
5-29-1998

A Dialogue with John Kenneth Galbraith: Aspects of Political Psychology

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>



Part of the [Other Political Science Commons](#), and the [Other Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(1998) "A Dialogue with John Kenneth Galbraith: Aspects of Political Psychology," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 21 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol4/iss21/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: A Dialogue with John Kenneth Galbraith: Aspects of Political Psychology

Author: Editor

Volume: 4

Issue: 21

Date: 1998-05-29

Keywords: Dialogue, Galbraith, Political Psychology

Abstract. This article describes political psychological aspects of a short talk and question and answer session with John Kenneth Galbraith, Paul M. Warburg Professor of Economics Emeritus at Harvard University.

Professor John Kenneth Galbraith spoke to and with an audience at the John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts, on May 26, 1998. Besides being prepared to discuss past accomplishments such as his directorships of the United States Department of State's Office of Economic Security Policy and of the Strategic Bombing Survey, his ambassadorship to India, and his over 30 books, he and the audience gathered to celebrate his latest work--Letters to Kennedy--that has just been published by Harvard University Press. Several aspects of political psychology arose during the dialogue.

Professor Galbraith stressed the developmental political psychology of President John F. Kennedy (JFK) in three different ways. According to Galbraith, JFK could not help but be confronted with the superior social and intellectual functioning--and ultimately the supreme sacrifice--of his older brother Joe who was to die on a military mission in World War II. The expectations of others who had contact with or knew of Joe was an omnipresent feature of JFK's family environment, social circle, years at Harvard, and beyond. Secondly, Galbraith emphasized that JFK's political speech and behavior were very unremarkable as a US representative and senator, but they matured into something with profound potential by the time Kennedy achieved the Presidency. Third, Galbraith stated that as a new US representative, Kennedy used to phone him and ask how to vote on economics-related legislation. Later on, JFK phoned to ask for background on the issues. Still later, he rarely called.

Galbraith emphasized the role of self-identity in political struggle. According to Galbraith, early in the 1960 presidential campaign, JFK believed that the political struggle would not be especially difficult. Why was this? JFK believed that he knew who he was and was comfortable with that identity. In contrast--JFK believed--his challenger, Richard M. Nixon, knew neither who he (Nixon) was nor was comfortable with himself. Whether JFK was correct in these beliefs, they nevertheless helped guide his own political decisionmaking.

Galbraith also addressed the bureaucratic conflict engendered by his long and close friendship with JFK. For example, when Galbraith was to become Ambassador to India, the Secretary of State designee, Dean Rusk, sought to obtain JFK's concurrence that Galbraith's professional communications to JFK should occur solely through State Department channels. Galbraith states that JFK asked him for his opinion--the paraphrase of which was that communicating through State was like "making love through a mattress." The latter seems to be an interesting turn of phrase highlighting the affiliative components of meaningful counsel to a political superior.

Finally, as to the recent nuclear testing by the government of India, Galbraith very strongly advocated that the ensuing furor should in no way detract attention from the much more significant problem--the large arsenals of nuclear weapons and significant proliferation vulnerabilities of the other declared

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

nuclear powers, especially the US and Russia. One way of conceptualizing the above is the figure-ground reversal of what immediately seems compelling from what should be.

As Professor Galbraith approaches his 90th birthday, his perceptive comments seem pregnant with political psychological import. Is he actually a political psychologist? As Galbraith stated when asked whether he was more accomplished as an economist or political scientist, "why be bothered with artificial boundaries?" (See Galbraith, J.K. (1963). *The great crash, 1929*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.; (1970). *The affluent society* 2nd Ed. Rev. NY: New American Library; (1990). *A short history of financial euphoria*. NY: Whittle Books; (1998). *The socially concerned today*. University of Toronto Press; (1998). *Letters to Kennedy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.) (Keywords: Dialogue, Galbraith, Political Psychology.)