

# NYT Interview: Michael S. Schmidt with former White House Chief of Staff John Kelly | 10.22.24

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## Speakers:

Michael S. Schmidt - 14.69%

John Kelly - 85.31%

## Notes:

Interview Summary: Michael S. Schmidt with John Kelly

Audio Sourced From:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/22/us/politics/john-kelly-trump-fitness-character.html>

Key Revelations

On Fascist Tendencies

- Kelly explicitly characterized the former president as fitting "the general definition of

fascist," citing traits including far-right authoritarianism and admiration for dictators

- Described him as someone who would "love to be" a dictator if given the opportunity, comparing it to his business management style
- Expressed serious concern about the former president's statements regarding using military against American citizens

#### On Constitutional Understanding

- Indicated the former president showed little appreciation for the Constitution or American history
- Noted he frequently attempted to exceed his presidential authority
- Described his frustration with constitutional checks and balances
- Revealed he regularly had to check with White House counsel about the legality of presidential directives

#### On Military and Service

- Disclosed disturbing attitudes toward military service and veterans:
- Expressed disdain for being seen with wounded veterans, particularly amputees
- Repeatedly referred to fallen service members as "losers" and "suckers"
- Could not understand why people would serve selflessly, always questioning "what's in it for them"

#### On Hitler Comments

- Revealed the former president made multiple positive comments about Hitler
- Kelly had to explain why such statements were inappropriate and historically incorrect
- Noted the former president's limited understanding of historical context

#### On Leadership Style

- Described an expectation that subordinates would break or circumvent laws
- Highlighted a pattern of rejecting American values and constitutional principles
- Noted a preference for authoritarian approaches to governance

#### Kelly's Concluding Thoughts

- While not identifying the former president as the single biggest threat to America, characterized him as the only president in Kelly's lifetime who has "rejected what America

is all about"

- Emphasized the importance of character in leadership
- Called for national reconciliation, urging Americans to "stop hating each other just because we have a difference of opinion on political issues"
- Expressed hope for the country to "become friends again" while acknowledging uncertainty about whether this is possible

## Context

This interview represents significant public commentary from John Kelly, who served as White House Chief of Staff and maintained relative silence about many of these matters until now. His decision to speak was apparently prompted by recent statements about using military force against American citizens.

### **Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:00:02**

Do you, what do you think? Do you think he's a fascist?

### **John Kelly**

**00:00:07**

Well, I'm looking at the definition of fascism. It's a far right authoritarian, ultra nationalist political ideology and movement characterized by a dictatorial leader, centralized hypocrisy, militarism, forcible suppression of opposition, belief in a natural social hierarchy. So certainly in my experience, those are the kind of things that he thinks will work better in terms of running America.

### **John Kelly**

**00:00:41**

You know, again, back to this issue of, you know, democracy is complicated, messy to operate, probably the worst kind of government there is, except for all the other ones. I think Churchill once said, and again, our Constitution our found is built in to the Constitution into the way our government operates, built in a lot of checks and balances and didn't design the government streamlined and whatnot.

### **John Kelly**

**00:01:18**

So. But certainly the former president is in the far right area. He's certainly an authoritarian, admires people who are dictators. He has said that. So he certainly falls into the general definition of fascist for sure.

### **Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:01:48**

If he was left to his own devices, would he be a dictator if he didn't have people around

him?

**John Kelly**

**00:01:53**

Oh, I think he'd love to be. I think he'd love to be just like he was in business. He could tell people to do things and they would do it and not really bother too much about whether what the legalities were and whatnot. But again, I didn't know him before, so I can't believe.

**John Kelly**

**00:02:17**

And I think this issue of using the military to go after American citizens is one of those things I think is a very, very bad thing even to say it for political purposes to get elected. I think it's a very, very bad thing, let alone actually doing it.

**Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:02:38**

So you're saying when you saw him say that recently and as he said on the campaign trail, that was something that really concerned you to the point that you thought as you sat there trying to figure out what to do, you thought maybe it's worth answering some questions about this.

**John Kelly**

**00:02:53**

Yeah, that's it is. And I go back to George Washington and how he set up before there was an America, how he set it up so that the military would stay out of, would not be used in the United States or domestically in that the, you know, the way forward was for military officers not to be involved in politics.

**John Kelly**

**00:03:23**

And again, unless you're someone like me or Mattis or, you know, people like that that retired from the military or left the military like Mark Esper or Mike Pompeo, and then go into a political job, whether it's elected or Assigned by the White House. It's a little bit different because you've been involved in it, but for the most part, you just.

**John Kelly**

**00:03:51**

And that's why I'm so hesitant to talk. You certainly never to tell or recommend to an American who they should vote for. Because now that I'm out of political job, I'm back to being pretty much a retired, retired military officer who should not get too involved in this kind of thing. Yeah, I mean, I, until the former president started talking about this.

**John Kelly**

**00:04:16**

And this, this goes back to my, when I was in the White House, for that matter, dhs, I was,

you know, originally conversation would be, you know, Mr. President, that's outside your authority. Or, you know, that's, you know, that's a routine use. You really don't want to do that inside the United States.

**John Kelly**

**00:04:40**

But now that he's talking about it as I'm going to do it, is, again, it's disturbing.

**Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:04:52**

I mean, is he the biggest threat to the country that you've seen in your life out of all the threats like post 9, 11, all these different things?

**John Kelly**

**00:04:59**

I think no. I think he's certainly the only president that has all but rejected what America is all about and what makes America America in terms of our Constitution, in terms of our values, you know, the way we look at everything to include family and government. And he's certainly the only president that I know of that was certainly, certainly in my lifetime that was like that.

**Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:05:33**

And did the former president appreciate the Constitution? Did he appreciate any of these things?

**John Kelly**

**00:05:41**

No, it was fascinating. He doesn't know a lot about American history. And certainly, as I guess a former executive in his civilian world, you know, I guess you can be a dictator because you could fire people pretty easily, and the only thing theoretically that you have to follow is the law. But then again, an awful lot of people break the law and expect subordinates to break the law or to circumvent the law somehow.

**John Kelly**

**00:06:15**

And that's where he was coming from. That was his worldview.

**Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:06:21**

So he expected the people that worked for him to break the law.

**John Kelly**

**00:06:24**

Well, when he would give, and I think I've told you this many times, when he would tell me that he wanted to do something 100% of the time, I checked with the, with the White

House counsel because oftentimes he wouldn't have the authority to do what he wanted to do. And again, that's a, that's an interesting point, because if you listen to certainly my study of presidents, and if you listen to presidents when they leave office, whether they write a book or, you know, do interviews.

**John Kelly**

**00:06:56**

One of the things that surprises them initially was how little power they actually had and how much they had to work with the Congress to get things done. And most of them accepted that and worked within the rules of what the Constitution dictates. It's frustrating, I'm sure. Well, I know it's frustrating for them because, you know, their agenda that they're trying to push, and suddenly they have to go to the Congress to get money.

**John Kelly**

**00:07:26**

And if the Congress is not inclined to go along with it, then it's very frustrating. But that is the law.

**Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:07:34**

And when he was. When he was confronted with the fact that he couldn't do something, did he want to do it anyway? I mean, when he was confronted with the fact that he couldn't do something legally, did he want to do it anyway?

**John Kelly**

**00:07:48**

He would. He would try to. He would make. Try to make the case that he did have the authority. He would. He commented more than once that, you know, that Hitler did some good things, too. And, of course, if, you know, history, again, I think he's lacking in that. But if, you know what his, you know, Hitler was all about, it'd be pretty hard to make an argument that he did anything good.

**Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:08:20**

So what would you say when he said to you that Hitler did a lot of good things?

**John Kelly**

**00:08:24**

Well, I tell him that. I said, you know, sir, if you. First of all, you should never say that. But if you knew what Hitler was all about from the beginning to the end, everything he did was in support of his racist, fascist life, you know, philosophy. So that nothing he did, you could argue was good.

**John Kelly**

**00:08:51**

It was certainly not done for the right reason. And. But he would occasionally say that.

What would he say when you would lay that out to him?

**John Kelly**

**00:09:02**

He just, you know, that'd be the end of the conversation, usually.

**Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:09:12**

Does he have disdain for the disabled?

**John Kelly**

**00:09:16**

Certainly. His not wanting to be seen with amputees, amputees that lost their limbs in defense of this country fighting for every American, to him included, to protect them that didn't want to be seen with them. That's an interesting perspective for the commander in chief to have.

**Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:09:38**

Why didn't he want to be seen with them?

**John Kelly**

**00:09:40**

He would just say, look, it doesn't look good for me. So anyways, I don't know. I. Not a psychiatrist. If you're a psychiatrist, I guess you could take a stab at some of these questions, but I'm not.

**Michael S. Schmidt**

**00:09:58**

But he basically said to you that those who died for America on the battlefield were losers and suckers and he said it more than once.

**John Kelly**

**00:10:07**

Yes, but he was not. But he would say it would always did something else would get him going oftentimes again, McCain he talked about, and it was. It was like a. Almost a recording. But the point is, anyways, he would say it at times, sometimes unexpectedly, but he never could wrap his arms around why people would serve the country in uniform.

**John Kelly**

**00:10:30**

What was in it for them? That was the general theme. I think that's much more actually powerful than talking about what he said about, you know, loosened lies. I think he just could never wrap his arms around why people would do things selflessly. What's in it for them? I think that's a much more powerful, you know, but that's just me.

I'm not recommending anything to anybody. I'm just saying other than that when you're looking to vote for someone regardless, you got to. You got to look at the character and all of those kind of things and then start looking at the individual's policies. We can always, you know, even if you're a conservative Republican, you know, much of what's gone on the last three and a half years hasn't been what you've wanted to have happen to the country.

**John Kelly**

**00:11:25**

But, you know, we can, we can get by it because you might have, you know, a Republican come in in the future. But if a person's character isn't at least minimally acceptable, then I think that person can do a lot more damage. We've got to. I just wish I'll end with this. I just wish at the end of all of this, whoever wins, that that person and the leadership in the country, certainly the political leadership in Washington, to include the House and Senate, that people say, okay, let's take a breath, let's step back.

**John Kelly**

**00:12:09**

This has been really, really hard. Let's try to come back together as Americans, stop hating each other just because we have a difference of opinion on political issues. I just hope we do that somehow. I don't know if we will, though, but I hope we will. I hope whoever becomes the president will start that process.

**John Kelly**

**00:12:30**

Let's become friends again.