JFK interview with Martin Agronsky, November 1957 (edit April 3, 2017)

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NBC Television Presents

1:07 – 2:24

JFK: Martin.

MA: Good afternoon, Senator Kennedy.

JFK: I hope you saw that cod on the way up. That’s an indication of our dependence on the sea here in Massachusetts.

MA: Indeed, I did. I think it’s not only the cradle of liberty – it’s the Finnan Haddie capital of the United States, too. I’m rather glad we came to give people a chance to see this lovely old room, Senator.

JFK: Well, we think in Boston that it’s the cradle of liberty. Philadelphia has some claims, but this is a room which a good deal of history in this section of the country and really the whole United States was written. So I’m glad that you’re here and some of the people around the country can see it. The Declaration of Independence was read in this room and many of the early battles before the Revolution were fought out in this Council Room. I think, really, that unless we understand the past we really don’t know anything about the present and certainly cannot comprehend the future – so that it’s good to start here.

3:28 – 4:59

MA: Why’d you end up in politics? Certainly that’s as tough an assignment as anyone can take. What led you into politics?

JFK: I’m descended from a long line of politicians. My grandfather was Mayor of Boston. I had a number of great-uncles who were state Senators, and my father was involved in political life. So at least the environment always at home was never really business as much as it was public affairs. So that was the natural direction – at least the subject of interest for all of us.

MA: Well, the environment at home – your Kennedy family is said to be a very close-knit family, and your father has had a tremendous influence upon all of the family – especially on the eldest son. Was that one of the influences? Was that one of the things that led you into politics?

JFK: Well, I think the whole subject – what I’m trying to suggest is that at least during my years of growing up the whole subject of interest at home was public affairs and, as I say, my grandfather – I lived with him for a period when I was at school, and he was a very active politician. So that was part of it. Then when the war ended and I came back to Boston – I had been going to law school before the war began and that no longer seemed… I really didn’t want to go to law school then. And I worked for a while for a newspaper, and then a congressional seat in the district that I lived became vacant. And I think that politics – I really feel that the Senate is the most interesting job in the country.

6:16 – 9:05

MA: Senator, you’ve got a Pulitzer Prize for a book that deals very perceptively, I think, with political courage. In the opening chapter you discuss something that interests me very much in this area of politics. You talked of the awful pressures that beset a conscientious Senator. You made, too, the observation – if I remember correctly – that Senators who go down in defeat, as you put it in a rather sardonic vein, in a vain defense of a single principle will not be on hand for that or vote on any other principle in the future. Now Senator, I wonder if we could put it this way: do you feel that on occasion a good Senator must wrestle with his conscious and win?

JFK: Now, well, ah – you mean rise above principle? Well, I suppose that there are many occasions where – what I was attempting to suggest is that there are many occasions where a Senator who may have strong convictions on a matter is faced with the problem of either it’s in the worst interest of his area, but he may feel it’s in the national interest. It may be against his – it may imperil his own security and that of his family and his opportunity to be of further service. There are all sorts of considerations – his obligations to his party which made it possible for him to serve. There are all sorts of obligations which a Senator has, so that he has to face all of those. Now it just depends on how he thinks and how much he feels a sense of integrity himself, and how much he’s devoted to his job and how much he feels that honestly he could do his service is of a sufficient nature that if he voted a certain way that it would cost him his position and he wouldn’t be able to affect some of the other works he wants to do. So there are a lot of reasons why a Senator should give in.

MA: Well, there are many reasons when he should give in, but how about when he should not? Are there times that come too when he should not?

JFK: I attempted to talk about eight Senators who had not given in – who had done what they thought was right, and what happened to them. Some of them were defeated. Very few of them were given public approval at home for many years. Some of them eventually were honored. But I tried to show what happens to some of those who did. It’s not altogether an encouraging story. The people don’t always respond to courage. I suppose all of us it’s true, Martin, that when we want something done and a Senator or a Congressman – or any political officer – does not do it we don’t usually say “well, he doesn’t agree with me, but I honor him for the courage of his convictions.” Rather we always put some other tag to it. We all want our own way, unfortunately.

10:55 – 11:20

JFK: How could you ever get your way in this country when you think that any bill which involves regional interests has to get approval of a sub-committee of the House, the full committee of the House, go to the Rules Committee, go to the House, pass the House, start again at the sub-committee, the full committee, go to the Senate with unlimited debate and everything in the Senate, and finally be passed by the President. So that everyone has to give in some and everyone loses. So everyone’s slightly disappointed.

15:11 – 16:28

MA: There are many people who feel and some who have said, as a matter of fact – you’ve heard the crack yourself, I’m sure, around the Senate – that, making a play on the words of your title of your book *Profiles in Courage*, that there are occasions when you could have shown a little less profile and a little more courage. And many people speak, in particular, of the censure against Senator McCarthy in that connection. Now, I think it only fair to point out that at the time of the censure vote you were in the hospital and certainly couldn’t have voted. Nevertheless, I wonder if I can ask you this, sir: would you or would you not have voted to censure Senator McCarthy?

JFK: Well, Martin, as I’ve said on many occasions, I wasn’t in the Senate at the time, and I was away for nine months. And I felt that as I was not a member of the jury, while I would have been perfectly prepared if it had come up in the summer of ’54 – I was prepared to vote on the matter. It did not come up while I was in the Senate and I was not equipped at that particular time as it came up almost only three or four weeks after I went in the hospital. I’ve said since then that based on the evidence that was presented and Senator McCarthy’s transgressions of the rules of the Senate that I thought the censure was a reasonable action. Now, I don’t know what more I can say on it.

17:09 – 19:22

MA: But I wonder, Senator, if we could talk about this other matter. Could your religion conceivably ever influence your conduct or judgement as a Senator or as a member of the House or as a President of the United States? I raise the question, I feel an unpleasant one…

JFK: I don’t think it’s unpleasant at all. Of course your religion has an effect on all your actions. I would hope if action is based on any ethical or moral plane, of course your religious convictions influence you. Whether they do or not or whether we meet the standard that we would like to meet is another thing. But of course it does have some influence.

MA: Well, let us discuss it then in the political sense. There are many who feel, justifiably or unjustifiably, that were a Catholic to be in the White House he might be influenced by, let us say, by directions or opinions or inclinations of the Vatican. How would you respond to that?

JFK: Well, obviously Martin, there’s nothing that the Pope – when you say the Vatican I assume you mean the Pope. There’s nothing that the Pope could say that would have any effect on your Constitutional obligations. I swore an oath to defend the Constitution when I went in the Navy and I’ve taken it four times since in my elections to Congress. It’s the same oath, I believe, as the President takes. In effect its essence is the same. After all, the Pope speaks as the head of the Catholic Church. My faith is a personal matter. It doesn’t seem to me to be really conceivable – in fact it’s impossible – my obligation would be, if I were – as somebody sworn to defend the Constitution is to uphold the Constitution. Whether I – what church I go to on Sunday or what dogma of the Catholic Church I believe in is a personal matter. It’s really my business and whatever other faith any other American may have is their business. But it does not involve public questions of policy or as the Constitution defines the responsibilities of a President or a Senator or a member of the Armed Forces.

19:29 – 19:55

JFK: In other words, that there is no obligation – that the obligation of a public servant to defend the Constitution is his obligation – is the obligation. What he does with, as far as – what prayers he says or whether he goes to church on Sunday or whether he fasts during Lent. Those are all personal matters which are really his affair. I hope that everyone has some religious conviction, or if they don’t their rights are protected also by the Constitution.

23:25 – 24:11

MA: I wonder if we could talk about another facet of any man who has presidential ambitions, or if he does not is spoken of as having presidential ambitions – I won’t go into the disclaimer again – your health. During the war – I referred to your war record – you were very seriously injured when your motor torpedo boat, I believe it was, was cut in half by a Japanese destroyer. Your back was very seriously injured. You’ve had a number of very – of really major operations. What is your health like today?

JFK: It’s certainly good enough to keep me traveling all over Massachusetts and meeting all my commitments, so I don’t really feel it’s a matter of concern to me now.

24:19 – 26:58

MA: Senator, you’ve always been a kind of a literary type and cared to a considerable extent about intellectualism and intellectual problems. I’d like to raise a question that I think both of us would perhaps regard as pretty important. Has the intellectual been divorced from politics in our country, or too much divorced? Insufficiently appreciated?

JFK: Of course, historically, as you know Martin, most of our early political leaders were all intellectual. They called the cabinet of talents in Washington’s first administration – it would be difficult to – when you think of Hamilton and Jefferson and Adams. They would certainly rank among the top intellectuals in this country’s experience – in addition to being top political leaders. As a matter of fact, in 1856 the Republicans sent three people around the campaign circuit: William Cullen Bryant, Longfellow and Emerson. All made speeches. In those days all the eggheads were Republicans. So there’s been a very intimate tie – now there is some evidence that after – at the beginning of this century, the end of the nineteenth century, that that link perhaps was broken. And in this century there have been periods when there’s been some suspicion of those too interested in intellectual things. So that the trend has gone up and down, but certainly in the beginning the tie was intimate. It’s not perhaps enough intimate now. I think that some professors who play an active part in political life or who attempt to set down policy for political parties are somewhat disparaged by not only some elements of the public, but also by their own colleagues. They’re not interested enough, they say, in pure doctrine – instead of realizing, I think, their obligation to contribute their own…

MA: Is it a political handicap to be regarded as an intellectual or as an egghead? Do you find that in your career?

JFK: Well, when it’s spoken disparagingly – I don’t think that people – I think Americans like brains. I think when it’s spoken of disparagingly perhaps they mean those who are not perhaps demonstrating sufficient interest in the welfare of the average person. That their interest in intellectual things removes them too much. That is – in some cases that’s true. We’ve seen many evidences of it. So that I would think that’s – I don’t think that people resent intellectuals if they – but there’s no reason why merely because you’re an intellectual you should have a claim on any public office. I think you have to demonstrate other qualities.

27:00 – 27:50

MA: Senator, you’re an extremely expectant father at this point. I believe your first baby’s due to be born on Wednesday, and I wonder if I can ask you a rather personal question.

JFK: Or sometime this week, I hope. I don’t know.

MA: Sometime this week. If you were to have a son would you encourage a political career for him?

JFK: Yes. And I hope if I had a daughter I might encourage her to play some part. I don’t know – I don’t think that this should be confined to men only. But I would, definitely. I hope he would grow up to be, if not a politician in the sense to devoting all of his time, I would hope that whatever he did do that he would have some sense of responsibility for what went on.

MA: Do you hope it’s going to be a boy or a girl?

JFK: Oh, well, I don’t care really, Martin. Whatever it is I’ll be delighted.

MA: Well, thank you very much, Senator Kennedy, really for an interesting glimpse into the thoughts and the life of a Senator of the United States.