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BARACK OBAMA INTERVIEW
JOHN MCCAIN: FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS
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BARACK OBAMA
Former President of the United States
November 11, 2017
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 25 Minutes

START TC:
QT: 01:00;00;00

QT: 01:00;00;02

CREW:

President Obama interview take one, marker, soft sticks.

QT: 01:00;05;04

TITLE

First impressions and admiration for John McCain

QT: 01:00;08;12

BARACK OBAMA:

When I got to Washington, I already had seen John on television and admired his career from afar. I was, I think, familiar with the extraordinary heroism that he had shown as a Navy pilot and then you know, surviving unbelievable hardship as a POW during the course of the Vietnam War. I had also seen how he had conducted himself in 2000, when he first ran for President, and I think, like many people, admired the fact that, although he was a conservative and ya know, had very clear views about the limits of government, he wasn't an ideologue and was somebody who ya know, occasionally would break ranks with his party around issues that he thought was important.

QT: 01:01;10;19

BARACK OBAMA:

So—so I already was an admirer of John's before I got to the Senate, and when I got to the Senate, I think most of those impressions were confirmed. I will say that you know, when I got to the Senate, I think John's reputation for occasionally not suffering fools was accurate as well. And you know, I think that you know, the interesting thing about John is—is you know, when he thinks he's right on something, he's more than happy to let the other person know, including his colleagues, but you know, he's also somebody who I think, you know, even in those early years as a freshman always impressed me as caring deeply about the institution, judging people on the merits, not on who they were, ya know, what their status was, and somebody who ya know, was fundamentally of—of the kind of character that you'd want to see representing the American people.

QT: 01:02;24;10

TITLE

The 2008 presidential race

QT: 01:02;28;07

BARACK OBAMA:

I went through probably the most grueling presidential primary in American history. You know, I was the upstart running against Hillary Clinton and it dragged on for a very long time and was getting a lot of attention. And so when I came out of that to realize that now I was going to be running against a certifiable American hero was a little daunting, and I think John had great appeal among independents, John obviously had the extraordinary biography, he looked the part, and had the experience of not just 18 years in the Senate but having run for President before.

QT: 01:03;20;15

BARACK OBAMA:

I'll be honest with you. The—the—the big disadvantage that John had was timing. You know, he's running against some very strong headwinds. He had championed the war in Iraq, and the need to stay the course, so to speak, at a time when the country had soured significantly on the Iraq War, and then the economy collapses and you've got a Republican president. And I think by necessity John did everything that he could to support President Bush's

efforts, but it also meant that he was in a tough position having to defend what everybody could see was an emerging crisis.

QT: 01:04;12;02

BARACK OBAMA:

So I didn't know all of that necessarily at the beginning of the summer of 2008 when the General Election essentially began, but I think that what I always saw out of John during the course of that General Election was him conducting himself in a way that was tough. He was a competitor, he wanted to win, but he never crossed the line. I think he was always someone who felt that there was a certain example that public figures should set in terms of how they treat other people, how they speak in public, what were fair attacks and what weren't, and I think he conducted himself with the kind of dignity that was consistent with his broader career.

QT: 01:05;08;06

TITLE

The 2008 campaign was not a race against McCain, but for a new direction for the country

QT: 01:05;12;05

BARACK OBAMA:

Well, you know, Joe and John McCain were close. John had relationships with a lot of folks on the other side of the aisle in our former colleagues. He was close to Joe, he was close to Hillary, he was close to John Kerry, and so I think Joe's opinion of John was consistent with what you'd hear with everybody else, is that--that John was somebody who was a fundamentally good man and loved the country deeply and—and was fair. I think that you know, Joe, as my running mate ended up really taking the same approach that I did throughout the campaign, which is we weren't really running against John McCain, we were running for a new direction for the country.

QT: 01:06;07;08

BARACK OBAMA:

And you know, if—if you look back on that 2008 campaign, you know, really the issue was not personal. The issue had to do with some broader visions,

and what the parties at that stage represented, and—and so in contrast to some political campaigns and presidential campaigns that we've seen, it wasn't a matter of questioning John's character, he didn't question mine, and you know, I'm proud of the way that both sides conducted that campaign for the most part.

QT: 01:06;59;03

TITLE

The townhall where McCain defended Obama when a voter called him an Arab and John's integrity

QT: 01:07;04;10

BARACK OBAMA:

Yeah, I did see that, and I thought it was one of John's finest moments as a public figure. Not because I was self-interested in—in what he was saying, but because you know, what you rarely see in politics is elected officials standing up to the passions and biases of their base. That's true on the left, that's true on the right. It's a hard thing to do. The easy thing to do is to either go along with what your constituents are saying or to sidestep the issues, and for John to—in an environment in which at that point he was already—had an uphill battle, where the energy of the party was being captured by his vice presidential nominee, Sarah Palin, and it was a much more red-meat populaced, angry tone.

QT: 01:08;11;10

BARACK OBAMA:

For John in the middle of that to say, you know, hold on a second, we don't demonize each other, we're all Americans, we're all on the same team, we can have profound disagreements without impugning the character of the people that we're running against, I—I thought was an indication of who John fundamentally was. I never, in all my interactions, and you know, we had some tough interactions both before I was President and after I was President, but I never saw John treat people differently because of their race, because their ethnicity or religion, I never—or gender. I never saw John engage in the xenophobia or nativist impulses that sometimes we've been

seeing in our politics, and—and that wasn't a put on. You didn't get a sense that that was something that he actually felt but had to hide.

QT: 01:09;28;15

BARACK OBAMA:

Ya know, John I think, took people on that basis of who they were, and he was an equal opportunity—he had an equal opportunity temper. You know, if he—if he got mad at somebody, it didn't matter who they were, he'd holler at them, but you know, I never felt as if John was willing or inclined to tap into some of the darker forces in American politics, and you know, that's something that I've always deeply admired about him.

QT: 01:10;10;07

TITLE

On McCain's concession speech in 2008

QT: 01:10;14;14

BARACK OBAMA:

Yeah, I took the time to watch it, because I thought it was important to hear what a worthy opponent had to say in summation of the campaign he had run, and he could not have been more gracious, he could not have been more generous about wishing my administration well, and I think it was a capstone to a race well run.

QT: 01:10;47;15

TITLE

Obama's presidency and his working relationship with McCain in foreign policy, the war on terror and immigration reform

QT: 01:10;54;12

BARACK OBAMA:

The first couple years of the presidency, John's in the minority in the Senate, and unfortunately the polarization that has become all too familiar in Congress had already set in, but we're in crisis mode, because the world's

collapsing. The financial system's frozen, the auto industry's about to go belly up, and so we're running around putting out fires, trying to move initiatives forward, and we've got two wars going on. And I think—you know, John, as a member of the Republican caucus, was a consistent critic of my administration, but we'd meet on occasion. He'd come over and we'd have a conversation.

QT: 01:11;49;09

BARACK OBAMA:

And I think where John was most passionate was with respect to foreign policy.

QT: 01:12;00;00

BARACK OBAMA:

So we had been on different sides of the Iraq War. Not only was I opposed to it, but by the time I'd been elected we'd been there five years and I thought it was important for us to begin a gradual withdrawal. John did not like the idea of having a timetable; he thought that that would potentially reverse some of the gains that had been made by the surge of forces in 2006, 2007. But I think what he came to recognize once I was in office was that I wasn't an ideologue either and even though we'd continue to have some broad disagreements about strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan, we were able to find common ground in making sure that we were able to provide the support that our troops needed to carry out their missions and to negotiate a pathway that was not too abrupt and could result in you know, renewed gains by our adversaries there.

QT: 01:13;20;03

BARACK OBAMA:

The other area where I think John was very clear was respect to how we fought the War on Terrorism. He had been a strong voice in opposing torture in any form, obviously, because of his history. Nobody had greater standing to describe just why it was that it—it was a violation of our values and our ideals but also ineffective for us to engage in any sort of torture, or what were termed 'enhanced interrogations'. Having John's support as we tried to maintain vigorous efforts to go after Al Qaeda and others that would do us harm, but to do it in the right way I thought was very important and very useful.

QT: 01:14;21;07

BARACK OBAMA:

Now, as time went on, after two years, you know, John's in the majority. Or at least we lose the House and John's in the majority in the Senate and by necessity then there are negotiations on other domestic issues. I think one of John's finest moments was the work he did around immigration reform. It's something that he had started when we were both in the Senate, before I was elected President, before we were running. He had had a consistent interest and belief in creating a smart, effective, lawful, compassionate immigration system.

QT: 01:15;06;01

BARACK OBAMA:

And—ya know, so, his leadership in the group of eight senators, half Democrat, half Republican that came together and ultimately passed I think, a very sensible and comprehensive immigration reform, was an example of the kinds of leadership that—that John displayed while he was in the Senate during my presidency, but also I think showed his basic belief that this is a country that's strengthened by its diversity, that's strengthened by the energy and dynamism that people from every corner of the globe bring to the United States.

QT: 01:15;51;13

BARACK OBAMA:

Ultimately, we weren't able to actually get a bill on my desk to sign because the House Republican caucus balked in passing the fine work that the Senate had done, but I think John's voice in that was something that I consistently admired.

QT: 01:16;13;12

TITLE

On Ted Kennedy, John's illness and Obama's respect for McCain

QT: 01:16;18;13

BARACK OBAMA:

I was very close to Ted Kennedy. He was a mentor and supported when I got to the Senate. He had a very severe sp—spasm, episode, on my inauguration day and that's when we first started understanding that Teddy was gonna be going through a tough battle. And ya know, when I heard about John, obviously that came to mind. I heard about John's ailment the same way that I think most Americans did, through—through news reports and I was fortunate to be able to call him right away and just let him know that I thought he was too ornery to—to give into any sickness, and that I suspected he'd be around for a while.

QT: 01:17;31;18

BARACK OBAMA:

You know, it was a good conversation in part because I think that so often we get caught up with the day to day, and the surface differences that we—you know, emphasize so much in our culture. And I think that conversation allowed me to say to him what I'd said before, but maybe took on a little extra urgency, and that is the degree to which I believed he was a great American and had served this country with honor and valor and sacrifice, and that I was grateful for that, and I was grateful for the relationship that we had been able to develop, and that he needed to fight every step of the way, as he always has.

QT: 01:18;36;05

BARACK OBAMA:

And as is typical of John, he made some jokes and deflected any compliments. Got him maybe a little uncomfortable, but—but I'm—I'm sure that there were a lot of people that I was speaking for that day, including ya know, people who had been on the other side of political fights but never lost a basic respect for—for a guy who has given his all to—to the country that he loves.

QT: 01:19;22;08

TITLE

On American values post-World War II and McCain's worldview

QT: 01:19;26;16

BARACK OBAMA:

You know, John came of age in a post-WWII era that I think so often younger folks forget. We constructed, after WWII, a international framework and international institutions to promote a certain vision for how nation states could relate to each other and how individuals could interact with their governments. And it—it involved a certain core set of values of democracy and liberty and human rights, tolerance and rule of law. A belief in trade and commerce between nations, rather than zero-sum competition. A belief in multilateral institutions that could work together to help promote the peace.

QT: 01:20;52;00

BARACK OBAMA:

And John's part of that generation that helped to build those institutions and helped to shepherd the end of the Cold War and the Berlin Wall coming down, and new nations arising that threw off the yoke of dictatorship, and our military and diplomatic and economic and cultural efforts all led to unprecedented human prosperity and greater freedom than we had seen in the past. And I think John, at this stage in his life, has the time to reflect and recognizes that that thing we built is worth defending, and a lot of that progress can be reversed if we aren't tending to those ideals and those values.

QT: 01:21;52;08

BARACK OBAMA:

You know, American leadership in the world, John, I think, recognizes and understands, is not just a matter of us having the biggest air force or the mightiest ships or the latest weaponry. It has to do with people thinking we're more likely than not to do the right thing. That we're willing to do things that don't just involve our self-interests but involve the greater good.

QT: 01:22;21;20

BARACK OBAMA:

I think John recognizes that for our democracy to work, we have to continually get involved and it matters that our leaders try to be as honest as possible and as transparent as possible, and that our politics aren't designed to exploit divisions, but are designed to elevate debate and to create a sense of a common bond around a common creed. So you know, if you think of John's life as the son of someone who had fought on behalf of American freedoms and values, who himself is part of our armed forces that defended

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that freedom, and he himself going through the kinds of sacrifices he did. Who watched the end of the Cold War with us victorious not by firing shots but because of the strength of our ideals, who had worked on the international scene to try to build on the progress that had been made, and who had lived through a tumultuous period of time when people who had been excluded from American life were now included, I think it makes sense for him to say, in—in the time I have remaining, let me make sure that I'm still fighting on behalf of those things. That—that my work is not yet done, and those—the threats to that progress, both internationally and domestically, come from the outside, come from very real enemies and adversaries that are dangerous and that we have to go after and defend ourselves from.

QT: 01:24;35;13

BARACK OBAMA:

But I think John understands they also come from the inside, that there are ways in which we can damage ourselves by not living up to the best version of America. And to the extent that he's got a platform to articulate what he thinks that best version is, ya know, that's just one more notch in his service belt.

END TC:

QT: 01;25;03;08