, and I was wondering if you got this estimate from specific instances that you could recall when you knew him, let's say, at the time of the war or just after the war. I mean, how did you arrive at this sort of a judgment, for example, that he preferred to postpone decisions or avoid decisions if possible?

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FORBES: Well, I think I got it from talking with him and staying with him very often which I would do in Washington if I was there and being a working journalist, writing a great deal about Europe, about the whole problem of the cold war, being what's called somebody rather engage and thinking it very urgent, that the comparative phlegm with which John Kennedy viewed issues which appeared to me to be burning and made me think that he was very much more detached from it. I think he needed the spur of participation in order to.... People say that he got the bug of becoming historian and thought very much that afterwards.... And I think he did acquire that. Even after Profiles in Courage I wasn't convinced that he was more than the sort of exercise which a man in the eighteenth century would take up in order to say that one could turn one's hand to that sort of matter. Already I think that The Years.... What was the name of his thesis at Harvard?

O'CONNOR: Why England Slept.

FORBES: Why England Slept is an excellent piece of high class journalism, but, I mean, as a publisher I wouldn't be very interested in it. I think that Profiles in Courage has nothing in it anywhere which shows an enormous, broad sweep of an historian's view of the world. If his gifts had turned in that direction, added to his experience of how really important decisions have to be taken about really important matters, I believe he probably would have been a very good historian because office changed him completely. He was always reluctant. He was reluctant to have to take a line. He didn't care for it. His contact during the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] period is...

O'CONNOR: That's an excellent example.

FORBES: . . . very indicative of his preference to sit this dance out if there is any chance of sitting it out. It's true that it was embarrassing for him because McCarthy was a friend of his family's and was a guy who was used to dropping in for a drink. In a way he was used to McCarthy because McCarthy had become a friend both of his brother Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] and of himself before he [Joseph McCarthy] had, in fact, opted for the issue which

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was to make him so famous. I can very well remember McCarthy was considered a good junior senator who was worth cultivating. And then people would say in the British embassy when we were looking around for people who would support NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], which was being created at that time, and give it a favorable wind, "That fellow McCarthy is a sort of young, ambitious character. He's looking for some kind of bandwagon to get on. We could interest him in the Atlantic alliance."

So it was perfectly innocent, but having acquired this familiarity with McCarthy, who was liked by other members of his family and by himself, he was very, very reluctant to disassociate himself or anything else that he might get up to, which I think showed a lack of thought as to what it was all about. I mean, he didn't see in what direction McCarthy was running - totally counter not just liberal American tradition but to a basic American tradition.

O'CONNOR: Did you hear him talk about McCarthy? Can you think of any specific instances when he did mention his affection or lack of affection for McCarthy? This is one of the most controversial issues in his...

FORBES: Well, I could hardly help hearing him talk about McCarthy because, I mean, McCarthy we would talk about long before he had become notorious because, you know, I'd be about my affairs and then would get back to the house and he was there. "What are you doing tonight? Are you doing

anything?" "I thought Joe McCarthy's coming around for a drink, and we might take out a couple of girls from the Senate typing pool or something like that." It was on that kind of degree of....So then one began to be interested in McCarthy. I found McCarthy unsympathetic. I mean, that isn't a question of hindsight. I didn't find him particularly dangerous or anything like that.

(I do remember once - although it's not worth mentioning - having a conversation with somebody at one of the conventions and Randolph Churchill - who later became a friend of the president - and I introduced him to the Kennedys in the first instance - had suddenly joined in the conversation and said something, and Mrs. John Sherman Cooper [Lorraine S. Cooper] turned to him and said, "Well, that's an extraordinary thing for you to say,

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coming from Wisconsin." Randolph said, "What the hell do you mean? I don't come from Wisconsin. Who the hell do you think you're talking to?" She said, "Why I'm talking to Joe McCarthy, aren't I?" And he said, "The hell, Madam, you're talking to Randolph Churchill." That was a confusion to do with their brash personalities rather than with their political convictions.)

He felt that there probably were a great many fellow travelers and Communists in public life - and there were a certain number - and it wasn't the pidgin; it wasn't his choice of subject. He didn't see any reason why Joe McCarthy shouldn't be pursuing the matter provided the ends were correct. He was not a man easily shocked by anything.

O'CONNOR: Kennedy?

FORBES: Kennedy. He was fairly urbane and untroubled by matters - at that age certainly. He didn't identify, I think it's fair to say, with the difficulties of intellectuals, and he didn't see how easy it could be for great unfairness to be done to people. I think it's also true to say that he didn't identify in a way that the liberal Kennedy of world legend might have been expected to do either with the poor urban problem or the press. He had a detachment which reminded me very much of Winston Churchill in the sense that his life had been protected by money. Money was a great insulator. If you don't sort of make your bed and get your own breakfast and have a certain amount of conversation with people who are doing all sorts of ordinary, simple jobs, it does rob you of a great deal of.... I mean, whole areas in which empathy should naturally play a part are closed to you. Things come as quite a surprise to you when you get to hear about them and someone comes to explain them to you.

Considering all that, I think that what seems clear in the case of Kennedy is that whether you call it ambition or the need to fulfill the ambition which others have set for you in your family - father and so on - had been a block to him being a fully integrated personality, which I think is a possible explanation, or whether you simply think that he was a late maturer, I believe that having arrived at the summit of any man's ambitions that it had an enormous liberating effect on his personality, that, say, he began to live and understand matters very, very rapidly. Office had almost the opposite effect that you might

expect on somebody. It's so easy for people to say that the cares of state weigh them down to such an extent that they can't cope with understanding human problems or going very deeply into matters. Via some kind of contradiction exactly the opposite happened to him. Having this enormous burden of work which he found he could in fact deal with far more efficiently than he imagined – of

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course, helped by the best staff that probably any American president has ever assembled - he found... I mean, he took a much closer interest in his friends' problems. We'll touch later on the most interesting human angle that historians will later get down to, how this man's marriage was not so much remade as actually made while he was in the White House. His whole attitude to women, to friendship... I know that the amount of time he spent in compassionate conversation with friends who had had sadnesses and difficulties which had occurred while he was in the White House was very great and would, I think, have been inconceivable. He wouldn't have gone to that trouble, wouldn't have felt that degree of empathy with their problems if he had not reached a strange kind of liberation and become a more integrated human being.

He didn't really become himself until he was president, as a matter of fact, which I'm sure you will find struck people like David Gore [William David Ormsby-Gore Harlech] and others who had known him well. He had it in him always, I'm sure. I think people do, and one saw these flashes of insight at the odd moments during the fifteen years I knew him before. Anyhow let's get on to something else.

O'CONNOR: All right. You brought up the subject of his marriage, and I wanted to ask you something about that anyway. You knew him before he was married.

FORBES: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Do you recall his conversations with you just before he got married or about his planning to get married? What sort of a man was he then? Was he going into marriage with any misunderstandings?

FORBES: You see, he always expressed himself in frivolous terms, which to an American is sometimes shocking but less shocking to an Englishman because in this country we think very often that it's quite possible and suitable to express yourself frivolously about serious topics and seriously about frivolous topics, which is why I think that social life on this side of the Atlantic is more rewarding and gay, (in now obsolete, alas, sense of the word, i.e. jolly) I think, than on the other. He had a kind of a joking way of talking about serious decisions. I think he was very conscious that he was marrying in a way which was suitable in the sense that he was marrying a very pretty girl who was also Catholic, his family was pleased. You know, it's what the French call bien. It was bien. It was okay. If you have to get married,

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you might as well marry somebody who's thought to be suitable by background and that kind of thing. I think that he was infatuated with Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], but I think that he also was aware that he was taking on somebody basically incompatible. I didn't think the incompatibility was as serious as that. There have been many, many happy marriages between people who had - the husband who has had one very strong interest which was not in fact shared by the wife. There have been many happy marriages in which the wife is not required to be a continual helpmate. This is true of business, politics, writing.

But it was there, and it was so glaring that a man like Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop] who later became extremely friendly with both, but was not at all during the first ten years or so after the war in Washington with either. I can remember him saying quite a long time after the marriage, "I find the marriage of Jack to Jackie indecent." I said, "Well, why do you find it indecent?" He said, "Because it's ludicrous for two people to get married merely because they admire each other's appearance. They make a marvelous looking couple, but they're totally ill assorted. It seems to me quite unsuitable and most self-indulgent of them (I think was the word he used) to have gone and got married." That was a very exaggerated judgment, but the fact that it was made shows that to other people there was strong evidence of some basic incompatibility. Jackie was certainly very bored by politics and very bored by the very aggressive camaraderie of the Kennedy family, absolutely foreign to her nature. Fortunately, I think, she also spotted that it was really foreign to Jack's nature. He was loyal to his family and loyal to his family atmosphere - "Honor thy father and mother that as thy days be long and...." you know - that he was of them and not of them. He viewed them with detachment, sympathy, but I think Jackie simply would have wished it could be with greater detachment and not to have to go there quite so often and not to have the family quite so much around one's neck, you know. They're not intellectual. By English standards I wouldn't call Jackie an intellectual at all, but she's nevertheless somebody who has a very much more sensitive nature and much less extroverted than they all were.

His relations to his father were always very interesting. I think that his individuality was shown by the very early date at which he separated himself altogether from his father's judgments while at the same time not abating by one jot the very great affection he felt for his father. I can remember sharing a room at Hyannis in his father's house. Jack used to

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snore a lot, and there was a good deal of reason sort of to postpone the moment of actually dosing down. We would sit and chew the cud quite late. I naturally found myself totally out of sympathy with almost all of the ideas of old Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], and I found that there was absolutely no embarrassment whatsoever on his part in agreeing with many of my criticisms of his father's views. They did in fact, as I think the father has said somewhere, have a kind of armistice in which they less and less discussed* affairs because the father realized that the possibility of finding common ground diminished rather than increased with years.

He valued his father's judgments in business matters. I felt a kind of... I think it required a slight effort of will on his part not to be bothered about the actual way his father had chosen to make his fortunes and one of the reasons why he never had a thing to do with the administration of it, merely lived off the investments. He found it very useful to be rich, but he didn't really... He would have been a little bit more comfortable, I think, about it if the fortune had been one of the more respectably acquired ones, by comparison, with some of the great American tycoons. He was very true to himself in his love for his father which I think was absolutely genuine. I mean, you can love an old rogue. And, also Mr. Kennedy's affection for his children was and is immensely touching. It's the most true part of him.

O'CONNOR: Well, listen, I didn't want to get you away frankly from the subject of John Kennedy's marriage a little too early. You mentioned a little earlier something about the possibility of a breakup of that marriage. I wondered if you'd comment on that, your feeling...

FORBES: My feeling was that it was going for the rocks but never reached the rocks.

O'CONNOR: Why was it going for the rocks?

FORBES: I think because I think if you don't conceive of the possibility of divorce, which Catholics don't whether they are devout Catholics or not... Of course, John Kennedy was as detached in his view of his religion as he was about many other of his views. He was not a devout Catholic. He just happened to be a Catholic like he happened to be rich. He accepted both matters with the same resignation. Certainly in the early stages of his political career he found it a great deal more of a nuisance to be a Catholic than to be rich. He wasn't devout. The French have an expression, dévot et croyant.

*Interviewee's note: Except the question of buying 'pols' and votes of course.

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I would have thought he was ni dévot ni croyant. He wasn't a great one for going deeply into religious matters. He conformed.

In this connection I recall at the time of the council, the conclave for the election of a new pope, the present Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, [Roy Howard Jenkins] went out on rather short notice. He went out for the Observer [London Observer] to do two long think pieces about the concave. He called up out of the blue the American College to speak to Cardinal Cushing [Richard James Cushing] because he thought there might be a chance of going around to talk to him. Cardinal Cushing was feeling bored and low about the proceedings and said, "Sure come right over and let's have a chat." They walked up and down in the garden of the American College where Cushing stayed. Roy said, tentatively trying to find common ground as any journalist would before getting into the ecclesiastical side of the

matter that he knew the Kennedys, he was a friend of Jack's, and was amazed when Cardinal Cushing said, "Well, Jack's the one I like least. I've known him. I married him, christened his children, but he's not the one I'm fond of. It's his mother and Bobby and Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] whom I like, and I really am not that fond of Jack." Of course, one is old enough and urbane enough never to be surprised at the hypocrisies of the princes of the church, but there were certain utterances made at the time of the president's death and afterwards by Cardinal Cushing...

O'CONNOR: I wasn't aware of that.

FORBES: ... which made one recall this particular disclosure which he'd made.

O'CONNOR: Do you recall those utterances because I've never heard that before?

FORBES: Nearly everyone recalls that Cardinal Cushing spoke as if Jack Kennedy were his favorite son. I just think that those of us who had been aware of this interesting disclosure, gratuitously made to Mr. Roy Jenkins, which he naturally didn't see fit to publish at any time, one thought it slightly hypocritical that Cardinal Cushing had to go so far. It was all part of this extraordinary avalanche of the beginning of the myth.

O'CONNOR: If you recall again - I hate to chase you back to the same subject- but I'm still quite...

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FORBES: Anyway, this came up simply because I do believe if you are Catholic and married, because you don't conceive of divorce as being possible, it may have the effect of making you work much less at the business of making a marriage succeed, and all human relationships do require a considerable amount of effort and self sacrifice. If you think they just go on forever, you perhaps forget this or it's more easy for you to forget it; or you close your eyes to certain matters which if you thought there was the sanction of separation or divorce around the corner, you might do a little bit. So I think the drift apart was made wider and faster by this. He was not a man made for domesticity in his own view. I read somewhere something written recently about a great friend of mine, Ian Fleming, whose words the president is supposed to have very much enjoyed, and the famous writer Rosamond Lehmann [Rosamond N. Lehmann] had said of Ian - I can't quite remember her exact terms; I think she said something about - "Ian gets off with women because he can't get on with them." There were similarities in both men's characters.

Jack was very, very attracted to women who were very attracted to him. He had not had, until his marriage, the sort of relationship which was intimate emotionally and intellectually as well as physically. He really only acquired and only discovered in himself a capacity for domesticity when the restrictions of his great office made it inevitable for him to be home nights, as it were, a great deal more often. Even the nanny of his children has

remarked that he never saw much of the children until he moved to the White House. He discovered again - you may say it was by force ma'eure that he discovered the pleasures of family life and possibilities of a happy marriage. But he did discover it, and the fact he discovered it shows that it was in him all along. And it is another aspect of the early part of his life, that first while, having been so very, very different to what it was when he became president. His whole personality did change, but I don't think this means that it wasn't all there before. He conducted his private life in a way which was much more usual to people in wartime, if you see what I mean. The casualness of officers and men who feel that they may lose their lives quite soon is a common phenomenon. It's less common in what's called peacetime, but this was his way. Then he had a good deal of reserve which he didn't learn how to break down, I don't think, until he reached the presidency, except for a very, very few people indeed.

The extraordinary thing is, though not a proper Bostonian in any sense of the word and having only been taken to Boston supposedly late in his life, he did have something of that closeness and reserve, not willing to give anything away. I'm

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sure that mitigated against the success of his marriage. And then I suppose that on his mind all the time were political matters or matters to do with the advancement of his political career, which comes to the same thing, which was exactly what Jackie didn't want to hear and was bored stiff by. Anyway, so their lives did become very separate.

O'CONNOR: You apparently felt that this had reached the point where you and Lady Astor, perhaps...

FORBES: Mrs. Astor, [Ana Inez "Chiquital" Astor] yes.

O'CONNOR: Mrs. Astor, had to take a role in, in effect, warning him or suggesting to him that this...

FORBES: Well, we were just sort of.... We loved him and wanted him to get on. We just thought that he ought to be looking in the driving mirror; I mean, he ought to be making sure the troops were all going to be there on the day. This was, you see, pretty late. This was '56 as I remember this conversation. Mrs. Astor said she remembers it; she recalled it to me not long ago. She said, "Do you remember that night with Jack?" He did take it appalled; there's no doubt about it. But I would think that it was more patched up. He didn't want to be married to anybody else and she didn't want to be married to anybody else. But it wasn't really going well at all. This thing did happen that day.

I think that Jackie was not immune to the excitement of power, but I don't think it was a dominating role and I don't mean this in a pejorative way at all. Life at the top is very much more interesting than life lower down. Ward healing politics and trying to get into Congress or into the Senate are all very much on the same level. There's a terrible lot of boring stuff

and having to deal with boring people. I mean, I think, of all the forms of snobbery there are, the snobbery for power and being where the action is seems to be the least reprehensible. I mean, I don't think that one could say that that's wrong anyway. In the case of the marriage it served a purpose. It made her feel that she could be useful in a way which she knew how to be whereas before she was ill at ease and couldn't manage it. Also, it made her see... Perhaps, you see, knowing Jack so well and seeing his rather detached view for anything other than the fruits of ambition, she didn't really believe that he would make such a great president as all that. You can re-fall in love with a man when you find that he is really a very much more serious and impressive proposition than you'd got used to believing.

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O'CONNOR: I'm amazed that that wouldn't be apparent to the person whom he was married to long before it would be apparent to other people.

FORBES: Well, you know, he himself didn't know how good a president he would be. I think he had genuine apprehension and genuine diffidence. He used to say, having seen how extremely badly the affairs of the country had been carried on by a large number of rather mediocre people, that he could hardly believe that he wouldn't be able to do better than at least some of them. But I don't think that he was sublimely confident in his ability, you know. I haven't put it in quite the right way, but you must get the chance to impress more when you are dealing with very important things. Also, his work was there. It was much harder to disassociate himself from it. It was quite different coming back to a house in Georgetown after Senate debate when you can sort of push the thing away to walking into your private quarters from your office, all in the same building. You do carry the thing with you all the time, and almost every action you're taking is in some way connected with the office if you're president of the United States. She was sharing for the first time in it all. I'm sure this brought them very much more closely together.

Of course, what brought them closer together is he discovered that he really loved children. He'd always been very good to children. It was easy because one of his most amiable characteristics was to say really what was on the tip of his tongue to everybody, and children value that more than anything. The one thing they can't stand is being talked down to, you know, and he had that. Then he found that fatherhood was a very exciting and splendid experience. I think that's what really brought it together. Then he was killed at the one moment the marriage was really going quite well. The degree of compassion and concern which he experienced when the little boy died - his premature child - surprised everybody, and I think surprised his wife not least, and he was terribly, deeply upset, you know. He'd formed deep attachment. The thing is interesting because of this extraordinary accident of history which makes a man grow up in every sense of the word in the White House, Washington, D.C., which is a curious place to be growing up, maturing as a man and as a husband and as a father, everything - and as a friend.

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Of course, the only person who can really talk to you well on this subject is David Harlech. It's terribly difficult for an American president to have friends. It's possible for him to have cronies. Cronies aren't much good really because they are usually sycophantic. It's dangerous to have friends who have power because you never know quite whether they will be playing off the degree of intimacy they have with the boss against some other colleague and that makes mischief and trouble. You have to be ready to be a butcher in politics and the president in particular. So one doesn't really seek intimacy, and yet you need it. Power has to be shared or at any rate you have to be able to let off a bit of steam. By this extraordinary accident - it couldn't really have happened in the days when Britain was a great power because it would have been too inconvenient for the president of the United States to make the ambassador of a great power his intimate confidant - but because we cast off our responsibilities and really didn't play any role of importance in the power struggle, well, it was quite possible for him to let down his hair with David Gore.

O'CONNOR: Also the very fact that David Gore had been not merely the ambassador but a friend long before he was ambassador.

FORBES: Yes, but people have greatly exaggerated the degree of intimacy between David and Jack before he became president. They were not that close. And although it's perfectly true that the president, when shown the list of potential ambassadors, did think that David, you know, shone out - I mean he was like Hyperion to a Satyr to all the rest - and he therefore to that extent asked for him. And he'd also been very impressed by his performance at the United Nations which he'd kept in touch with. But I don't think that it was a question... Nor do I think it was really very Machiavellian on Macmillan's [M. Harold Macmillan] part or anything like that to toss it up. It was simply David Gore had in his own way been doing very much the same thing as Kennedy. He had grown up suddenly. He was not the most... He came from a very, very serious political family on both sides, but he'd had a frivolous youth. He loves rushing around in James Bond, fast cars, nearly killed several people and himself several times. He was having not a late maturity but sort of that type of thing. They both found themselves becoming very interested in the serious matters of power at the same time which made it very easy as contemporaries to talk to each other.

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I can't believe there will ever be another case where the president of the United States would have as his best friend... It made Gore's task a little bit difficult because, of course, there was a great deal he had to keep in his mind - what he had from the president as the president's friend and confidant and what he was informed of through the State Department and the rest of it - and I think he did perform that task extremely honorably. I think it was enormously useful to the president to have this personal safety valve. Of course, when he said that he thought that David Gore was by far the most intelligent man in British public life that he'd come across, it's a wonderful tribute to have paid to you but to some extent it was - one always is apt to pay tribute to people who agree with you more than to people who disagree

with you. They were in agreement a great deal of the time, and I think that they saw.... David Gore had certainly thought a great deal more about the problems which he'd seen in the United Nations. I think he helped to open Kennedy's eyes a lot to some of those issues which Kennedy hadn't really thought about. It was a very valuable friendship and you ought to get David.

O'CONNOR: He has been interviewed.

FORBES: He has. The marriage thing. The marriage did come right, as you know, and tragedy struck it down when it was absolutely right as rain. It would, I think, have been right as rain for as long as the JFK presidency lasted.

O'CONNOR: I expressed amazement in the car when you mentioned that you had seen this before the president had. I'd like to ask you again how in the world did you see this - did you see the fact that the marriage was liable to break up - before the president himself had?

FORBES: The president may well have been right in the sense that he thought that we were exaggerating the danger of it.

O'CONNOR: But what specifically...

FORBES: But what I meant is that he did express surprise that his slip was showing to that extent. Do you see what I mean? It's a little bit like, I mean, in the theater, you know, and novels. It's always the

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husbands are last to know that their wives are leaving them, or wives that their husbands are leaving them and so forth. There's a certain deliberate blindness in people, I think, because most people think, well, everything's all right and all the rest.

O'CONNOR: That's an extraordinary step to take, though, to mention this to the husband, and I wondered what in the world had brought you and Lady Astor to this step.

FORBES: It's Mrs. Jackie Astor, not Lady Astor.

O'CONNOR: Oh, I keep calling her Lady Astor.

FORBES: Because you can confuse her with the Virginian lady who was still alive at that time, and we don't want to attribute anything to her wrongly. Well, we were pretty good buddies all of us, you know, and

had been apt to go out in all sorts of weather and didn't have that many secrets and also had this very easy way of talking in which people talked off the top of their heads and out of the bottom of their heart at the same time, you know. It was perfectly easy to simply say, "It's all very well talking about being President, but don't you think we ought to feed the troops first?" That's all. That's how it came out. Then he became quite serious.

I remember an evening which was also illustrative of his wonderful throw-away humor. No man ever went less out of his way to get votes except in the sense of organization than he did. I mean, he found it virtually impossible and repugnant to kiss babies and go through the ordinary thing, you know. He profoundly despised the necessities of the democratic process in that direction. Also, he didn't like familiarity of contact - somehow connected, I think, with his rather strange pollution mania which I'll call it. I suppose a man who has to change his clothes and shower as often a day as he did would rouse the interest of a psychologist which I am not. But later on in the conversation - we'd moved on to some nightclub, I think - up comes an old character called Gregory Ratoff. I happened to recognize him. I don't think Jack did. But he rushed up and said, "Senator. I want to shake you by the hand," with his sort of a foreign accent. He said, "I want you to know that I shall be voting for you as president of the United States in 1960." (Laughter) Well, he is a man who carries an enormous amount of weight on the West Coast, Ratoff. He also is a Catholic in very high standing with the Pope.

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Jack detested being interrupted by anybody in a kind of autograph hunting, scraping up, brainless kind of way when he was in the middle of saying something, which he was at that time. When the guy said that, he hardly looked up and all he said was, "Jesus, don't tell me you've got the vote now." Ratoff said, "I've been a citizen for twenty years." [Laughter] I just thought, you know, there's something wonderful about having the self confidence to have that sort of throwaway like you can't resist a crack when many a sort of political manager would think, "My goodness me. That's not how I want my candidate to carry on at all."

But he was very lovable and admirable in that way. He didn't really go for that. He had this very strong sense of watching himself. He saw the ridiculous side of public life almost more than any other public man I've ever met, certainly more, and I've known quite a few. I knew Churchill [Winston Churchill] terribly well. He was a sort of friend of the family in and out of the house from boyhood. FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] was a cousin of mine, and I used to see him. I've seen a lot of politicians in my day. But he did think that there were sides of it which were so ludicrous and so absurd. He hated the degrading side because he had scruples about it.

I bear in mind an incident which happened. It was very revealing of his character. It was in 1952, and his back was still fairly bad. But he went along to the convention [Democratic National Convention], and the Massachusetts delegation was uncommitted, I think. He was shackled up in the Ambassador East or West, one or the other. I had formed an enormous admiration from this side of the Atlantic for Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], read up a great deal about him and formed the view that he ought to be the Democratic

nominee in that year and had gone out to Chicago to request an introduction to him, actually during the Republican Convention which preceded the Democratic Convention, had breezed into a dinner the first night of my arrival and, very fortunate timing, I sat right there with the governor. I took to him and had a lifelong admiration for him and great friendship, loved him. I really had a political schwarm for him at that moment. So naturally I wanted to get as many of my friends as possible to root for him. Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] knew him quite well because she was living in Chicago, but Jack was totally unconvinced and felt in his bones that the governor was not his kind of guy and that he was not probably the governor's kind of guy. Actually he was not as right about that as he thought.

Anyway, I said, "Look here, to heel with these scruples. It's much better to be on the bandwagon than not. It's silly to have

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to get on it afterwards. One must sort of make one's point before." He said, "What the hell, it looks as if it's going to start rolling. What do you expect me to do?" I said, "Well, there's no harm in calling up and saying you're going to go along with him." The governor asked him around to breakfast. In those days he hated getting out of bed at all in the morning, Jack. He said, "Well, look I'll go around. I'll tell you what, I don't suppose it'll last long, I shall come back and get back into the sack. Come around to my room, and we'll have a chat and see how it goes." So I go around and he says, "Well, for Christ's sake. I don't know why I allowed myself to be railroaded into that. That was an absolutely catastrophic breakfast." I said, "What happened?" "Well," he said, "practically nothing happened. As I saw it, he was looking at me and he knew that I didn't really think he was the best candidate. He knew that I knew that he knew...." You know, it was one of those sort of things. "He knew that I felt that I oughtn't really to be there."

I think myself that he got this slightly wrong. Adlai - you know, people said because Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] hated the Kennedys and despised them and all that that there was some kind of prejudice parti pris of Adlai's vis-a-vis Jack. This, I think, is not quite fair or true. He certainly conceived an admiration for the president. He was a person quite capable of divorcing his own disappointments from his own judgments.

O'CONNOR: This wouldn't have been so until after Jack Kennedy was president, though.

FORBES: No, but all the same, I mean, he didn't know enough about him. Don't forget that some of us thought that there was this presidential timber inside Jack. I never thought it was a disaster that he should be so ambitious. I thought it was a pity that he didn't take a more enthusiastic and serious interest in some of the great issues of the day. That was the only thing. I never thought that he would fail to cope with them once he'd take an interest. But I used to slightly boggle at his conception of getting a job first and thinking about the issues later. I do remember saying that I thought he was presidential timber and hearing Joe Alsop say this only proved my total ignorance of American politics and my inability to size up a candidate, which in the light of

the later enthusiasm of Joe struck me as funny. This temperamental

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clash between the two, was, I think, a pity, and yet they could have got closer. There was, certainly long before Cuba, an incident when Adlai from the United Nations was recommending to the president on the telephone very much more energetic action against the Russian government.

O'CONNOR: In what respect?

FORBES: Well, I cannot remember the issue unfortunately. I've been trying to look this up before coming to talk to you, but there was an incident in which - there was some particular issue - the roles were reversed and the president, having put down the telephone, said, "He's a rum one, that Adlai." I mean.... "He certainly doesn't lack guts once he's screwed his courage to the sticking point." But, of course, it never was the same moment in the same issue that they.... They were more similar in temperament. Just a general idea. They both were, to my mind, indecisive men.

O'CONNOR: You're the only man I've ever heard say that about John Kennedy. I've heard that certainly before about Adlai Stevenson.

FORBES: Well, one has heard it. In fact, it was a great criticism leveled against him - we don't want an indecisive man in the ring. Most people, certainly Jack Kennedy foremost, found something grossly affected and confidence-shaking in a man who couldn't grasp office when it was tendered to him - you know. "Let this cup pass from me " and not snatching it. They both had the capacity to make up their minds when pushed, I think. I don't believe that Adlai would have been any more indecisive a president than Jack. All that's in the realm of hypothetical speculation and to hell with that. But it was sad, I think, in a way, and it was also part of his anti-intellectual feeling that he didn't really cotton on to the pleasures of intellectual discussion until he went to the White House. He had moments of enthusiasm. I remember he had been to the London School of Economics briefly, and he was very anxious to get back to talk to Harold Laski when he was here in 1945. Occasionally he'd get very enthusiastic about some book somebody had sent to him which he'd read and you could see the ferment there. He had basically not thrown off the general prejudice which until the last ten years did exist in the United States against intellectuals. Thank God, that period is now past, I think, and probably it is the country where intellect is more esteemed than any other, luckily for us all.

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Anyway, he discovered he was an intellectual potentially. He discovered that he could go the distance. It was rather like people who are too diffident about playing tennis at home against somebody they've heard played at Wimbledon. It improves your game enormously,

the better the player you're playing with, and he found that his game was greatly improved by dealing with the top notchers. He had this extraordinary gift of being able to see when he was in a group of higher graded players than himself what was best in each of them. He was a marvelous brain picker, which is one of the most important attributes of office. He had just the right brain for knowing which brains to pick and when to pick them which, unfortunately our present great president hasn't quite got, I don't think. I hate to see him 'rotted'. I feel like Orson Welles who said the other day, "When people begin to detest the United States that's when I begin to love them." Lyndon Baines Johnson is a sort of symbol of the unloved United States, and unlovable United States, which distresses me profoundly. This feeling of being unloved makes him do worse things all the time and pushes him int...

O'CONNOR: You seem to have a certain amount of affection for Lyndon Johnson. I'm somewhat surprised at that.

FORBES: Well, he is after all the president who's gotten onto the statute books more social legislation than any other, and I think we all owe a historical and social debt for that. I'm not even absolutely convinced that if Jack had lived he could have got anything like that amount for the people.

O'CONNOR: You and a lot of other people.

FORBES: Even in the second term, at the end of it, you know. The color problem - hadn't got a clue about it before he went to the White House. This is not surprising since the only colored person he knew was not a Negro - in the shape of Adam Clayton Powell [Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.]. I remember very late, sometime in the fifties, he'd only just heard the expression "Uncle Tom" and was very, I mean, like a man who just made this extraordinary literary discovery. "Do you know that Clayton Powell's got this marvelous expression for - I believe he called Dawson [William L. Dawson] of Illinois - the trouble with him is he's Uncle Tom." I said, "Everybody's familiar with this expression. I've got news for you, kiddo; this is not absolutely the last word on the subject."

O'CONNOR: I'm amazed to hear that.

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FORBES: He had a great degree of innocence. This was part of (a) his detachment from public affairs and (b) part of his feeling that people in authority who had read all the papers probably did know better and had judged the situation more or less correctly. It was that sort of person. It isn't till you had all the papers and had the chance to make up your own mind that you can say they're wrong. An example of that, he did get pushed into making a brave speech about Algeria when he was senator.

O'CONNOR: What do you mean, got pushed into it?

FORBES: Well, in the same way that most Kennedys decide to take up a political issue. A certain number of people in their brain trust, amongst their advisors, say, "Well, we're always in the market for an issue." This was not purely a Kennedy matter.

I was very much involved at one time in the European movement, and I can remember the terrible trouble we had after the war trying to get Churchill to get down to brass tacks about certain details we wanted to put across in his name and other things. I said, "Well, what about this?" He said, "My dear boy, I don't care about the details. I think this thing is going to happen, and I want people to say, 'You see, even up to the end of his life he was very farsighted and understood this.' Don't bother me about the details."

This is the normal thing. You say, "I must get on in politics. I must take a stand on any number of issues. Let me look around for an issue in which we can back the winner and appear to have backed it at the right time." I don't think there was any profound feeling that the lot of the people of the Maghreb [North West Africa] was very, very important to the United States. But he did decide to take a line exactly opposite to that of the French government and made the speech. That made him very unpopular in France, however. This was uncharacteristic of him, because if you had linked up his speech on Algeria, you would have gone on and looked at the whole situation of the Arab peoples and British declining influence in the Middle East and you would, therefore, have begun to take an interest in Nasser [Gamal Abdel Nasser] and whatnot.

I was a tremendous anti-Suez boy, and in '56 I was there while the Suez operation was under discussion at the United Nations. Just at that particular moment he rang up from Boston and said, "Look, I've been invited by the Tavern Club of Boston to address them for the first time in my life. I've never even set foot in the joint." The Tavern Club of Boston

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is a sort of - oh, I don't know what you would say - dining club where speeches are made, social, political, literary, anything you like, but it's pretty stuffy. Until you've ever been out here it's a horror show. I've been there twice. Once to my horror, I thought I was having a sort of free dinner, they suddenly said, "Now we call upon our guest, Mr. Forbes." I had to get up and make an impromptu speech. It was perfectly dreadful because I am an expatriate Bostonian. I'm born over here.

O'CONNOR: I didn't know that.

FORBES: Yes, but I'm a stuffy, proper Bostonian by blood. It just so happens that I got born here, and I lost my citizenship because I went into the army in 1940 here. And so I've got relations everywhere. In fact, I can well remember the time when I used to go and stay with my brother-in-law Winthrop [Frederic Winthrop] who was master of the Myopia [Mypoia Hunt Club] hounds. Then I used to say about going into Boston, "I've got a date. I'm going in to see Jack Kennedy." The people over

there were sort of stuffy Republicans. It was terrible, and only the farm manager used to say to me always, "Well, Mr. Forbes, I like your friend Kennedy. Don't tell Mr. Winthrop, but I'm going to vote for him" and that kind of thing.

By this time the Tavern Club at last had got around to the fact that they had an important senator in their midst, and it was time to ask him around to dine. He said, "Look, it says I can bring a guest. It doesn't specify what color or anything so I thought it would be rather a laugh; if you're free, you come with me because I shan't say who I'm bringing, and you can point out some of these jerks to me if I don't know them. Anyway," he said, "it would amuse me to get to this sort of thing." So we go along and it was quite a big dinner - Lev Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall], Erwin Canham [Erwin D. Canham], Cabot Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge], the whole caboodle was there. Jack was the guest speaker.

It was very indicative, too, of how interesting his social position was because he was a man wholly devoid of rancor, and his personality was completely well integrated so that he had no worries of any kind at all. He could see everything with a sort of detached view. And yet he was aware of the interplay of snobbish forces in his life. In England he could see which English people basically didn't like Americans, and he knew people who didn't like Irish people. He knew about it. He was always amused and interested by this sort of sin but absolutely unaffected by it because he was his own man and happy with his

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money in the bank and damn good looking; he'd get any girl he wanted in life. So this was not a problem to him, but he was aware of it as a problem and the fantastic posturings of people socially amused him. To that extent he was interested.

He viewed with a sort of detached cynicism these very Republican people who came up so sycophantically to him, and he also was amused by one man who got up - he was something to do with the club - who made what was supposed to be a joke. It was in such appalling taste - saying, "I recall as an old member that we once asked a Democratic congressman to address us. At that time the club was undergoing repairs, and we were meeting at the Somerset Club. We said, 'Where would you like to have dinner? We could either have it at the Somerset Club or at the Copley Plaza,' or something like that. And he said he'd rather it would be at the Copley Plaza - now the Sheraton Plaza - because his uncle or his father was a waiter at the Somerset Club." I dare say he was an old world Republican doing the Democrats a favor by asking him or something. I remember saying to Jack, "It must be something to do with my Bostonian antecedents, but I found myself blushing so much when that man was making that remark out of sheer atavistic shame that I could hardly bear it any longer." And he said, "Well, I wondered why more people weren't blushing with shame. But can you believe that such people can still be around?"

In fact, he made an extremely witty and funny speech, more or less off the cuff, which he kept rather short. Then everybody came out and wanted to talk to him, and he said, "No, I'm terribly sorry. I've got to go down to the Cape. Could somebody find Mr. Forbes who was with me because I think we'd better go? He's coming down to the Cape with me." Well, I knew we weren't going down to the Cape - it was the wrong time of year anyway - the only indication he had made that he was going to put everybody slightly in their place. We got into

the car and I said, "What's all this about going to the Cape? We're not going to the Cape." I said, "I thought that was a damn funny speech you made." He said, "Yes, we're going to the Ritz [Ritz-Carlton Hotel]. I feel like some chowder." He had a passion for chowder. He adored it. So we went and sat in the lobby of the Ritz while he had about three bowls of chowder in full public view. By this time it was fairly late at night, and quite a lot of these coves who had come to the Tavern Club had come in and seen there was no question of going to the Cape, never had been any question. We were sitting chewing the cud over chowder. That was as near as he went to sort of saying, "Well, we don't want them to get too uppity about having had me to dinner."

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But, anyway, at that time we were in the middle of the Suez crisis, and both on the way to the Tavern Club and after it we talked about it a good bit. I said, "Look, Anthony Eden is in fact out of his mind. I mean, he's off his head. He's got a sort of pathological, paranoid thing about Nasser. Even if he was successful in occupying the whole of Egypt, he couldn't hold it. He'll come to the next election, supposing he could even stay in power, and will have to ask for conscription and taxes to be increased. This is absolutely a fact of total folly." He said, "Well, I'm not too sure. I think I might have done the same thing. I'm not so sure if..." I said, "Look here, Jack, you amaze me. You haven't done your homework on this. You haven't studied the matter." I'm quite sure that if he'd really been following the thing, you know, he couldn't see the same point of view. But his reaction was a little bit, "Well, these guys have been in the game for a long time, and they've probably weighed up and things like that." Of course, what taught him that people in authority have not weighted things up correctly was the Bay of Pigs. He made up his mind then never to accept anyone's view without looking into the thing from the beginning yourself and coming to your own point of view, which was quite right. It was an example of his comparative detachment from the affairs of the day that he could assume that things were for the best in the best of possible worlds until he'd actually studied the matter.

O'CONNOR: But hearing you talk like this makes me shudder and it makes me think how lucky we were the man who became president matured as he did when he became president because you paint a picture of a relatively immature man, a man not suited for the presidency.

FORBES: Well, it's better to be immature at - how old was he when he went to the White House? I forget.

O'CONNOR: Mid-forties.

FORBES: Mid - well, yes, I had hoped - than it is to be wholly immature at the age Dwight Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] went into the thing. I say that diffidently. [Laughter] Senator Truman [Harry S. Truman] was a mature man, but he was very ignorant of public issues and his maturity stood him in

immense good stead because in my mind he's one of the great presidents of American history. But he made a hell of a hash for the first few months because he hadn't read any of his stuff. As soon as he applied his maturity to paper work, he got practically everything right from then on in. It saved the world, no doubt about it. But so long as you do mature - in Eisenhower, it seemed to me, you got the worst of

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of all worlds. There was a man about whom the myths had been created before he was put into the White House. He was put in as a result of the myth, but there was nothing behind the myth.

In the case of Kennedy the myth was made after. In fact, much the most interesting and extraordinary thing about Kennedy's myth, I think, is the myth as it exists with young people. This is the terrible sadness about his assassination. For the first time the United States, which does build up in people tremendous resistance to power and riches and money, had a spokesman with whom people who would in the ordinary way have been emotionally against United States policy - you see what I mean - but because of his being there, feeling his own way, and being very young, they could identify with him. He did have the right reactions within him - just like Bobby.

We're not making this interview about Bobby, who is to my mind a very, very different character than his brother, but I think it true to say about Bobby that his commitment on matters like the racial problem and certain other things which he's associated with is a genuine one. That is to say that he has had certain flashes of a Pauline character on the road to Tarsus which have affected his tripe, his guts. He is emotionally committed on certain matters, but again this is due to previous total and abysmal ignorance about everything. He learned about affairs when he was in the White House. Jack thought Bobby was a wonderful organizer. He never respected his political judgment on matters until he discovered that you can't spend all your time talking about politics and gave him office. Then he had this forced intimacy with his brother, and his brother came to admire him and acquired a sort of extension of the president's own thinking. But he, did, I think, become.... I mean, he again is somebody who has matured a little bit, and one must look at him quite differently because he's matured by actual contact with problems.

I see exactly what you're.... I mean, what you're saying is it's very frightening that you sort of shut your eyes, pick out a man, put him in the White House and you just hope...

O'CONNOR: And hope that he does make it. Exactly.

FORBES: I think it is very frightening. I think the whole democratic process is absolutely frightening. I'm wholly in favor of it. I mean, I agree with Churchill saying it's the least bad of all the processes available for educating people to run their affairs. It is a very chancy business, no doubt about it. I mean, Eden is another example.

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He got the job because he'd been waiting for it for a very long time. People hadn't been really studying how little suited he was for exercising great power. They hadn't studied what terrible complexes had been aroused by this very prolonged wait; how much he had a kind of paranoid thing of thinking people were belittling him and saying he was wet and sissy and, therefore, he had to take some very bold action to prove himself to his own equals. The projection of people's personal problems onto high affairs of state is a very terrible matter. We see it in the case of General de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gualle]. His projection of his own traumatic experience at the hands of President Roosevelt in the war has made his hatred of the United States so great that one feels that he'd be very happy, like Samson, to bring the whole country down in ruins upon us all, simply in order to spite the United States. But that's just the sort of thing that I think the president would have written rather well about when he got around to it after having ceased to be president. The trouble is that I don't believe the president, so long as his brothers continued to seek office with enthusiasm which they would have done and do, still do, would have been able to have been quite such a good historian because he would have found himself continually inhibited about what he was saying because he would have to watch out for Bobby's chances or Teddy's chances, you know. So he would have ended up putting it all in the Kennedy archives for opening up...

O'CONNOR: Keeping it for twenty-five years, exactly.

FORBES: [Laughter] Because he would have been loyal. You know, they would have looked after him, and he'd have to look after them.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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