

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

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<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.

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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.

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

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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.

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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.

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.

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.

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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.

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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.

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.

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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.

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.

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

Michael S. Schmidt 00:08:58

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.

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.

00:10:53

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.

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.

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.

00:12:30

Let's become friends again.