

**ADDRESS BY RT. HONOURABLE PERRY CHRISTIE,
PRIME MINISTER
ON THE OCCASSON OF THE RE-INSTALLATION OF THE JFK
MEMORIAL AT BLAKE ROAD AND WEST BAY STREET
10:00 A.M. 21 DECEMBER 2012**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, I wish to welcome you all to this commemoration ceremony, along with those speakers who have come before me.

Today, we mark the visit of the only sitting American President to visit The Bahamas in an official capacity. That took place fifty years ago and the world was a very different place. As Dr. Pateman so aptly recounted, Nassau was not chosen arbitrarily as the location for the meeting with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. The British as you know were then responsible for our external affairs as we were still then a colony.

The people of the world then, just as now, lived in uncertain times, albeit for different reasons. Only two months before the Anglo-American conference in Nassau, the world held its breath as the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics inched closer to nuclear war.

Against this backdrop, our little island, if only temporarily, became the focus and focal point of Cold War tension. The British, a military power in the face of the expansion of Soviet Communism, hoped to forge its ties even more with the American global democratic counterweight. The Americans wanted to show to Cuba and Moscow, that such blatant threats, not only in the Western Hemisphere, but on its very doorstep being only “90 miles from Cuba,” would not be tolerated.

The two allies tested the limits of friendship, pondered the depths of compromise and strengthened their resolve in the face of the next great ideological challenge right here in little Nassau. For those few days, the world watched this intersection of worlds; where the old world met the new world, when lands across an ocean who had fought each other bitterly in the past came together to face a new future, and where, on a peaceful island, peace was sought through cooperation.

President Kennedy’s visit held wider implications for Bahamian civil society at the time, particularly for the young intellectuals who called themselves the National Committee for Positive Action. While the world was living in a state of transition from the order of the World Wars to a bipolar division of global hegemony, The Bahamas was undergoing its own internal political shift.

The General Election of 1962 was the first election under universal suffrage, and we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of women’s suffrage this past November. However, the victory of women’s suffrage was dampened by the anachronistic system of suffrage based on property ownership and gerrymandering. The nascent Progressive Liberal Party had won the popular vote, but the United Bahamian Party, composed of the landed, white

Bahamian elites, swept to a clear majority of eighteen seats out of thirty-three in the House of Assembly.

When President Kennedy emerged from one of the tense meetings with Macmillan, he noticed a group of young Bahamians with placards, peacefully occupying the space allotted to them by the Commissioner of Police. Macmillan paid them no mind, but President Kennedy walked over and asked them why they were “demonstrating,” in his own words. This National Committee for Positive Action was a group of young, progressively minded individuals who felt the electoral system under which they carried out the highest of their civic duties was not designed to benefit the larger society.

They were demonstrating the inequality and inequity of the electoral system under which they had to abide as a British colony. President Kennedy abandoned protocol and his security detail and spoke with them a while, and then invited five of them to lunch with him.

The political implications of such a gesture were great and transcended borders. While the struggle for civil rights raged in the United States, President Kennedy had lunch with future black leaders of The Bahamas, including a young Sir Arthur Foulkes, our Governor-General. While the UBP and the elites of Bahamian society looked down upon them, one of the most powerful men, if not, the most powerful man in the world, sat down and shared a table and conversation with them. Dr. Eugene Newry our Ambassador designate to the United Nations were among the NCPA organizers.

President John F. Kennedy’s ideas for the embrace and advancement of civil rights could have been an underlying cause, helping endear him to the cause of these young Bahamians; we will not know for sure, but it should be celebrated, regardless. As one who came from segments of society which had frequently experienced discrimination and prejudice, perhaps he felt a sense of kinship with this group, and felt that one day, the political landscape could mature such that their ideas could come to fruition for national benefit and development.

It is said that following President Kennedy’s planting of the tree here, he said he would return in five years to see how it had grown. Unfortunately, as history tells us, this was not to be. But we mark this fiftieth anniversary of the visit of a fine man and a bold President, hoping that he has seen not only how his tree has grown, but how the relations between the United States and the United Kingdom have grown deeper and firmer through years of coordinated action, and how the relations between United States and The Bahamas have grown ever deeper since our independence, as we have asserted ourselves, often in step, regionally and internationally.

As our neighbours, we respect the friendly ties we have developed, and continue to develop, such as through this week’s Partnership Dialogue, the first held between our two countries. This should not negate the close ties and coordinated action we have taken through avenues such as Operation Bahamas Turks and Caicos, and through the

President's Emergency Plan for AIDS (PEPFAR). Though as friends, we maintain mutual respect for the decisions we make as sovereign nations.

May the relationship between the Commonwealth of The Bahamas and the United States of America, like the trees planted here today, and those planted fifty years ago, grow strong and deep, and stand firm against the headwinds that may buffet us socially, politically and economically. May we remember that the friendship we have developed can only be strengthened, and may a vision of President John F. Kennedy's world, where all are respected and valued, come to fruition in both our countries.

May God bless the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, and may God bless the United States of America.