

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

VICKI KENNEDY INTERVIEW
JOHN MCCAIN: FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

VICKI KENNEDY
Wife of Ted Kennedy
November 07, 2017
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 18 Minutes

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

QT: 01;00;00;00

CREW:

Take one, common mark.

QT: 01;00;07;09

TITLE

A raucous introduction to John McCain

QT: 01;00;11;09

VICKI KENNEDY:

My first recollection of John McCain was in 1993. Teddy and I were married in the summer of 1992, but I remember seeing John McCain on the floor of the senate in 1993 in a very dramatic exchange, where Teddy had come onto the floor because an older senator and a younger senator were kind of involved in a heated argument, shall we say. And Teddy asked to be recognized and he called for regular order to try to cool down temperatures. And John burst out of the Republican cloak room and came onto the floor. And at least as Teddy told the story later he says that the presiding officer turned to the parliamentarian and he said, "If McCain strikes Kennedy, adjourn the senate closed." So they both just roared with laughter about that. So, that was my introduction to John McCain.

QT: 01;01;14;08

TITLE

McCain's work to normalize relations with Vietnam speaks to his character

QT: 01;01;18;12

VICKI KENNEDY:

You know, I also knew John McCain through John Kerry. And I watched the two of them and heard John Kerry talk a lot about their trips back to Vietnam. And that was such a courageous and powerful thing to do. John McCain, who had been a prisoner of war for all those years, going back and fighting for normalizing relations between our country and Vietnam. So he obviously was a very special human being, who looked beyond narrow interest and looked in a very broad way. And Teddy had enormous respect for that.

QT: 01;01;57;21

TITLE

The Profiles and Courage Award

QT: 01;02;03;01

VICKI KENNEDY:

I got to know him when he was a recipient, along with Russ Feingold, of the John F. Kennedy Library Profiling Courage award, and he and his family, he and Cindy, and also with his young son, Jimmy, had come to Boston to receive that award.

QT: 01;02;20;22

TITLE

The award was incredibly meaningful to John

QT: 01;02;26;02

VICKI KENNEDY:

Well, it was a big deal to all of us, and it was a big deal to the library and that's a very nice thing to hear.

QT: 01;02;31;16

TITLE

John's son Jimmy's 10th birthday was during the ceremony

QT: 01;02;36;05

VICKI KENNEDY:

I remember the conflict with his son's birthday very well. I remember Teddy telling me about it, and his concern that John's son's birthday, I think he was going to be 10 years old, and John was worried about not being able to spend as much time in Boston because of his son's 10th birthday. Well, no one loved a birthday more than my husband did, so he planned a wonderful, exciting, extra special birthday for Jimmy, and he told John, he said, "Bring him along, we're going to do something special," and so he did. He had birthday cakes, he had coast guard trips in Boston harbor and it was really fantastic.

QT: 01;03;14;06

TITLE

On the Profiles in Courage Award

QT: 01;03;19;04

VICKI KENNEDY:

So, the Profiles in Courage Award is given by the Kennedy Library every year to someone who has stood up against their own interest, not worrying about what it meant for their own political future, and stood up for something courageous. It's based on President Kennedy's book, Profiles in Courage, and it was given that year, I believe it was 1999, to Ross Feingold and John McCain, who stood up for campaign finance reform.

QT: 01;03;46;05

VICKI KENNEDY:

John stood up against his party, and it was a very difficult thing, I think, from a political point of view, and a courageous thing, from a public interest point of

view. It was an exhilarating weekend, it starts with a wonderful dinner, and a speech at the dinner. Then there was an award ceremony the next morning, and interviews and a ceremony and more speeches. It was very moving, and then we had, afterwards, I believe we gathered and had a meal together in the library. And it was very wonderful.

QT: 01;04;31;01

TITLE

John and Teddy's relationship and looking for common ground

QT: 01;04;36;21

VICKI KENNEDY:

Ya know, I think Teddy loved working with John, and John has been very gracious about talking about Teddy as a Senator. He's told me wonderful things about Teddy as a senator, about how he was a person of his word, about how he didn't take himself seriously. He took the issues very seriously, and how he was always looking for common ground. And he's told me stories about how Teddy would just bellow on the floor of the senate, and then right afterwards, would pat him on the back and say, "That was pretty good, right?" He said they could sort of go at it and then come back and still be friends.

QT: 01;05;11;17

VICKI KENNEDY:

And I think that was the essence of being able to really do a deal. Teddy felt really strongly, and he knew John felt that way, and I think that's why they worked so well together. They were all moving toward something that was good for the country, and they might have a different way of getting there, but if they talked it out, if they worked it out, they could just find that common ground to move things forward. And John shared that, shared it very, very strongly. You just listen to somebody, and you listen for that nugget of common ground, and see how you can move it forward.

QT: 01;05;45;07

TITLE

Today's political environment

QT: 01;05;50;02

VICKI KENNEDY:

I think there's more common ground than people perhaps recognize, if they just sat and listened to each other. That's the important thing, and if personalities didn't get in the way, and that people weren't demonizing the other side. And John McCain understands that. Ted Kennedy understood that, that people can have different views, and still be patriots.

QT: 01;06;17;20

TITLE

Teddy and John worked well together

QT: 01;06;22;13

VICKI KENNEDY:

I remember Teddy and John working together on several issues. They worked together on immigration very, very well. They would meet in early mornings, and have bipartisan meetings, trying to work through some very, very delicate issues, and they almost got there a couple of times. It required a lot of compromise on both sides, and people taking tough stands, but knowing what they're basic beliefs were, and knowing how far they could compromise, and then sticking with their compromises. They worked very, very well together.

QT: 01;07;01;05

TITLE

Both Teddy and John got pushback from their more partisan colleagues

QT: 01;07;06;20

VICKI KENNEDY:

Teddy absolutely got pushback from his side of the aisle on some of the positions that he took, without question, and I know John got pushback from his side of

the isle, on some of the positions that he took. I think they both viewed this as a sign that they were moving in the right direction.

QT: 01;07;24;04

TITLE

Teddy and John shared a sense of purpose and joy

QT: 01;07;30;14

VICKI KENNEDY:

Teddy loved working with John McCain, they both had a great sense of humor, and they could find humor in situations, even in tense situations. I think that's what made this relationship so strong. We were talking about immigration, and there was a very tense moment in immigration, and one particular senator on the other side of the isle from Teddy had been particularly difficult in this negotiation. And John used his famous, we'll call it straight talk, so he used his straight talk, and he kind of blew up at the senator, I think very strategically.

QT: 01;08;12;14

VICKI KENNEDY:

And that senator stormed out of the negotiation and he went to Teddy, and he goes, "Pretty good, don't you think?" And then the negotiations went on and they—and they got to where they needed to go. Teddy came back, and he and John roared about that afterwards, and they just enjoyed each other. They said, "That was a very clever technique." It was that kind of thing, they were serious about their purpose, but they enjoyed what they were doing.

QT: 01;08;37;12

VICKI KENNEDY:

They both understood human nature, and human beings. And it was a wonderful thing to see.

QT: 01;08;45;14

TITLE

Both Teddy and John followed their family traditions of service

QT: 01;08;50;09

VICKI KENNEDY:

I have to say that I so reject the characterization of either John or Teddy as non-conforming to their family traditions. To both of them, because John McCain followed in his family tradition, and has lived a lifetime of public service, and has been a hero, who has fought time and time again for this country. He's an incredible patriot, and if I may, I'd say the same thing about my husband, who spent a lifetime in public service. They both lived up to the finest traditions of the people in their families who came before.

QT: 01;09;29;17

TITLE

John's life has been spent in service to country

QT: 01;09;34;12

VICKI KENNEDY:

John's life has been about service to country. If you look at it in a very broad way, the positions he's taken, the things he's done from campaign finance reform, when he bucked his own party, and was willing to stand up courageously for that. I think about his standing up on the Abu-Gharaib Prison torture situation and being outspoken; he and Teddy stood together on the Armed Services committee against that and it was a very powerful message that he gave on that.

QT: 01;10;16;02

VICKI KENNEDY:

I think about his position on immigration reform and over and over again, I think about him now, how he stood up, he's standing up for regular order in the United States Senate. He's standing up for a senate to work the way it was historically meant to work. How he voted against a procedure on a health care bill that he felt was not—had not gone through the proper procedures. He wanted something aired in the light of day that had gone through committee. He stands up time and time again because he says, and—and I feel it so deeply, and

people follow him because of it, that this is about something more than him, more than the moment, it's about our country, it's about the United States Senate, it's about the future. And I think that's part of the power of John McCain.

QT: 01;11;14;11

TITLE

John McCain is an American first

QT: 01;11;18;18

VICKI KENNEDY:

John McCain is without question a conservative. He's a principled conservative. He's certainly not a democrat, but he is a—he is a patriot, he's an American—he—first, and he is a person who doesn't vilify the other side. He looks for ways to move the ball forward; he looks for ways to make progress for our country in a way that's true to his values. I think he is just the essence of what we want in a United States Senator.

QT: 01;11;56;03

TITLE

Teddy and John's relationship during the 2008 presidential campaign

QT: 01;12;01;01

VICKI KENNEDY:

They spoke during that campaign. There was certainly no animosity between them. They were still friends. And I—I recall so vividly and really, I was so touched. Before one of the debates in that campaign, Teddy fell ill, it was a brief illness, he had a hospital visit, but we were back home in time to actually watch the debate. And John started the debate by saying, "I just want to say something about my friend Ted Kennedy and hoping that he's feeling better." I mean that's—that's friendship, and this is—and the election was—was politics.

QT: 01;12;42;02

VICKI KENNEDY:

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

And understandably they were going to be on different sides, John certainly never expected Teddy to be supporting him as the Republican nominee for president, and expected Teddy to vigorously support his candidate and his nominee. But that didn't impact the fact that they would still be friends.

QT: 01;12;59;23

TITLE

John and Teddy used to imitate each other

QT: 01;13;05;00

VICKI KENNEDY:

I've certainly heard John imitate him, and I can hear it in my mind's ear, Teddy saying, you know, "Oh, John." Absolutely.

QT: 01;13;15;10

VICKI KENNEDY:

It is very endearing.

QT: 01;13;17;04

TITLE

John's speech at Teddy's memorial service

QT: 01;13;23;03

VICKI KENNEDY:

I recall John speaking at Teddy's memorial service very, very vividly. He was eloquent, he was funny, he was moving, and he did everything I had hoped he would do when we asked him to speak. It was so important to us, to all of our family, that he speak that evening and it was—he was—he was very, very special.

QT: 01;13;47;13

TITLE

Learning about John's diagnosis

QT: 01;13;52;00

VICKI KENNEDY:

I first heard that John had been diagnosed with brain cancer from my nephew, Congressman Joe Kennedy. He called me and—because he wanted me to hear it. I was shell-shocked, I couldn't believe it, and I kept—I said, "No, no, there must be—there must be a mistake. It just can't—this can't be right." And then I started to listen to news reports, and within just a very short period of time, all of my children and Teddy's children, all—you know, contacted me. For all of us, this was such a deep sadness and concern and worry. And of course, I immediately started reaching out to the McCain's, but it was just—it was a blow.

QT: 01;14;43;12

TITLE

John has the same cancer Teddy had

QT: 01;14;47;11

VICKI KENNEDY:

I was in absolute disbelief that John could have the same cancer that Teddy had. It was—it was—it was weird to me; it was—it was—it was not believable. I had—I had to take time to really absorb that this could be—that this could be happening.

QT: 01;15;05;19

TITLE

On John's attitude towards his diagnosis

QT: 01;15;10;04

VICKI KENNEDY:

I find that John's attitude toward this diagnosis is so similar to my husband's attitude toward the diagnosis. And I'm very uplifted by that. And it is that—this is—I've had suffering in my life, and this is—I am not going to let this define who I am. I've got living left to do, and I'm going to live. And that was Teddy's position, I remember Teddy saying that he had children who had had cancer, and his having this, having cancer was nothing compared to that. And I know John has said he's been through much worse things and it's this attitude of putting it in a place, but continuing, and, "I've got work to do, and I'm going to do that work, and I'm going to have my life, and I'm going to go on," and I think it's just so wonderful to have that attitude.

QT: 01;16;09;20

TITLE

John's vote on the repeal of the Affordable Care Act

QT: 01;16;14;20

VICKI KENNEDY:

I watched John cast the vote, the thumbs down, against the Skinny Repeal of Obamacare. I heard his speech. I—I heard—I read his statement, I—his speech later. Gotta backup because his speech wasn't—I heard his speech later, on regular order. I read his statement on regular order. I was so motivated that I actually wrote an op-ed about it. I thought it was such a moment for the United States Senate, to have a senator stand up for the senate. Yes, because I care about healthcare and I care about the Affordable Care Act. I cared about the vote, but I cared about the United States Senate, and that's what John was standing up for.

QT: 01;17;06;16

TITLE

On John's recent speeches

QT: 01;17;11;08

VICKI KENNEDY:

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

I think John has made some incredible speeches. I think he has throughout his career. I think right now we're listening to him with open ears, and with a renewed interest maybe, with a special focus maybe. But his focusing on issues, I don't think is anything new. He's done that throughout his career. Maybe it's the way we're listening to him that's new.

QT: 01;17;44;14

TITLE

On optimism and belief in who we are

QT: 01;17;50;00

VICKI KENNEDY:

If I didn't have hope that the senate could return to being a senate again, then I would just throw up my hands in exasperation, and that's not who I am. I am an optimist, and I believe John McCain is an optimist, and that's why he's speaking out, because he believes that things can return to regular order. Perhaps not tomorrow, perhaps not next week, but we all have to work toward making things better, again. We all have to listen to each other again. We have to go back and learn from our history. Throughout history, men and women of goodwill, in both parties, came together and faced the greatest challenges, they addressed the greatest challenges facing our nation. We need to be able to do that again. I think that's John McCain's message to us all.

QT: 01;18;40;06

TITLE

John McCain is a Lion of the Senate

QT: 01;18;44;11

VICKI KENNEDY:

I think John absolutely is another Lion of the Senate, without question.

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

END TC: QT: 01;18;50;01