Habib Bourguiba, Jr., Oral History Interview – 4/1/1964

Administrative Information

Creator: Habib Bourguiba, Jr.
Interviewer: David Schoenbrun
Date of Interview: April 1, 1964
Location: Tunis, Tunisia
Length: 13 pages

Biographical Note
Bourguiba, Tunisian Ambassador to the United States from 1961-1963, discusses meetings with John F. Kennedy (JFK) in 1957, 1961, and 1963, his discussions with JFK about Algeria’s war of independence from France, and JFK’s influence on the stature of diplomats from “third world” nations, among other issues.

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Habib Bourguiba, Jr., recorded interview by David Schoenbrun, April 1, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.
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Oral History Interview

With

Habib Bourguiba, Jr.

April 1, 1964
Tunis, Tunisia

By David Schoenbrun

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SCHOENBRUN: This is David Schoenbrun and we are talking in the office of the secretary general of the presidency of the republic of Tunis, capitol of Tunisia. The secretary general is His Excellency Habib Bourguiba Jr., who is the son of the president of the republic, and a distinguished Tunisian statesman in his own right. Mr. Bourguiba, junior, was originally in Washington in 1956 and 1957. I think that you opened the Tunisian embassy there, did you not?

BOURGUIBA: Yes. Four months after the independence I was given a piece of luggage, a diplomatic passport—one of the first we ever had after four months of independence—and the mission of being the pioneer in Tunisian diplomacy in the United States.

SCHOENBRUN: Is that where you first met Senator John F. Kennedy?

BOURGUIBA: I met Senator Kennedy in March ‘57. That was already about eight months after my arrival in the United States. I thought it was my duty to establish contact with all the statesmen of the Capitol Hill and I had a couple of long talks with him, especially dealing with Algerian problems and the Algerian war which was raging at that time.
SCHOENBRUN: I remember at the time, myself being in Algiers when we were doing our “Algeria Aflame” television report, there was a story current that you had influenced Senator Kennedy and were largely responsible for his speech on Algerian independence. Is there any truth to that?

BOURGUIBA: Well, it’s very flattering to give the impression to have been the speechwriter of President Kennedy, or Senator Kennedy at that time. As a matter of fact, it happened that two months after these long talks I had with Senator Kennedy, Senator J. F. Kennedy gave a very important statement in Congress dealing with the Algerian war and the French politics in Algeria and in her former empire. And the whole story was generated, I think, by some comments which were made by the French governor general in Algiers, Monsieur Lacoste [Robert Lacoste].

SCHOENBRUN: Robert Lacoste, yes. He actually did accuse you of having inspired the...

BOURGUIBA: Well, I would not take that as an accusation; I think it is very flattering, although I cannot really claim any credit for that. I think Senator Kennedy was bright enough to write his own speeches. The only credit I would claim would be to have raised some interest in him dealing with the problem and to have given him at least our view, our own view of the problem, because up to that moment only the French views were distributed and circulated in the United States.

SCHOENBRUN: How often did you see Senator Kennedy in that period of 1957?

BOURGUIBA: Only twice.

SCHOENBRUN: For about how long each time?

BOURGUIBA: Once for maybe forty-five minutes and another time was an hour and a half.

SCHOENBRUN: Do you recall today with any accuracy the impression that Senator Kennedy made upon you?

BOURGUIBA: Of course after eight years it would be difficult to really remember every detail. But there was one thing which was striking: his eyes, his blue, almost icy-cold eyes, piercing his interlocutor...

SCHOENBRUN: The person he was speaking to, yes.

BOURGUIBA: ...gouging him, weighing him, and weighing every word. That was the
main impression I had.

[SCH]ENBRUN: Well, you are of the same generation of young statesmen as Senator Kennedy. You’re a bit younger than the senator was at the time when you met him. What is your age now?

BOURGUIBA: I am 37.

SCHOENBRUN: That was what—about seven years ago? You were about 30 then. Did you have any feeling then or did you report back to your government in any way that this was a man, a future leader of America?

BOURGUIBA: Well, it would be too easy to state afterwards that I was a prophet. Honestly, I did not put any prophecy. But the interview that I had with Senator Kennedy was so impressive that I could not but report to my government that he was a man to watch and to—I thought it was fair to say that something could be expected from him.

SCHOENBRUN: This is a very small footnote of my own I’d like to add at this point as a kind of parenthesis. About a year after that speech, I received a letter from Eric Sevareid [Arnold Eric Sevareid] of CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] Washington at the time, whom you knew, and Eric told me that Senator Kennedy was preparing to make another speech on Algeria and that it was going to be a very strong one and he asked for my views—I had just come back from Algeria, I was in Paris—and asked me what I thought about it. And I sent a telegram to Eric saying, “For goodness sake, tell him not to make a speech on Algeria now. I’ve just come back from there. The situation is very dangerous indeed and I will send a letter explaining my reasons.” And I sent that letter. I’ll send all of this through to Mr. Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], by the way. I have the original Sevareid telegram. But the speech was supposed to be made on the ninth of May and after discussing it with a number of people, not just myself, but many, Senator Kennedy decided not to make his second speech on Algeria.

BOURGUIBA: If I understand, that was four days before the thirteenth of May.

SCHOENBRUN: That is right. And undoubtedly he probably would have been blamed for the coup d’état in Algiers had he made that speech.

BOURGUIBA: Definitely.

[SCH]ENBRUN: You left Washington then in 1957 and became, in turn, ambassador to Rome, to Paris, and you went back to Washington. You were
appointed Tunisian ambassador at the beginning of 1961. Could you tell us then about your meeting? I believe you then became the first ambassador to turn in his papers of accreditation to the new President.

BOURGUIBA: Yes. If you don’t mind, instead of starting by my meeting with President Kennedy, I would like to demand a little something which just looked like an anecdote or like a pun made by the then American ambassador in Tunisia, Newby Walmsley [Walter Newbold Walmsley, Jr.], when he was kind enough to offer dinner in my honor before my leaving for the United States. He made the very good toast, I think, and a very witty one. He could not but notice that there was a coincidence in this appointment. I was the first ambassador, son of a president to be accredited to a president, son of an ambassador. So, my whole mission started on such auspices. We had something in common, our fathers, if I may say so.

SCHOENBRUN: Was Ambassador Walmsley the first one to bring to your attention that particular coincidence?

BOURGUIBA: Yes he did, during the toast. I think it was interesting to notice that. Then I left for the United States. When I arrived there on the second of March...

SCHOENBRUN: Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. Bourguiba, but I want to get this perfectly straight. You were the son of a president accredited...

BOURGUIBA: Ambassador, son of a president accredited to a president, son of an ambassador.

SCHOENBRUN: Right, all right.

BOURGUIBA: And the ceremony of my presentation of credentials took place on the tenth of March 1961. And here again, another coincidence—and I can’t but remember the words of Arnauld, French philosopher, who said, if I may have a very free translation, “What’s terrible in death is that it makes out of life a destiny”—meaning that once death has sealed the life of someone, you can interpret him. I was the first ambassador to present my credentials to President Kennedy. When my father, President Bourguiba, came on a state visit he was the first head of state to make a state visit to the new administration.

SCHOENBRUN: When was that?

BOURGUIBA: On the second of May ‘61. And then the last meeting, I think, I have the feeling that I was the last ambassador to take official leave of President Kennedy on the eighth of November last.
SCHOENBRUN: May we now go back over these dates to the first date, the tenth of March, 1961. You were appointed, you had been in Paris as ambassador. You were appointed ambassador of Tunisia to Washington in February and you arrived in Washington, as I remember it was the second of March, was it not? Because I had also been transferred to Washington for CBS.

BOURGUIBA: We were the refugees…

SCHOENBRUN: We were the refugees from General de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle]. [Laughter] And it was the tenth of March that you presented your credentials. Could you start from that morning and tell us about your meeting with President Kennedy as the first ambassador accredited to him in his presidency?

BOURGUIBA: Well, President Kennedy gave me the impression that I was the old-timer giving him some training.

SCHOENBRUN: Well, could we back up a little bit before that. You saw him on the tenth of March. What was the procedure, as an ambassador? You went to the White House...

BOURGUIBA: The procedure is much simpler than the procedure in Rome or in Paris. First, you come in a lounge suit—or business suit as is said in the United States—accompanied by the chief of protocol, who was Angier Biddle Duke. So I was taken from home with one of the members of my staff, my press attaché, Ferid Mahresi. We were taken to the White House, introduced and taken into the Fish Room where we were supposed to wait until we would be introduced to the study of President Kennedy. While we were chatting I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder. I turned my head, there he was, President Kennedy was there. Angier Biddle Duke was about to introduce me. He said, “Well, I know already Monsieur Bourguiba.” And he just took me, as simply as that, to his office.

SCHOENBRUN: Rather different from the way you are presented, let’s say, to President de Gaulle?

BOURGUIBA: That’s the least you could say.

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SCHOENBRUN: And so quite informally the President walked in...

BOURGUIBA: Quite informally we walked into his office. He gave me a seat, and then very simply again, told me, “Now, what do we do? You know you’re the first one.”
SCHOENBRUN: He didn’t know how to accredit an ambassador?

BOURGUIBA: How to receive him, or at least the minimum of motions. So I explained, according to my experience on the matter that these letters were supposed to be handed to him, he was supposed to read them. They were written in Arabic, of course. He was supposed to understand them. I had tried to give him some ease on the matter so I gave him a translation of the text. We then accept them and then we could chat.

SCHOENBRUN: Was Angie Duke with you?

BOURGUIBA: No, we were just tête-à-tête.

SCHOENBRUN: Is that usual when an ambassador presents his credentials, that he is alone with the chief of state?

BOURGUIBA: It depends on the protocol of the country. If it is a very formal solemn affair as it is done in Britain, France or Italy, there is the first formal presentation of the ambassador who comes with members of his staff, and he presents his staff to the president, after having been accepted as ambassador, once he’s given his credentials. Then the receiving president presents his own staff who is gathered around him. And after this solemn part which is recorded by films, etc., both the president and the newly appointed ambassador go into a study for an informal chat in order to make acquaintance.

SCHOENBRUN: But in our country, you just got fished out of the Fish Room?

BOURGUIBA: Exactly. [Laughter]

SCHOENBRUN: Do you recall what you chatted with the President about?

BOURGUIBA: Well, I think.... If I had time I would go and dig in the foreign affairs archives to find out my report on that. But I think the main problem was our relations with France. It was exactly ten days after the meeting which took place between President Bourguiba and President de Gaulle and this meeting, of course, was mainly, the main topic of this meeting was the war in Algeria and the ways of putting an end to it. So I think I can be sure that a good percent, if not more, of our chat was about this situation. And it was in a way a kind of continuation of our first talks in 1957 because unfortunately, the war in Algeria was still raging.

SCHOENBRUN: Had you referred back to it in that talk to the original speech of the Senator?
BOURGUIBA: Yes, certainly, and I took certain pleasure in telling him that I had been credited with preparing that speech for him and he was kind enough to say it would not have been a mess.

SCHOENBRUN: It was apparent already then, after your father’s meeting with President de Gaulle, that line in 1951, that the Algerian war was going to be ended, that France was going to go ahead with the liquidation of the colonial setup, was it not?

BOURGUIBA: Yes, but unfortunately as far as Tunisia was concerned, we had another kickback in July 1961.

SCHOENBRUN: Did you discuss Bizerte and the Tunisian problem with the President?

BOURGUIBA: Yes, when Bizerte was.... Well, I talked to President Kennedy during that first talk, of course. Fortunately, I had to talk to him twice more during the summer of 1961 when we had those three bloody days.

SCHOENBRUN: Yes, I remember. I was there in Bizerte. Do you recall any personal impression that the Senator-become-President made upon you? Did you still think he had ice-cold eyes that cut into you?

BOURGUIBA: They were a little more cutting. They were even sharper.

SCHOENBRUN: A strong man?

BOURGUIBA: A strong man who had certainly lots of spontaneity in his beliefs and feelings but a sense of responsibility came as a brake. And I think it was a blessing for a man who had the responsibility that he had. You know, being one of the two men who had that little red button better be a cold-blooded man.

SCHOENBRUN: You had that impression of John Kennedy being cold-blooded far back then in ‘57, long before he became president?

BOURGUIBA: Yes.

SCHOENBRUN: By cold-blooded...

BOURGUIBA: I mean the man who does not let his emotions prevail. He has emotions. He has feelings. He has ideals. But, if I may say so, having the ideals of Don Quixote did not allow him to act as Don Quixote. He acted like Sancho Panza.
SCHOENBRUN: Yes. Well, I wanted to make it clear because as you know very well from your long stay in our country, such words as “ice-cold” and “cold-blooded” sound like a man who wasn’t Kennedy.

BOURGUIBA: No, I was speaking objectively. No, no, I was strictly giving an objective description of my impression of his eyes. But I have seen him live, act, talk, and react sometimes. He is not a cold-blooded man—only by willpower that he would kind of put a kind of brake on his emotions because of his responsibility. I think it’s more a compliment than derogatory, what I’m saying.

SCHOENBRUN: Well, I agree. I had—and we’ve all had the same experience. My first time I saw him and I looked—and he looked at me, I felt his eyes were a kind of one-way mirror. He could look into me but I couldn’t look into him. And there was nothing I had inside me that John F. Kennedy couldn’t get out of me in about thirty seconds flat, and I’m not the easiest reporter to push over as you know. But this man had an enormous effect upon me. It’s that sort of thing we’re talking about.

BOURGUIBA: I think one of his main qualities was the golden quality of a boss: to know how to manipulate men, take out of them the best of them.

SCHOENBRUN: You said earlier that you could probably find your original report in the archives. I just made a note of that and we’d all be very grateful if you could send a note to the head of the archives of your government here to see if you can dig out that report and send it in later on as an accompaniment to this tape. Because I think it will be very interesting to see what on the spur of the moment, when you got back to your embassy, you actually sent back about your meeting with the President.

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BOURGUIBA: I certainly will try to convince them that it is not a confidential paper. [Laughter]

SCHOENBRUN: Well I hope you can and actually, I believe, as Mr. Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] may have told you in his letter to you, this is for use of historians and will be very valuable to them. You said that after this first meeting of accreditation, you had occasion to see the President again in July at the time of the Bizerte fighting with the French and all told in the two years that you spent in Washington, did you see the President officially more often than that?

BOURGUIBA: Well, “officially” means also functions, social functions. I saw him many times in functions. But as far as real talks, I could count one, that first, then a couple during the Bizerte crisis, two more before Bizerte, one during the visit of President Bourguiba and two or three more meetings with serious talks between the two presidents (and I was there).
SCHOENBRUN: What impression did you get after your many ambassadorial tours of
duty in Paris and in Rome? What impression did you get of the social
and cultural life of Washington under John F. Kennedy?

BOURGUIBA: President John F. Kennedy was fighting like mad to introduce some
really cultural life in Washington. And I think he really once more
undertook a challenge. Because I had the feeling.... I had developed
the impression, studying the very geopolitics of Washington, that a city as important as
Washington but only inhabited by transients practically, either diplomats who by definition
are transients, or because of the game—if I may call it “game”—because of the turnabout of
administrations, the population of Washington can hardly settle long enough to allow a
cultural tradition to settle in deep roots. And that was one more challenge that President
Kennedy was undertaking—to establish something.

SCHOENBRUN: You, as an ambassador of a small country, part of the so-called third
world, saw quite a lot of the other African, Asian, and South American
ambassadors. What did they think of Kennedy and where he was going
and his views about the relations of our country with the third world?

BOURGUIBA: John F. Kennedy was respected and I may say that the reactions which
were recorded at the news of his assassination would be more eloquent
than any comment I can make. He was certainly more than
appreciated.

[-9-]

His positions were adopted, not only appreciated. And many people made the difference
between what he wanted and the fact that the law—the unwritten law of check and balance
between executive power and legislative power—became more check than balance
unfortunately. He was trying to do his best. He was trying to go ahead with lots of projects,
viewing far ahead in the future. But unfortunately either the routine or the—I don’t know if I
should say “backward” mentality or...

SCHOENBRUN: Say what you please. Let’s really be frank.

BOURGUIBA: Let’s say a little out-of-date mentality of certain members of the
Congress did not allow him to go ahead with projects which certainly
could have done much, much, much more good.

SCHOENBRUN: I believe you told me once in one of our own meetings in Washington
and, if it’s correct perhaps you could confirm it. You and other
ambassadors from the small nations felt that for a long time you were
lost in Washington, that your countries were not really received. You didn’t mix in the so-
called Anglo-Saxon world, but with Kennedy that began to change. Do you recall that?
BOURGUIBA: No, honestly I can’t recall. Especially I can’t see how I could have made such a statement because I came with Kennedy.

SCHOENBRUN: No, but you were telling me about the others. One of the things that you had noticed was that they felt more at home, that Kennedy understood their problems, was more sympathetic to them. You remember that you told me about, the general attitude....

BOURGUIBA: He certainly made the great effort to help. And that is one of those problems which unfortunately is still plaguing the reputation of the United States. Kennedy came a few months after the invasion of the UN, as some people said, by African states.

SCHOENBRUN: All you small countries were making trouble for us, huh?

BOURGUIBA: Small countries making troubles. And also, don’t forget the problem of the color.

SCHOENBRUN: The color problem, exactly.

BOURGUIBA: Many of the diplomats of new countries from Africa had really a hard time.

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SCHOENBRUN: Oh, now I do remember. You were the ambassador to the United Nations as well as to Washington and that’s the night you and Naylor and I were having dinner, and you were saying that one of the things that Kennedy has done was to take up this question of making you feel like white men and brothers, instead of some trouble-making foreigners. That’s what I wanted to confirm. And that struck you because of your work at the UN as well as Washington.

BOURGUIBA: Yes, everywhere it was felt. As a matter of fact, you might have noticed, David, when you were there, after having been away from the States for quite a while although you had visits, you may have noticed that a good eighty percent of those foreign diplomats, African diplomats, started wearing their national dresses all day long because it was a kind of little protection.

SCHOENBRUN: That’s right.

BOURGUIBA: Against, I won’t say brutality, but at least against too obvious, too much of an obvious segregation and embarrassment.

SCHOENBRUN: I did notice that and I also noticed what you had told me and Mahresi
and the Moroccans and other friends of yours from Africa, the Nigerians, that during the years that Kennedy was president, that you people were invited to the White House, to dinners and social functions and other things much more than ever before in the past.

BOURGUIBA: Well, maybe it’s only due to the fact that President Kennedy had decided to give some more luster to his...

SCHOENBRUN: And he liked parties.

BOURGUIBA: He liked parties. He was of age to still like parties. [Laughter]

SCHOENBRUN: Well, your father likes parties too. I remember the birthday party that your father gave for his sixtieth birthday. I don’t think it’s got anything to do with age. Kennedy was full of life as your own father is and as you are. What about your last meeting with the President. What was the date of that?

BOURGUIBA: That was the eighth of November last.

[-11-]

SCHOENBRUN: Your father had asked you to come back to take this new job as secretary general of the presidency. And could you tell us about your farewell meeting with President Kennedy?

BOURGUIBA: Well, this kind of meeting, although we really did not intend to, but there is always a little moment of emotion because as far as I am concerned, in three years, I have learned much more than I did in one year from my first time of duty. I had a little more experience so I could have a more, deeper knowledge and a deeper understanding of things. I had learned especially to screen many of the prejudices which I had been taught by the very fact that my education was more European than cosmopolitan or American. I have learned also to love the United States and I expressed to President Kennedy my regret of leaving although I was not regretting of coming back home.

SCHOENBRUN: No, of course not.

BOURGUIBA: I have been a militant all my life and after eight years of being the troubadour of our action, I wanted to participate. And President Kennedy was very kind in understanding these feelings, sharing them in part. But the last words really which struck me was when we shook hands, he said, “Wish me luck.”

SCHOENBRUN: That’s very interesting. He never explained why. He was always aware, as you know, of the responsibility of his office.
BOURGUIBA:  It could be “wish me luck” for my actions, “wish me luck” for life, “wish me luck” for anything. It is one of those words which you can interpret afterwards because it becomes easy. But on the spot I was not struck by it. It could have been only a kind of politesse, or a kind of kindness. But, when twelve days later, he was assassinated, that “wish me luck” really made something in my heart.

SCHOENBRUN:  It certainly was a very typical politeness of his. Most men would have said, “Farewell, Mr. Ambassador, and I wish you luck.” But it was very typical of John F. Kennedy to say, “Wish me luck.” He had in that way a quality that I recall of President Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] who used to sometimes sign an autograph by saying, “From President Roosevelt to his friend,” and he always liked to call you his friend instead of saying that [he was your friend]. It was sort of the same kind of mentality which is great modesty in a man. Well, I’ve made notes on this and we’ll check further on some of your reports. I think that Mr. Robert Kennedy would appreciate any of the official documents that you had and the reports that you sent back to your government, if, as you say, you can persuade your foreign minister or your father not to consider them to be confidential. This conversation has been taking place in Tunis, capitol of Tunisia, at the presidency of the republic with His Excellency, Habib Bourguiba, Jr., the secretary general of the presidency. And this is—what is the date?

BOURGUIBA:  The first of April.

SCHOENBRUN:  Is it April Fool’s Day?

BOURGUIBA:  April first, 1964, David.

SCHOENBRUN:  Well, we picked a fine day to do our conversation. This is not an April Fool’s joke.

BOURGUIBA:  No, unfortunately not.

SCHOENBRUN:  And thank you very much for this. We’ll send this off to Mr. Kennedy and follow it with whatever documents and if you have any further thoughts that you may have later on, anecdotes or things that come back to you in your own thinking about this, please just send a tape on to us.

BOURGUIBA:  I certainly will.
[END OF INTERVIEW]
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