



**CONVERSATIONS  
WITH KENNEDY  
PART 4**

## Matters of Big Steel,

By Benjamin C. Bradlee

April 13, 1962—"It may have been a good week for the Democrats but not for the U.S.," the President started off, when I called him just before lunch to ask about the steel price increases. He was really sore. "Now we are going to have a terrible struggle between management and labor—everything we have been trying to avoid in this administration."

Roger Blough (head of U.S. Steel) had just visited Kennedy and there were rumors before his visit that Big Steel felt it had an understand-

ing on price increases, after settling with the steelworkers.

"There was no question of any understanding," Kennedy said, his voice raised. "They had to come down here, because they couldn't just have sat up there and not opened their kissers about the increase . . . in the face of reports that steel was going to have a very good year, in the face of steel working at only 80 per cent of capacity. And then come in here two days after the labor contract was signed."

The President called me back at 2 p.m., when I was lunching at the

## Big Business and a Big Temper

Hay-Adams hotel with Ken Crawford and Arthur Schlesinger, and he was madder than ever. "I just want to read you a wire," he started off, while I signaled the waiter urgently for a pencil and a menu to write on. "It's from the FBI office in New York investigating the steel thing. Quote: 'J. F. Tenant, general counsel United States Steel, informed us today that he is too busy to talk to agents from the bureau.'"

And here my notes break down, but the telegram continued to the effect that Tenant suggested to the FBI agent that he be contacted in

New York on April 20 (a Friday) for further discussions as to when certain steel company executives might be interviewed by FBI personnel.

"Who . . . do they think they are?" the President asked. "It just shows how smart they think they are and how they think they can screw the government."

The President was about to leave by helicopter from the White House lawn to go on maneuvers with the Marines, and then on to Palm Beach. But his anger was running over.

I asked him about the charges that were being made about his vindictive-

ness against the steel companies. Kennedy said he'd heard all about them, but asked "What would you have us do? We can go at this thing forty different ways. The point is, I can't just make a charge and then walk away. That's when they say 'We beat 'em.' They used us, that's all, and what can we do? We can't just walk away and lie down. We're going to tuck it to them and screw 'em.'"

May 15, 1962—Conversation turned to Kennedy's remark about all businessmen being SOBs, a reaction to the news of the steel price

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rise. Wallace Carroll had reported in The New York Times of April 23, 1962, that the President had said to his advisers April 10, "My father always told me that all businessmen were sons of bitches, but I never believed it till now."

The President said tonight "I said sons of bitches, or bastards . . . I don't know which. But I never said anything about *all* businessmen. And furthermore, I called (James) Reston (of The New York Times) and Reston knows this, but he didn't have the guts to change the original story." The President went on to say that it was bankers and steelmen that his father hated, not all businessmen. But he added that it didn't make much difference now, whether he said all businessmen, or he didn't. The businessmen thought he had, and that was fine with him . . . "wherever you are."

Kennedy fingered his elaborately scripted place card at one point during dinner, and said out of the blue that he had a collection of these place cards signed by every head of state who had been honored at a White House dinner. The collection now amounts to some 60 cards, he said, as pleased as a small child talking about his bug collection.

At one point the President got off on France and DeGaulle, how difficult it would be to find his replacement, and then he digressed on the French economy, which he said he had been studying.

"It's fascinating," he said. "Here's a country getting a 5½ per cent annual increase in its GNP, while we struggle to get 2½ per cent. They have almost no unemployment, while we have too much."

Kennedy then revealed that he had asked Walter Heller, the chairman of his Council of Economic Advisers, to send some CEA staffers to France for a report on how France was able to do it.

May 16, 1962—We were back at the White House for dinner this night, this time with Ziggy de Segonzac (Adalbert de Segonzac, long-time Washington correspondent of France-Soir) and his wife. There was a slight interruption just before dinner, when we received a call that our house was on fire. I called the fire department from the White House, and rushed back, to find the street blocked by fire engines, and my heart sank. But it was only the dishwasher motor, smoking, and I was back before the cocktail hour was over.

The President drinks at least one Scotch on these occasions, but often



Associated Press

French President Charles deGaulle greets President and Mrs. Kennedy as they arrive at the Elysee Palace in Paris in May, 1961.

doesn't have a second, even though the guests do. He walks in after everyone has arrived usually, a little stiff at first, it seems, immaculately dressed (and often quite critical of my clothes. I remember once wearing brown shoes—dark, dark brown shoes—with a blue suit one night and he went out of his way to tell me that that combination was out; okay for daytime, but never at night.). He loosens up as the evening wears on. He likes to tease, loves to be teased, especially by Jackie, when she calls him "Bunny."

Kennedy finds it intolerable that he doesn't have the facility for languages that others have, and his pride in Jackie's linguistic talents is tinged

with jealousy and bewilderment. His French can only be described as unusual. One French friend says he speaks it "with a bad Cuban accent," while another says, "He apparently doesn't believe in French verbs, much less pronounce them correctly."

Just before his trip to Berlin in June 1963, he spent the better part of an hour with the Vreelands (Frederick "Frecky" Vreeland, a young foreign service officer and the son of Vogue editor Diana Vreeland, and his wife) before he could master "Ich bin ein Berliner."

Thursday: The Kennedy Clan Gathers

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