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BILL CLINTON INTERVIEW  
*JOHN MCCAIN: FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS*  
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**BILL CLINTON**  
**Former President of the United States**  
**December 18, 2017**  
Interviewed by Teddy Kunhardt  
**Total Running Time: 28 Minutes**

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

**CREW:**

President Bill Clinton interview, take one.

**QT: 01;00;07;04**

**TITLE**

John McCain as a POW

**QT: 01;00;11;00**

**BILL CLINTON:**

Well, I was aware when the news stories broke that the son of a very important Naval commander was a prisoner of war. And eventually it broke - because I had a deep memory of it - that he could have gotten out and didn't. As a matter of honor, he wouldn't allow himself to be used for a political advantage by the Vietnamese, and he wouldn't abandon his fellow prisoners, and that made a deep impression on me. (Cross talk) And then, of course, he came to my attention later when I was a Governor and he emerged as a member of Congress and then a Senator.

**QT: 01;00;56;03**

**TITLE**

John Kerry and the Vietnam War

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**QT: 01;01;00;01**

**BILL CLINTON:**

Yeah, I remember when he testified before Congress against the Vietnam War. So I was active in a variety of groups that opposed our policy in Vietnam, so I knew about John. And I later served with Bob Kerrey, who lost a leg there and won the Medal of Honor. And later served with Chuck Robb, who may have seen more actual physical combat than any of the others. And then when I ran for President, I got to be friends with Pete Peterson. They were the sort of big, front line of the people pushing for a change in policy. And Pete, like John, was a long-serving prisoner of war.

**QT: 01;01;46;01**

**TITLE**

The first time he met John McCain

**QT: 01;01;51;15**

**BILL CLINTON:**

I think the first time I met him was when I was a governor; he probably doesn't remember this. It was when I was a governor and President Reagan was in office. And I was very active in the Governors Association, so I was there all the time. Plus which, all the governors met every February and they went to dinner at the White House. And I believe it was at one of those dinners that I first shook his hand.

**QT: 01;02;15;19**

**TITLE**

Normalization of relations with Vietnam

**QT: 01;02;20;09**

**BILL CLINTON:**

When the last American troops left Vietnam in 1974, there were still a lot of questions about remaining POWs and people missing in action. And of course, the South Vietnamese government fell in a hurry and the Communist

government in Hanoi took over the country and were alienated from us as we were from them. We had an embargo against them; there were all these unresolved commercial issues. We froze a lot of their financial accounts, those that we could, our country did. And we just sort of were stuck there. By the time I became President, President Nixon had made his famous trip to China in the '70s, then President Carter established relationships with China. President Bush, under President Reagan - the first President Bush - became our envoy to China. So we were dealing with them.

**QT: 01;03;28;19**

**BILL CLINTON:**

And I remember Deng Xiaoping came to the United States when President Carter was in office and the governor of Georgia had a big state, like state dinner there. So it was obvious that the American policy was to try to get along with China while not giving in to human rights abuses that we disagreed with. We were developing rapidly an economic relationship and many people believed that we should try to bury the hatchet with Vietnam. Again, not to masquerade our political disagreements, especially over human rights, but because the lo—the war was a long-time over; the Vietnamese had always been uncertain of their security living under the Chinese weight above them. Anything from invasion to water rights were- all these things were very sensitive to them, so they clearly wanted a reconciliation with the United States. But we had some things to work out, especially the unresolved fate of the POWs and the MIAs.

**QT: 01;04;45;17**

**BILL CLINTON:**

So when I got into office, I wanted to do something about it. And I realized because I hadn't served in the military and because I had openly opposed the Vietnam war from the time I was a student at Georgetown, working for Senator Fulbright who was Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and against our policy. I realized I had to have the support of American veterans, and there was no chance of having the political capital to make the right moves and sustain them, much less ultimately reach a comprehensive agreement about what their responsibilities would be on the POW-MIA front, and what ours would be on the economic front, and then how we could proceed toward a trade agreement which would bind us close together, give us another friend in Southeast Asia - or at least an ally; we weren't yet friends

- and then push back on any attempt that some future Chinese government might make to dominate southeast Asia, which none of the countries and people there wanted to happen. So I looked around and the people I just mentioned - McCain, John Kerry, Bob Kerrey, Chuck Robb and Pete Peterson, then a House member from Florida - were prominent members of Congress with an interest in this who had served and sacrificed in the war in Vietnam.

**QT: 01;06;26;16**

**BILL CLINTON:**

But we really needed McCain. Chuck Hagel from Nebraska was—came along a little later and he was interested in doing something, and he was the only other Republican that was really prominent in this movement. But if McCain hadn't been there and been willing to step up after he was not only imprisoned for five and a half years, but started his imprisonment with a broken leg and two broken arms, and was clearly tortured, and clearly had the high ground because he refused an early release, if he hadn't come along, I don't think any of it would have happened.

**QT: 01;07;02;09**

**TITLE**

Working towards normalization and the outcome

**QT: 01;07;05;21**

**BILL CLINTON:**

We were regularly in touch with each other. There were some face-to-face meetings individually and with small groups, but mostly we worked through our staffs because we were all on the same page. We agreed on what had to be done in what order, and about a year after I took office, I lift the embargo. Then within another year, we'd resolve a lot of the commercial interests that hadn't been—that were hanging fire. And we lifted the freeze on the bank accounts of the Vietnamese in return for which they promised to step up their efforts on the POWs and the MIAs, and they did. By 1999, I became the first President since Richard Nixon to go to Vietnam, and the first ever to visit Hanoi. And I also visited a site where Vietnamese were up to their—above their knees in mud, stomping around, trying to recover the remains of people killed there.

**QT: 01;08;17;23**

**BILL CLINTON:**

And they had recently found the airplane parts which were traced to an American pilot whose family had never known what happened to him before this was done. It was an amazing thing, and it was particularly moving because the Vietnamese themselves had 300,000 people who were missing, and many of them had been blown to bits in our bombing campaign. And they didn't have the means to do the search or identify people. But they were as good as their word. They worked hard and they helped us to resolve a significant number of cases, which meant a lot to the families back in America. I think it meant a lot to the veterans' community, and I know it meant a lot to John McCain and the others who stuck their neck out to help us end the long estrangement. And I think nearly every American's glad we did now, you know. We still have our political differences with Vietnam, but we don't have a better friend in Southeast Asia at a time when we need all the friends we can get.

**QT: 01;09;38;12**

**TITLE**

Partisanship in Congress after Clinton's win in '92 and McCain's commitment to basic decency

**QT: 01;09;43;07**

**BILL CLINTON:**

Well, you know, to be fair there's always been some contention. There was even in the middle of World War II. But it got particularly bad after—frankly, after I won in 1992 because the Republicans thought they had a lock on the White House. They didn't think any Democrat could beat them. And the circumstances were remarkably similar to today. We had a superficially recovering economy, but it kept slipping back into recession and almost all the gains were going to people at the very top of the income scale. There was an enormous amount of anxiety not just in rural America, but then also at urban America about the fact that the lowest income Americans in the previous 12 years had seen their incomes go down, whether the economy was down or up; whether the stock market was up or down. So it created the

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conditions for a pretty severe version of the kind of cultural, social, and economic divisions in the country, which can be quickly turned into a state of virtual armed and angry combat in the United States Congress.

**QT: 01;11;20;05**

**BILL CLINTON:**

McCain, he's a human being, he's a politician. He couldn't be blamed for wanting to be one of the beneficiaries of that since, at the time, their base was bigger than ours. But he never ever allowed politics to get in the way of doing what he thought was best for the country. Getting any ally could do something for the veterans, do something for the military that was needed. Stand up against ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo. Let people who are trying to make peace in Ireland do it. You know, he—he—I know he didn't agree with everything I did on foreign policy, but he was astonishingly brave when we needed him to stand up for basic decency and the clear interests of the United States at a time when we were moving toward a climate that if somebody in the other party did something, it had to be wrong. You know, if I did it, they had to oppose it. And he never was that way.

**QT: 01;12;36;17**

**BILL CLINTON:**

There was plenty of stuff we had an honest disagreement about, and when we did, he'd take up his cudgel and come after me - which was all fair; I liked it. You know, that's what's normal. But he never tried to make it harder for Americans to vote. He never tried to play the race card. He never tried to personally demonize his opponents in a political fight. And he was always open to doing something that people didn't expect him to do, like support campaign finance reform or to take climate change seriously. I mean, he lived in Arizona, it was getting so hot you could hardly breathe sometime. I was once there when there was a dust storm hundreds of feet high in the air, and it was so hot it was unbelievable, and it's continued to happen.

**QT: 01;13;33;17**

**BILL CLINTON:**

So McCain was one of those guys that was always willing to look at the facts; look at the facts, see what's happening. I think a lot of that is in his nature, and a lot of that comes from military training. When, you know, as they spring you off an aircraft carrier and hook you on in an airplane, there are a

lot of moving parts, a lot of things that could go wrong. But you know there are some facts and no matter how much you wish those weren't facts, they are. Well, the rest of life's like that, too. And McCain, I think both for noble motives and out of practical experience, was always willing to break the mold he was in if it was clearly the right thing to do, and that's an invaluable commodity.

**QT: 01;14;27;19**

**TITLE**

Hillary's friendship with McCain and their work to build bipartisan consensus around climate change

**QT: 01;14;33;06**

**BILL CLINTON:**

One of the things that meant the most to me after Hillary went to the Senate was how the friendship that developed between her and John McCain. And because he was in so close to Lindsey Graham, with Lindsey Graham. Lindsey did, said what he thought he had to do, I think, in the campaign. But let's not forget, it was just a few years before when Time magazine was honoring her and Lindsey Graham wrote the—the statement full of good things about Hillary that were all perfectly true, but it all happened because of John; because of Hillary's friendship with John. And they decided, with Lindsey's involvement, that we were having the wrong debate over climate change; that we were debating whether it existed or not and whether it was caused by human activity or not, when we should have been bating—debating whether the Republicans or Democrats had better ideas for reducing global warming's threat as quickly as possible in a way that created the most new jobs and the most new businesses. That is, until just the last few years.

**QT: 01;15;53;04**

**BILL CLINTON:**

You know, Al Gore wrote a book warning about all this in 1992. I mean, this is been a long—this issue's been around awhile. But just until the last few years, we didn't have those kind of discussions. Then when Iowa - which is now a Republican state, especially in rural areas - when Iowa became the state in the country with the highest base load capacity of wind, and the

farmers were making a lot of money out of selling their wind energy out of their windmills on their farms. And Texas became the state in the country - thanks to subsidies to get them started signed by then-Governor George W. Bush - Texas produces more wind energy than any other state in the country.

**QT: 01;16;40;23**

**BILL CLINTON:**

I think McCain saw that it was an opportunity to try to build bipartisan consensus and have the right debate. You know, the Republicans say, "Now all we need here are the right tax incentives and the private sector can do all this." And then the Democrats could say, "Well, no, that's not exactly true because the wind blows hardest between the Canadian border with North Dakota and the Texas border with Mexico; too far west for many cities to be involved. So the wind blows hardest where the people aren't. Also true, except for Florida and California and a couple of other places about the sun, the sun shines most efficiently for the generation of electricity, except for those urban centers where people are not. Although the technology's so good now, solar panels that work in New York, New Jersey, anywhere. But it wasn't the truth then. So we would say, "No. We have to invest through the utilities or directly in transmission lines so you can generate the most energy." Or we would say, "There need to be changes in the rules so the utilities will get in this game and finance the cheapest of all clean energy, conservation."

**QT: 01;18;03;18**

**BILL CLINTON:**

But the point is, he loved this stuff. And so, he and Hillary somehow decided that it'd be a really good idea if they took some skeptical Republican Senators on a couple of trips. And they went to Point Barrow, Alaska, which is the northernmost settlement in the United States, and saw the— Eskimos literally weeping because their way of life was coming to an end and their villages were going into the mud. And then they went to Svolvær on an island 600 miles north of Norway; the northernmost settlement on planet Earth where there is a serious climate change laboratory. And Hillary always joked that the—on their cabins there were signs that said "You can't go outside at night without lights and rifles or the polar bears will eat you." But they went there because these people who were living there could detail in the most graphic terms how the climate was changing and especially how the Arctic



was changing, and how soon there would be whole periods in the summer when there would be no Arctic ice, and what the consequences could be not only of polar bears, but to the way of life of all the native people who live there.

**QT: 01;19;21;09**

**BILL CLINTON:**

So they just got close. I could tell she was crazy about him. You know, she respected his service and he respected her, I think, especially because she was on the Armed Services Committee, the first New York Senator ever to serve. And he went out of his way to tell me how—what a good job she was doing, and how smart the Pentagon was to ask her to be on the Committee to serve, to basically structure the military of the 21st century. It was wonderful to see at a time when everybody was fighting each other, that here ya know, the Senate was working its magic. It was still a place where people could be friends and work together and do things and still have their arguments. He deserves a lot of credit for being that kind of person. He was not subject to a lot of the forces that whip other people in line to do things that are plainly self-destructive not only to our country, but to their own happiness and sense of worth.

**QT: 01;20;32;08**

**TITLE**

On Hillary and McCain's friendship and the importance of trust in a democracy

**QT: 01;20;36;18**

**BILL CLINTON:**

They had something else that's worth mentioning. In this crazy world, they trusted each other. It's very hard to make a democratic system work if there is no trust. It's very hard if the information delivery chains give you the impression that there's no difference between fact and fiction, and truth and lie. We can all be wrong. If you deal with enough facts, you'll be wrong from time to time. If you deal with enough complexities, you'll be wrong. If you live long enough, your memory'll begin to play a few tricks. But John McCain believed that Hillary knew the difference in fact and fiction, and truth and lie, opinion and evidence; and that he could rely on her to do the right thing. So

when they had an argument, even if it was over something they couldn't resolve, it would be an honorable one and then they could still be friends. It sounds so commonplace, but it's become too rare. And it's going to be difficult for our country to recover without the recovery of respect and trust - which is, aside from my enormous respect, admiration, and affection for him, one of the reasons that for the first time in my adult life, I'm praying for a swift boat with McCain at the helm to rescue him from his current dilemma. God knows we need him now.

**QT: 01;22;33;18**

**TITLE**

McCain's stance on the 2017 Republican attempt to repeal Obamacare vs his support for the tax bill

**QT: 01;22;38;10**

**BILL CLINTON:**

For one thing, you've got to understand he didn't stop entirely being a politician. And one of the things I always enjoyed the good-natured kidding with him about it, is that no Republican ever made a tax cut, especially if it helps rich people they didn't like. That's sort of the credo; it's almost the theology of the modern party. But there's no question there's no regular order here. They didn't have good hearings; the Democrats weren't involved; nobody got to ask questions; the public didn't get to see all the cost things of the Congressional Budget Office. A load of people have no idea what some of the things in here are. So—and it was, in many ways, designed as a political hit job against big Blue states that don't vote with him.

**QT: 01;23;31;22**

**BILL CLINTON:**

But—so I don't like it. But I think, for him, just like he didn't want—if this turns out to be his last service in the Congress, I believe he saw it in simpler terms. I think he, he didn't want to cost millions of people their healthcare, and we know many thousands their lives by repealing Obamacare without at least the assurance that something was going to replace it that would prevent the worst consequences of repeal. And there was no regular order and nobody had a clue. I mean, the House of Representatives voted 54 times to

repeal the bill and never gave a thought to what they would put in its place. So, he couldn't stomach that. The taxes I think he believes are different. I think he didn't want at the end of his service to be on record against tax cuts, many of which he probably agrees with. And I think he believes the discipline of economic realities will force - if this bill passes with all of its evident flaws and it's what will add to the deficit and the debt, I think he thinks that it'll have to be addressed.

**QT: 01;25;00;06**

**BILL CLINTON:**

And I guess he was thinking about the bill President Reagan passed when he got elected which was I thought, horrible but irresistibly popular, and had more stuff in it for middle class people by light years than this does. But they eventually, President Reagan clawed back 40 percent of that; agreed to sign bills re-imposing revenue raising things to help the people that needed help and to pay for the government that needed to be paid for, and they still tripled the debt of the country. But at least they clawed it back. And then, by the time I showed up 12 years later, we were able to have 3 surpluses and pay down things on the debt of \$600 million dollars, billion dollars. I think that's what McCain thinks. Economics are fungible and you can fix it; it'll come back. But you can't give people their lives back. That's why I think he wouldn't do the wrong thing on healthcare.

**QT: 01;26;01;10**

**TITLE**

On patriotism and the lessons we can learn from McCain

**QT: 01;26;06;08**

**BILL CLINTON:**

First of all, we can learn that every citizen has a responsibility to make something of the freedom we've been given by our Constitution. When John McCain was in the Navy, which he inherited from two previous generations, he fulfilled his responsibilities. They were more awful and more painful than almost every other citizen of his era, but he did it. The least we can do is to know more about the issues that affect our lives and vote, and be active, and work. You don't have to be a millionaire to do that. McCain wasn't. Then

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when he moved to Arizona after he got out of the Navy, much injured, he kept working. He worked when he was winning; he worked when he was losing. He had about as much influence as—in the minority as he did in the majority. Sometimes he had more influence in the minority than in the majority because sometimes the Democrats would listen to him more than the Republicans.

**QT: 01;27;23;16**

## **BILL CLINTON:**

The thing you can learn is that patriotism is not a bunch of words; it's how you live every day. It's—it's believing that America is an idea that's constantly changing but grounded in freedom, equality, and responsibility. And that's what we can all learn whether you agree with him or not. Yes, he was irascible, yes, he was irritable. You might be irritable, too, if you had to deal with the consequences of wounds from almost 50 years ago, but he showed up. Time and time again, he showed up. Here he was, people were giving him up for gone and the healthcare vote comes up, and he showed up. And in our family—and maybe that's why he and Hillary got along so well - is our daughter who said many times, "Our number one motto is, "Get caught trying."" So you can look at John McCain's whole career. You can agree and disagree with what you will. But you can't dispute that he loved his country, that he was capable of being affectionate with and honorable to people with whom he had disagreements, and that he always got caught trying.

**END TC:**

**QT: 01;28;17;06**