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Roots of a Friendship



**CONVERSATIONS
WITH KENNEDY
PART 1**

This is the first of seven excerpts from "Conversations With Kennedy" that will appear this week in *Style*. Bradlee is the executive editor of *The Washington Post*.

By Benjamin C. Bradlee

This is a record of conversations I had with John F. Kennedy during the five years that I knew him—between 1959, when he was a senator running for President, and 1963, when he died on the 1007th day of his presidency.

From the day I met him—I think it was in a Senate corridor after President Eisenhower's State of the Union Message in January, 1959—through the first year of his presidency, I

kept no formal notes of these conversations. During that time I was first a political reporter in the Washington bureau of *Newsweek* magazine, and later its bureau chief. In those capacities, I wrote hundreds of thousands of words, many of them about conversations with Kennedy, many on the record, and many off the record. I have used these files to refresh my memory, in writing about conversations during this period.

But Kennedy's impact on me as a person, and as a journalist lately come to the glamor of Washington, was so strong—and remains so even today, 15 years later—that I can still quote

That 'Dominated My Life'

verbatim whole chunks' of conversations with him.

It is this powerful impact which accounts for the absence of a formal record of our conversations during the first years of our friendship. It happens to very few of us that some neighbor, some family friend, someone whose children play with your children (however reluctantly), becomes President of the United States. It now seems clear that when it happened to me, that friendship dominated my life, as Walter Lippmann had warned me it could.

It was invaluable to me as a journalist, of course, and I used it without

embarrassment to give *Newsweek* the intimate details of the life and thinking of this remarkable man who lit the skies of this land bright with hope and promise as no other political man has done in this century.

It is stating the obvious that the sum total of all these contacts—some-where between 125 to 150 over a period of five years—is neither numerically nor qualitatively sufficient to constitute anything like complete understanding of a vital and complicated man, who had lived so much of his life before I ever knew him.

And it is equally obvious that since

the setting of these contacts was predominantly social, the President Kennedy that I saw and heard in the flesh was a President off duty, a President trying to relax, a President hungry for personal contact otherwise denied him by the burdens and isolation of his lonely office.

And so the portrait is necessarily personal and one-dimensional, reflecting only what Kennedy said to me—not what he said to others—reflecting generally what he said and did after hours—not what he said and did when he was actually presiding over the crises and tensions of the country.

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KENNEDY, From MI

And surely reflecting my personality, not the personality of someone with a different sense of values, humor and proportion, whose conversations with Kennedy would be essentially different.

"What makes journalism so fascinating," President Kennedy once said to me, "and biography so interesting (is) the struggle to answer that single question: 'What's he like?'"

Well, John F. Kennedy was like this . . . at the times and places we saw each other. Eleven years ago, I described him as graceful, gay, funny, witty, teasing and teasing, forgiving, hungry, incapable of being corny, restless, interesting, interested, exuberant, blunt, profane, and loving. He was all of those . . . and more.

His brief time in power seems to me now to have been filled more with hope and promise than performance. But the hope and the promise that he held for America were real and they have not been approached since his death.

The first of my vivid memories is of the night of the 1960 West Virginia primary, the first of the primaries where Kennedy was not initially a favorite, and the first primary where Kennedy's Catholicism would be fairly tested.

Kennedy had run in the West Virginia primary against his father's advice, and knew that he had to win it to stay alive. He was back in Washington on primary night, after a completely financed and flawlessly organized campaign, whose only minus moment had come when Franklin Roosevelt Jr., campaigning for Kennedy in the mountain "hollers" where every shack had a picture of FDR on the wall, had cast tasteless asper-

sions on Hubert Humphrey's World War II record.

The Kennedys asked us to sweat the vote out with them at dinner, but dinner was over long before any remotely meaningful results were in. After a quick call to brother Bobby at the Kanawha Hotel in Charleston we all got into Kennedy's car and drove to the Trans-Lux theater to see "Suddenly Last Summer." Bad omen.

It was a film with a surprise ending, whose publicity included a warning that no one would be admitted after the show had started. And no one included the next President of the United States. No manner of identification could change the usher's instructions, and so we walked catty-corner across New York Avenue and 14th Street to the Plaza theater, which specialized in porn.

This wasn't the hard-core porn of the '70s, just a nasty little thing called "Private Property," starring one Katie Manx as a horny housewife, who kept getting raped and seduced by hoodlums. We wondered aloud if the movie was on the Catholic index of forbidden films (it was), and whether or not there were any votes in it either way for Kennedy in allegedly anti-Catholic West Virginia if it were known that he was in attendance.

Kennedy's concentration was absolutely zero, as he left every 20 minutes to call Bobby in West Virginia. Each time he returned, he'd whisper "Nothing definite yet," slouch back into his seat and flick his teeth with the fingernail of the middle finger of his right hand, until he left to call again.

When we got back to their house on N Street, the telephone was ringing. It was Bobby and it was victory—big. Modest war whoops were let fly, a bottle of champagne we had brought

—in case—was opened, and the "Caroline" was ordered up for the flight to West Virginia and a post-midnight victory appearance. Would Tony (my wife) and I like to go along? Would we ever!

Once in West Virginia for the victory appearance, Kennedy ignored Jackie, and she seemed miserable at being left out of things. She was then far from the national figure she later became in her own right. And this night, she and Tony stood on a stairway, totally ignored as JFK made his victory statement on television.

Later, when Kennedy was enjoying his greatest moment of triumph to date, with everyone in the hall shouting and yelling, Jackie quietly disappeared and went out to the car and sat by herself, until he was ready to fly back to Washington.

The first trip we ever took with the Kennedys had been on a small chartered airplane from Annapolis to Hyannisport in September 1959. We first drove to one of those mindless regional political throws that JFK attended regularly as an unannounced presidential candidate. This one was in Prince George's County, Maryland, in one of those motel convention halls that became a home away from home for Kennedy during the next year.

I remember most watching Jackie, and the almost physical discomfort she showed, as she walked slowly into this crowded hall to get stared at—not talked to, just simply stared at. Her reaction, later to become so familiar, was simply to pull some invisible shade down across her face, and cut out spiritually. She was physically present, but intellectually long gone. We were to see that expression a hundred times in the years to come.

NEXT: *The First Hundred Days*

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