

Konstantinos Karamanlis Oral History Interview—3/12/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Konstantinos Karamanlis

Interviewer: Mariline Brown

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Biographical Note

Karamanlis was Prime Minister of Greece from 1961-1963 and again from 1974-1980. He also served as President of Greece from 1980-1985 and again from 1990-1995. In this interview, Karamanlis discusses the three times he met with John F. Kennedy, including their conversations about Cuba and ancient Greek history, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Konstantinos Karamanlis

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Oral History Interview

with

Konstantinos Karamanlis

March 12, 1965

Paris, France

By Mariline Brown

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BROWN: This is Mariline Brown, a Greek by birth but British by marriage interviewing Konstantine Karamanlis who was Prime Minister of Greece for eight consecutive years since October 1955. Konstantine Karamanlis was born in Serres, a town in Macedonia, Greece, in 1907. He graduated in Law at the Athens University and entered politics in 1935 when he was elected a member of Parliament for Serres. In 1947 he was appointed Minister of Labor and in May 1948 he took over the Ministry of Transport which he later exchanged for the Ministry of Social Welfare. In 1950 he became Minister for National Defense. Following a change of government in 1952, he gave up the Ministry of Defense and took over the Ministry of Public Works until 1955 when he formed his first cabinet. In 1956 he founded the National Radical Union Party, known in Greece as ERE. As a result of the elections, Mr. Karamanlis' party obtained the absolute majority in the years 1956, 1958 and 1961. In the 1963 elections Mr. Konstantine Karamanlis' party did not obtain a majority vote. He left Athens and has been living in Paris ever since.

I must add here that, at Mr. Karamanlis' special request, the Information Officer for Greek Affairs of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, is speaking on his behalf.

Mr. Karamanlis, when did you meet President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

KARAMANLIS: I met President Kennedy at the White House in April 1961 when I was invited to Washington by the United States Government. As far as I

can remember, I was the first official visitor to be received by President Kennedy. He told me at the time that he wanted my visit to be the first official one so as to show his love and interest for all that concerns Greece.

BROWN: What struck you in President Kennedy when you first met him?

KARAMANLIS: What impressed me deeply was the kind, simple and friendly manner in which he received my wife [Amalia Karamanlis] and myself. After showing us around the White House, he took us to the children's [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy; John F. Kennedy, Jr.] room and introduced each one to us. At a certain moment during the visit of the White House, President Kennedy smiling showed me imprints left on the floor by the golf shoes of his predecessor General Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. He said, "No matter what one may think of the political views of General Eisenhower, one must confess that as a general he was a most extraordinary man."

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I arrived at the White House at a very critical moment, at the moment of the failure of the landing of the anti-Castroists in Cuba which had caused so much feelings in the political and diplomatic circles in Washington. I knew how critical the moment was so I asked President Kennedy to pass me on to the Members of the Cabinet and their assistants so he could devote all his time to the settling of this crisis. His lucidity and self-control impressed me profoundly. He replied that he would deal personally with me and that he was interested in Greece. Further, he wanted to hear my own opinion on the various matters of general interest. As a matter of fact we not only carried out our full program of work as originally decided but we did much more.

BROWN: What, may I ask, did you talk about with President Kennedy?

KARAMANLIS: We obviously discussed Cuba. When he gave me full details of the problem, he asked me how I personally judged the situation. I told him that in my opinion there were two ways of acting. Either immediate and decisive military action or alternatively political and economic blockade which would lead to the downfall of the Castro [Fidel Castro] regime. He answered that he excludes the first because, in his opinion, it was dangerous and because it will be contrary to his general policy which tended to obtain general appeasement. In reply to my remark that I was surprised at the unpreparedness of the landing, he said that the adventure of Cuba was a heritage of the past but that he had decided personally to accept the responsibility because that was in the interest of the American nation. At that moment, I understood and appreciated the continuation of thought between his deeds and his views as expressed in his most interesting book *Profiles in Courage*.

BROWN: Mr. Karamanlis, how often did you meet President Kennedy?

KARAMANLIS: I met President Kennedy in all three times. Once, in the course of our

meeting mentioned earlier, then on that very afternoon and our third time when he kindly accepted to have dinner at the Greek Embassy. At the afternoon meeting, a preliminary discussion took place on matters concerning Greece, matters of economic and military nature, the question of military aid, of security of Greece, of the public debt, et cetera. President Kennedy showed real and deep interest in all these Greek problems. He then congratulated me on the settlement of the Cyprus problem. Remembering that on previous occasions he showed his sympathy for the Greek views, I replied that I had been a position to foresee his election as President I would have delayed a solution of the Cyprus problem in order to obtain better results. President Kennedy replied that I acted correctly because even he himself could not have obtained a better solution. He then said: "The distance between the Capitol and the White House seems small but in fact it is great. It is easy sometimes to say things there, but these things are often very difficult to realize here. Here the correct solution must always combine with what is necessary and what is possible."

BROWN: Did you discuss any other subjects?

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KARAMANLIS: Yes. The exchange of views touched upon the international situation generally with special emphasis on the dangers which would result for peace from the tension which existed at the time by the provocative action of Russia. I told President Kennedy how fearful we were of the Communist danger and how we saw it, we, who geographically were so near Russia, and generally speaking so near the Communist danger. I also explained to him that in our opinion the action taken by the Free World against Communism did not seem particularly successful. To this remark he replied textually: "Nobody wants war and I believe that Russia does not want war either. As you know very often wars are a consequence of mutual distrust in the relations between peoples. Without relaxing our defensive preparation I have decided to start a sincere effort in order to make away with the existing distrust and to create conditions of confidence and understanding. Indeed confidence and understanding are essential if one wishes to reach an agreement. If Russia refuses our contribution then we will be convinced that she is of bad faith. Personally, I believe that she will not refuse". These were President Kennedy's words. The results have justified the policy of President Kennedy and this is a great satisfaction for me in view of the fact that many people in my county and elsewhere feared that the results would have been unfavorable.

BROWN: When did your third meeting with President Kennedy take place?

KARAMANLIS: As I said previously, President Kennedy came to dinner at the Greek Embassy. This was indeed a very important occasion because as you are well aware the President never accepted dinner invitations. He came to the Greek Embassy as a mark of esteem; I must say I very much appreciated his gesture.

BROWN: Do you recall what you talked about during dinner?

KARAMANLIS: Yes. Strange to say we talked about the history of ancient Greece. I was surprised to see how well informed he was, especially on old texts. After explaining his views, and expressing his admiration for the classical period, he ended by referring to Philip [Philip II] and Alexander the Great. "I admire," he told me, "the first more than the second. Philip has been an equally great general and a great statesman, it is he who laid the ground for Alexander's success." When I recall today his talks and the subsequent activities of President Kennedy I find that fate had decreed that he was to be the founder of a new and wonderful period in the historic march of the American nation. With a liberal spirit but also admirable steadfastness he dealt with the economic and social problems of his nation. With courage and prudence and wisdom he set the foundations of human rights and racial equality. Lastly with a unique decisiveness but with a full conscience of his responsibility towards humanity, he faced the great Cuba crisis and he was successful in guaranteeing the security of the United States and of the free world without sacrificing peace. In President Kennedy one found combined virtues which are not usually found in the same person. He was an idealist and at the same time a realist. He was deeply humane yet also very dynamic. He had a strong will coupled with infinite kindness. A look of steel which could turn into a child's smile

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very often light his face. President Kennedy was in my opinion an apostle and a politician, maybe more apostle than a politician. With his deeds he wished to set examples. He created a tradition. Thucydides relates that Pericles used to say about the Athenians that they were lovers of wisdom without the loss of manly vigor. For President Kennedy, one can undoubtedly say that he was a lover of wisdom without the loss of manly vigor. Favorable or unfavorable comments will make no difference to the place President Kennedy is to occupy in history. History has already placed him as a luminous milestone in the universal conscience. There has been no leader whose loss mankind has so sincerely and so unanimously regretted. In his lifetime President Kennedy worked for mankind. After death he continues to serve it. He serves it as his untimely sacrifice has turned him into a symbol urging and inspiring in the men of the young generations the noble ambition to imitate him. I consider myself very uniquely privileged for having had the good fortune of knowing this man. His faith, his kindness, his humanity were unique.

BROWN: Mr. Karamanlis, I thank you so much for having accepted to answer all my questions. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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