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JOHN KERRY INTERVIEW
JOHN MCCAIN: FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS
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JOHN KERRY
Former United States Secretary of State
October 25, 2017
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 24 Minutes

START TC: 01;00;00;00
QT: 01;00;05;03

JOHN KERRY:
Take 29 (laughs).

QT: 01;00;09;19

TITLE
First impressions of McCain

QT: 01;00;13;21

JOHN KERRY:
Well we first met in the Senate. I mean we first met. I think I came to the Senate a few years before John, and then he came and we met as senators. I think it's fair to say we would both acknowledge that in the beginning there was a little bit tension and certain questioning each of the other. John had come to Massachusetts to campaign against me, and he wasn't personal or anything.

QT: 01;00;41;09

JOHN KERRY:
He came to support the party. I understood that, but obviously I'd have loved it if he hadn't come. And you know, he and I were on different paths with respect to the war in Vietnam. So inevitably, there was just a little bit of who is this guy, what's he all about? We have to get over the past, both of us, and we did. That's the important thing. It didn't get in the way.

QT: 01;01;14;21

TITLE

Kerry and McCain's divergent experiences in Vietnam

QT: 01;01;19;08

JOHN KERRY:

Well obviously, they were extraordinarily different. John suffered the fate that I think every single person who went there was hopeful of avoiding and terrified of, which was the idea of being captured by the enemy. I think every person who's ever served in the military has nothing but the highest level of respect for those who fight for their country and then lose their freedom and are held by the enemy and subjected to unspeakable acts of inhumanity of one kind or another. To survive five-and-a-half years plus and some of it in solitary confinement is just an extraordinary human feat. So his war was a war from the air, land on an aircraft carrier. You're there at night. You got the Navy all around you. You got good food.

QT: 01;02;17;07

JOHN KERRY:

You're pretty safe in that environment until you get back up in the sky again. One day he got knocked out of the sky and breaks both arms and so forth and is captured. My war was down in the delta mostly, running around in the rivers, getting shot at, almost always in ambushes exclusively, and fighting your way out of the ambush. Seeing the war on a ground level in hamlets and with some interaction with the Vietnamese people that led me to believe we were on a Quixotic errand. And that's why when I came back, that and other reasons of things I saw and what was happening strategically, the decisions, everything, weighed on me in a way that made me a very vocal and determined anti-war activist after I came back.

QT: 01;03;20;22

TITLE

Kerry and McCain eventually bonded over Vietnam despite their different experiences

QT: 01;03;26;05

JOHN KERRY:

Yeah, we talked about it a little bit. When we famously had a coming together, which was ironically kind of forced by the seniority system of the United States Senate, we were both members of a delegation going to Kuwait and Baghdad after the liberation of Kuwait and Kuwait City. John and I were by seniority assigned to the same four-seated, tabled grouping in the plane. I remember distinctly. I was sitting facing forwards of the direction of flight. John was seated opposite me, facing backwards. There we were you know, two guys thrown together on a long flight. Neither of us fell asleep early. We were both awake, and we began a conversation. We just got talking.

QT: 01;04;21;19

JOHN KERRY:

I asked him a lot of questions about his war, about the prison, about the experience, about flying, about what he felt, what he saw, and he asked me questions. We had a real, an amazing conversation, which ultimately led the two of us to the same conclusion, which was the war still raged in too many hearts in our country. We were not at peace with ourselves in this period. Both of us saw a strategic value in trying to move to a different place with respect to the relationship with Vietnam, so we agreed to work together. It really was one of the most important conversations I had in the entire time I was in the United States Senate and one of the most meaningful.

QT: 01;05;08;18

TITLE

On Kerry's and McCain's shared work to uncover information on remaining POWs and MIAs in Vietnam

QT: 01;05;15;06

JOHN KERRY:

Well both of us shared a deep belief as people who'd worn the uniform of our country once upon a time and notwithstanding the differences of our service, we were united, you know, 10 times over in the notion that the country had an obligation to fulfill our responsibility to let the families of those who were missing and still unaccounted for in action, they needed to get every bit of evidence available to satisfy their, this gaping hole in their lives and to try to fill

it and give them peace. John and I understood that whatever strategic interests we might've had in moving to a different relationship with Vietnam would never be possible unless those questions were put to rest.

QT: 01;06;03;11

JOHN KERRY:

So we agreed, both of us, coming at it slightly different. John's experience gave him a deep-rooted sense that they had been responsible and tracked every name of every live person. They knew who was where and who was there. So he had some doubts about the legitimacy of this, but when it appeared on the cover of Newsweek that question mark, "Are Americans still living in Vietnam?" There are these guys, and there's this whole Rambo, First Blood ethos of people being alive and needing to be rescued. So that, the mythology had grown around that. Together with real evidence that existed in the Defense Intelligence Agency, the CIA, elsewhere of last sightings alive, and those last sightings alive were never followed up on.

QT: 01;06;52;22

JOHN KERRY:

There was also a belief in some quarters that former Secretary Kissinger had not negotiated for the return of people from Laos and Cambodia. So that lived on, and John and I agreed to tackle that in the context of the POW/MIA Committee, which amazingly, to me, drew really outrageous attacks on John of people who were accusing him of being the Manchurian Candidate and that he was a traitor and he hadn't lived up – I mean it was just awful stuff. I'd have to reach out and put my arm on John's arm sometimes and just restrain him from lashing back. He was really terrific in putting up with all of that.

QT: 01;07;38;21

JOHN KERRY:

We traveled to Vietnam together. We did all kinds of things, but we were each other's wing man during that period of time. It's one of the proudest accomplishments I think because what we did was put together the single most exhaustive, most transparent accounting for

missing in war ever performed by any country in the world. No country has ever gone to the lengths that the United States of America still goes to with American troops in Vietnam, going down into holes in the ground and digging for the remains of service people to bring back answers to families. More than 700 families have been able to have closure and bury their loved one here in the United States as a result of this work. It's extraordinary work.

QT: 01;08;29;17

TITLE

On Kerry's and McCain's return to Vietnam and the Hanoi Hilton

QT: 01;08;34;20

JOHN KERRY:

Well you know I mean, walking into the Hanoi Hilton, John Kerry with John McCain, particularly because of my own opposition to the war was obviously a, you know, odd bedfellows journey in the first place, and we both knew that and we honored that. By the way, John, in his spirit of trying to reach out and put history in its proper place became friendly with a lot of people who had opposed the war. You couldn't do otherwise and be a impactful Senator in the United States Senate in our country, but John did that. So when we walked in, we were on this mission to try to get answers about the war. He and I just wound up, we wandered through, and he showed me. He said, "This is where I was. This is where I was."

QT: 01;09;25;08

JOHN KERRY:

I walked in with him, alone, the two of us, into this cell with a little bed, with tiny quarters. And I just felt this overwhelming sense of how extraordinary it was that here was – here were two guys who had different views about the war, who'd come from a different place, came from a different place politically, but we were finding a special kind of common ground, right there in Hanoi, in that cell. And that has always stayed with me. It was also sort of together with that conversation, it was the iconic photograph or metaphor, if you will, in my memory of that journey and of how special it was to have had that relationship with John McCain.

QT: 01;10;12;04

TITLE

Kerry and McCain's work to normalize relations with Vietnam

QT: 01;10;18;17

JOHN KERRY:

Well, we just worked really hard, and we worked with Republican and Democrat administrations alike. John and I worked very closely with General Brent Scowcroft. He was terrific, could not have been less political or less partisan. He had one mission: get the job done. He was a general's general and a great advisor to George H.W. Bush. President Bush was – George H.W. was deeply committed to this endeavor. He committed resources. He went after it. He lifted, you know, helped move on the embargo, and ultimately, we were able to lift it with President Clinton and normalize under President Clinton.

QT: 01;10;57;05

JOHN KERRY:

And that couldn't have happened without, I think, the jointness of the effort between John and me and ultimately, the contribution of all the members of the committee, Chuck Robb, Bob Kerrey, Nancy Kassebaum, Chuck Grassley, a whole group of senators who took their obligation seriously. In the end, we had all, I think it was 13 members of this committee, sign the report that declassified millions of pages of documents, provided transparency to families, and really lanced the boil, if you will, that empowered us to be able to move forward. And John and I would both tell you that, I think John, I mean we've appeared in many events together, talking about this movement to the normalization of Vietnam.

QT: 01;11;47;22

JOHN KERRY:

And we have both often quoted a very influential ambassador from Vietnam who helped with this process who said how important it was to be able to mention the word Vietnam and not mean a war but mean a country. I think we've gotten to the place where it's a country, and

we have a brand-new relationship with it that many people couldn't possibly believe given the nature of the war.

QT: 01;12;17;06

TITLE

On healing the wounds of Vietnam

QT: 01;12;22;00

JOHN KERRY:

Look, I think again, John McCain would tell you just as I am now that there are some people who are never going to get over it. This was a difficult, I mean this was a horribly difficult period in the life of our country. When brothers disagreed with brothers and fathers and sons and families were divided and fought over this war, and it was a very divisive period, perhaps second only to the period of the Civil War itself. And we paid a high price for that division, and now Ken Burns' extraordinary film has helped people to see the continuum, to understand the full measure of this journey.

QT: 01;13;07;20

JOHN KERRY:

And—and I do think that John and I being able to lead the effort to get the answers on the POW/MIA Committee, together with Bob Smith, who was our Vice-Chairman, and to be able to get to the point of lifting the embargo, moving to normalize, and then having President Clinton go and be the President returning there. Then I went back with President Obama. That transition came about because of the work that we did, and I do think it contributed significantly though I will not venture to say that it has ended some of those divisions because I'm sure some people will just go to their grave, unfortunately, with hard feelings.

QT: 01;13;51;20

TITLE

American values and patriotism

QT: 01;13;57;21

JOHN KERRY:

You don't have to all do the same thing to embody American values. John's a patriot. I consider that what I did was an act of patriotism. I did it because I loved my country, and I thought my country was doing something wrong. I wanted my country to make that right. And John would say that, I think. There are different ways to be patriotic. I think that John obviously personified a very special naval lineage with his grandfather and his father and his own service, that's quintessentially American in so many different ways.

QT: 01;14;40;00

JOHN KERRY:

He was mischievous at the Academy and other places too, which is kind of part of our, the nature of being a warrior, and he was a warrior. I think that in all those ways, yes, he did, but don't, you don't isolate one particular path as the personification of those values. I think there are loads of people who in their own way have personified American values. The beauty of our values, the beauty of America is that you could be who you are. You can be what you want to be. We accept everything, and it melds together, and that is the mosaic that makes America. John fits very prominently and squarely in that mosaic. But there are lots of ways, I think, for people to make contributions to that.

QT: 01;15;31;00

TITLE

Modern politics and threats to democracy

QT: 01;15;36;08

JOHN KERRY:

What is happening today is just plain dangerous, really dangerous. Our democracy, regrettably, and I think John recognizes this in many ways and has talked about it, is threatened because of the amount of money in American politics, because of the, you know, Citizens United decision that really takes away any restrictions and forgets about the concept of corruption in the system, because of the gerrymandering of the United States Congress. Well we don't have a fully democratic election. In the general election, it's very hard with the districts, the way they're drawn for a genuine democracy to be reflected.

QT: 01;16;14;18

JOHN KERRY:

So we're—we're—we're—we've got real challenges right now, and what is happening in Washington today is contributing very significantly to those challenges because it is beating up on our democracy. It is beating up on the participants. It is without regard to a gentle respect and dignity, if you will. It has no dignity. It is creating a grotesque spectacle out of the American political process, which is losing respect on a global basis. So I'm glad John has spoken out about some of it and some other colleagues, and I hope many more will because our nation is at risk in this process, not party, but nation. That is what you swear allegiance to when you take the oath of office in the United States Senate and House.

QT: 01;17;10;21

TITLE

The attacks on McCain in South Carolina during the 2000 presidential primary

QT: 01;17;17;03

JOHN KERRY:

Look, in South Carolina, the attacks on John, personal and on his military record were both wrong. They were obscene. They were inappropriate. They had no place in American politics. I think that it was very important for us to stand up for the truth, for the reality of what was being done here and what was stated. I mean John McCain suffered hugely in prison. He was a hero in the sense—every sense of the word, that he lived up to the highest code possible.

QT: 01;17;54;13

JOHN KERRY:

Even if you under torture said one thing or another that you didn't mean to, the fact that you went through that torture, the fact that you kept trying to hold onto that code is one of the lessons we learned in the course of that war that changed the way in which people were instructed to respond to that kind of torture and interrogation. So John, by refusing to go home when he was offered the chance ahead of people who had been captured before him, it was just inappropriate.

He stood up for the highest values of our country and for the highest values of basic human behavior, leave the country out of it. This is just a matter of fair play and decency and rectitude, and John had a very strong sense of that.

QT: 01;18;46;15

TITLE

Separating the presidential candidate McCain and Senator McCain in 2008 and compartmentalizing in Congress

QT: 01;18;52;17

JOHN KERRY:

Because it was nothing personal about it, it had to do with positions, statements made. John hit me just about as hard, if not harder, on the subject of Syria when I think John knew that I thought we ought to be doing more, and I wasn't happy with where I was. He took his frustration out, and I understood that's how he felt. We got over it. We got beyond it. The important thing is that you live every day in the United States Senate hopefully with another day coming at you. If all you do is get churning and broiled up over the last vote and you stay there, you're never going to get the next vote, and you're never going to get anything done.

QT: 01;19;37;10

JOHN KERRY:

So you learn over time how to compartmentalize a little bit. It's not altogether good that you do that in some ways. The system doesn't work if you don't. In the end, it's hard for people to understand how people are doing that, and it's part of what contributes to the sense that Congress is just a place where people play games and it's out of touch. I understand that, but it is what you have to do in order to be able to get through it.

QT: 01;20;04;06

JOHN KERRY:

It's the personal stuff that I think goes way too far, and we have to get that out of the system now. I mean it'd be a blessing for American politics if we could just get back to the place where it was based on

normal, you know, argument about one issue or another, and you try to score a point at the expense of what someone said or did previously.

QT: 01;20;27;09

TITLE

On restoring civility in the political process and the importance of truth

QT: 01;20;32;05

JOHN KERRY:

There's always a chance because human beings populate the Senate, and human behavior has all kinds of opportunities. I personally believe that the United States Senate and the House could very rapidly be restored to a place of respect in America if leaders within the House and Senate were to lead in that direction and just make it clear, "You're not going to be a committee chairman. You're not going to be promoted."

QT: 01;20;59;17

JOHN KERRY:

You're not gonna get—we're going to run a different kind of operation here because we're going to do something that respects the American people and respects our own political process in a way that lifts us up as a nation and makes us an example people want to follow, not something people today look at with scorn in our country and elsewhere. I think that's the difference. I believe people make a huge difference in this process. If we could reestablish a basic standard of truth, which I know matters to John also, about what the facts are so that we're making fact-based decisions, that would go a long way towards helping restore faith in the American democratic process.

QT: 01;21;48;03

TITLE

Kerry and McCain, a friendship based on mutual respect and the importance of bipartisanship

QT: 01;21;52;17

JOHN KERRY:

John McCain and I, first of all, I think we both respect each other. There are times when we've made each other mad. There are times when he's gotten angry at me. There are times when I've gotten angry at him, and yet, we've always had a basic respect that I believe came out of the ultimate friendship that we made later, after the events that sort of took us in different directions. We both understood how desperate the country and the Senate are for relationships that are forged that way and that are based on that mutual respect and that always try to find the center of that respect.

QT: 01;22;35;06

JOHN KERRY:

And I think John and I keep coming back to that because we've traveled some mighty strange and turbulent miles together and separately to come to the same place as senators where we knew we could make a difference. I think that, I think that you can differ on an issue and differ respectfully and differ passionately, and still like the person you're differing with. That's very important to us in America. A lot of people don't understand that in other countries.

QT: 01;23;13;17

JOHN KERRY:

As Secretary, I would explain that to people. They couldn't understand because they all live in these or many of them in authoritarian. There's only one thing. You only spout one point of view. Nobody dares take on the leadership. That's not us, and that's one of the proudest things about the United States of America that really separates us from everybody else. But now it's gone too far. We got to bring it back. And John would agree; we got to bring it back.

QT: 01;23;40;05

TITLE

Teddy Kennedy embodied lessons in bipartisanship

01;23;45;03

JOHN KERRY:

Well, Teddy, you know, taught all of us a lot about trying to reach out across the aisle. And Teddy would reach anywhere he could find

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somebody to work with him on an issue of one kind or another. He was a master at it, and I think John saw the same thing I saw, which was something worth trying to emulate.

QT: 01;24;06;09

TITLE

Learning of McCain's diagnosis

QT: 01;24;10;08

JOHN KERRY:

I believe I heard it on the news, but it was so close to a telephone call I got from my office that I can't tell the difference whether it was one or the other. But I was very quick to learn about it.

QT: 01;24;25;01

TITLE

On McCain's legacy

QT: 01;24;29;13

JOHN KERRY:

I'm not ready to start defining any of that because John's on his two feet, fighting like hell, and that's good.

END TC: 01;24;41;26