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HENRY KISSINGER INTERVIEW  
*JOHN MCCAIN: FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**HENRY KISSINGER**  
**Former National Security Advisor**  
**October 19, 2017**  
Interviewed by Teddy Kunhardt  
**Total Running Time: 24 Minutes**

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

**QT: 01;00;07;06**

**TITLE**

On learning John McCain had been shot down in Vietnam

**QT: 01;00;12;13**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

I did, but in a general way. It was lost in the noise. At that time, I didn't know the family and I didn't know him, so it was one of the casualties of the war to me.

**QT: 01;00;31;16**

**TITLE**

Becoming aware of McCain as a POW, Hanoi negotiations and his relationship with the McCains

**QT: 01;00;36;18**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

You know, when I first became conscious of McCain in this way as a prisoner was toward—was at the end of the war and I was in Hanoi to negotiate the schedule of the release of the prisoners and I had established a schedule on the basis of whatever principles we had adopted and on my last night in Hanoi, one of the leading Vietnamese said, "As a sign of goodwill, we will let

you take Commander McCain with you on your plane.” And I said, “I won’t take him. We’ve just established a schedule and I’m not going to make a personal exception and of course I also thought in the back of my mind, if the first prisoner out is the Commander of the Pacific Fleet, that cannot—that would be very inappropriate, and I knew his father at that time so it was the wrong thing to do at that moment. So then after—so John had to stay for three more months.

**QT: 01;02;09;00**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

So after he came out, there was a reception for all of the prisoners in Washington and Commander McCain came up to me and said, “I want to thank you for saving my honor.” And he didn’t tell me that he had been offered this release two years earlier so that was the beginning of our friendship. And so McCain has always had an extraordinary moral stature in my eyes. I knew his father, his father was Pacific Fleet Commander and they both were perky, inspirational men. He commanded—he was CINCPAC, he was—that meant he commanded the theatre. So all the military action we ordered in Vietnam when it was ordered was carried out by him. Never once did he mention his son and never once did he ask for information about his son.

**QT: 01;03;54;04**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

He may have had other sources but in his dealing with the White House, he was the CINCPAC and whenever we thought that President Nixon needed a little shot in the arm, we—we had urged a briefing by Admiral McCain. So that’s—I didn’t know the event two years earlier and he never told me.

**QT: 01;04;29;00**

**TITLE**

Admiral Jack McCain’s approach to Vietnam War presidential briefings

**QT: 01;04;35;00**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

McCain thought that when his country was at war, he had a duty to do it as successfully as he could, so when he came in, he did not say—he didn't give a rah, rah, rah speech. He simply explained his missions and what he was doing in a way that made you believe—it made you—here is a man who can do it and who will do it, and—but he didn't do it with inspirational phrases or patriotic statements, he just acted like a man who felt he had a job that had been assigned to him by the President and he was telling us how he was doing it.

**QT: 01;05;30;19**

**TITLE**

The Christmas bombing

**QT: 01;05;37;17**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

Admiral McCain was during the Christmas bombing as he was during every other operation. He received his orders, he made his recommendations, but there was nothing in his bearing or never in his words any reference to his son. Now—and—but it's important also to understand what the Christmas bombing was. It's been represented in some of the media as a massive bombing of civilians. The Christmas bombing was the use of B-52's against tactical targets in Hanoi and in other—and the tactical targets were mostly anti-aircraft batteries and even the Vietnamese have claimed I think less than 2,000 casualties from the whole period of the Christmas bombing but of course the prisoners were in what was called—later called the Hilton, the Hanoi Hilton, which it was not. It was an ironical description of it, and they certainly saw it going around them. They weren't hit but it was—now why was it important?

**QT: 01;07;24;16**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

We had been negotiating for five years and we had been sort of tormented because they would always come up with just one more request and they always dangled the prisoners as the final thing at the end of the line and we always argued—felt that having fought for these many years in several

administrations, we had to end the war with something other than just returning prisoners and so the issue was, what kind of political structure could we agree to. I won't go into any of those details but President Nixon decided and I agreed that we had reached a point where only a shocking event that would show to them that this gradual escalation or the gradual conduct of the air war would no longer work and that we were absolutely determined to bring the war to a conclusion. The Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese had already agreed to one draft, and so it was a question of relatively marginal issues case by case but not in their totality.

**QT: 01;09;00;10**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

So it was—so President Nixon decided to use B-52's against military targets wherever they appeared. And the whole so-called Christmas bombing lasted less than two weeks. So this was not a prolonged action but it brought home to them that the period of procrastination was over.

**QT: 01;09;34;15**

**TITLE**

Admiral McCain never talked to the president about John

**QT: 01;09;40;12**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

I never heard and I don't believe it happened that Admiral McCain talked to the President about his son. It would be against the code of honor of the McCain's, that they would ask for a special expectation when they were serving the country.

**QT: 01;10;01;18**

**TITLE**

On Senator Kerry, McCain and the normalization of relations with Vietnam

**QT: 01;10;06;10**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

There was an investigation that was run by Senator Kerry at one point about the fate of prisoners—

**QT: 01;10;15;00**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

The missing in action. Which is the first time that I saw the two together and at that time, Kerry appeared at least to me as a—in a more hostile form than he later emerged. But at some point, I don't know the exact date, the two devoted themselves to make—giving meaning to the normalization of relations that was in the process of occurring and I know the Senator took several trips to Vietnam without any ill will for the torture he had systematically received while he was a prisoner and I always associated him in my mind with all of the efforts, the various efforts that were made to bring back the relation to Vietnam to not only to normalcy but to a way in which the two societies thought of each other in a constructive manner.

**QT: 01;11;33;09**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

He was more forgiving than I was.

**QT: 01;11;36;20**

**TITLE**

Kissinger's relationship with John McCain

**QT: 01;11;41;18**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

Senator McCain became a close friend. We met frequently, we talked even more frequently. Because in a period of enormous divisions in this country and gre—incredible self-righteousness, here was a man who stood for fundamental principles, and it didn't matter whether you did agree with him or didn't agree with him. It was important to have somebody of such a power of integrity so that even those who disagreed with him could feel that this was not a personal issue. For example, he and I, close friends as we are have

disagreed on the diplomacy to conduct vis a vis the Soviet Union and when he was a presidential candidate, at the Republican Convention, he spent three hours of lunch inviting me to hear my view on how—how it should be done. Which was different from his—from his view, and still he was kind enough for many periods afterwards to introduce me to his committee by saying that he was—that I was a person who had a major influence on his thinking.

**QT: 01;13;27;20**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

So that was an—and the national divisions have not become less in this period but here is somebody who would show you what the country in its best principles could represent and what your duty was and whether you agreed on every tactic or thing or not, it doesn't matter. And so I—he ran for President and he didn't make it but he represented a continuity of faith and dedication that was presidential if we are lucky in its qualities, if we're lucky in our president.

**QT: 01;14;32;11**

**TITLE**

John McCain as a politician and his legacy

**QT: 01;14;38;11**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

You know, the ordinary principles of how you get by in the Senate, he—they—you could point out a certain lack of willingness to compromise and then he was not a backslapping individual who ingratiated himself in such a way that you—it would break you out, not give him something. John McCain thought through his problems and then he developed a conviction, and then he stood by this conviction, but that was inspirational to many people and the country will remember him after he is gone as a man who kept up the importance of certain convictions and who was never affected by the tactical maneuvering of the moment and the career orientation. There are many episodes in his campaign, he wouldn't use certain arguments against Obama because he thought they might be interpreted or used as racial—or based on racial and he wouldn't even consider them.

**QT: 01;16;16;11**

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**HENRY KISSINGER:**

And so there was on the one hand, very strong for his convictions but also very strong for basic principles of America and I think that will be his lasting contribution.

**QT: 01;16;37;05**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

You might get the impression that I'm somewhat prejudice.

**QT: 01;16;44;00**

**TITLE**

On McCain's regret that he didn't run with Lieberman in 2008

**QT: 01;16;49;10**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

Well it would've been hard to take the Vice Presidential candidate of a previous run within the same time period but it's McCain. He thought it was the best man, was a reasonable judgment. Lieberman is a strong and valuable personality. On substance, it would've been a good choice.

**QT: 01;17;21;19**

**TITLE**

The news of McCain's diagnosis

**QT: 01;17;26;17**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

Somebody told me. It's shocking. It was shocking because I had sort of thought of McCain as a permanent feature and I called him often and we talk and characteristically he won't talk about his illness except in a very general way. So most of our conversations are normal conversations that we've had over many years.

**QT: 01;18;14;10**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

I try to call him every week and—and I do. I sometimes miss the exact week but—.

**QT: 01;18;27;10**

**TITLE**

On integrity, where we are now and what we will lose when McCain is gone

**QT: 01;18;33;03**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

The country will lose a conscience. We have to hear from McCain or somebody like McCain even if we're not going to do all the things he wants. A test is a sort of a beacon so that you know what one line of thought should be because you know it is unselfish. You know it is not based on career. You know that he has thought deeply about the country. So as I've said, I don't always agree with him but I always agree with his motive and with his commitment and what we need is to bring along another generation of people in this present world where when you talk to college kids, they're very career oriented and they are sort of planning what is most practically useful for them. And it's becoming more and more prevalent because of the way communications now—now operate to have a—sort of a rock, to which you can look and of course it shouldn't just be one person, there should be hopefully a group of people like this so that's what we will lose and you will find in your interviews that many people who were on the other sides will mention.

**QT: 01;20;44;20**

**TITLE**

John McCain's feelings on torture

**QT: 01;20;50;00**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

It's important to him to demonstrate that America is strong enough to admit its shortcomings and overcome them. I think it's an important task, it's characteristic of him who was tortured that he would want to make sure that



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his country cleans itself of—of this. I wouldn't give it the same priority although I think it's important.

**QT: 01;21;34;23**

**TITLE**

John McCain's son Jack and the Naval Academy

**QT: 01;21;39;00**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

I spoke at the Naval Academy.

**QT: 01;21;41;05**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

But his son was under some restriction. He had sort of broken some rule.

**QT: 01;21;48;15**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

It was not a major event but they wouldn't alter it. They—I finally saw him at the end of my visit but they didn't build him into the visit the way you'd expect from the son of a close friend.

**QT: 01;22;08;10**

**TITLE**

Henry Cabot Lodge

**QT: 01;22;12;05**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

I lived with him in Vietnam for three months and I knew him over many years. He—he and Nelson Rockefeller were always friends but sometimes rivals. But he is another one who is a public servant type like McCain. Not of the same—I mean, it was a different field but I'm delighted, I knew him well.

**QT: 01;22;56;12**

**TITLE**

Kissinger's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday

**QT: 01;23;01;04**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

Senator McCain came to my 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party and maybe you can get that clip, my daughter has a video, but somebody in my family has a video and there were a number of distinguished speakers. Kerry spoke, Clinton spoke, Schultz, and John McCain went up and said, "I have only one thing to say," what he said when he met me, "that I want to thank Henry for saving my honor." It was the most effective speech.

**QT: 01;23;54;11**

**TITLE**

Love of McCain

**QT: 01;24;00;02**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

But if you want a really positive view, talk to my wife.

**QT: 01;24;07;10**

**HENRY KISSINGER:**

Oh, she is absolutely smitten with him. And she's basically, she makes no consensus either, so she—she loves him.

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**END TC: QT: 01;24;19;21**