EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER JR.

July 20, 2005
New York, New York

Participants

University of Virginia
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Schlesinger: I knew Ted first in 1960. I'll be starting my 89th year in October and my memory isn't as acute as it used to be. The first Kennedy I met was Rosemary. At Exeter, I roomed with a fellow named John O'Keefe. His mother, Ruth O'Keefe, was a great friend of Rose Kennedy. His father was a doctor. The two O'Keefe girls were roughly Rosemary's age and they—Rose and Joe [Kennedy]—were worried about the girl, Rosemary. In the current view of psychiatry they had, the O'Keefes invited Rosemary to spend a few months. John, my roommate, invited me to dinner over Christmas holiday. That's where I first met the Kennedys. Joe Kennedy Jr. was a classmate of mine at college. I was aware of JFK; he was the class of 1940, but I did not meet Jack Kennedy until after the war. I met him at Joe Alsop's in Washington and he then was Representative of my district in Massachusetts. Tom Eliot had preceded him. In the timing of the years, I had supported him for Senator, but I don't recall having met Ted Kennedy. I engaged him on occasion with Robert Kennedy. Robert Kennedy had a letter in the [*New York*] *Times* announcing the merits of the Yalta agreement. I rebutted his letter; Jack said to me, "My sisters are very mad at you because of what you wrote about Bobby."

In 1956 Bobby Kennedy joined the [Adlai] Stevenson party and I was involved in the campaign.

Young: Yes.

Schlesinger: In 1952 and '56, we shunned each other, and then in Morgantown, West Virginia, there was a thunderstorm and gathering dusk. We raced to the bus and it was a pelting thunderstorm; to my dismay, to our mutual dismay, I sat down on the seat next to Bobby. Four hours later, we had become friends.

In 1960 I came out for Kennedy and my then wife, Marian, had come out for Stevenson. Bobby sent me a letter about something else; he scrawled a postscript saying, "Can't you control your own wife? Or are you like me?" In the 1960 campaign were my first memories of Ted. He was a well-mannered young man and he kept calling me sir. I think I finally persuaded him not to call me sir. I didn't have much impression of him.

In '62 JFK summoned the Massachusetts people to consider what should be done to elect Ted Kennedy, his younger brother, to the Senate. My memory of the meeting is not specific. I have the impression that the Irish and Kenny O'Donnell were not enthusiastic about Ted Kennedy.

Young: Not enthusiastic about him or about his running, or both?

Schlesinger: About his running. They were loyal to the Kennedys and Kenny said to me, "If the President wants that, we'll do it," but I didn't get the impression that he thought the world would

be saved by Ted Kennedy's nomination for the Senate. I think perhaps part of that was Eddie McCormack, his nephew, John McCormack, Speaker of the House. John McCormack wanted Eddie running for the Senate and perhaps Larry O'Brien, a hopeful, backed Eddie McCormack. But my impression of those days—

Young: Do you have an impression of the father's wishes in Edward's running for the Senate?

Schlesinger: Yes, I think the father wanted it very much. The stroke [first stroke, December 1961] had taken place.

Young: Then the second stroke took place, I think, almost simultaneously with Edward's victory over McCormack in the primary. That was in September of '62, but he had won the convention in the summer, the nomination by the Democratic convention in Massachusetts.

Schlesinger: That made all the more reason to elect Ted Kennedy to the Senate. The father, Joe Kennedy, had been very eager to nominate Bobby Kennedy for Attorney General.

Young: Yes.

Schlesinger: Bobby was not enthusiastic about that.

Young: Was JFK enthusiastic?

Schlesinger: He was; he knew Bobby's qualities. Bobby was not enthusiastic about it. He had spent enough of his life chasing people, prosecuting. Anyway, Jack regarded satisfaction with his father's personal ambitions as a priority. Therefore in '62 and '68—I do not retain an impression of Ted's first term as Senator, but I have—It's covered in my journal; this is June 1969, reelection: "On the Democratic side, Ted Kennedy was taking a more vigorous and radical role than I would have anticipated. He's leading the fight against the ABM [anti-ballistic missile] and against the search-and-destroy strategy in Vietnam, and he has been outspoken on a number of domestic issues." I'll leave that with you.

Young: Thank you. Was that your first clear impression of Edward?

Schlesinger: Yes. As I say, more vigorous and radical than I had anticipated, because he was not an outspoken Senator like George McGovern or Eugene McCarthy, or Bobby Kennedy. There was a series of Teddy jokes, because he was senior to Robert Kennedy. I didn't get the sense of leadership.

Young: When he entered the Senate, his brother was President, his other brother was Attorney General, and that meant three Kennedys in two branches of government. He was also the youngest Senator in the body. It appears to me that for all of those reasons and perhaps more, he vowed to be seen but not heard. He spent a great deal of effort, I think, in the Senate, doing what a junior Senator should do who respects the institution, rather than—as he puts it—giving a speech the first day you arrive on the floor, which is common now.

Schlesinger: No, I agree with that. He was learning the ropes and those are long ropes, distance running. Now they're short, hundred-yard dash. Then, in the summer of 1969, Alexandra [Schlesinger] and I were on a yacht in the Mediterranean and were following the rocket to the moon, July of '69. We were watching the moon and had a radio and the landing was taking place before the sunrise. Sam Spiegel, the film producer, approached us, 4 a.m., 5 a.m., with the sunrise, saying, "I heard Ted Kennedy was involved in an automobile accident in Martha's Vineyard." When I came back a few weeks later, I had a talk with Ted Kennedy.

Young: This was after Chappaquiddick? Soon after?

Schlesinger: I think it's a great sadness that that eliminated him for the Presidency, because he's a great Senator. He tested the waters in 1980.

Young: Yes, I'd like to ask you a little bit more about his Presidential ambitions or nonambitions. Would it be correct to say that when he launched his political career, it was not with a thought of becoming President or anything more than a Senator ,and only later, after both of his brothers were murdered, that he came to think of himself as a Presidential candidate? Or is neither of those a fair assumption?

Schlesinger: In 1980, he challenged [Jimmy] Carter for the nomination. He felt that Carter's leadership was nonexistent and that he was too far to the right and the country should be saved from [Ronald] Reagan and so on. Steve Smith lost his taste for politics with the Robert Kennedy assassination, but he was part of the family. Ted asked him to run the campaign and made a great speech at the Democratic convention.

But I think in a certain sense, Ted Kennedy was a parliamentary type. His brothers were executive types. Jack and Bobby were satisfied only by executive responsibilities. They were frustrated by the pace, the frustrations, of the Senate, whereas Ted loved the Senate and was, is, a great Senator. I think he could have been a great President. Does Bill vanden Heuvel agree with this?

Young: Yes. I think that when you compare the brothers, this is a very important point of comparison. It does raise the question about Edward as to whether the Senate was always his métier and he liked it; he was good at it. Why he was and the others were not—they were executive types as you say—is a question I couldn't pretend to answer. But it does raise the question as to why would Edward think of a career outside the Senate? Let me put an observation to you. You may recall some of the discussions about Robert—should he run, should he not run—in '67 then in '68. You were very much in those discussions.

Schlesinger: Yes.

Young: Edward has shown us his own notes of those discussions, but also, as you've written in your own book about Robert, while the situation was rapidly changing with McCarthy's entry and then with [Lyndon] Johnson's withdrawal, it was a very up-and-down situation. Edward seems pretty consistently to have counseled against running.

Schlesinger: That's right.

Young: But he should hold off until '72. That was on the assumption, of course, that Lyndon Johnson would be President. One of the reasons he gave was that it would split the party. You are familiar with all of those, I believe. I think Bill vanden Heuvel tended to be on that side of the argument too, and perhaps others in the family, the sisters, Ethel [Skakel Kennedy]—Ethel was certainly for his running. I think Jean was too. You were very prominent in that. But thinking from Edward's point of view, the possibility of a defeat was something that weighed heavily on him—what that would mean for the family and what that would mean for himself. I don't know, I'm speculating here.

Why did he run against Carter as an incumbent President if he felt so strongly earlier that this was a very risky thing to do? That was his advice to Robert. I'm talking too much here, but I'm

contrasting his decision to run against Carter with his advice to Bobby about running against an incumbent Democratic President.

Schlesinger: Yes. I think he learned the lesson of ’68. Ted Sorensen and Fred Dutton and so on were against his running. I think Dick [Goodwin] and I were strongly in favor of his running because it seemed to be the psychological moment. It was maybe that Ted, reflecting on this, felt the psychological moment, and frustration of Jimmy Carter and the “malaise” speech in 1979. “Malaise” is not a particular word in his speech, but in a sense Jimmy Carter was blaming the failure of his own Presidency on the American people. I think that may have struck him as the psychological moment.

Young: Which would suggest, maybe, that he was more attentive to the mood and state of the country outside the party, whereas in ’68 he may have been more concerned with the delegate votes and what does it mean for the party. Would that be a fair assessment?

Schlesinger: Yes, he learned from Robert Kennedy, the decision, not narrowly construed in party terms, but in terms of public crisis. But I cannot remember a series of meetings about Ted Kennedy.

Young: Later? Meetings about whether he would run or not? There isn’t too much about that. Most of the meetings that I’ve read about—I haven’t covered this yet in my interviews with him—I had talked two weeks ago at length about the ’68 RFK campaign and the convention that nominated [Hubert, Jr.] Humphrey and the effort to get him involved as Vice President or subject to a Presidential draft.

Schlesinger: Dave Burke should be helpful.

Young: Yes.

Schlesinger: Because they were one—

Young: I think some staff people were pushing him very strongly and the most well reported, or the most well known of the meetings, in the literature at least, were the meetings on the Cape, where the children and the family were brought into it and he decided he would do it.

Schlesinger: Yes. I can’t recall whether I was involved, but I was much closer with Jack and Bobby than I was to Ted. But the thing about Ted Kennedy is that he is more articulate now, in his 70s, than—He used to talk in cryptic shorthand and he would never complete his sentences. He referred to legislation as HR some name, technical name, and so on. Suddenly he’s become an articulate person.

Young: Did that happen after the death of his brothers?

Schlesinger: I think it has happened in the last ten years, because his television interviews are far more effective than in the past. As I say, he would talk a kind of parliamentary shorthand, but I cannot remember that he had been wrong on any issue. He enjoys the parliamentary sport of coalition building. He and Alan Simpson, for example: I was out at Aspen a couple of weeks ago. Alan Simpson, the Senator from Wyoming, Republican Senator, said to me, “Have you seen Ted Kennedy recently?” I mentioned that I had had dinner with him. Alan Simpson said, “I love Ted Kennedy. He and I work together.” Orrin Hatch is a friend. Ted enjoys the Senate.

Young: He doesn’t seem to bear a grudge against anybody.

Schlesinger: No. He’s great fun.

Young: I've asked him about this, "What is it about politics that attracted you, or you felt a real feeling for?" My guess is that his exposure to politics as a young man, young boy, was through his grandfather, when he was at Fessenden or Milton Academy. He used to come in to Boston and spend part of Sunday with Honey Fitz [John Fitzgerald] and he recounts, in *great* detail, the things he saw and heard and what he learned from this extraordinary figure; there's nobody else like him in the family. It was there he learned about the Irish, Boston, immigrants, the personal interaction that was so fascinating.

Schlesinger: An Irish-American laureate, political laureate. There was a fellow named Clem Norton, who was filled with anecdotes about honor. Clem Norton. I used to know Honey Fitz and I heard him sing "Sweet Adeline" [*laughs*].

Young: I think neither Robert nor Jack had those experiences as a young boy with their grandfather, with Honey Fitz, as he did later. But he said, "I just liked the street politics."

Schlesinger: Jack and Bobby were inward types. They were reflective. Joe Jr., and Ted were sort of outside, external types. Joe was a classmate of mine. Joe Sr. was proud of his family. He didn't insist that they agree with him. For example, Jack wrote him a letter when he [Joe Sr.] was about to testify against the Lend-Lease bill. He said, "You cannot oppose aid to England," and Joe Sr., weakened his testimony. He was opposed to—He was a classical isolationist—He was opposed to [Adolf] Hitler, the war, and he was opposed to the Second World War and he was opposed to the Cold War. He was opposed to the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine; JFK voted *for* the Marshall Plan, *for* the Truman Doctrine. Kennedy remarked to Dorothy Schiff in 1960, "If I were running on the Communist Party ticket, my father would be all for me." Joe Sr. was interested less in the agreement of his children with his prejudices, but in their capacity to defend their own positions.

For example, he sent Joe Jr. to Harold Laski, from the London School of Economics, because he wanted to expose—The Laskis took Joe on a trip to the Soviet Union. I didn't know him terribly well.

Young: There was also a drive to make something of yourself, your own success.

Schlesinger: Yes.

Young: And not in business.

Schlesinger: [K. LeMoyne] Lem Billings used to say—JFK's great friend, Lem Billings—used to say, "To hear the Kennedy boys talk about money is like hearing nuns talk about sex." That's why Steve Smith was absolutely essential; he understood money.

Young: In Edward's campaigns, you know the times when he would have to raise money and a lot of it, even his Senate campaigns, a great contrast from the first campaign, where you could just write a check.

Schlesinger: The Republicans didn't have a candidate to run against him.

Young: I was interested in something you said a while ago, when you observed a change in his public speaking or thinking or way of expressing himself from talking in the staccato, shorthand, bill number, or something that was mysterious to those not in the know, to his articulateness and also, would you say, his liberalism, or did it move the other way? You said you detected this in the last ten years or so.

Schlesinger: I think he was always a liberal, but he was, as I said in the '68 notation—I felt that he was more vigorous and radical. That may have been the opposition to the Republican administration. I think, as much as he would bridle at the term, he was always a liberal.

Young: It's notable that he is certainly an icon of what all the conservatives think of—to be held up as a liberal, the dirty word "liberal." He has always used that.

Schlesinger: He's a great fund-raiser with the Republican Party.

Young: But on the other hand, there's the side that is the pragmatic politician, the coalition builder, the person who works for and will settle, for the moment at least, on what's a compromise or a consensus solution, whether or not it is what one would think of as a liberal stand. As part of the workings in the Senate, it's just extraordinary for an outsider to see the public portraiture of Ted Kennedy in the conservative press and rhetoric, and then hear of his reputation in the Senate among both Republicans and Democrats; that is not his reputation. So it's a two-sided picture, the two, like a split image of the man. So in what does the liberalism consist? It's not the liberalism, is it, of Gene McCarthy, or is it?

Schlesinger: Gene McCarthy was a frivolous man. I don't think he was a liberal. Ted Kennedy is an equalitarian of opportunity. He wants his to have the best education, the best medical care, the best housing, and so on.

Young: And equal justice.

Schlesinger: And equal justice. He feels that passionately because he was the lucky one to have all those advantages, and the least he could do is provide equal advantages to young people.

Young: Did all the Kennedy brothers have this feeling, or was it a difference in how that figured in their political, public philosophy?

Schlesinger: Joe Jr., disappeared in the war. He voted for [James] Farley in the Democratic convention of 1940 and he may have been more conservative. I didn't know him well, but he may have been more conservative. Bobby went through a conservative period.

Young: In the '50s?

Schlesinger: Yes, he voted for [Dwight David] Eisenhower in 1956.

Young: I didn't know that.

Schlesinger: Yes, he was so disgusted by the Stevenson campaign. He felt that Stevenson was like Mario Cuomo; he was too intelligent to see only one side of an issue and he would think aloud and before the press conferences, and it earned him a reputation for indecision. Actually, as Governor of Illinois, he was quite decisive. But in that—

Young: That was anathema to Robert? So much so that he would vote for Eisenhower?

Schlesinger: He saw enough examples—He traveled with Stevenson, and saw enough examples of Stevenson's indecision. I think I incorporated that in my book. If you have any further questions. . . .

Young: We can stop now if you would prefer. I could talk forever, but we don't have that opportunity. Maybe you would like to say something about—Would you place all three brothers in the landscape of American liberalism in the same place?

Schlesinger: Yes.

Young: They have that in common? Though they didn't have personal characteristics all in common?

Schlesinger: As I said, JFK, in my book, *A Thousand Days*, JFK was a realist disguised as a romantic. Robert was a romantic disguised as a realist. One was a man of reason; the other, a man of passion. Ted was not in the—Even as I was saying, an equalitarian, he wants to equalize opportunity for all children. He rejoices in the process of legislation, whereas Jack and Bobby were frustrated, impatient with the processes of legislation.

Young: The realist disguised as a romantic, Bobby was the radical or the romantic disguised as a realist. Where would you put Edward in that scheme of things, idealist and realist?

Schlesinger: He isn't a romantic. He is a realist. I think he enjoys the lawmaking process.

Young: There is passion there too. There's a passion that comes out. This is not a subject of our discussion here today, but I think as one tracks the course of his personal life and the weight of the tragic and unanticipated events, the personal things he has suffered, and being the only one left of the men in the family, it is truly remarkable. I don't think any one of the other boys, Kennedys, had to deal with *all* of that.

Schlesinger: Absolutely, and he is a master of—

Young: And his own personal—When Jack was injured, too, he had troubles. Edward carries a lot of pain around constantly.

Schlesinger: He has operated as a father substitute, uncle substitute, for—He's an extraordinary, generous—There aren't words. His words at Jackie's [Kennedy Onassis] funeral and so on were marvelous.

Young: His marriage to Vicki [Reggie Kennedy] I think also was very important.

Schlesinger: Absolutely.

Young: He sort of talked about his turning points in politics, though he wouldn't use the term; that's my term. He mentioned the '94 campaign, the early '90s, as a time when he came to certain—He asked himself a lot of questions. Massachusetts people were thinking maybe he was a has-been, part of the '60s, "He's not interested in us and our issues." I think that challenge, that perception of himself, was a challenge to him. He really—It's almost like talking to a young man again when he's talking about the Massachusetts '94 campaign and today. There's just a lot of zeal and zest for national issues, but also issues for the people of Massachusetts; he makes that connection. Anyway, that's a new story. He's lived so much longer than any of his brothers; there's so much history, personal history, so much political history, so much Senate history. The Senate is not the place today it was then. What's remarkable to me is how he survives in it.

Schlesinger: Had to make history.

Young: Yes. Thank you very much for this time.