Transcript Q&A

JFK and the Future of Global Leadership

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Question 1:

Two questions really, very quick ones. The first one; Kennedy saw stupidity multiplying, needed to re-examine our own attitudes… What was his attitude – because I get conflicting reports on this – what was his attitude to Vietnam?

And the second question is quite relevant I think to your economics background; in the West we’re paying young people not to work because there aren’t jobs for them. Why not pay them to do worthwhile international work? Graduates managing projects; non-graduates, vocational people getting actively involved in the physical work. It develops them, it gives them a sense of achievement, it contributes to achieving the Millennium Goals – effectively a funded Peace Corps. What stops that happening?

Question 2:

I’ve noted actually you’ve said that you haven’t heard actually any of the American presidents saying what President Kennedy has said. I think because he was assassinated, that’s why they have not said what he said, and they don’t want to end up in the same boat as President Kennedy. I’m one of his admirers actually, and his policies, but I keep on hearing that the CIA, the stupid CIA, they’re stupid, but they are the ones who are ruling the world, the CIA. And nonetheless, we have to agree on one thing, that – of course, I think you’re the head of the Earth Foundation and you work at the UN, is that true? And you’re very near the decision-making people. Why don’t you tell them that the CIA is very stupid and they have to do something about it? Thank you.

Question 3:

Professor, you didn’t mention the first Vienna meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev. I’d be very interested in your reflection of the impact that had on Kennedy, because the Sorenson and the Schlesinger biographies suggest it had a really quite dangerously negative impact. He came away from that pretty shocked. I’d be interested in your reflection.

Patricia Lewis:

So you’re looking at 1963 and the anniversary that’s coming up in a few days, but next year we have the anniversary of the First World War. And our minds
are very taken with this, and what we’re trying to learn from the past in 2013, and what we could learn for today. And I wondered if you could give any thoughts on that from this perspective of leadership.

**Jeffrey Sachs:**

Great, thank you very much. First, I’ll just take them in order, they’re all wonderful topics.

Kennedy knew that ground war in Asia would be a disaster but, like every president that had come before and many that would come after, he was afraid of the political consequences of an expansion of communist regimes. And so he was part of the Cold War era and thinking and politics, and understood that Vietnam posed a terrible problem for him politically as well as obviously a major problem of foreign policy.

Remember that he had served in Asia, nearly died in Asia in World War II. He had no illusions about the region and about what was possible. He wanted to find a way out. Probably his model for a way out was Laos, where the Soviet Union and the US agreed on a neutral government in 1962 – it was one of the few achievements between Khrushchev and Kennedy – and he viewed that as a plausible answer. He was surrounded, of course, by hardliners who wanted to escalate. He was swept along to his deep, deep dismay after the result with the coup against Diem in the fall of 1963. In October 1963, he issued an order for the withdrawal of 1,000 advisers by the end of 1963. This was the first plan for withdrawal of advisers; remember that no troops went into Vietnam until – no normal troops, there were special forces, so CIA and Green Berets – but no standard military troops went in until March 1965.

So the largest body of thinking of a much disputed issue is that Kennedy would not have gone into a military escalation, that he was looking for a way out. But even when he gave the order for the withdrawal of the thousand advisers in the fall, he said it should not be made public. He was trying to keep manoeuvre. He was afraid of the coming election in 1964. He exemplified what I think is the best account of Vietnam that was ever given, and that’s by Daniel Ellsberg, in an essay called ‘The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine’. And Ellsberg’s analysis was that the US didn’t wander into a swamp or a quagmire, it knew what was happening, but the whole idea of every leader was don’t do anything until after the election and so avoid the political consequences.
Kennedy to the end was political, was aiming for re-election, was absolutely, privately, I think without question, uninterested in a war but didn’t know what to do, and told many, many senators at the last month of his life, especially Mansfield and Morse: we’re going to get out of this thing, we’re going to get out, but after the election. And so I think that that is the most plausible.

He was very, very doubtful of the military by this point, obviously, very doubtful. He did not believe in it, but even to the end, he was carried along with the coup, which he just greeted with dismay that he had allowed that to happen and that Diem had been killed by the generals. He viewed this as a terrible shock, and really had a tremendous amount of remorse about it.

On why we don’t have a global effort to solve these horrendous yet solvable problems of extreme poverty – beats me! I’ve spent 13 years showing how this can be done at incredibly small cost, and every time we actually do something at small cost we get large results. And when I approached President Obama about this in early 2009, he brushed me off. And he really brushed me off, he basically said ‘can't get it done politically’. I was very disappointed and quite aghast, because his job is actually to get it done not to brush it off.

And he had decided early on... you can’t – I mean you can imagine – the White House is a cynicism machine. And it is not only a cynicism machine, it is a focus group machine. So it is the supreme expression of the status quo. Don't take a risk, everything to be calibrated. I can't stand these political advisers. They don't have an idea in their head, except the one assignment, get your guy re-elected. Who cares whether they're re-elected, any of them? Our job is not caring whether they're re-elected, it's what they do. And so all of the political advisers I've known, I can't stand them. They may be perfectly nice people, but it's a despicable profession, just one rung less bad than – I won't say it. There are others, but it is...

**Patricia Lewis:**

Except for all the political advisers in the room.

**Jeffrey Sachs:**

Well, if you're a political adviser, solve a problem! Who cares whether your boss is re-elected? These positions are there not to serve them as individuals; they're there to solve problems. And you read, for instance, David Plouffe – you'll get me going on this – but his account of the 2008 campaign,
The Audacity to Win: 350 pages, utterly ingenious, not one idea in it about why you would want to win, just how to win. Not a single idea about why we should care whether Barack Obama is president.

And the truth is it didn’t matter, because that’s how we govern too. We have almost complete continuity, I believe. Even Bush’s temporary tax cuts have become permanent under Obama.

You know, the question you raise about assassination... after a lot, a lot, a lot of reading, but I am hardly an expert in this, I think the first thing you have to say is: we don’t know. It is possible that CIA agents were involved. I think there are strong reasons to believe this was not Kennedy being killed by a branch of government, I don’t believe that it was an organized conspiracy from the top, but there is enough murkiness and terrible behaviour in the investigations and destroyed evidence and all the rest to suggest that there is a lot that we don’t know about this. So I do not think that it’s...

But I do think that it’s right to feel that presidents might be afraid. And Kennedy was afraid also of even insubordination from the army and so forth. He had seen during the Cuban missile crisis the despicable behaviour of Curtis LeMay, who was the secretary of the Air Force, who was nearly insubordinate during this period, muttered all through the crisis that Kennedy was an appeaser, that the quarantine was a joke – just completely beyond responsibility of a military official to civilian rule.

So I think that the idea that they're afraid is correct. But frankly, don't become a president if you're afraid. It’s not a job for the timorous. And Kennedy was absolutely almost morbid in the calmness with which he faced death in discussions all through his life, because he was at the edge of death many times because of his poor health. And he talked about the fact that he could be taken out, that he could die – he was completely with equanimity in the face of this actually. And he was not afraid; he was a physically courageous person. We know that, what happened with the sinking of his PT boat. I mean it was sheer, true, not exaggerated physical courage – reckless courage actually. And so he wasn’t afraid.

On the CIA, I now know – well I knew already – I'm sure they read my tweets, I'm sure they read my columns, they know I'm not a fan and I have not minced words. I think it’s a disastrous organization that should have been closed down decades ago. It has no role and I feel that it’s a shame that Obama turned to the CIA and to other special operations forces for essentially a secret war that extends over many, many countries right now. And I find it horrible and also an example of inexperience, because Kennedy, partly by
dint of his own experience with the military and then by the lessons of the first couple of years, came to understand he couldn’t trust them at all. But Obama didn’t. Obama bought into it right from the beginning, and the person that he’s put in charge of the CIA is the one that has run a lot of these operations from the start, and I think it’s horrible.

In terms of the Vienna summit, Kennedy famously said that this was extraordinarily difficult. He felt that he had been basically beaten up by Khrushchev, who was very aggressive ideologically, but especially aggressive about Berlin. Because the essence of the summit in Vienna was Khrushchev’s declaration that the Soviet Union would unilaterally recognize the GDR and eliminate the access rights to West Berlin. And Kennedy said this would be war, this is a vital interest of the West. And Khrushchev basically shrugged his shoulders and said, well, so be it. And Kennedy left absolutely forlorn, not knowing what would come, deeply dismayed over the fact that the world could end over access rights to half a city in the middle of the eastern sector of Germany, which he regarded as an absurdity. He never wavered from the defence of Berlin, but he regarded it as another absurdity of the world. Kennedy had a deeply ironic view of the world, and he found it deeply ironic that the world could come to an end over Berlin.

Of course Khrushchev was a blusterer and when many things conspired to lead to the mass exodus of East Germans through Berlin in 1961 and the wall was put up in August 1961, that actually ended the Berlin crisis per se and Khrushchev never came back to his threat. Because part of the threat was, what do we do to handle this embarrassment of the flow of people out of Berlin, and the wall ended that. And Kennedy understood that intuitively, and literally at the end: don’t do anything with the wall. The wall will end some of the problems, so even though it’s a horrendous demonstration of inhumanity, it’s not a matter for protest. And Kennedy never protested it.

But the meeting… I actually think at a certain level, Kennedy acquitted himself very well at the summit, though he regarded himself as having failed. He was very clear about the Western interest, that it would defend Berlin, he never wavered, and Khrushchev backed off in essence, and the wall was the answer rather than war or rather than a unilateral declaration.

In a way, though Kennedy viewed the summit as a failure, it was a success at one level. But it was a failure to make any breakthroughs of course on bigger questions and Khrushchev followed up – well Kennedy followed up later in the year with allowing the huge US nuclear advantage to become known to the world through a speech of a senior defence official. And that was deeply
embarrassing to Khrushchev. So Kennedy in a way pushed back by saying we have the dominant power, which was breaking a view that Kennedy himself had contributed to, that the missile gap was on the other side, and it was made clear that the missile gap was on the US side. And that was another one of the reasons – there were four or five of them – why Khrushchev decided to move with missiles into Cuba, that he had to even the military balance, defend Cuba, push back in the face of the US. It was the dynamics that one gets when things get out of control and when one bad turn leads to the next one.

So an unhappy event, leading to a series of unhappy follow-ups, nearly culminating in disaster. And I think that that is how I would respond to the issue of 1914 and 2014. 1914 arguably was the most momentous, calamitous shock in modern history, even rivalling or commensurate with World War II. It set the stage for two global wars, for how many disasters worldwide that followed. And yet now there’s a new stream of books, there have been thousands written about World War I – nobody really can explain why it happened. You can tell the events, you can tell the chronology, but there was nothing that justified the war. There is no deep cause. There are triggers of crises, there’s intrigue, there’s misunderstandings, but there is no cause of World War I in my opinion, after having consumed a lot of this literature. There are explanations; individuals in their daily work of course led to the war. But nothing that is commensurate – there’s no underlying cause for this war.

That’s our world, to my mind. That’s the overwhelming truth, which is that if things are left alone it doesn’t mean they’re going to solve themselves. And the idea that sometimes you need a worse crisis to make things better I regard as among the stupidest pieces of advice in the world, because things also go out of control. And so you actually have to watch the small things because if you don’t they become bigger things, and then you have to watch those things because if they don’t they can become bigger things, and if you don’t watch those things they can become disastrous. Of course, this leads to a life of anxiety, not a life of calm. It is not the case in my view that things take care of themselves, and when we see the blustering and we see the casualness of going off to war, and we see Iraq or Afghanistan or – I regard the latest coup in Egypt as yet another disaster – when the American official today, William Burns, says this is Egypt’s second chance.

That’s bullshit, if you’ll excuse me. How can a military coup be a second chance? Why doesn’t he say it’s a military coup? Military coups usually end badly. They lead to repression; they lead to people being shot. The idea that you’re going to solve this problem by imprisoning leaders that represent some
very substantial part of the country, whether it’s 40 per cent or 60 per cent or 70 per cent I don’t know – but it’s not zero. And it’s not two per cent. It’s a substantial part of Egypt, and this is the kind of normal behaviour that we’re engaged in right now and why we need leadership and why I wrote the book.