

John Kenneth Galbraith Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 09/10/2002
Administrative Information

Creator: John Kenneth Galbraith

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Biographical Note

Galbraith was an economist, educator, author, and diplomat. During his career, he was a Professor of Economics at Harvard University (1949-1975), and served as Ambassador to India (1961-1963). In this interview, he discusses his relationship to the Kennedy family, his involvement in JFK's congressional and presidential campaigns, and JFK's motivations for the presidency, among other issues.

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John Kenneth Galbraith—JFK #1

Table of Contents

| <u>Page</u> | <u>Topic</u> |
|-------------|---|
| 1 | Meeting the Kennedy family |
| 2 | Meeting John F. Kennedy [JFK] and Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. at Harvard |
| 4 | Involvement in JFK's run for Congress |
| 4, 9, 15 | JFK's personality and determination |
| 7 | Describing JFK's congressional career |
| 7 | Myths concerning JFK's motivations for the presidency |
| 10 | Planning a meeting between Eleanor Roosevelt and JFK |
| 11 | JFK's run for the vice presidency at the '56 convention |
| 12 | Writing speeches for JFK |
| 14 | Attending the first diplomatic dinner with Dean Rusk |

First Oral History Interview

with

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

September 10, 2002
Cambridge, Massachusetts

by Vicki Daitch

For the John F. Kennedy Library

DAITCH: I'll just set up the tapes by saying that my name is Vicki Daitch, and I'm speaking with John Kenneth Galbraith. It's my honor to do so. And we're at your residence at [Street Address removed] in Cambridge. Okay. Actually, obviously, we're talking about John F. Kennedy because I'm working for the library. So I'd like to ask you first about your meeting him. I know that you met him when he was actually at Harvard [Harvard University].

GALBRAITH: In the late 1930s I was a tutor in Winthrop House. And for reasons that I don't recall, that was the favored house of the Kennedy Family. They were all there at one time or another. And his older brother [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] was a very close friend of mine. He and Joe Kennedy, Sr. [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] were my introduction to the family.

In the summer of 1934, I was in Washington seeing the beginning of the New Deal as a very interested observer. And fresh from California, I thought it would be fun to take the boat from Norfolk back to Boston, up to Boston, which I did. And I was assigned to a table in the steamship with Kennedy, Sr.--Joe, as he was called.

DAITCH: So that was before you met Joe, Jr.

GALBRAITH: That was my introduction to the Kennedys. We got along very well. Perhaps partly for that reason, the two boys at that time came into Winthrop House, as Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] did later.

DAITCH: That's interesting. So obviously you met Joe, Sr. before you met Joe, Jr.

GALBRAITH: Beg pardon?

DAITCH: You met Joe, Sr. on the ship before you had met Joe, Jr., at Winthrop House.

GALBRAITH: Oh, sure.

DAITCH: Oh, that's interesting. Well, tell me what that was like. You were an instructor, a tutor?

GALBRAITH: I was a very-far-down-the-list instructor. So far as the lowest order of Harvard instructor, I was it.

DAITCH: Right. And did you ever teach any of the Kennedy boys?

GALBRAITH: I saw a great deal of Joe, Jr., who was in my room in Winthrop House a big part of his time. And I particularly remember his coming in 1936 to get me to join a company he was organizing. It would have the purpose of getting people to bet on the election of Alf Landon [Alfred E. Landon], because they were politically committed and, they argued, that had taken over their judgment. And this was an easy way to make money. I didn't join the company, but he went ahead, and decided that the Harvard Business School was the ideal ground. And went over there, set up in a chair, and took all available bets of the Faculty Club on Landon [Landon Street]. And made enough money to buy a new car.

DAITCH: Oh, my gosh!

GALBRAITH: A few nights after he got the car, he called me for some reason I've forgotten. But we both had occasion to go out to Wellesley to see friends, and drove out together. He was in a state of fury at his brother...

DAITCH: John?

GALBRAITH: ...who, he said.... He said, "Look, I bought this car. I had to work for it. And you know what Jack did? He got one, too, on the installment plan."

DAITCH: [Laughter] So he was, well, justifiably mad.

GALBRAITH: That entire footnote, that was one of my first encounters with the Kennedy family.

DAITCH: That's funny. Did you know Jack at that time?

GALBRAITH: Oh, I knew him. But he was also in Winthrop House. But whereas Joe was the favored student of every important Harvard man in the political or economic area, Jack was regarded as slightly easy-going.

DAITCH: Really! You mean in his studies?

GALBRAITH: As to studies.

DAITCH: Yes? Oh, oh. So did you ever teach either one of them? Were you ever an instructor for their classes?

GALBRAITH: Whether they were in my classes or not, I do not recall. I've never looked up the list of my students. But my impression is that my acquaintance was largely with them through the house, which was then, as now, partly a teaching institute and not in the classroom.

DAITCH: Okay. But you did have the impression that Joe was the scholar, and Jack was the good-time brother?

GALBRAITH: I didn't have the impression. They both created it.

DAITCH: Right. So it was understood that Joe was the brother who was going to do things.

GALBRAITH: Oh, we had no doubt about that. And that was the tragedy of that terrible experiment he went on, typically perhaps, in the Air Force.

DAITCH: Was that like Joe to want to do something like that?

GALBRAITH: Very much.

DAITCH: Yes. It was a tragedy, no doubt. Did you have any contact with him after he left Harvard while he was in Europe or before?

GALBRAITH: Not that I recall. My contact with John F. Kennedy began at the end of the

war, after he came back from the Pacific. I perhaps had some communication with him, but nothing that I strongly recall.

DAITCH: After he came back, did you come into contact with him when he decided to get into politics, or sometime before?

GALBRAITH: We got into contact when he--if my recollection serves--when he first decided to run for Congress. From that time on, we had regular meetings, usually committed to economics and politics.

DAITCH: He probably sought you out for your advice in that first period? Or do you remember?

GALBRAITH: No question about that. I was available for my delight in having that association with politics. And I assume, since I talked about nothing else much, he was interested in my economics.

DAITCH: Right. Now, I suppose, obviously, he knew that you were interested in politics, too, though, and that would have been the other reason.

GALBRAITH: Oh, he knew of that interest from the first five minutes after he got in it himself.

DAITCH: Right. So tell me about what you remember.

GALBRAITH: There was no indication of his interest in politics while he was still an undergraduate.

DAITCH: He said later that he had hoped to become a writer or an academic maybe. Do you remember any indications of that while he was at Harvard?

GALBRAITH: Beg pardon?

DAITCH: He had said that he would like to become a writer or an academic maybe? And I wondered if you saw that at Harvard?

GALBRAITH: I don't remember ever hearing him talk about being an academic. But he did always have in mind that he was going to be a writer or that he would be writing. That I knew of him perhaps not from the beginning, but from very early in his life.

DAITCH: You're obviously well-known for your writing and editorial skills. How

would you evaluate his writing skills?

GALBRAITH: Well, like everybody else of that age, he had a considerable way to go; and to the extent that my memory serves, I felt that was true at the time. His writing didn't, in those early days--when he was first in the Congress, as late as that--flash into my mind as something that was particularly fine. I thought of him first as a Kennedy, second as a very attractive person, third as a moderately good congressman, and fourth as an increasingly engaging friend. But I didn't remember him as a particularly talented writer. I'm not sure I remembered him as a particularly talented politician. But I did come to know him as a very attractive person, to whom I was both as an individual and as a politician increasingly committed.

DAITCH: So over the years you would have had a lot of contact with him then, after the war, after he ran for Congress?

GALBRAITH: In the years after he came back from the war, and particularly when he decided to launch his congressional career, I saw him maybe once a fortnight, sometimes once a week. He would be up here, particularly when he began to cultivate his congressional district. And on those visits, Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.], who lived just over the fence from where we're talking today, and I were both on his visiting list. I'm sure I gave him a wealth of mediocre political advice.

DAITCH: He, obviously, would have been seeking advice from other people as well. Do you know from whom? I'm especially interested in this because you watched him develop as a politician. It's fascinating.

GALBRAITH: Well, this was a point that I would predict we emphasize. One could not, then or later, know John F. Kennedy without a sense of the intellectual progress that one saw, on political matters, economic matters, social matters. He was concerned and advancing in them all. John F. Kennedy you saw one night; and if you didn't see him for two or three weeks, he was something more, and something new.

DAITCH: Right. That's a very quotable, I think, thing you say there.

GALBRAITH: Well, this is something I strongly felt at that time.

DAITCH: Did others feel the same way? Did you speak with, say, Schlesinger about that?

GALBRAITH: This was a narrow band of people. But it also included Arthur Schlesinger;

and I'm sure there were others who were politically more oriented, including the people who from Massachusetts surrounded him politically in the White House.

DAITCH: When you say politically more oriented, what do you mean?

GALBRAITH: I mean that they were in touch, close touch, with the Massachusetts political leaders, structure, scene, strengths, and, without any doubt, his weaknesses and deviations. I was not, and the people that he knew at Harvard were not.

DAITCH: Did you see that as a strength of Kennedy, that he had this breadth of people that he drew around him?

GALBRAITH: I never thought of it in those terms. I saw it as a necessity for somebody running for office in this state.

DAITCH: Right. [GLASS KNOCKED OVER]

GALBRAITH: Well, the inevitable companion of pieces of illness and some age, you knock things over. [BREAK] Sit down and relax for a minute. She'll be here.

DAITCH: We probably got most of it. Sad to say, I do these kinds of things all the time. [CONVERSATION ABOUT THIS AMONG GALBRAITH, DAITCH, AND WOMAN NAMED JULIE ANN REGARDING GLASS KNOCKED OVER.]

GALBRAITH: What was your question?

DAITCH: That's beautiful.

GALBRAITH: You've got that going again, the tape?

DAITCH: Yes. I've forgotten where we were, though. We were talking about him as....

GALBRAITH: Well, the sort of reaction to Massachusetts politicians. I don't know that I had any reaction. They regarded me with a natural doubt as a college teacher, and I regarded them likewise as young Massachusetts politicians. But on the whole we had a very friendly relationship. We weren't of the same order of support of Kennedy. But we got along very well. So did Arthur Schlesinger, so did some

others.

DAITCH: What other people that you can think of were from the Harvard group?

GALBRAITH: I'd have to search my mind, but many of the Harvard people became associated after the election. I assume that he had some relationship to McGeorge Bundy before he was elected, but it was not close. But Bundy, of course, became a dominant figure in his presidential life. So were others. In his political years I would think of those academic types closest to him were Arthur Schlesinger, Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], of course, and myself.

Oh, I can get two or three others, but the real political guides were not as strong in those days as they later became. But we had high respect for them for two reasons: They were in a different area of advice and guidance. And it was my position that they wouldn't know very much about economics and economic policy, which in those years was central. And it was their even stronger position that a Harvard teacher, which I was, couldn't have any political sense.

DAITCH: Right. Well, do you think there was any truth to that?

GALBRAITH: Undoubtedly.

DAITCH: Right. It sounds reasonable. So tell me, you've said in some of your writings that--I think "undistinguished" maybe was the word that you used to describe Kennedy's early career as a congressman. Do you still see it that way?

GALBRAITH: I have no strong recollection of it, but it was oriented to his own career. He had his eye on the White House from somewhere near the beginning. And I think it's fair to say that he wasn't associated with any deathless piece of legislation. If he was, I've forgotten. He was known as a good liberal voter, and not as somebody who fixed himself on a particular goal as to a particular legislative act and made his career out of that. No doubt a very sensible decision.

DAITCH: Right. There's this myth that--I don't know if it's a myth, so I'll ask you--that John sort of decided to go into politics because Joe was the one who was supposed to, and he was somehow taking Joe's place. Did you ever get the feeling that there was any sense of that in him?

GALBRAITH: No. And I could be quite accurate on that. There was a wonderful thing in the Kennedy community, which extended to Bobby and to other members of the family, that around differences of view, differences of purpose, but great cohesion as the Kennedy Family. And there's no doubt that Kennedy was very much a

part of that feeling. I particularly remember in the presidential election a meeting in New York on, among other things, economics, economic policy, again, the central role of that given the state of the nation and the economic situation. Joe Kennedy, on economic policy, spending, political support, from that and other matters came in with a line of argument substantially to the left of his son.

DAITCH: Really!

GALBRAITH: I came in with broad support for Joe. A memorable meeting came afterward when, and I'm sure, I'm still quoting accurately, or more or less accurately, Kennedy said to me, "How the hell did you get such a hold on my old man?"

DAITCH: [Laughter] Good question. How did you get him to agree with you on that?

GALBRAITH: That's all I remember.

DAITCH: Do you think there was something about the family...? There was always this idea that Joe, Jr. was going to be president. Do you think that there was anything to the notion that John somehow decided to get into politics to take his place?

GALBRAITH: Oh, it's possible. But I never thought of that as his major motivation. His major motivation was that he wanted to be president. I think he was also interested in showing Joe, Sr., whom he enormously respected, what he could do. But I wouldn't rank that anywhere close to his personal idea.

DAITCH: Where did that come from, this goal?

GALBRAITH: Oh, it's afflicted a lot of people.

DAITCH: It seems so single-minded because he pursued it from a very young age straight through and just did it. It seems almost impossible. It must have been an enormous force.

GALBRAITH: After his death, in the 1952 [1972] election the Democrats had no clear candidate. I was out on the West Coast giving a lecture at the University of California. A huge delegation of California radicals, and particularly people oriented against the military and any adventures resulting from that, came in to say they wanted to put my name on the California ballot for president, for Democratic candidate. It was the shortest political meeting in history. I listened to all the arguments. Then it came my turn, and I had to tell them that being Canadian-born, I was constitutionally ineligible. I think

it's fair to say that the meeting ended in the next five minutes. For me it didn't end because I went on to give my lecture and told Kitty [Catherine A. Galbraith], who was with me, and thought on the way home, how really quite exciting it would have been.

DAITCH: No doubt about it. So do you think there was anything about the war years, John Kennedy's war experiences that may have caused him to rethink politics as a career?

GALBRAITH: His ambition?

DAITCH: Yes.

GALBRAITH: That may have been so. But looking back on it, I don't think I ever had any extended conversation with Kennedy on his war experience. As far as I was concerned, and I think this was true of others, it was something of which he was proud, which was an exciting time, but which he set aside. He did not consider himself an ex-soldier.

DAITCH: I think one of the characterizations that I've heard of him, possibly from your writings, is that rather than looking behind at what he had done, he was looking forward to what he was about to do. He wasn't looking back at his accomplishments. He was always looking forward to what he wanted to do.

GALBRAITH: Oh, there's no doubt about that. This is really what I meant to stress. He didn't want to be, as I say, an ex-soldier. He wanted to be the next president.

DAITCH: Do you think he really...? I mean you're telling me this, and it's hard to believe that he's twenty-seven years old, say, he's in Congress for the first time and he already has his heart set on the presidency?

GALBRAITH: Oh, no doubt.

DAITCH: Really.

GALBRAITH: No doubt.

DAITCH: Did he say so?

GALBRAITH: And equally, so did his father.

DAITCH: Really.

GALBRAITH: Joe Kennedy would have been quite pleased to be president himself, and was by no means reluctant to delegate that obligation.

DAITCH: Right. But John wasn't reluctant, I take it. He wanted it.

GALBRAITH: Beg pardon?

DAITCH: He wasn't reluctant. It wasn't his father insisting that he do this. He wanted it.

GALBRAITH: I never had the slightest sense of his reluctance.

DAITCH: So tell me about you. You were with him off and on pretty frequently during the years that he was in Congress? And you've told me that he developed. Nearly every time you saw him, he was developing.

GALBRAITH: There was something more every time we met. And in those days he actually began thinking of the presidency. He was also very careful about his Massachusetts base, and was frequently here on weekends. When he came on a Saturday, we brought one or two friends, I brought Kitty, my wife, to Lochober's, and we had a Saturday evening dinner. I don't know how many of those there were, but that was something which we took for granted. If he was here, we'd likely go for dinner; and if we went for dinner, it would be Lochober's, and we had a Saturday evening.

My most gorgeous recollection, of which perhaps too often I've told, was my involvement with Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt]. She did not like Joe Kennedy, Sr. Did not like what he said in that famous interview when he returned from being ambassador about the Roosevelt presidency. And she was adverse to John F. Kennedy. She had a nightly program in those days here.... Turn that off. [BREAK]

A weekly program at Brandeis [University] when she introduced somebody. And I persuaded Kennedy and Mrs. R., who was a very good friend of mine, to have one of those evenings, patching up the relationship between the Kennedys and the Roosevelts. It was a typical Galbraith creation, because they met, he went on the program, they talked about policy, and it went very well. I listened to it partly with interest and partly with self-congratulation. Then when it was over, as you might expect, there was a sizeable press conference. One of the first questions was: "Mrs. Roosevelt, the fact that you got along so well tonight, does that mean that you will support Kennedy for president?" And Eleanor said, "It certainly does not." And that was the news of the occasion.

That night at Lochober's, Kennedy came in with the saddest look I ever saw on his face, said to me, and I think I'm still quoting accurately, "I always thought, Ken, that you could find a college professor who had some sense of politics. But you've certainly proved that that is not possible."

DAITCH: But it was a good effort.

GALBRAITH: Yes. Actually, there is a footnote, much more than a footnote. Time passed, weeks and months. The convention came, and Eleanor came over quite vigorously for Kennedy.

DAITCH: Oh, that is nice.

GALBRAITH: Months later.

DAITCH: Right. So it did work.

GALBRAITH: Only eventually.

DAITCH: That is a nice story, and I hadn't heard that before.

GALBRAITH: You hadn't?

DAITCH: No. Maybe I just missed it, but I hadn't heard that. That's good. Tell me a little bit about the 1956 election in which Kennedy came, I suppose, somewhat close. At least he was running for the vice presidency, the vice presidential nomination. Did you, thinking you weren't supporting Kennedy?

GALBRAITH: I wasn't taking any part.

DAITCH: Okay.

GALBRAITH: I wasn't involved, and didn't seek to be, on that particular matter because I didn't consider being a vice presidential candidate in that election was any particular useful thing. So I wasn't at the convention. I viewed it all with a certain sense of detachment. And I mean as far as vice president was concerned, simply didn't pay any attention.

DAITCH: I was curious whether you thought, as some people have suggested, that that was sort of a dry run for Kennedy for the presidential nomination.

GALBRAITH: That was very much my feeling.

DAITCH: Really?

GALBRAITH: And I suppose I was addicted somewhat to the old cliché that the vice

presidency is the end of the road. John Nance Garner's comparison of the job with bovine excrement.

DAITCH: So you didn't have a lot to do with the '56 convention. In the meantime Kennedy is still growing as a congressman, senator.

GALBRAITH: I was out lecturing in California at the time of the '56 election. You must think from this interview I spent a lot of time in California, which is true. That's where I did my graduate work. And was quietly there after the lecture, when I got an urgent call to come to Springfield, Illinois, and help write speeches for Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], which I did. And helped him endlessly to one of the greatest defeats of the party.

DAITCH: So is that something you had been doing all along, is writing speeches for various people?

GALBRAITH: Beg pardon?

DAITCH: Writing speeches, was that your first foray into speech-writing? Or had you been doing a little bit of that all along?

GALBRAITH: I'd been writing speeches, good and bad, all my life. Whether they were effective or not, is somebody else's problem.

DAITCH: But I'm told they were usually well accepted.

GALBRAITH: They were. Most important.... Well, skip that. Go ahead.

DAITCH: What were you going to say?

GALBRAITH: I was going to tell a wholly unrelated story.

DAITCH: Tell me what it was, and we'll make a note.

GALBRAITH: It was about Greece.

DAITCH: About Greece, okay. We'll make a note to come back to it. Greece story. But I did want to ask you about, in terms of speech-writing.... I'm jumping ahead a little bit in chronological order, but we were talking about the Inaugural Address, Kennedy's Inaugural Address, earlier. I'm told that you had at least a little bit, and you said you didn't have that much input, but I'm told that you had some input on that.

GALBRAITH: I worked on it a great deal with Ted Sorensen and with Kennedy himself. Kennedy took a large personal role with the two of us, perhaps one or two other people, going along. And I read it, the last draft before it was typed, mimeographed. And right then, along the.... I believe that after Ted Sorensen and after Kennedy himself, I had had the third-level effect.

DAITCH: Particular things in this speech that are memorable to you that you actually maybe contributed?

GALBRAITH: Sure. The last line, "Let us begin...."

DAITCH: Wonderful line, wonderful line.

GALBRAITH: That was mine.

DAITCH: Beautiful.

GALBRAITH: And Kennedy called me up afterward when they got the response to tell me that, in effect, that I was good at short speeches.

DAITCH: Four lines and four words. What else in this speech do you remember in particular that you...?

GALBRAITH: Oh, I'd have to go and check up.

DAITCH: Maybe we'll take a look at that. I'm thinking that it would be useful if we could talk again.

GALBRAITH: If you could bring me a copy of the speech.

DAITCH: I would be delighted to do that.

GALBRAITH: I will isolate what came from Ted, what I think came from the president, and, with some emphasis, what came from me.

DAITCH: Oh, perfect timing.

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

GALBRAITH:where one wanted more strength. A major one was, just as I left for India, in Cuba, his yielding on that ill-timed adventure in Cuba. I was soundly against that. I was in Washington at the time. There was a big dinner the night before it was announced, which I had to attend with Dean Rusk [David D. Rusk], a diplomatic dinner that I had to go with the man in the Kennedy administration I least admired, and I may say it was reciprocal. I got there, to this dinner, about an hour late because I was working on a paper against the Cuban adventure and had to get it typed and dropped off at the White House because I had just heard that it was coming the next day. That was the occasion when I did not feel that Kennedy showed the requisite strength.

DAITCH: Do you think...? And here's another piece of...

GALBRAITH: Come in. [ENTER KITTY GALBRAITH] We've had a long evening of reminiscences.

KITTY: Yes, I know. Are you ready to have a little rest?

GALBRAITH: What?

KITTY: Are you going to have a little rest? We're going to have supper at six o'clock.

GALBRAITH: Okay. Well, I want one or two more, and I'll put them over on Kitty.

KITTY: Then you're coming back on Thursday?

DAITCH: I hope so. We were going to talk about that, and we had tentatively planned to do that.

KITTY: You just got up to the dinner before we left for India?

GALBRAITH: Beg pardon?

KITTY: Is this the dinner before we left for India? The dinner in honor of Dean Rusk by the...

GALBRAITH: I was just telling her about that.

KITTY: ...Swedish Embassy [Inaudible]. You're going to be late for your first official dinner just after you'd been sworn in. And to be late for the dinner

in honor of the secretary of state who'd sworn you in. For an ambassador, that was pretty--a miracle.

DAITCH: Oh, dear.

GALBRAITH: The next day we left for India, and I had breakfast with Kennedy, and two things happened. He later remembered my position on Cuba, but I was particularly struck that morning because the *New York Times* had an article on the new ambassador to India, which was favorable, and it was on the time. Kennedy pointed to it and said, "How'd you like that article?" It was all right. I said, "I liked it all right. It was a good article. I don't see why they had to call me arrogant." And Kennedy said, "I don't see why not. Everybody else does." [Laughter]

DAITCH: Oh, that's cute. He strikes me as such a funny person, just very cute with the little comebacks. I don't want to keep you. I know that...

GALBRAITH: I think maybe I'd better rest for a little while.

DAITCH: Right. Let me turn this off, and we'll make plans for another.

[END OF TAPE #1]

[END OF INTERVIEW – JFK #1, 9/10/2003]

John Kenneth Galbraith Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List

B

Bundy, McGeorge, 7

G

Galbraith, Catherine A., 9, 10

Garner, John Nance, 12

K

Kennedy, Joseph P., Jr., 1-3, 7, 8

Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr., 1,2, 8-10

Kennedy, John F., 1-15

Kennedy, Robert F., 2, 7

L

Landon, Alfred E., 2

R

Roosevelt, Eleanor R., 10, 11

Rusk, David D., 14, 15

S

Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr., 5-7

Sorensen, Theodore C., 7, 13

Stevenson, Adlai E., 12