

Talks at GS: Fredrik Logevall

John Rogers: Hello everyone. And welcome to Talks at GS. We are broadcasting today from our studio at 200 West Street in New York City. And it's a pleasure and an honor for me to be joined today by Professor Fredrik Logevall, the Laurence Belfer Professor of International Affairs at the Kennedy School, and also a professor of history at Harvard University. So welcome, sir.

Fredrik Logevall: It's great to be with you.

John Rogers: Thank you. Well, professor, you're the author of nine books, including the most recent *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, which won a Pulitzer prize for history back in 2013 and your new book of what we're going to discuss today, *JFK, The Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917 to 1956*. This is the first of two volumes focusing on the life of our 35th president and it has already received critical acclaim.

So, let me first talk about writing about the JFK. You were born in the year President Kennedy was assassinated and for me on the shocking day that he was assassinated, I was home from school when my uncle came racing to our door to tell my mother and me that the president had been shot and growing up in an Irish Catholic family, my grandparents had a picture of JFK on the wall of their home. I have that actual picture still today at my own home, but let me sort of paraphrase a quote from Inga Arvad that's in your book. He walked into the hearts of our family and had always been there. So, I know why I wanted to read this book. So, let me ask you that, given this larger than life status, why did you want to write this book when there has been so much written already about President Kennedy?

Fredrik Logevall: That's a really good question. And I think it's, I think it's a couple of things. I think its number one that he's long fascinated, fascinated me. I've written about JFK and other contexts, especially with respect to foreign policy and maybe in particular Vietnam and his decision making on Vietnam, which of course is really important. I also had a sense that this is one of the great

American stories. That the story of the Kennedy family and of him in particular tells us so much and that connects to the time in which he lived. I wanted to approach this biography as a historian, which I am, so I thought I can use. This is the conceit. I thought I can use Kennedy's life, tell the story of his rise, but then also use it to tell the story of America's rise because it's quite remarkable. The United States in 1917, the year in which he's born is, is kind of a junior member of the great power club, but it's not really a member. It's kind of in the wings of history is how I put it in. And then by 1963, when he's killed, it's the greatest military, economic power the world has ever seen. How does that happen? So, in that half century, I think we can tell that story. And then I'll just say one other thing about this, John, which is that I think even though we have endless books on the Kennedy presidency, on the Kennedy family, on the nature of his marriage with Jackie, the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination, of course, we actually have remarkably few biographies. I think it's a strange thing, but I thought there's an opening for me to pursue this because in terms of a kind of full-fledged biography we have very few, the last, I think is Bob Dallek, which is now almost 20 years ago. And I thought we need, there's a need for this book.

John Rogers: Well, you've said that you believe that we can better understand the first half of the so-called American century through the lens of Kennedy's life. And particularly as you think about the early years of the Kennedy's life that you focused on in this volume in particular as a historian, why do you see those years in the way that you've come to understand that they're important to American history? And then can you give me a sort of view, because you're a great interpreter, certainly of the Cold War, the Vietnam period, and this book is really kind of a lead up to it, but can you put that period of American history also in the context of the current one we're living in today?

Fredrik Logevall: Excellent questions. I, you know, I think one of the things that I determined, and this is something I don't think previous biographers have by and large done, is I determined that Kennedy's teens and his twenties were really, I think, profoundly important in terms of shaping who he was and who he became. It's not to say that it stopped at age 29 in terms of his development and his worldview, his political philosophy. But I think the 12 or 14, 15 years prior to that are really important. And so, I wanted to look closely at them. After all, if JFK is like the rest of us or most of

us, those are really formative years, probably for all of us, probably for you and me. It's our teens and twenties that do a lot. And I thought because of the mammoth correspondence that the family keeps during precisely that period. It drops off dramatically after the end of world war II.

But Rose, the mother writes a lot of round robin letters to her kids. The kids write back. Joe Kennedy is amazing in terms of the father, that is to say, in terms of the letters that he writes too, especially his sons, his older sons, Joe Jr. and Jack. And so, I thought, you know, I want to give extra attention to this period. This is also when he serves in the South Pacific. And I think he comes back from that experience, 1943 in particular, I think he's changed like many fighting men were. And I think we understand his subsequent decision to enter politics only if we grasp grapple with his period in the service and what he encountered. So that's at least the beginning of an answer. We can pursue that further on. The second question, I think the connections to today, let me put it maybe in the, in the following terms, I think John F. Kennedy determined when he came back from the Solomons, when he came back from the war, that, and this is by the way, fascinating difference between him and his father on this. They broke over appeasement. They broke over US intervention in the war. I detail this in the book and his father disagreed with him on this. He came back, I think, convinced that the United States had to play a leadership position in world affairs. It had to work in concert with others. I think even, even then the young Jack Kennedy believed in collective security, believed that the United States had to have allies.

But I think he was convinced that the United States, as the greatest power now in the world, it was already clear by 1944 in his mind that the US would be what would emerge as the top, as the top dog had to in subsequent years and decades be really foremost on the international stage. And I think that's still a question for us today. And maybe one other thing I'll say here, I think I'm fascinated by the degree to which John F. Kennedy as a Harvard undergraduate and later, but even as undergraduate age 20, 21 was interested in the question of democracy. Can democracy survive? What does it take for it to survive? What's required of a robust and functioning democracy? And you see if you look at his first congressional campaign in 1946, he's a skinny 29-year-old running for the 11th district here in Massachusetts. You see him saying to his audiences, by the way, sounding themes that we see in the inaugural address, famous inaugural address in 1961. And in

other speeches, as president talking to them about the need for having an informed and an engaged citizenry reasoning from evidence and committed to the proposition that bargaining between the parties is required, if you're going to have a functioning democracy. So, there's also that connection between then and today.

John Rogers: Well, that's actually very good place to start because we look at the early years. And if we just delve into that for a moment, you start at the very beginning and navigate us through his childhood and the time at boarding school. But what can we learn from those years as a student, as well as a young man, struggling with both the health issues, which and living in the shadow of his older brother, Joe Jr.? What can we see in that? Because the one thing I was taken by this is how the health issues come into his life all the way through and these near-death experiences. I mean, it's really quite remarkable, but what, what can we see from that? And then then, and as part of that early years, you know, he was accepted at both Princeton, Harvard. He ends up in the end in Harvard. And it was the start of his sophomore year that his father was named then to be US ambassador to Great Britain, Joe senior. And so here's a figure that in his life looms larger than I see it throughout from reading your book and particularly on foreign policy, but to your earlier point that you mentioned, however, his views, his views are different, his views become different.

Fredrik Logevall: They do, they do. So, I think in terms of the early years, one of the things that I take away from his childhood is, as you pointed out, that he is sick a lot as a child. Some of this was hard for me as a researcher to pin down, what exactly is the ailment at various points, but he's in the infirmary all the time when he's at Choate, for example and at Harvard too, he spends a lot of time in the infirmary. And I think that it has important effects on him as it would on anybody. I think it helps make him a voracious reader because he spends so much time in bed. He becomes fascinated by history, by European statecraft, by biography. He begins to read by the way, Winston Churchill. This is long before Churchill becomes you know, a leader and prime minister.

And so, when there's an interesting connection between him how he sees himself in Churchill, which we can pursue, but I think that's what the young Kennedy does. And I would say one other thing here about the ailments they're important and especially the Addison's disease, which is only diagnosed in the late forties, but I don't think we should, or fascinating to me that the ailments which are real and are debilitating, do not keep him from having extraordinary energy and determination. And in fact, maybe they help on some level and make him more determined. So, in his political campaigns, for example, he works harder than his opponents, start earlier. It's a secret of his success as a politician is that he began his earlier works harder than the opposition in all of his campaigns, but he can go from dawn until midnight.

And so, these elements don't stop JFK from this determination to succeed as a politician. And I think they are a secret of his success. So, that's one of the things that I would take from those early years. I would also mention here just very briefly that we should not lose sight of the fact that Rose Kennedy, his mother, who was overshadowed in the literature. And I think understandably so by Joe, who was such an overpowering figure in his son's life. Rose, I think is important. It's more Rose than Joe who instills a, this interest in history, this interest in reading. this love of politics. Something, one of the things we might discuss today before we finished is that this is somebody who, who loves and believes in politics and in government. I think he gets that much more from his mother. Now on, on Joe Kennedy, as ambassador and it's influence, I think it's an extraordinary chapter, I think, in this story and it consumes actually a few chapters in my book that his father you said, becomes the ambassador to come to Britain in 1938, a very important moment as the war clouds gather, he becomes a champion of appeasement and as close ally of Neville Chamberlain, and even after Chamberlain and Halifax, you know, when war begins, even before war begins, they really move away from appeasement to a policy of deterrence.

Joe Kennedy is adamant that we should appease Hitler and the Germans. He believes this even after the war begins in 30 and 39. And Jack, unlike Joe Jr, who never can move away from his fathers out of his father's shadow Jack in ways that I document in the book, including with his senior thesis, which becomes his first book, Jack shows a willingness to part ways with his father on

issues, on this issue and others. But that ambassadorship and the effect that it has on, on Joe Senior himself, but on the rest of the family, including a young Jack, a really important part of the story.

John Rogers: Well, if we look then, just after this, we look at 1941. And despite the health issues and you chronicle very well, how we get to be into the Navy after failing to get there on his own. So, you know, that's interesting in its own right, but he ends up in this situation where he doesn't see any action and he ends up down in the South and he's got this basis and you know, so he's there. He's, he's got those sorts of job. It's boring, it's as boring as it was in Washington. It's boring. And so, and, you know, is it really that when he takes the, he gets the opportunity to see it in a big way when he gets to go to the South Pacific and actually gets in a position to command a PT boat. And that in that being with, you know, this group of men, that these basics of leaderships tend to be formed.

And it's just a very interesting snapshot, I think, of his life during that period. But how much does that start to shape this worldview? Because you know in the time of war, you're in what you have to do every day, and I think they've all painted and including him a pretty good portrait of what life was really like being on that boat, which was not glamorous by any means as the movies now have portrayed. And you know, what you see in some of the pictures of what went on, but you know, this difficult thing on a craft that wasn't really, you know, designed for, if you look at it for the purpose that it was set out to achieve.

Fredrik Logevall: Yeah. I mean, it's an amazing story. And I think you're quite right that he finds the desk jobs that he has burdensome. He works very hard, I think to, to get into to a war theater. He is ultimately successful, partly with his father's help, which is fascinating by the way, parenthetically, but his father still believes that he does not want to see his sons anywhere near harm's way. And yet both Joe Jr. and Jack now are in the harm's way. And Bobby's not too far behind. So, if the war lasts into even 1946 then Bobby too, would've seen combat. But I think that experience in

1943, and the ramming of his boat, by a Japanese destroyer, and his action afterwards to help save his crew, I think they were of immense importance in terms of development.

But I would also say even before the ramming, so in those months when he's in the Solomons, but before he sees heavy action, the letters home, both to his former girlfriend, Inga Arvad, in some ways the love of his life, at least until Jackie comes along, a woman he really loves. And he regrets, I think, breaking up with her, she, by the way, is under FBI surveillance as a potential former Nazi spy. So, we have transcripts of conversations between Jack and Inga, including in various motel rooms and et cetera, but he writes to her from the South Pacific. And I think what we see, what I suggest the book is a growing maturation, a growing skepticism about the military brass and what they are wanting to do. I think for the rest of his days, Jack Kennedy will have a certain skepticism about the use of the military instrument to solve political problems that comes in part from his experience here.

But as I said before, I think it's a transformative moment for him. I think he realizes that he's got leadership potential. I think he comes back the war, not fully committed to a political career. And we have to remember the Joe Jr, who's the golden child, doesn't get killed, is not killed until the summer of 1944. So, he's killed later. And it's an interesting question if Joe Jr comes back from the war alive, what does Jack Kennedy do? Can he still enter politics at some point, I think probably he does, but he probably defers. And so that Joe Jr can run first, but because Joe Jr was killed, he is in a position in 1946 to seek this congressional seat.

John Rogers: Maybe we could take this moment since you mentioned Joe's death and for the consequences of this political career that emerged and turn to politics. He embarked on his first campaign as a 29 at 29 years of age. And it was to represent the 11th district of Massachusetts. How did winning that campaign become what you call the prototype for his future runs for office?

Fredrik Logevall: I think in a few ways. I think that he decides I'm going to start earlier than the competition. So, they open a campaign office in the 11th district here in Boston long before the competitors for the Democratic nomination. And let's remember, this is all that matters once you win that Democratic nomination in the spring, you're effectively guaranteed. Then, and I suppose today of winning in November, but long before those Democratic opponents are even, have even decided that they're going to run, he and his father and their team have already established an operation. So, that's how it becomes in part of prototype. It's a prototype also in the use of the family. In all of his campaigns, it's family operation, his mother Rose is a superb political campaigner. His sisters become very involved in terms of helping him and helping him to go to small receptions.

Sometimes they appear by themselves at these receptions. His father of course, has his bank, his check book permanently opened. And even the younger siblings are involved in that 1946 campaign. And I think it also finally becomes a prototype or maybe not finally, but in a heavy use of volunteers, one of the things they determine in 1946, it becomes really a cemented in 1952 when the Senate race against Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. And we also see it again in 1960 is an extraordinary use of volunteer labor, which speaks to one of his attributes. People want to work for this guy. It's a source of puzzlement to some of his aides, how people just keep flocking through the doors at headquarters, asking what they can do. That's an important strategy that's really established here in the first campaign and is then carried on through the subsequent campaigns.

The last thing I'll say is that I think he understands even in 1946, that what he says on the trail, his speechmaking is going to help make or break him as a politician. Truth is he's not very good. He becomes later an effective orator and he becomes especially good at extemporaneous speechmaking, including in the White House. He can speak in full paragraphs without resort to text, but early on, he is actually not very good. And one of the things we see is that he spends endless hours with Eunice, one of his sisters or Joe, his father, going over speeches and saying,

well, what worked, what didn't work? How should I improve? There is a determination here to succeed that I think we see already in that first campaign.

John Rogers: Well about that 1946 campaign you also have written that in substantive terms, he had fashioned through his writing and the speechmaking that you're just speaking about a political philosophy that transcended narrow selfish vision of his father and his elder brother in the form of a poorest liberal internationalism, I think is what you said. Idealistic, yet it was infused with pragmatic realism, which really resonated with me. Can you just expand on, because you've touched a couple of these pieces, that political philosophy and how he applied it once he was in Congress?

Fredrik Logevall: Yeah, I think it's a really good point. I think it's important to understand him and I think his ultimate success and also, I think, and I talk a little bit about this in the preface, in terms of his legacy. You know, we often say that the reason why he is so popular among Americans in recent decades, is because of the glamour of the Kennedy White House, the beautiful family, Jackie and the kids, or it's about his speechmaking, or it's about the circumstances of his death as you and I were discussing before we went on today, you know, the, the nature of the events in Dallas all of that, I, and I'm sure it all does contribute to his legacy. I think more important though, is what you refer to or what I refer to as this political philosophy that he developed. I see it already in 1945 and 1946, so when he's running for Congress. It's a capacious, a kind of capacious vision, which envisions an important leadership role for the United States abroad.

Again, in working also in concert with allies and at home though, he's not particularly liberal. He's very much, I think, a centrist politically, although in the very much in the Democratic Party, I don't buy arguments that have been made that he's actually a conservative. I don't think the records are supports that base is not particularly partisan, not particularly ideological in what he wants, I think is a continuation of a, partly from the New Deal, apart from the Fair Deal under, under Truman, but an America in which government, it won't solve all our problems, but government can be harnessed

to address real problems. It can speak to society's highest aspirations. I think that's one of the things he believes. His signature line from his inaugural address that we all can quote, ask, not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.

This, I see versions of this really in these first speeches. And I think this is, this kind of gets up at the heart of this. It's an emphasis on the things that Americans have in common, more than, more than maybe what divides them. I'll say one other thing about this, which I think is totally interesting. He said at one point to David Ormsby-Gore in, I think 1955. So, this is before he becomes president, but he's in the Senate, David Ormsby-Gore, a good British friend who becomes Britain's ambassador to the United States during Kennedy's administration. He says, you know, David, I'm not sure I'm cut out to be a politician. Ormsby Gore says, what do you mean? And he says, well, I, you know, I can see the merits in the other side's arguments a little bit too much. And I sometimes begin to see that, you know, they have good arguments. Maybe my own argument is not so good. I think that's an insight into, because there's other evidence for this too, that he's, as I suggested earlier, he's not particularly part is partisan. And for me, at least in our deeply divided moment in this country and, you know, October of 2020, I think it's an important message. There's a kind of dynamic centrism that I think speaks to us, speaks to me today.

John Rogers: Great. Well, I enjoyed this today and for all of our viewers here, we just want to give you a great round of applause. We would do that if we're all together, but you'll have just to accept our congratulations by this magnificent work. And I encourage everyone go out and get it. Thank you very much.

Fredrik Logevall: Thanks so much for having me on and my best to you all.

John Rogers: Thank you.

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