

**Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Oral History Interview – 5/7/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa

**Interviewer:** Emmanuel Omatsola

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**Biographical Note**

Balewa, Prime Minister of Nigeria from 1960 to 1966, discusses his memories of President John F. Kennedy's (JFK) character, JFK's influence on world affairs, and the impact of JFK's assassination on Nigerians, among other issues.

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(Signed) Abubakar Tafawa Balewa  
(Date) 28<sup>th</sup> July 1964

Accepted:

(Signed) Wayne L. Grove  
(Date) January 27, 1965

Oral History Interview

with

Alhaji the Right Honorable Sir Abubakar Tafwa Balewa, K.B.E., M.P.  
Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Lagos, Nigeria  
May 7, 1964

By Emmanuel Omatsola

For the John F. Kennedy Library

OMATSOLA: As one of the world leaders who mourned very deeply the passing of the late President John F. Kennedy of the United States what in your opinion made him tick so much in his death that East and West were brought closer together and I think that the North and the South moved closer together, too.

BALEWA: I was really very grieved when I heard the news of the death of the late President Kennedy. I was then away from Lagos. I was at Kaduna and it came as a real shock for I had met him in Washington when I visited the United States in 1961 at his invitation. I was his guest for eight days--four of which I spent in Washington in a house just across the road opposite the White House, the famous Blair House--and I saw very much of him. He was really a great man. In my discussions with him I learned quite a lot and though he was considered as young for a statesman, he was really very matured in experience. To speak of mental age and physical age, and to speak of statesmanship, I think the late President Kennedy's age could be regarded as matured as that of any older statesman. He really worked very hard to bring about understanding between the West and the East especially, and I can remember meeting one or two Russians after his death who told me they were sad at the death of President Kennedy, because they thought he

understood them and they also understood him. It was really a sad loss for the whole world, for all of us, for the West, for the East, and especially for us in Africa.

OMATSOLA: It was also said of the late President Kennedy that he took the United States out of continental isolation into which that great country had put itself by not opening up its mind to things happen-

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ing far afield all over the world. From our connections in Nigeria with the United States during his time, perhaps you would like, Sir, to comment on this statement I have just made?

BALEWA: Well, he really did quite a lot in this field, but one would not regard him as the first American president who saw the importance of America throwing away its policy of isolation, but he in his time did very much to bring America to its rightful position of being in the forefront of the struggle for the progress and for the peace of mankind. It is true indeed that what he did in the few years he was president did more for world understanding than any other American leader. It was really very tragic that he wasn't given time because I could see that were he to have survived, he would have really gone round a lot of countries, and with his personal charm, his wisdom, his calm, his understanding, and his deep knowledge of all the problems, he could have brought together all the nations and all the continents, and no doubt there would have been a greater ease of tension, though of course the present ease in the tension which was threatening the world before was all due to him, due to his efforts, his courage and his determination and frankness when speaking with his own countrymen and when speaking to the leaders of other nations.

OMATSOLA: The late President Kennedy also in his lifetime made science the slave of man. He brought science right to the doorstep of the ordinary man. I am thinking now of the many journeys into space undertaken by United States astronauts, his communication ideas which brought us nearer America via one of the communications satellites and through which you, Sir, conversed with him in the United States. And also on the humanitarian side we think of the Peace Corps and the very many aid programs into which the United States put its might and its conscience.

BALEWA: Then the late President Kennedy could be regarded as an all-

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rounder. Apart from encouraging the scientific work of his people and apart from establishing what you call the Peace Corps and other humanitarian things, he was himself keenly interested in all what was going on. I think that one could rightly say

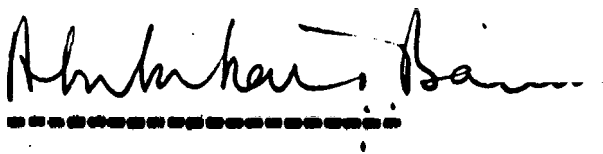
that during his lifetime he appeared to me to be more informed on current events in the world than any other person. I think he was an admirer of many things. This quality, I think was made more certain by his willingness to give time and to have patience to listen to those people learned in different things like scientists and all such people. I think the world will never forget this great man. I can remember when I returned from Kaduna to Lagos: I have a boy who is only six years old. Truly he saw the film in the television on the assassination of President Kennedy and that little child came to me and said, "Why did they kill Kennedy?" Men and women who were illiterate who saw the film of his death, who only heard of him, were really very sad that the man had died in the way he did. That was a mark of greatness for people who lived thousands of miles away, who never heard of one, to mourn one's death and to consider it a loss. That was the greatest tribute that the world could pay him and which he, I think, richly deserved.

OMATSOLA: And as if to emphasize his international character and appeal, didn't he give the United States the human rights bill and the world in general the test ban treaty?

BALEWA: On the test ban treaty he contributed a great deal, and he was responsible for the human rights bill. I hope that the excellent work which he started during his time will be continued by the future Presidents of the United States. I read quite a lot about the late president, I read many of his speeches and from them one could see, one could have a really good picture of the man. And also one could see how deeply religious he was. I remember reading in one of the American magazines when he was campaigning for the

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Presidency of the United States. He was asked which he would choose (you know he was a Catholic), between his religion and becoming President of the United States. He said, of course, he would choose his religion. And one could see the man from these speeches, and I could really recollect--my memories of meeting him are still fresh in my mind and really formed excellent impressions about the man. And while I have met quite a number of great man, quite a number of important leaders of different countries, the late President Kennedy really impressed me very greatly.



Abubakar Tafawa Balewa

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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