Human Rights and the Legacy of Robert F. Kennedy

With Kerry Kennedy Cuomo, Loune Viaud, and Peter Edelman; Moderated by Anthony Lewis
John F. Kennedy Library and Foundation
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JOHN SHATTUCK: I want to welcome you on behalf of myself and Deborah Leff, the Library Director, tonight to a wonderful forum. I want to thank the sponsors of our forums, the Fleet Financial, the Lowell Institute, Boston Capital, and our media sponsors, the *Boston Globe*, WBUR, and give special thanks to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for making possible tonight's forum and a series of forums, "Seeking Common Ground: Civil Rights and Human Rights."

From the day that the Kennedy Library was dedicated, it has honored the life and legacy of one of our country's great political visionaries, Robert F. Kennedy. And tonight we pay tribute to his vision and his leadership of a global movement for human rights.

Robert Kennedy had a visceral connection to this movement. He described what he saw this way. He said, "There is discrimination in New York, apartheid in South Africa, and serfdom in the mountains of Peru. People starve in the streets of India, intellectuals go to jail in Russia, thousands are slaughtered in Indonesia, wealth is lavished on armaments everywhere."

Standing before the Berlin Wall on February 22, 1962, he electrified a crowd of 200,000 when the East Germans fired rockets with red balloons over the wall, and Robert F. Kennedy declared, "The Communists will let the balloons through, but they won't let their people go."

In South Africa, in June of 1966, he struck a powerful blow against apartheid before any other Western leader had done so by giving hope to those who engaged in the struggle to believe that "each time a man stands up for an ideal or strikes out against injustice, he sends a tiny ripple of hope. And crossing each other from a million different corners of energy, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and apartheid was destroyed in 1990, it was the ripples of hope started by Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and other leaders at the dawn of the modern human rights era that eventually swept them away. When genocide engulfed Bosnia in 1992 and Rwanda in 1994, it was the human rights vision of Robert Kennedy that tragically went unheeded. "No longer can any people be oblivious to the fate and future of any other."

Before I introduce our panel tonight, please listen to the words and be introduced to the person of Robert Kennedy in South Africa. The film, I'm afraid, is not of the highest quality, but the power of what is said captures what he was about.

[Film played] [Applause]

If I could ask our distinguished speakers panel to come and join me on the stage. Thank you. [Applause]

We are very honored to have with us here tonight an extraordinary panel of speakers who will help us go to the heart of what Robert Kennedy's legacy on human rights is all about, and our principal speaker, Kerry Kennedy Cuomo, is a particular honor to introduce. She is the daughter of Robert Kennedy and a human rights visionary herself. She's the founder, and until 1995, she was the first Executive Director of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, and under her leadership, the Memorial and its Human Rights Center have become one of our country's leading human rights organizations, supporting activists around the world and creating major award programs, in particular the RFK Human Rights Award.

Kerry has led human rights delegations to all parts of the world and has made major contributions to the international struggles against child labor, disappearances, ethnic violence, environmental degradation, impunity, censorship and discrimination against women. She's published widely on human rights and is the author of the powerful book published in 2000, *Speak Truth to Power: Human Rights Defenders Who Are Changing Our World.* Please join me in welcoming Kerry Kennedy Cuomo. [Applause]

KERRY KENNEDY CUOMO: Thank you so much, John. It's great to be here. It's always wonderful to come back to the Library and see so many old friends and new friends, and especially to be here with John Shattuck who is one of the real leaders in civil rights in the United States and human rights around the world. We were able to work together a bit when he was Assistant Secretary for Human Rights, and I stayed with him in Prague when I was writing *Speak Truth to Power*, and it's just always so great to see you. Thank you for inviting me, John.

As President Bush is now trying to say to Saddam Hussein, "Don't worry, you won't be here for too long." In view of world events, I think it's especially meaningful to recall the life of Robert Kennedy and to consider his legacy, both in terms of domestic and international human rights. As John had asked me to address this issue, I was thinking about what does a legacy mean, how do you measure someone's legacy? And I think after walking through the exhibits, especially today, some of it might be in photographs or articles or videotape that we saw here tonight, but really, to me, the real question is, how do people carry this person in their hearts? How do they exist after they've passed on?

Over the years, I've heard hundreds and hundreds of people tell stories about how they were touched by my father. I know Glala Sioux at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation told me about Robert Kennedy visiting his school and that he had asked the librarian why there weren't more books on Indian history and culture and language.

And a grape picker at Cesar Chavez's camp in Delano told me about watching Robert Kennedy break bread with Cesar Chavez during his great fast and brought with him the national spotlight which had helped support the grape boycott and bring better conditions to the grape pickers.

And I met a journalist in New York who described following Robert Kennedy to the Mississippi Delta, I imagine with Peter Edelman, who's here, and how my father opened up his eyes to the misery in America, and how unusual it was for a politician to be pointing out all of our problems.

And, of course, when I was living in Washington for the last eight years, I heard Congressmen, Senators and the President of the United States speak about how their political careers had been inspired by my father.

Everyone has a different story, so it's not easy to come up with a common denominator on what Robert Kennedy's legacy is, but looking back and thinking of the images of that campaign 35 years ago and the photographs of people reaching up to him, so desperate to touch him, I remember he used to come home from those campaign stops and his hands would literally be red and he couldn't grasp a glass, because they were so swollen from people grabbing at him, and he always had his cufflinks missing.

I think it's not necessarily because of his policies or because he articulated things in a different way, but really because he touched something deep in the soul of the members of his audience. What he touched was the noble soul in each of us. He spoke to the best in us, the part that believes in change, in the possibility, in the capacity to overcome even the most enduring and difficult problems we face as a society.

He said we can organize labor without the mob, despite Jimmy Hoffa. He said we can assure the vote to every American, despite Jim Crow. And for the first in our history, African Americans got the vote. It was literally the first time we had one person, one vote, and finally America, for the first time, during his lifetime, became a free democracy.

He said we can stop a war, despite a president. And there was eventually peace in Vietnam.

These were all apparently insurmountable problems, but he believed in the ability of an individual to make a difference.

There was no group of Americans who Robert Kennedy admired more or held in higher esteem than those who were willing to risk their lives for basic civil rights. And as our nation's lead prosecutor facing the terror of organized crime, Robert Kennedy was determined to use the law to bring criminals who threatened our country to justice.

But that eagerness was always tempered by his commitment to protect civil rights and civil liberties, even when it meant letting the accused, like Jimmy Hoffa, go free. As Attorney General at the height of the civil rights movement, Robert Kennedy was keenly aware of the capacity for overzealous or corrupt law enforcement officials, the Bull Connors of the world, who abuse the awesome power of the law. He took that conviction on his travels around the world and criticized governments which invoked national security to suspend civil liberties.

Countries which, on national security grounds, would throw the accused in jail for seven days without telling his family or lawyer where he was or why he was held.

Countries which would invoke national security to do away with the requirement of the hard facts, and instead merely assert it had secret evidence linking the accused to a group which threatened the interests of the nation, thereby holding him without charge for six weeks, six months, even life.

Countries which allowed law enforcement merely to insist without ever demonstrating that the accused was such a threat to national security that he could be sent to a military tribunal where his conversations with his lawyer could be secretly recorded and used in evidence against him, where he would have right to appeal to a judge, even if tortured, and where he could be sentenced to death with no judge, no jury, no right to appeal, and no hope of release, all under the cloak of secrecy made possible by a mantle of national security.

Under the Antiterrorism Act, all those things can be done now, legally, in the United States of America. Imagine the possibility for abuse. Imagine our collective responsibility to remain skeptical and vigilant.

Over the course of the last 18 months, the United States government has undertaken a sweeping reform of laws on a wide range of issues under the rubric of national security which, taken together, amount to an unprecedented assault on our fundamental values and most cherished beliefs, including attacks on the Freedom of Information Act, the Whistleblower Protection Act, the attorney/client privilege, laws and regulations which allow for domestic spying, federal invasions of privacy, like access to library records, and the establishment in law of racial profiling and military tribunals, to name a few.

Opposing undue attacks on civil liberties is central to the ongoing legacy of Robert Kennedy today. Just as Robert Kennedy brought the power to the federal government to bear when state and local governments attacked civil rights workers in the 1960s, today organizations like the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial bring the power of the international legal regimes to bear on national governments which fail to comport with rights enumerated under the International Declaration of Human Rights and other covenants.

We are able to use those laws, because just as the civil rights movement gave birth to tremendous heroes, like Martin Luther King, today we are blessed by people of tremendous courage and noble spirit who have sacrificed themselves for human rights the world over, people like Nelson Mandela, Elie Wiesel, and Loune Viaud, here today.

They personify Robert Kennedy's faith in the noble spirit and firm belief in the ability of the individual to overcome apparently insurmountable problems. Each has faced the giant forces of evil in their country with little more than the slingshot of their heart and nerve and sinew to support them.

Each has suffered the consequences of their challenge. Some have faced imprisonment and brutal torture; others are threatened with death; and too many have endured the censure of their colleagues and the wrath of their society.

We don't laud them because they've been targeted for repression, but because in the face of the most brutal repression and with full knowledge of the consequences they have stood their ground in the fight for justice and human rights.

It's said we need heroes to remind us of what the human spirit is capable of. One of those heroes is Abubakar Sultan. He works with child soldiers in Mozambique who have been forced to commit torture and murder and rape, often against their own family members. Abubakar came from the capital, which was relatively safe during the war, but he left his family, his two young children again and again to fly in rickety, little airplanes to the scene of the war. He would go up to these kids, 13-, 14-, 15-year-old boys with Uzis and try and get them to put down their guns and come with him to be rehabilitated and perhaps reunited with family members, if that was possible to do.

I asked him why he continued to risk his life to do that for total strangers, and this is what he said: "It is something strong within yourself. You feel you are a human being and there are other human beings there suffering. You are better off, so you need to sacrifice. It's hard to explain. It's perhaps a kind of a gift that you have inside yourself."

Well, people like Abubakar and Loune Viaud, and so many others do what Robert Kennedy did. They show us, they help us recognize that gift inside ourselves. Thank you. [Applause]

JOHN SHATTUCK: Thank you very much, Kerry, for those powerful thoughts about today and about your father's legacy.

Let me introduce the other three members of our panel here this evening. Peter Edelman, all the way over on my far left, was at Robert Kennedy's side as a key aide during his 1968 presidential campaign and as legislative assistant throughout his time in the Senate. He has written a moving account of RFK's leadership and vision during what was, we would all agree, a very tumultuous time in America, in Peter's 2001 book *Searching for America's Heart: RFK and the Renewal of Hope.* He's had a long and distinguished career as a leader in public service in both federal and state government and in the academic world where he is today. He's published widely on poverty, constitutional law and issues about children and youth. And I think to show particularly his strength of character and his own views of moral issues in public policy, his article on President Clinton's welfare policy, "The Worst Thing Bill Clinton Has Done," received the Harry Chapin Media Award in 1997.

Next to Kerry Kennedy Cuomo is Loune Viaud, the recipient of the 2002 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award for her heroic work in combating the HIV/AIDS crisis in Haiti. In a country where AIDS is rampant, Ms. Viaud has been a leader in the struggle to provide treatment for AIDS and many other public health problems affecting the extremely poor, who are the vast majority of people in Haiti. She is the founder and director of Zanmi Lasante, a sociomedical complex in the town of Cange, a vast squatters' settlement in central Haiti, where there are few passable roads and no reliable electricity. This is one of the few places on earth where HIV/AIDS is being treated, where the poorest of the poor live, not in facilities located in urban centers. Her persistence resulted this year in a $67 million dollar grant to Haiti from the Global AIDS Fund, and her leadership represents the vision of Robert F. Kennedy at work in our world today.

To moderate this evening's discussion, we are very fortunate to have with us one of the leading journalists in America, and someone I always introduce as our national treasure, my friend Tony

Lewis. For nearly half a century, Tony has been a moral compass on human rights at home and around the world. He knew Robert Kennedy at the time Kennedy made his famous trip to South Africa. Twice he has won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting and commentary in the *New York Times* on the civil rights movement, the US Supreme Court, and the great civil rights and human rights struggles and crises that have shaped the second half of the 20th century. He is now the Visiting Lawrence Lombard Professor at Harvard Law School.

So I will now turn it over to you, Tony, and thank you very much. [Applause]

ANTHONY LEWIS: Thank you, John. Ladies and gentlemen, I'll tell you that this is a rather emotional subject for me, for many reasons. One of them is a personal one, because when Robert Kennedy was in South Africa, he was there by invitation, as you heard, of the National Union of South African Students, of which my wife was then president, and she was, in a sense, his host, and changed her life, changed a lot of people's lives.

On the way down to South Africa -- maybe this is an insight into what Robert Kennedy was like -- he stopped off in London, where I was then a correspondent, and he asked me to get together a group of British people who knew something about South Africa to talk to him about his visit, as he was on his way.

One thing I remember him saying to them as they all sat down to lunch, I guess it was, "Don't give me ideas for things I can say that are tough and that will make me look good in the United States but make their lives more difficult. Give me things to do that will help them. Give me things to say that will actually do some good for the people who are living under that system."

That's an unusual thing for a politician to say, but then he was a very unusual politician, not like other politicians, not one that I've ever met.

I shouldn't go on. I have many stories, but I'm the moderator, so [laughter] I should get a grip on myself. I'll just say one other thing. It's not really a story, just sort of a reminder. Robert Kennedy came to the office of Attorney General -- I will say that he happened to be, or I happened to be a classmate of his at Harvard College. I didn't know him then. When he came to be Attorney General, I was a reporter covering that department, and I thought it was a very odd choice. He was a person of very little legal experience, mainly sort of a zealous appearing prosecutorial type in Senate committee hearings. So I was very skeptical about his appointment.

Then in rather short order, first of all, he picked assistants who were all very eminent. Then one of the first things he did was to take wiretapping legislation, which had been proposed by the Department of Justice, and turn it completely around so that it became a bill to protect individuals against undue wiretapping by the government, instead of an authorization to the government to wiretap. One of the next things he did was to arrange to press hard for fairer bail hearings and bail procedures so that people who were poor, not just people who were rich, could get out of on bail when they were charged with a crime.

Kerry quoted a Mozambican and her quote sort of rang a bell with me. She asked him why he was doing what he was doing, he said there's something strong within yourself. I felt that about Robert Kennedy. I don't want to be corny. I will simply say that I kept feeling about him that there was something profound in him that couldn't stand cruelty, injustice, hungry children, et cetera, et cetera. It had nothing to do with political advantage. Often it was politically disadvantageous to him, but he was a person who lived and breathed caring about other human beings and was prepared to devote a very large part of his life to that.

If that's the legacy -- I will conclude my unsought remarks by saying if that was his legacy, we need it these days.

Now, maybe I'll start with Peter, and start by quoting something from Peter's book that reminds us that Robert Kennedy was not only a person of feelings about human rights and civil liberties, but

he was very funny and that was part of his character and part of what made him such a winning person.

Peter, in this book, describes a meeting at which he thinks he's going to talk to Robert Kennedy about getting a job with him after Kennedy is elected to the Senate. He meets Kennedy, Kennedy's sitting on the fender of a car outside somewhere …

PETER EDELMAN: Outside the White House.

ANTHONY LEWIS: That helps.

PETER EDELMAN: Where he'd gone to get his knee looked at because he had hurt it playing touch football.

ANTHONY LEWIS: As Peter writes, "Playing, what else, touch football." Well, many of you are too young and you don't know about the identification of Robert Kennedy with touch football. Then Peter writes:

"The interview was about to start. He would undoubtedly ask me for my strengths and weaknesses, for the last three books I had read, things like that. I was ready.

"'Are you going to come to work for me?' he said. I was speechless. I thought fast and stammered, 'How much will you pay me?'

"'You can work that out with Ed' Kennedy said.

'I have this problem,' I heard myself [Edelman] saying, 'I've been out of law school three and a half years and I haven't practiced law.'

"'I had that problem, too,' Kennedy said, 'I worked it out.'"

Well, that's what he was like. Well, Peter, maybe we can begin by your just telling us a bit about what it was like, not as a journalist running into him occasionally, but working for him when there were these repeated occasions, daily, again and again, in which this welling up of human feeling occurred.

PETER EDELMAN: Well, of course, it was wonderful, Tony. I think many of us have had lots of professional relationships in our lives and been in offices, whether it's political or someplace else, where sometimes people were a little bit more ambitious or in business for themselves or things weren't always pleasant. There was an atmosphere in that office that Robert Kennedy engendered, that what we were about was really making a difference to people. And it was all done because of his sense of humor. He was certainly intense about it, but it was all done in a way that was always positive. You always felt like you wanted to be there and work on those things.

He was somebody, I think, who got up every morning and said, "What am I going to do today? What am I going to do today that makes a difference?" And if he had had a good yesterday, in whatever way, something he'd achieved legislatively somehow, people that he had reached in some way, and it was always measured around concrete accomplishment, it didn't matter when he got up the next day. My view of it was that he started all over again every day, "What am I going to do today?"

Now, maybe there was an existential sense that you didn't know how many days there were. I don't know. And what it was about -- I thought about it when Tom Putnam called or wrote and asked me to be on this panel -- human rights.

You know, human rights were not part of the American, and for that matter, still not always considered a part of the American domestic discourse. It was in the international discourse, the

Universal Declaration existed, and so on, but I don't think he thought in terms of that phrase. And yet, everything that he did, whether it was in foreign policy, whether it was going to South Africa, going to South America, talking about these issues on the floor of the United States Senate, everything that he did, and in the United States as well, was about human rights. We've already talked about some of it -- civil rights, civil liberties. This is the American discourse.

But it always came down to human terms. One of the huge differences, beyond the commitment to really making a difference, beyond the commitment to really working on changing things, was that it was always connected to people. The way he learned, I don't think I know anybody, have ever known anybody, who learned so uniquely in this way of going out. He read books, he always had a book with him. Every day he was going on an airplane, he had a book. But he learned by going out and seeing and talking and listening, listening to people, just all of his senses operating.

So, for him, the best day was when he went and listened, and people knew that it was absolutely genuine. There was something about him that … they all knew who he was, right? Robert Kennedy, the president's brother, all of that. But he could walk into the poorest home, a place where people were obviously struggling and connect and immediately there would be a feeling of rapport.

One of my favorite stories is when we were in Mississippi, the horrible time when we saw hunger in this country that he said he had never seen anywhere except in the Third World countries up until then, and Kerry and I were talking about it coming today from the airport, how he came home and he couldn't stop talking about it. She says it was the one time that he said to his children that they had to go and do something. He was that explicit about it because he was so moved.

But at the same time that that was so incredibly powerful and serious and awful to find that degree of hunger in the United States, we walked into the home of a man and his family who had been farm workers, and they had been pushed off the plantation, the land on the plantation. This was why there was so much hunger in Mississippi at the time. And there was no recourse, you couldn't get welfare if you were a family, and welfare was $55 dollars a month for a family of four anyway. But you couldn't get welfare if it was a two-parent family. So the plantation owners, the power structure, were deliberately pushing families off the land.

This man's name was Andrew Jackson. Kennedy thought that was sort of funny. So he walked in and he said, "So you're Andrew Jackson." The man looked at him and said, "So you're Bobby Kennedy." And they both had a huge laugh, and then they had a wonderful conversation.

ANTHONY LEWIS: Peter, I think I'm going to move and sit down (Lewis takes a seat with the other panelists), but I will just say that I think that your point about the fact that human rights was not so much on the agenda then is a very important one. The whole explicit movement in this country, Human Rights Watch, all of those things, really began after that. When Robert Kennedy cared about Mozambicans-- that was Kerry. But when he cared about South Africans or people as you said in Latin America or in Mississippi or wherever, that was something quite new. That was not what other politicians did.

My question to you is to try to relate what happened then, Peter, to what's going on today. Why do we lack a sense of that kind of human concern, or at least I think we do, in this country today, among politicians?

PETER EDELMAN: Tony, let me say before I answer that, which I'm not sure I can, just one more word about Robert Kennedy himself, and that is that Kerry talked about the legacy being inside of all of us and about these personal contacts, and indeed that story -- and there are many -- of meeting poor families is with that. But he was also somebody who had a real sense of what we should do, not just that we should do something, but a real sense of what we should do. And he thought about it constantly, about how it all fit together.

So he started from the very time he was appointed Attorney General, when you were skeptical, and you talked about some things about civil rights and civil liberties. He installed his high school friend Dave Hackett in an office that opened on to the Attorney General's office, and he said to him, "I want you to do something about juvenile delinquency." That was the term of the time. That ended up being the planning, took place in his office as Attorney General, the planning for what turned out to be the War on Poverty.

And he kept learning as he went on. When he came into the Senate, he had always talked about it was important to have jobs, but he began to see how that proliferated and the connection of jobs and education and all the work that he did. And we can go into it more, but I just wanted to say that if you looked at his daily schedule on the domestic side, of course he voted on every issue. He represented the state of New York and there was lots of work on behalf of constituents, but it really was an amazing connection, and things would be added to it.

Going and meeting Cesar Chavez, you added work on behalf of the farm workers. They become very, very close friends, as well as allies. Go down to Mississippi and you see hungry children and you acquire a commitment to ending hunger in America, and you do something about it. You have a programmatic strategy.

So you meet people in your own constituency, in Brooklyn, in New York and they say to you, "We really have to do something about our situation here," and he starts planning. He went up, I'm sure Kerry remembers this, almost every night for a year, and met with people in Brooklyn, to work through with them their plan for what they would do in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood.

So we're talking about something that's really amazing and very special, and when you ask the question on that level, of course not because he was one of a kind, and we were very, very lucky. And, of course, I always say, we cannot lament, we cannot say, "If only we had Robert Kennedy, if only we had Dr. King," any of our heroes and heroines. Because it's up to us. And one of the things that's very, very troubling about where we are right now is that we're the same wonderful country, and so what we're experiencing right now with leadership I assume in this room that most of us are very troubled about and with things about to happen that are scary. I don't know how many of you, I've had conversations with people over the last weeks who say this is the scariest time they've ever seen, and I'm talking about people who are my age, who have been around for a long time.

So why it's different? Well, I'd have to say -- I could say a lot of things, more than we have time for. Too much money in politics, people don't want to run for office, just the fact that we've become so much wealthier as a country, and that means that in terms of these kinds of issues, some of these kinds of issues about human rights, that more people are comfortable and don't do what they should do being more comfortable, which is to be even more responsible about others who have less. There are so many reasons why we've kind of changed this country. But fundamentally, I have to say to you it's the old Pogo thing -- we looked at the enemy and the enemy is us.

ANTHONY LEWIS: We've met the enemy.

PETER EDELMAN: Yes, it is us.

ANTHONY LEWIS: Well, Loune the two of us at least relate very much to this past figure. You didn't know him, you're too young. And yet, you've won an award in his name for doing work of a kind that he would have profoundly admired. When you won this prize, how did you relate Robert Kennedy, this figure from your past, to what you are doing and the needs of today? Did they have some meaning together?

LOUNE VIAUD : First of all, let me thank the JFK Library, the staff, and all of you for inviting me to be part of this panel.

I think RFK and all of us present this evening believe in human rights, and we believe that health is a human right. That's why we -- when I say we, a group of Haitian, American, we develop and implement projects in Haiti to address the issues of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. We believe also that the poor are dying every day from preventable diseases. We believe that we have to do something.

ANTHONY LEWIS: You sound just like Robert Kennedy. We believe we have to do something. He could have said that; he did say it. You're doing something which is an even stronger version of his visit to Mississippi, and having this child with the distended stomach from hunger sit on his lap, a famous scene. You're going as a person who could have had, I take it, a comfortable life. You're going into a community that is desperately poor, lives in shacks, that's infested with a deadly, mortal disease, HIV/AIDS, and, as you said, other illnesses, other endemic diseases. Why? Why did you do it?

LOUNE VIAUD: Someone had to do it. I don't know why, but I'm happy that I'm the one among a group doing this kind of work. We are 700 people.

ANTHONY LEWIS: Seven hundred?

LOUNE VIAUD: People working in Zanmi Lasante, the organization I work with. And at the clinic, we see about 200,000 patients a year.

ANTHONY LEWIS: Two hundred thousand?

LOUNE VIAUD: Patients a year.

ANTHONY LEWIS: Wow.

LOUNE VIAUD: We follow 4,000 patients living with HIV, and 10% of that we offer antiretroviral drugs in through Zanmi Lasante, which are the same type of drugs that Brigham and Women, or any other big hospital in the world offers. I can't even describe the place, because it's indescribable.

ANTHONY LEWIS: We should all remember the words you spoke, "I'm happy that I'm doing it." That's a powerful statement.

Kerry, you sort of took the wind out of my sails of what I was going to ask you. I was going to ask you to relate the legacy to where we are today, and you did that with a vengeance, very strongly. But say more, and maybe I'll ask you the same question I asked Peter, in a different way. Why is it that today there's this much greater gulf between rich and poor in this country? Why is it that in our politics the rich always seem to prevail and the poor to lose out? Why is it that our government seems increasingly less concerned with the rights of the weak and those who need help? Have we become harder as a people? Peter says it's still the same great country. Is it? Or is it different?

KERRY KENNEDY CUOMO: Frankly, I think you're talking about the federal government. I think it's a quite simple answer. We've had Republicans in power for such a long time, but that's their orientation. We now have a group of people running the country who come from the oil industry. I don't think it should be any mystery to us that the Bush Administration is going to be more interested in helping the wealthy than, for instance, the Clinton Administration or the Carter Administration or the Johnson-Kennedy Administration before. I think that's where the orientation lies.

I think that there are politicians out there who are incredibly, incredibly compassionate and who give their lives to upholding those who are in poverty. One of the great ones, I'm so sorry that we've lost, is Paul Wellstone. [Applause] It's easy, it's so easy to be cynical about politicians, but, again, Robert Kennedy believed that politics is an honorable profession, and that it was one of

the highest callings, to be in government and to serve the people. I think that we kind of need to help direct our leadership and we also need to uplift the leadership that's there, that is doing the right thing.

So just to come back to the sort of theme of what can we do, and what Loune is doing, one of the politicians around the world who has spent his life trying to uplift the poor is President Aristide in Haiti. [Applause] His government hasn't been ideal; there's been problems with it. That's true, but, nonetheless, what the US administration, what the Bush Administration has done to that country is absolutely appalling. We have a blockade around Haiti stopping all food, clothes, medical supplies, anything that could help Loune in her work from going to the government of Haiti, not only for the US, not only US aid is blocked because of US policy, but all aid from Latin America and Europe.

LOUNE VIAUD: Even loans.

KERRY KENNEDY CUOMO: They not only cannot get the aid, but they can't the loans. We're doing this to the poorest country in our hemisphere, the third hungriest country on earth. That just does not seem to me to reflect the will of the people of the United States. This policy is based by the Bush Administration on voting irregularities in Haiti, which is quite extraordinary.

So I think, to me, the question is, what can we do, and let's not just have this discussion and then all go home. Let's try to change this policy in Haiti. That would actually be something great to come out of tonight. [Applause]

ANTHONY LEWIS: When you say that, I agree with you. I have to say, I don't suppose it's up to me to agree or not, I'm the moderator, but I think there's a lot of feeling in this country today of helplessness, and that's part of the change. When Robert Kennedy was here, people felt something could be changed. Maybe it was because he set out every day to change it. But I think today, we feel very separated from government, and very powerless to affect what it does. Peter, do you agree with that?

PETER EDELMAN: Yes, but I guess I want to say something, and we are all feeling, right now particularly … you should say what Russell Baker said. Will you tell that?

ANTHONY LEWIS: Well, it's a quote that has … but I'll just let it speak for itself. My former colleague and friend Russell Baker, who was for many years a columnist on the *New York Times*, sent me an email recently of which the last sentence was, "Do you feel sometimes like you're a passenger on a hijacked country?" [Applause]

PETER EDELMAN: So I think we do feel that way. I also think that while there are immediate concerns that are absolutely terrifying that we wish we could do more about, one of the things that we ought to, a perspective or an approach we ought to think about is the fact that what has been revealed here is that people on sort of our side of the political ledger are just flat on their backs.

The Clinton era is over. The Bush presidency, for all of the illegitimacy of its beginning has, after 9/11, been fully established. We really have to start -- Kerry's husband, Andrew, is writing a book that's going to tell us where the Democrats need to reform and what they need to say and do. I think a lot of it starts from the very, very bottom, to have a longer term vision of how we organize a broader base of support for moving in the right direction. That's not going to solve our immediate crisis in Iraq or make our economy more healthy, or other things, but it seems to me that we've sort of just relied on other people to make themselves available to run and then they turn out to be, who supports them, where does the money come from?

So even some of our Democrats take their money from some of the same sources, and this is a major change. You alluded to it. You talked about greater gaps. That's literal. In the late '70s, the

top one percent of the richest people had the same income as the bottom 20%. Now the top one-percent have the same income as the bottom 40%. We talk about the stagnation of the economy over the last 25 years with industrialization, and so on; the fact is, we have twice the real income as a country than we had then, and it's all stuck at the top.

There's money power and there's people power. We have some Democrats who have money, that's good, but on the Democratic side, it's really about much more involvement of lots and lots of people. What cheers me up, and it doesn't mean, again, that the national situation gets better that minute, what cheers me up is the number of people that there are around this country who are doing fabulous things in their communities, who really are making a huge difference. If we can find a way to knit that together, to join what they're doing and to make a politics that goes with the work that they're doing in the communities, I think there's tremendous potential.

When you look at the number of people -- just one issue that hasn't made its way into being politically efficacious yes -- the number of people who have trouble making ends meet in this country. If you look at the work that the Economic Policy Institute and Wider Opportunities for Women and others have done about how much it costs to really live, the poverty line is ridiculous -- $15,000 dollars for a family of three. Who can live on that? Or $18,000 dollars-plus for a family of four? What it actually costs people who are out there struggling, they're doing their very best, and the median job in this country, half the people have jobs less than this, pays $12.83 an hour. In 1973, it paid $12.06 an hour. That equals out, if you have that job all year long and 40 hours a week, that equals out to $26,000-some dollars a year. People can't live on that.

Now, when you look at the work that these researchers have done, it actually turns out, just figuring what it really costs for food and housing. Rental housing is off the charts. I assume everybody knows that. We have a real crisis in rental housing that we're not even talking about. And what it costs for healthcare and childcare, and so on. We're talking about 80 or 90 million people who are in deep economic trouble. It's not the 31 or 32 million we say are quote-unquote poor. Well, I think there's a politics in that, and I think if people who are public intellectuals as well as people at the other end, so that it comes at us in a media way and in a national way at the same time that people are doing it from the bottom up, that's where the future is.

ANTHONY LEWIS: It seems to me you've actually talked about two different things. One, how people are doing things in their communities in this country to change things and make things better for those who are suffering, which has been a characteristic of this country from its beginning. It's what de Tocqueville noticed when he wrote about the United States, that there was so much centered on the community. It's very different from a centralized country like France where only Paris mattered.

But you're also talking about, if I understand you, that being the start of a political change. And that's harder for me to see. In a way, your first point is that we have in this country some people like Loune, who are devoting their lives to very difficult work, and getting happiness out of it. That's a wonderful conception; I repeat that's a wonderful conception.

But do you feel, Loune, I don't know whether you get into the politics in Haiti at all, or do you stay out of that? Do you feel politically frustrated, or do you stick strictly to the hospital and your work there?

LOUNE VIAUD: It's easier to stay away from the politics. We're so busy trying to raise money and trying to find medicine that we … but I have to say that one of the tasks I asked the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial to do is to engage with the Inter-American Development Bank to see if they can release the loans earmarked for health, for potable water. People will see that as a politic, but if we can get this money, it will make our work, for the whole country, not only for Zanmi Lasante, it will make a big difference in people's lives.

ANTHONY LEWIS: Kerry, do you have a thought specifically along Peter's lines of what can change things in this country? Maybe we have to wait for your husband's book, I don't know.

KERRY KENNEDY CUOMO: I think Peter is right. There are wonderful people doing extraordinary work and empowering local groups. Mostly, it's not somebody jumping into a community and saying, "Here, let me help you." Mostly it's people from that community saying, "We're sick and tired of the way it's been and we're going to change it ourselves."

I think of people like Van Jones in San Francisco, who started Police Watch that's transformed the way the police conduct themselves. And it's really put an enormous dent in police brutality there. I think of Helen Prejean, who is one of the foremost advocates for the abolition of the death penalty.

I just spent a year and a half traveling around New York and virtually every single community I went into, there was somebody with some organization that was trying to organize politically and trying to change the way things work.

If you really want to change things, you have to be involved in politics in America. Because that's what creates change here. So I think community activists might disdain politics for a while, but eventually they realize that that's their source of funding, and that's the source of power. So I think there is hope, but I don't quite see the movement yet. But, Peter and I are going to start it.

ANTHONY LEWIS: On that happy note, I'm now going to go back to whatever that is and take questions from the audience. Ladies and gentlemen, we have a limited time, so I want to really strictly keep in mind what I'm about to say. No speeches. Questions only. Very brief. Everybody has to have a chance.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My name is Michael Javonovich and I'm Serbian. Whenever I come to this library, it is always an emotional experience for me. After I read *Profiles in Courage* by Kennedy, I became brainwashed for Kennedy's for life. I like Kennedy's not only for their looks, but for their outlooks.

Robert Kennedy worked with his brother JFK as a twin brother. No twin brothers have worked together as much as these two brothers. When Robert Kennedy was appointed Attorney General, they asked, "Why did you appoint him when he did not have any experience?" JFK said, "I wanted him to have experience, that is why I appointed him."

ANTHONY LEWIS: Now, Mr. Javonovich, you're very eloquent, but let's have a question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have very rarely a chance where a Kennedy would listen to me.

ANTHONY LEWIS: I know, but others want to talk, too.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You asked about how to change. I would like more Kennedy's to run for an office. I would like Kerry Kennedy to run for president. [Applause]

Now, since in a democracy you cut me short, I'd like to welcome the panel, I would like also to welcome you, and praise every one of you. Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm Dan Asher from Cape Cod. We're in a place that represents history. In that regard, we know that Robert Kennedy turned against the Vietnam War. We know that Johnson gave up the War on Poverty because of the cost of the Vietnam War. I was here a week or so ago dealing with the tapes of the President, and we could not answer a question that was raised, and that is, President Kennedy's viewpoint when we had 15,000 soldiers in Vietnam, what would he have done had he not been assassinated? Can you throw any light on whether Robert Kennedy had a viewpoint and might have advised his brother along those lines?

PETER EDELMAN: Tony, you probably would know best.

ANTHONY LEWIS: I was living abroad at the time at the peak of the Vietnam period. It's a very profound question, it's a very interesting question. Peter or Kerry?

KERRY KENNEDY CUOMO: I think you have to wait until Arthur Schlesinger comes back.

PETER EDELMAN: I don't think we're ever really going to exactly know the answer to that question. I think that people who were associated with the President believe that he was committed to being involved only at that level. You know, you can't prove these things historically, but what President Johnson did in Vietnam was a massive change, massive escalation, and it's totally different from …perhaps the time, and certainly in retrospect, the level of involvement that we had as a country during President's Kennedy's presidency was not wide. But it is a totally different thing from what happened thereafter.

So the best one can say is, why did Johnson escalate, what was the thinking that led to that, and so on, and at least from my understanding, as I was associated with Robert Kennedy a little bit later on, is that there's really no evidence that President Kennedy would have escalated the war in the way that President Johnson did.

I don't think that helps you very much, but certainly people who were involved at the time do believe what I think.

ANTHONY LEWIS: I would add one thought to that. We're speculating here, as Peter said. We don't know, we'll never know. I don't think. But to that speculation, I would add this: President Kennedy and his brother both learned a bitter lesson from the Bay of Pigs, the unsuccessful invasion of Cuba, mistaken, badly planned, a piece of folly. And the lesson was that you should not trust the experts, the people who told you what was going to happen, because they had lots of experience. The CIA, in that case. I think there would have been from both of them, perhaps especially from Robert Kennedy, a much greater resistance to those who were saying, "We have to go in, we have to go in, we have to save South Vietnam."

President Johnson did not have the same degree of footing in foreign affairs that by then President Kennedy had. He had made the great speech at American University about peace in the world. He had dealt with the Cuban Missile Crisis. He had learned the lessons from the Bay of Pigs. And I think all of that would have given him greater confidence to resist the importuning of people who said, "You have to do it or you'll look bad." That's just my guess.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Something that speaks to me so much about studying Robert Kennedy is the empathy that he felt for, as spoken, the children in the Mississippi Delta. I almost, in seeing footage of him, see just tremendous pain in his eyes and sometimes the way that he spoke, and Loune, you spoke to being happy and joyful in the work that you are doing, and I was wondering if you could speak more on how you can reconcile the joy that you feel and what you're doing with the sadness also that I'm sure you encounter on a daily basis. And if those that knew Robert Kennedy could speak on how he might have reconciled that and seen the joy, the everyday joy coupled with the everyday sadness.

ANTHONY LEWIS: What an interesting question. Peter?

PETER EDELMAN: Why doesn't Loune?

LOUNE VIAUD: I should say instead of happy, privileged. Privileged that I'm part of this struggle. I think I get my inspiration from the patients, because some of them, most of them work like eight hours, ten hours, and they're sick. When they come to the clinic, you can see they're not sad. I don't know, I'm not saying that it's easy, it's very difficult. It's very difficult to see patients, see people dying from hunger, or see people that you can't help, because we cannot help everybody. So that's why we're asking for release of the funds for the loans so we can, everybody can get some help.

I don't know if I answered the question.

PETER EDELMAN: Kerry gives me permission, I guess, to say something, because I know you have some -- Well, I don't know if you would anymore. Maybe you'll say something.

He was so complicated. He'd had a terrible loss, as the nation did, but he had had this terrible personal tragedy in losing his brother, which clearly had had, when you talk about the sadness in his eyes, I think that it had such a profound effect on him.

Now, what we know about Robert Kennedy in terms of the theories of history, there are those who say that up until President Kennedy's death, he was this or that and there's a list of theories. One of the reasons why I made a point of saying earlier that he was so determined the minute he took office as Attorney General to do something about the lack of opportunity for young people, particularly young people of color in this country, it was a gradual evolution. And he was a person who always identified, for his whole life, with people who had less.

But he was also a person, and here's a part where Kerry can tell you a lot more than I can, he was perfectly capable of sitting by himself and saying nothing for long periods of time. There were a lot of paradoxes. This was a man who resisted sharing any introspection with anybody else. If you asked him a question about his deepest thoughts, he would just put you off. But, clearly, he was engaged in an enormous process all the time of thinking about the world and, I suppose, where he fit into it, and things that he didn't share.

So there are paradoxes. What you saw in his eyes and yet the wonderful sense of humor and the deep determination and how positive he was about really making things happen, and how empathetic he was, as you pointed out, with children. He was just amazing.

And even that, there are funny parts, too. There was a time, I remember, we were out on a campaign rally somewhere and he picked up a little kid and brought the kid into the car and engaged in a long conversation with this child as they were on the motorcade, and then discovered they'd gone all the way across town. So what do you do? You turn the motorcade around and you go back and you take the kid back to where you picked him up. [Laughter]

KERRY KENNEDY CUOMO: I think that the quality that my father admired the most, beyond love, was courage. And he read books about courageous people, he surrounded himself with great sports figures, because he admired their courage on the sports field. And he memorized poems, which he recited to us all the time, about it. And he loved the Old Testament because it was so full of courage and justice.

I think that in the face of horror, of brutality, especially man-made brutality, poverty and war, and suffering and all its manifestations, that I presume he must have found the courage of people to go through that, to face that inspiring and a source of strength.

In my work, which is dealing with torture and lots of horrors and human rights, that certainly we work with people who are the Loune Viauds and the Martin Luther Kings of their countries. So it's not the repression, it's the resistance that makes you feel strong and inspired. So I imagine that he was inspired by the resistance and resilience of people, and angered by the repression that they felt.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a question about the United Nations. Lately there's been a lot of talk that Libya had been head of the Human Rights Commission, I guess it was. And in spite of that, I just wanted to get a feel from you as to what you feel the UN has done in their role of human rights. Have they done enough? Do you feel they've taken a leadership role? Or are they lacking in what they're doing as well?

KERRY KENNEDY CUOMO: I have to say that I always feel defensive of the UN, because I think it's really our greatest hope eventually for seeing through so many of the international issues that we're facing and particularly in the human rights field.

That said, you just have to look at it or spend about ten minutes there and you realize that it is the most dysfunctional organization. People don't speak to each other. There's not enough money for the programs that need to get done. There's a horrendous bureaucratic mess. Just the worst you can imagine of bureaucracy is right there at the UN in all its colors.

So have they done enough? Certainly not. But it's done a lot, and it's done a lot despite the extraordinary efforts of certain administrations, like this one, to undermine its work. I'm not talking about Iraq right now, although we could discuss that, but I'm really talking in terms of the human rights covenants and other types of work.

Loune Viaud is, again, a great example of that. There is a human right to medical care, and the United States government has stopped medical care, has stopped that right from being exercised by the people of Haiti. So actually, the RFK Memorial is now contemplating a lawsuit against the US government and the International Development Bank because of this. I hope that answers your question.

ANTHONY LEWIS: We have time just for the three people who are standing, and please make them short, I beg you, because we have just a few minutes left.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm Joia Mukherjee from Partners in Health. Loune is my boss, and she's a remarkable woman. My question actually is for Kerry Kennedy Cuomo. For us at Partners in Health, one of the things we say is that you have to allow yourself to be broken by the poor, and in fact there isn't really a way to do it without feeling that. Every day I look at your book, which is on my shelf, but I have no idea how to teach other people to be broken. It's shocking to me that people can see the poverty and see the injustice and just not pay attention and not let it get into their souls.

So I wonder if with your work and with your writings if you have any suggestions for us to make people care more or teach people better.

KERRY KENNEDY CUOMO: I have to say I've never really had that experience. I find that people who don't care really haven't experienced poverty. They haven't spent time with people who are struggling. I don't know, it's kind of horrible to think that you have had a different experience.

I think you have to give people, you have to show them the terror, and you have to give them a sense of hope that there's something to be done about it.

I don't know, I think generally people who don't really care haven't seen it, haven't lived it.

ANTHONY LEWIS: I'm going to give you a somewhat different answer.

Can I just say, the elites in every poor country see it every day, and they can wall themselves off to it.

This is just an experience I had. When I was in South Africa, as I often was in the worst times of apartheid, I happened to ride on a plane sitting next to a Catholic bishop and we talked. He said, "The people of this country," meaning the white people, "suffer from existential blindness." I said, "What do you mean by that?" He said, "They're blind to the reality around them because that's the only way they can exist." That's a good point.

KERRY KENNEDY CUOMO: I'm sure a lot of people, great, wonderful people in this room have walked by homeless people in Boston. You take a can off the street and throw it into the trash, but you won't reach down and help somebody who's homeless.

So I think all of us have some way of dealing with the poverty and the suffering in our midst without having it make us fall apart or change our lives to go and devote it to them every day.

I think generally, again, even with elites in different countries, if they're brought in in a way that's not threatening and they can sit down at a table, they can come and see your program, I don't know, I think that helps.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. Back in our country, a couple weeks ago, an experience down in New York City, heading to First Avenue, probably five or six hundred of us were herded into a small block with officers three in line on one side, and three in line on the other, and held for about an hour. I still question what should we have done. It felt like I have a right to walk out of this block, but we were all both angered and frightened by that experience. I'm hoping I'm within the realm, but it was sort of frightening, that kind of thing happened right in New York City.

PETER EDELMAN: You're totally within the realm. I think that's an enormously profound, difficult question. I don't want to speak to those particular police officers or the specific police policy of that day in New York City, but in general, in circumstances where if you responded in some sort of way that was physical, that's what they want.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We knew if we just tried to walk away, we'd be arrested.

PETER EDELMAN: As far as being arrested, that might not have been a very big thing as it would have turned out, but just in terms of what happens in any sort of street manifestation or demonstration when people engage in violence. It's counterproductive.

In many circumstances, and again I don't want to be specific about New York City, but certainly in many countries and many times in this country, and probably now in many parts of this country, the police would be delighted if people resisted in some physical way, in a way that could get on the evening news and discredit what you're doing. We're talking about Dr. King, we're talking about being non-violent.

And so I believe you absolutely did the right thing, as horrible and demeaning as it was.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: A very quick question. Every day I get solicitations to give money to different organizations. How can we help you in Haiti? [Applause]

LOUNE VIAUD: We have Partners in Health. It's an organization based here in Boston, and I can give you the address. After I give you the address and you can send contributions. We welcome contributions. We need …

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is there a Website?

LOUNE VIAUD: www.pih.org. You could send it maybe to the JFK Library, and you could forward it, would that be okay?

PETER EDELMAN: Except there are people here from Partners in Health that you could speak with and get the information directly.

ANTHONY LEWIS: Why don't you go, say, in the back corner of the room afterwards.

LOUNE VIAUD: Okay.

ANTHONY LEWIS: We're at the end of the program, ladies and gentlemen, and I'm going to again break the rules by just telling one little story about Robert Kennedy.

This may go to the point Peter was discussing before about whether he changed so dramatically after his brother's death. I never believed that. He changed, yes, but what was there in his concern for human interest was always there, and I think this story indicates that.

I have to give background for a moment. In those days, there was a federal statute called the Smith Act, which made it a crime to be a Communist leader, and a number of Communist Party

leaders had been sent to prison. Another part of the Act made it a crime to be a mere member of the Communist Party. Only one person was ever convicted under that part of the Statute, and the conviction upheld by the higher courts. His name was Junior Scales and he was from North Carolina. He was a rather unusual Communist. His father was a judge. It was quite a distinguished family. Junior Scales was sentenced to five years in prison and he appealed all the way up to the Supreme Court, which upheld his conviction by a vote of five to four. And he went to prison.

A few years later, a very distinguished professor at Columbia Law School, Telford Taylor, who had been a prosecutor at Nuremberg, came to Washington to the Justice Department to try to get some interest in his idea that Junior Scales's sentence should be commuted and he should be let out of prison. I happened to run into him at the Justice Department, and he was seeing various top officials in the Department.

Some time later, I saw Robert Kennedy and I raised the question of Junior Scales and the proposed commutation. And he rounded on me. He said, "You liberals, you always want us to do these things. You don't consider the consequences. If we commuted Junior Scales's sentence, why, people would be angry in Congress and we'd lose our legislation and the consequences would be terrible. So don't start telling me these stories." He could do that. And I sort of backed off, said, "Okay, I just asked the question, that's all."

Maybe a month later, I was at a social event where he was, and he took me by the arm and walked me out into the hall and in a very, almost shy way, he said, very briefly, "We're going to let your friend Scales out of prison."

That's what he was like. It bothered him. All the things he said to me, he was angry because he knew it was wrong, and he didn't think he could do anything about it. But then he thought he would do something about it. And he did.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much. [Applause]