

Yvette Cozier: Hello everyone. My name is Yvette Cozier, Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice at Boston University School of Public Health. Thank you for joining us for this public health conversation starter. Today's conversation is part of our SPH Reads series. SPH Reads is a school-wide reading program which aims to encourage critical thought and discussion among all members of the BUSPH community and is centered on a carefully chosen, thought-provoking book. The selection for the 2025-2026 academic year is *Ripples of Hope in the Mississippi Delta*, charting the Health Equity Policy Agenda, written by David Jones and edited by Deborah Bingham, Nicole Huberfeld, and Sarah Gordon.

Today, I have the privilege of speaking with Dr. Thomas Whalen, who serves as Associate Professor of Social Sciences at BU College of General Studies, specializing in topics surrounding 19th and 20th century American social and political history, the Cold War, and modern foreign policy. A noted scholar of modern American politics and presidential leadership, his research also explores Boston history and the role of sports in American society. His commentary is frequently sought by major national and international media outlets, including the New York Times, CNN, Politico, and the BBC. In addition to his scholarship, he contributes regularly to *Cognoscenti*, the opinion platform of Boston's NPR station, writing on politics, sports, and history. Dr. Whalen also has been recognized for his excellence in interdisciplinary teaching, receiving Boston University's Peyton Richter Award in 2010. Thank you for being with us today, Professor Whalen.

Thomas Whalen: Pleasure.

Yvette Cozier: Great. So just to start, could you share a bit about your career and current role at BU and specifically what drove your interest in history and ultimately the community presidency?

Thomas Whalen: Well, I grew up here in New England, north of Boston and right next door to Salem where I'm living now. And history is all around us. We breathed here in New England. And I think that from a very young age influenced me. And I went into journalism before I went into academia and I covered politics, sports, a whole variety of subjects, including public health. And I was satisfied with it up to a point, but the problem was for me is you have to do the story so quickly, you don't have the time to research to reflect on them. What is the larger meaning of this? How does this connect with everything?

And that's what kind of steered me into academia, particularly the field of history and social science. What does it all mean? Providing context. And that's why I enjoy my present role at BU as a teacher and as a researcher, as writing books, because to me, it's an opportunity to understand the wider world beyond Boston and try to make those connections and share my knowledge with others. And it's been very satisfying.

Yvette Cozier: Oh, no, that's great. I hope that our students will take that to heart to recognize that we can't really look at this isolation. Exactly. But it's like we really need a

historic lens on everything that we do. So in the current political moment, many people are familiar with RFK Jr., The current AHS secretary, but his father, RFK Sr., Or Bobby Kennedy, as I recall and being referred to, was also an important figure in American history. For those who are not familiar with the Senior Kennedy, can you tell us who Bobby Kennedy was?

Thomas Whalen:

Well, Bobby Kennedy in some ways was the runt of the litter in the Kennedy family, the famous political dynasty that has really been at the forefront of American history since the end of World War II. And he was the young brother who wasn't considered very bright. And the stars in the family were his older brother, John and his other older brother, Joseph. Joseph died during World War II, and John F. Kennedy assumed kind of the mantle of hope for the family because the patriarch of the family, Joseph P. Kennedy, wanted one of his sons to become President of the United States, the first Catholic President of the United States. And of course, John Kennedy realized those dreams. But along the way, John Kennedy recognized that his younger brother, who everyone had kind of dismissed as kind of a sissy within his own family, that's the way they described him, really had a sharp mind, particularly for politics.

And Robert Kennedy became his campaign manager in 1952 here in Massachusetts, in essentially the Senate race that made the Kennedy dynasty, because at that point, John Kennedy had served in the Congress and he was more or less a back bencher. Not many people knew about him on a national scale. But he decided in 1952 to take on one of the leading names in national politics. And the head of a political dynasty here in Boston and New England, the Lodge Dynasty. It was Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. And Robert Kennedy was tough as nails. He was a brilliant strategist. And with his help, his brother eked out a close victory against Henry Cabot Lodge and the Lodge Dynasty. And after that, the Lodge Dynasty basically fell apart and the Kennedys in some ways took its place. So there were like two ships passing in the night here, politically speaking.

And from there, when John Kennedy decided, well, let's go for the presidency in 1960, Bobby Kennedy was at his side. And he also retained the role of campaign manager. Now, in between that, Robert Kennedy served in the Senate as a lawyer for various oversight committees. And one of the oversight committees was kind of looking at organized crime ties with the labor union. And so he got head to head with Jimmy Hoffa, and Robert Kennedy acquired this image as being ruthless Bobby, did whatever it took to take down his enemies to get to the truth. But at the same time, sometimes his zeal got the best of him. One of his first jobs was to work for famed or infamous Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s. And Joseph McCarthy was an out-and-out demagogue, and Robert Kennedy never denounced him. In fact, Robert Kennedy thought he got a bit of a bad shake.

So in liberal circles, Robert Kennedy was strongly distrusted, and that kind of went on to his brother John as well. Joseph Kennedy, in fact, was a Kennedy family friend. He'd go down to Cape Cod during the summers and play softball with him. But on one day, I think he played shortstop, he made three errors, so

they never invited him back to play. Kennedy's only want winners, right? He also hated two of the Kennedy sisters.

So it was a very interesting relationship, and he was a Republican as well. But the McCarthy Stain was with the Kennedys throughout the Kennedy presidency. A lot of liberals just never forgave John Kennedy for his association, but particularly Robert Kennedy for never denouncing him. And Robert Kennedy, truth be told, he was a bit of a crusader when it came to his role, kind of busting bad men, as he called it, in the Congress as a lawyer, but he was also very conservative, a staunch cold warrior when he was younger. And when his brother became president, he retained a lot of those views. A lot of people thought he was very much the image of his more conservative father, Joseph Kennedy. And Joseph Kennedy once famously said, "Bobby's just like me. He hates like I do." Jack Kennedy kind of forgives people. No, no. Bobby, they stay hated. And he thought that was a compliment.

But Bobby Kennedy, unlike his brother, held grudges. But when his brother becomes president, he taps him as his attorney general at his father's insistence because his father said, "If you're going to be president, you need someone close that you can trust." And this is before laws were passed where you can't do that anymore, where your brother is attorney general or a family member. And he basically was considered in Washington the second most powerful figure in the federal government next to his brother. He was kind of a co-president in many ways. But as attorney general, a remarkable thing happened. He had an epiphany in the sense that he became more liberal, more sympathetic to social justice causes and was a leading figure in helping the civil rights movement move forward. And so he gradually moved from that kind of staunch conservatism to liberalism, though there were bumps on the road.

For example, he signed off on the bugging of Martin Luther King Jr, the surveillance that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover insisted on, though that might have had something more to do with J. Edgar Hoover more or less blackmailing his brother. His brother, as we now know, carried on a number of liaisons with various women and he got involved in scandals or potential scandals. And Hoover's price for covering them up, not saying anything was, well, I want surveillance on Martin Luther King Jr. And his brother kind of dutifully followed through on that. So that is certainly a stain on his legacy as Attorney General. But overall, Robert Kennedy is considered one of the best attorney generals of the entire post-war period.

Yvette Cozier: Wow. And one thing I just want to go back and ask you to clarify, it was Joseph McCarthy who was invited to Kennebunkport? I mean-

Thomas Whalen: Johnson, yeah. Hyannis Port, yeah.

Yvette Cozier: Hyannis Port, yes. Yes.

Thomas Whalen: Yeah. He was a family friend. And John Kennedy himself, that became a campaign issue in 1952 when he was running against Lodge, that he was too close to McCarthy. And liberals, which is strange to think about now, the Kennedys weren't considered liberal icons in the day. They were considered rather conservative, perhaps too conservative in the minds of many Democrats.

Yvette Cozier: Oh, that's very interesting. Well, one of the reasons of bringing up Bobby Kennedy at all is in this book, *Ripples of Hope*, the author was following Bobby Kennedy's journey into the other America, if you will, where those were less fortunate, but also really away from the public eye largely. So referring back to a BU piece that you wrote back in 2018, about the 50th anniversary of Bobby Kennedy's passing, you wrote about his unique ability to connect with the disaffected and disenfranchised. So can you say a little bit about, again, that sort of that transition that he was making to moving forward the civil rights movement, but then afterwards, trying to really connect with the everyday person and especially those who are most marginalized?

Thomas Whalen: Sure. I think it goes back to his childhood because he wasn't very popular. He was very shy, withdrawn. He was kind of a loner. And in many ways, he was a loner throughout his entire life. He was the outsider, the other. And when he became attorney general and then later senator from New York, he had a natural connection to those people who were not paid attention to, who were on the outs. And he had this amazing intellectual curiosity that you don't see in politicians. Politicians are always for the next election. Bobby Kennedy was really fascinated how everyday people lived. And poverty became a kind of moral crusade for him because living in Hyannis Port, living in one of the richest families at the time in the entire country, he had always been cut off. He grew up during the Great Depression, but he never felt the Great Depression because that's how different the Kennedy ... They were the top 1% in the day.

But now when he's attorney general and Senator, he travels broadly around the country. He sees how people live. He rubs elbows with them. And during World War II, although he didn't fight in combat, he served in the Navy and for the first time in his life, he gets to see a diverse group of people or rub elbows with them. And that really opened his eyes to possibility. And I think that was the great quality of Robert Kennedy. Aside from the intellectual curiosity, his ability to change, his ability to evolve, and his brother was the same way. They did not remain fixed in their ideological silos that they had earlier been in their lives. And that's what made Robert Kennedy the kind of iconic liberal figure that we know today, that he evolved to a point where he became a champion of the poor. And you look at his relationship with Cesar Chavez in California and helping migrant workers organize union. He was fully on board with that.

And when you think about it now, not many people, not many politicians are going to be on the side of migrant workers organizing. But Robert Kennedy, also I think the factor here is he was deeply Roman Catholic. And he, I think, was kind of more on the Roman and Catholic side of social reform that in the New Testament it says that for those less fortunate is our obligation, our duty to help

those, to help our brothers and sisters. And Robert Kennedy really took that to heart. And Rose Kennedy, his mother, really drummed that into him as a child. In fact, Robert Kennedy was her favorite child. So part of it was driven by this deep religious Catholic reformist faith that he carried with him to his grave.

Yvette Cozier: Wow. Wow. And yeah, It was remarkable how energized he was around that issue. And if you didn't really know the backstory, you thought that that was the way he always was. So I really appreciate showing that arc of evolution. So I guess just bringing this back to maybe the present, how important is it for national leaders to listen directly to the lived experiences of people, particularly in struggling communities? And what impact can that have on shaping policy and policy priorities and what did it do in Bobby's time as well?

Thomas Whalen: Well, you'd think that would be 1A on the top of the list, listening to people that they're supposedly serving, but that's not the case in modern politics because that's where the money has corrupted everything. Most modern politicians on both sides of the aisle, they're interested in raising money for their next campaign. And Robert Kennedy, I think because he was so rich, because he had all these financial resources at disposal, it allowed him to look beyond the donors, to go directly to the people, walk among the people, see what America was really like, and it opened his eyes and it influenced his policy decisions as Attorney General and as a senator.

So Robert Kennedy probably would've been a big endorser of campaign finance reform. If you have removed the money from the equation, probably you're going to have more and more politicians at least allow them the time to pay attention to their constituents to see what issues are affecting everyday Americans. But again, they are so caught up in the money game that that's all pushed to the background.

Yvette Cozier: Yeah. Yeah. Their job is to support the next campaign, pretty much. So just following into current times, given this history of RFK Senior, what should we understand about his son, RFK Jr.?

Thomas Whalen: Well, RFK Jr., he's an interesting case because he's kind of the opposite of the arc of his father. His father goes from very conservative to very liberal and social reformer. His son goes from very liberal to increasingly reactionary and conspiratorial in his statements. So he goes in the opposite direction, but in doing so, he has alienated the rest of his family who feels that he's essentially destroying the Kennedy dynasty as it had been existed for over 50 years in this country, that he has kind of made it impossible in some ways, politically speaking, for the Kennedy Dynasty to, I guess, rebound to become a national force as it once was back in the day. And so he's tarnishing the legacy. The brand is no longer there. And Robert Kennedy, some of his statements you just shake your head at because his father obviously would not approve.

And he's sidled up to an administration that frankly is quite authoritarian in his pronouncements. And they don't seem to care for the everyday American. It

seems to be geared towards the elite 1% in our country. And that, again, is the opposite of what Robert Kennedy was the focus of his career later in his life.

Yvette Cozier: Yeah. Yeah. No, I find it ironic. So RFK Jr. was an environmental health attorney and a very successful one. And I guess I always say, why wasn't he picked for EPA or something?

Thomas Whalen: Right. And I think it's hard to say what happened to him. I think part of it was frustration. A lot of people saw him as a future senator, but he had a lot of personal issues. He had addiction to heroin and he had a certain entitlement to him, which frankly is shared by many members of his family. Two of the men are born. They don't get elected office. The office comes to them and anoints him. So he had that arrogance that I think in some ways kind of evolved into this kind of right-wing conspiratorial mindset that I'm right and I'm going to show you and I don't care what you think of it. And if I break any norms or even laws, I don't seem to care. And that seems to be in line with the current Trump administration, but it's certainly not in line with the beliefs and values that the Kennedy Dynasty stood for for so many years.

Yvette Cozier: Very interesting. So just switching gears a little bit, just shifting a little, in your work, you comment on how media shapes public understanding of politics. Can you say more about this and specifically how might media narratives about poverty, rural America, race influence the public's willingness to support certain policies and both in the time of RFK Senior and in the current time?

Thomas Whalen: Well, the problem is now it's all, again, we have the money problem and the corporatization of mass media that we have all these mergers and they are trying to sell ad space to advertisers, well off advertisers. And talking about poverty, talking about issues of injustice to everyday Americans does not sell product off the shelves. And I think that's a major part of it. The other part of it is due to technological breakthroughs, the legacy media, namely television, radio, newspapers, magazines, they're kind of going the way of the dodo bird. And most Americans now, particularly people under 40, are getting their information from these social media sites like TikTok and so forth that have no gatekeepers. There's no kind of a cipher there. There's no editors. And so a lot of lies and misinformation is spread that way.

And that's why right now, to me, what's so frightening is we have a very misinformed public about crucial issues, particularly with regards to public health and social justice. And that can't be good for our democracy in the long term. And remember, our founding fathers, that's why we have in the Constitution guaranteed freedom of the press. They realize that an informed educated public is the greatest defense against the rise of tyranny, but that has been eroded away here in the 21st century. And unfortunately, I think Robert Kennedy Jr. has contributed to that given to some of his wild statements, for example, about vaccines and so forth.

Yvette Cozier: And those, particularly as you said, the wide open range of voices in some of the media outlets there. So on that note, what advice would you have for current public health students? You'd mentioned at the top of this that you had been a journalist and that you'd actually covered public health issues. We have students here in public health who are entering a totally different world. And so what advice would you give them?

Thomas Whalen: Well, first off, just go into the field with your eyes open and be aware of the growing distress against experts in their field, public health officials, that basically they're going to have to put on their battle armor. And the best way to fight ignorance is with knowledge, with patience. And I think what the BU School of Public Health is going to do is be able to arm those students with the very thing that all tyrants hate and authoritarian regimes. It's knowledge. And if you can do that and just stay with it and don't give up and just always get involved in the public sphere.

And I think a lot of the problem in academia in general that we're all in our ivy towers and we don't communicate enough. Now, I go out of my way. I never turn down an interview. I don't care if it's conservative, liberal or whatever, because I think it's important that we engage with the public, get our ideas out there. And if we do, in the long term, I think in the battle of ideas, the good ones will always win.

And so you have to be engaged. It's one thing to know your field and to be good at it, but it's another to actually rub elbows with the general public because ultimately they are the ones we have to serve. And I always kind of compare academia what we should be like, like the example of the Boston Pops, which was founded by the great Arthur Fiedler several decades ago. And what he did was kind of revolutionary because everyday people thought, well, classical music, the arts, that's for rich people. But Arthur Field said, no, no, you should look at classical music. You should look at symphony orchestras as libraries that anyone could just go and enjoy, get access to. And that's why the Boston Pops have become so popular.

They become kind of this iconic institution in Boston because it's not just to an elite group on Beacon Hill that they're available to, it's to all of Boston. And that's what public health does. Yeah, you're going to get a lot of pushback, but just remember, you have knowledge on your side, you have the truth on your side, science, and don't be afraid to share it. And I noticed when Robert Kennedy, whenever he makes these statements, he doesn't provide any backup, any facts. He cites kind of obscure pieces. Now, if you are truly educated, you can very patiently dismantle those kinds of disinformation and lies that are being said. But again, it's not going to be easy. It's an uphill fight at this point. But again, keep your eyes open to that fact.

Yvette Cozier: Yes. Well, very good advice indeed. And yes, I like the armor where we put the armor on, right. Well, Professor Whalen, I want to thank you so much for your time and your insights and your expertise. This has been a wonderful

conversation and I truly hope that the SPH community takes your words to heart. Thank you so much.

Thomas Whalen: A delight for me as well. Thank you so much.