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Transcript

JFK and the Future of Global Leadership

Professor Jeffrey Sachs

Director, The Earth Institute, Columbia University; Author, *To Move the World: JFK's Quest for Peace*

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Patricia Lewis:

Welcome everybody. I am absolutely delighted to introduce Professor Jeffrey Sachs who is the director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, and he's here to talk about 'JFK and the Future of Global Leadership'. I don't think it's too early to plug the book, and we have many over here, *To Move the World: JFK's Quest for Peace*. It's, as you know, been extremely well received and we're really looking forward to hearing what you have to say, Jeffrey.

Before I start, I just want to make sure that people understand that this meeting is on the record. Jeffrey's going to show a short film, he's going to then speak for about 20 minutes or so, and then we'll go into questions and answers.

I'm sure to everyone in this room, Jeffrey needs little introduction. He was previously at Harvard – I'm not sure if we're allowed to talk about that – but he's now at Columbia where he is not only director of the Earth Institute, but also professor of sustainable development and professor of health policy and management. He's considered to be one of the world's leading experts on economic development and the fight against poverty. He's a special adviser to the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, on the millennium development goals and this is a critical juncture for that discussion right now, and he's the director of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network. He's co-founder and chief strategist of Millennium Promise Alliance, and he's the director of the Millennium Villages Project. I think you've trademarked the word 'millennium', haven't you Jeffrey?

He's been an adviser to many governments and world leaders and he remains so, and he has advised the Solidarity movement in Poland, presidents Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and Pope John Paul II. He actively supports Bhutan's innovative strategy of gross national happiness, which is very good to hear. So Jeffrey, we will now begin with the film, and I guess we need to move away a little bit from that, and then go into your presentation.

Video: John F Kennedy

What kind of a peace do I mean and what kind of a peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables better nations to grow and to hope, and build a better life for their

children. Not merely peace for Americans, but peace for all men and women. Not merely peace in our time, but peace in all time...

Our problems are man-made; therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seeming unsolvable, and we believe they can do it again...

No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue. As Americans, we find communism profoundly repugnant, as a negation of personal freedom and dignity. But we can still hail the Russian people for they have many achievements in science, in space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture, in acts of courage...

Finally my fellow Americans, let us examine our attitude towards peace and freedom here at home. The quality and spirit of our own society must justify and support our efforts abroad. We must show it in the dedication of our own lives, as many of you who are graduating today will have an opportunity to do, by serving without pay in the Peace Corps abroad or in the proposed national service corps here at home.

But wherever we are, we must all in our daily lives live up to the age-old faith that peace and freedom walk together. In too many of our cities today the peace is not secure because freedom is incomplete...

So let us not be blind to our differences but let us also direct attention to our common interests and the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air, we all cherish our children's futures, and we are all mortal.

Jeffrey Sachs:

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. You've been watching excerpts from John Kennedy's speech at American University on 10 June 1963, 50 years ago last month. And 50 years ago in nine days from now we will celebrate the signing of the first and crucial and world changing peace agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States, the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The speech that President Kennedy gave on 10 June at the American University commencement was aimed at moving forward that agreement, and it succeeded. Just seven weeks after giving this speech, a treaty that was almost unimaginable to most Americans and to many in the world was signed,

and one month after that, it was ratified by the US Senate, which as you know very well is a near miracle on any occasion. And it was ratified not only by the two-thirds required under our constitution for a treaty, but was ratified by an overwhelming majority of 81 to 19.

Kennedy had done something that was unimaginable just months before. He had bridged a divide that was so deep, so sharp and so destabilizing that just months earlier, in October 1962, it has almost led to the end of the world in the Cuban missile crisis. And the story that I recount in this book is the story of leadership; how one helped to guide the world, how JFK *and* Nikita Khrushchev helped to guide the world from October 1962 through September 1963, when this treaty is put before the United Nations in Kennedy's last speech to the UN General Assembly on 20 September 1963, in which the entire world with almost no exceptions – only with the notable exception of China of the day and the grumbling of France – dissented from what was a worldwide expression of profound relief and a profound sense of having turned from as close a disaster as imaginable to at least a chance for peace.

A few weeks after that, Kennedy was assassinated. Much of what he hoped to accomplish did not survive him because the US soon entered the Vietnam War, and indeed the Cold War continued for two decades after and really only saw an end with the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev and with the end of the Soviet Union itself in 1991. But Kennedy had accomplished something that had definitive and lasting value, and that is that he proved by event, not simply by assertion, that it was possible to reach a binding agreement with the Soviet Union that was in the interests of peace, that was in the interests of both sides, and that would be honoured, as indeed the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was, and was subsequently extended to a general test ban treaty.

And not only was that treaty secured and ratified and proved to be successful, but it was followed – as Kennedy anticipated, hoped and planned – five years later by an even more important treaty, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968, which again has by no means solved the world's problems but dramatically eased the chances of mass proliferation of nuclear weapons. Obviously that's an issue we continue to grapple with every day, but Kennedy believed, and the intelligence and analysis of the day suggested, that there could be 40 nuclear powers by the 1980s if something was not done to stop the proliferation process. And the speech, its aftermath in the treaty, its follow up with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, played that role.

I find this episode amazing; largely forgotten unfortunately; absolutely poignant in the actions of the two leaders; marked by eloquence that is almost

unsurpassable. And the last brief part of that clip where Kennedy says, 'For in the final analysis our most basic common link,' I find to be the most beautiful words of the modern presidency and the most powerful words explaining and expressing the common humanity – the fact that we live on a crowded planet, on a small planet, we breathe the same air, we cherish our children's futures, we are all mortal – as compelling an expression of our common human fate as is possible.

But this episode of making peace I find to be persuasive for a couple of reasons. One is that I think arguably it saved the world, since all of the record up until 1963 was of not a stable balance of terror as some of our game theorists of the nuclear age assumed, or not a mutual assured destruction in which two great powers were in a stable way paired against each other, but a world filled with accidents and stupidity and misjudgements and near disasters, and one that was perfectly capable of blowing itself up, as I fear we remain today.

Second, it's a story, a period, of leadership, because what happened here – powerfully, demonstrably – was not the result of great global forces converging to a new situation but rather of two individuals, Kennedy and Khrushchev, who realized by the events of the Cuban missile crisis that enough was enough and that the normal ways of doing business, which were the ways of the CIA and the KGB, the ways of the militaries on both sides, the ways of the game theorists and their equilibria and their stability and their assumptions, would not suffice to keep the world safe. And so Kennedy in particular took the lesson of the Cuban missile crisis to be a lesson of the need for leadership, and he provided that leadership. And the last year of his life is a period of nearly miraculous leadership; almost everything done right – just as many things had been done wrong during the first two years of his presidency.

And most powerfully, this is an episode that demonstrates that what is taken to be the conventional wisdom, what is taken to be the normal way of doing things, can be disastrously wrong. And I feel that that is very much true with how we live our lives today in terms of international relations, even to the moment-by-moment developments in Egypt or Iran or Syria, or to the more slow-moving but equally consequential or more consequential issues of how we face the challenge of climate change and planetary wreckage that we are bringing to the world. There are a lot of smart people around – they're in 10 Downing Street, they're at the White House, they're in all of the corridors of power – and they're not solving our problems, not even close. And what's taken to be the normal way of doing things is not working. And we learn from

this particular episode something new about what can work, what it takes, how to bring it about. This is an act of will, of leadership – very unusual. And therefore it's a moment that is important for us to capture, to understand, to savour, but also to draw lessons from that are appropriate and applicable for us today.

So the story in short, because we just have a short period of time to explore it, is of course a Cold War nuclear arms race that at several points nearly turned to open warfare, and most dramatically the Cuban missile crisis. And it's a period in which the two powers were filled with ideas about the other side that were at the forefront of politics, that were dangerous, misguided, unnecessary, and ultimately with enormously high potential for destruction. Both sides felt that the other side was after global domination. Both sides felt that they were engaged most likely in a battle to the end for the fate of the planet – that either the US would come to defeat communism, and if necessary by war, or that communism would take over the world in its godless, heedless manner and that that would be the end of the story. In fact both sides were struggling with far more mundane matters of trying to keep their economies afloat, facing challenges of civil rights, internal instability – many, many problems that were very far from world domination.

But the notions on each side that the counterpart was an implacable foe, ready to do anything, however irrational, however evil, however desperate, to gain global domination, was very much a feeling on both sides. Of course not universally by any means; there were powerful voices for peace. There were peace movements; there were, of course, antinuclear movements of tremendous significance all over the world. But there were hardliners on both sides that constantly pressed, and when there was doubt on one side or the other, the hardliners tended to dominate. And that is a basic logic that one would even reflect from the so-called prisoner's dilemma or the fight of escalation of two sides, fearing that any step back from a hard line would be nothing more than appeasing the enemy, and especially in the history after Munich and the lead up to World War II, the fear of being soft in the face of a foe was as big a fear politically as well as strategically.

All through the 1950s, and especially after Stalin's death in 1953, both sides were groping for some manner of mutual accommodation, even as they built their nuclear arsenals. And Eisenhower, the US president, was very keen to find some way to reach an accommodation with the Soviet Union. Yet he was surrounded by hardliners. His foreign minister, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, famously referred to by Churchill as 'dull, duller, Dulles' – Churchill did not think very highly of him. And he was a terrible person and a terrible

secretary of state – held Eisenhower back from any bold initiatives throughout the period.

And the second agent of constant unrest and destruction was the CIA, an agency which has continued its tradition of disaster up until the present day. It is the Central ‘non-Intelligence’ Agency, able to commit acts of incredible stupidity with the incredible ease it seems, and it’s never really overcome it. And it was John Foster Dulles’ brother, Allen Dulles, who headed the CIA, so it was quite a family. And during the 1950s, that combination prevented Eisenhower – who took a very collegial and bureaucratic view of the presidency – from daring any initiatives.

On the Soviet side, of course, there were similar forces at play, hardliners, those who insisted on massive military build-ups, those who looked to the hardliners in the US and said they’re out for first strike, we have to build our arms as rapidly as possible and do everything we can to assert our prerogatives, especially in Europe and the Near East.

In the immediate lead up to Kennedy’s presidency both sides had proceeded some way down the path to a nuclear test ban, and this was derailed for two fundamental reasons.

One, most fundamentally, Eisenhower toyed with the idea of sharing nuclear weapons with Germany, which was Russia’s biggest fear by far. And it was an example of the US having no self-reflection or understanding of the Soviet legitimate security concerns. So there was a development at the end of the 1950s called the Multilateral Force, which was an idea of sharing of nuclear weapons in one way or another. There were several specific ideas put forward, none of them came to fruition, but many of them involved the idea that Germany one way or another would gain access to nuclear weapons. From Eisenhower’s point of view, he said that would just be fine, we could bring our troops home, it would be a lot cheaper, save money on the budget – but of course from the Soviet point of view this was as strategic a threat as could be imagined for the Soviet Union, given the history of destruction that Germany had caused just 15 years earlier. And this was one of the blockades to a settlement.

Much more temporally was a disaster which is par for the course in international affairs, and that was the CIA whispering in Eisenhower’s ear in the spring of 1960 that, as Eisenhower was going off to a summit with Khrushchev in Paris, ‘why don’t we have just one more spy overflight of the Soviet Union?’ Eisenhower sensed that this was not very prudent and he pushed back, but Richard Bissell, who is one of the great disaster figures – on

the top 10 list of American disasters of international policy – told Eisenhower ‘Everything’s safe; the Soviets have no idea about the U2; there’s no way anything could go wrong.’

And of course, as happened, the Soviets knew very well, and the CIA knew that they knew very well, that these overflights were taking place. They intercepted Gary Powers, shot down the U2, captured him alive, captured and collected the wreckage of the U2 and announced that a spy plane had been shot down, to which the US immediately responded that’s not true, that’s Soviet propaganda. They tried again – ‘no, no, a spy plane was shot down, this is intolerable’. Eisenhower lied again, and the US declared that this was a weather surveillance flight based in Turkey – at which point they produced Mr Powers and the U2 wreckage for global television. And for both these political and these tactical reasons, the Paris summit was scuttled and no treaty of course came into being.

Kennedy came into office in January 1961 very, very much determined to find a path to peace. And of course, in his inaugural address, he made the famous statement: ‘Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.’ And he was determined that he would settle issues with the Soviet Union, find a way back from the nuclear arms race.

And yet just three months into his presidency, Mr Bissell entered the Oval Office once again and whispered in the president’s ear that there is a plan that has been approved under Eisenhower that is well-advanced for Cuban exiles to invade and depose Fidel Castro. And Kennedy pushed back, as Eisenhower had a year earlier – said this doesn’t sound right. He was assured that the military brass and the CIA guaranteed that nothing could go wrong. Kennedy, stupidly, not only agreed but agreed in the most absurd way, by saying that the invasion would take place but there would be no US air cover for it, guaranteeing that when the Cubans landed in the Bay of Pigs they were immediately captured, killed, rounded up and it was an aborted disaster from the first moment.

And then proceeded an extraordinary exchange, where Khrushchev sent a private note to Kennedy, saying ‘Mr President, your country has engaged in international piracy and a massive illegal act of invasion’, and Kennedy stupidly wrote back, ‘that’s not so, this has nothing to do with the United States’, at which point Khrushchev wrote back – and I’m paraphrasing – ‘are you kidding? Aren’t those your planes, your ships, your arms, your training, your CIA agents?’ – writing back in incredible exasperation, and properly so. Two times within a year, directly utterly lied to by the president of the United

States on an issue of the highest security. Such is our smart international politics, of the kind that we rely on to this moment.

Well, as you know, the story took a much darker turn very quickly when Khrushchev decided to get even in a variety of ways; first threats in Berlin – and though those are quite complicated and important I'll pass over them in the interest of time, and note that it was early in 1962 that Khrushchev decided that he would put intermediate range offensive nuclear weapons in Cuba as a way to give the US a taste of its own medicine. If the US would threaten to invade Cuba, the Soviets would defend Cuba. If the US had intermediate range nuclear missiles in Turkey, then the Soviets would have intermediate range nuclear missiles in Cuba. Of course, Khrushchev lied blatantly and brazenly – it seems to have been a tradition of the time – and denied that the Soviet Union would ever use Cuba as an offensive base. Kennedy asked repeatedly and insisted that this would be viewed as a *casus belli*, that this was intolerable from the US point of view. The Soviet Union from top to bottom assured that this would never be done. And of course it was done.

What's quite remarkable for us to reflect on in thinking about politics is that when Khrushchev explains this to the foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, Gromyko says to him, 'What are you doing? You'll create war!' Khrushchev says, no, this has *nothing* to do with war – this is politics, we're going to put it in their face, this is just to give them a taste of their own medicine. And I believe Khrushchev entirely that this was his view; this had nothing to do with war, this had nothing to do with an attempt at a nuclear exchange, it was just about the stupidest thing in the world imaginable, which is what our leaders are utterly capable of doing all the time.

And so when the missiles were discovered – and how could the Soviet Union think that massive convoys going to Cuba from August, September and October wouldn't be discovered? And Kennedy was put deeply on the back foot because his political opponents were saying they're building a base for offensive missiles, and Kennedy assured again and again no, that's not the case, and then of course it was revealed that it was the case. The two sides nearly came to destroy the world.

And without recounting this well-known story, just let me emphasize how many accidents nearly occurred in 13 days, and how many advisers on both sides gave precisely the advice that would have ended humanity. All these skilled, trained, sophisticated people – 'you've got to bomb them first' was the

basic message. 'If you don't take them out, this will happen, this will happen...'

Kennedy and Khrushchev played with the steady hand. It's our undeserved blessing that it happened, because it could have happened a thousand other ways, but in the end the crisis ended, and I think – and I write and I argue – that from that moment on, these were two uniquely changed individuals. Because never in history – never in history – had two leaders experienced what they had just experienced. This wasn't about two countries, this wasn't about war; this was about the world. It was about survival.

And I think for Kennedy it was all the more shocking. He had come to office as a student of history; he had come to office completely aware of how stupidities could multiply. His greatest image in danger was World War I, both as recounted by Churchill and by Barbara Tuchman, that said this was a war in which two sides had stumbled into disaster. Stumbled, by accident, for no deep reason. And there he had almost done exactly the same thing.

And so the last year is a year of a complete change in tone, capacity, quality of leadership and determination to get it right. And also a major lesson – that in the end you can't depend on your advisers, you certainly can't depend on the CIA, you can't depend on the military. In the end he earned his keep because he understood that he uniquely had the responsibility to find a way back from the brink.

And the peace speech was written nearly in secret, without the intergovernmental, interdepartmental reviews. It was a draft of Kennedy and Ted Sorensen. It was seen by very, very few others. The first draft was almost a final draft. It's a magnificent work. It aimed to do one overwhelming thing – and I know that the time is short, I will stop in a moment. It aimed to humanize the other side, and it aimed to let the other side know we know you're human, we know you share the same aspirations. And this is an approach that I don't know of before or after, by any American president. And to me, it's encapsulated in the following sentences:

'So some say that it is useless to speak of peace or world law, or world disarmament, and that it will be useless until the leaders of the Soviet Union adopt a more enlightened attitude. I hope they do. I believe we can help them do it, but I also believe that we must re-examine our own attitudes as individuals and as a nation, for our attitude is as essential as theirs.'

I've never heard that again from an American president, that Americans need to re-examine our own attitudes – to Iran, to Islam, to the barriers that stop us

from cooperating internationally. We don't ask, we're not asked, to take a deep look. We only hear our leaders tell what others need to do. And the genius of this was to dig deep and put the international challenge on a moral basis and on a common human basis. Khrushchev reacted, the treaty was signed, the world was saved. It's a lesson for us today. Thank you.