

Joseph W. Alsop Oral History Interview – JFK #1, 6/18/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Joseph W. Alsop
Interviewer: Elspeth Rostow
Date of Interview: June 18, 1964
Length: 58 pp.

Biographical Note

Alsop, a journalist, author, Kennedy friend and associate, discusses his friendship with John F. Kennedy, reflects upon the Kennedy administration regarding issues such as the president's cabinet, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Berlin crisis, among other issues.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed December 13, 1988, copyright of these materials has been passed to the United States Government upon the death of the donor.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Joseph W. Alsop, recorded interview by Elspeth Rostow, June 18, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of
Joseph W. Alsop

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Joseph W. Alsop, of Washington, D.C., do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of a personal interview conducted on October 20, 1979 at Washington, D.C., and prepared for deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

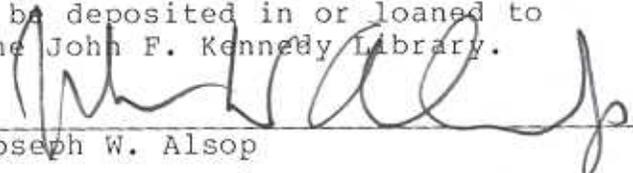
(1) During my lifetime, the transcript shall be available only to those researchers who have secured my written authorization. Thereafter, the transcript shall be available to all researchers.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript; however, access to the tape recording shall be for background use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase, or quote therefrom.

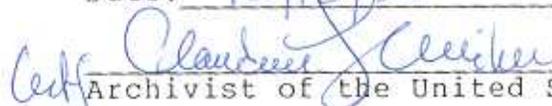
(3) During my lifetime, I retain all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter the copyright in both the transcript and tape recording shall pass to the United States Government. During my lifetime, researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations from the transcript and tape recording without my express consent in each case.

(4) During my lifetime, copies of the interview transcript or tape recording may not be provided to researchers except upon the donor's written authorization. Thereafter, copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the library to researchers upon request.

(5) During my lifetime, copies of the interview transcript or tape recording may not be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.


Joseph W. Alsop

Date: 12/13/88


Archivist of the United States

Date: 12/28/88

JOSEPH W. ALSOP
JFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	First impressions of John F. Kennedy
3	John F. Kennedy's health
4	Senate race
5	Boston Irish politics
9	1956 Democratic Convention
12	Catholicism
15	Kennedy's interest in political history
22	Kennedy's use of advice
25	Khrushchev meeting in Vienna
26	Bay of Pigs
26	Cuban Missile Crisis
32	Kennedy's cabinet
35	Operation Coordinating Board (OCB)
35	National Security Council (NSC)
38	Berlin Crisis
41	Soviet missile gap
43	Berlin Wall
48	Kennedy's reaction to criticism
52	Economic record of the Kennedy administration
57	Civil Rights bill

MEMORANDUM
KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 23 June 1964
Elspeth Rostow

During the space of four days I watched two men talk for the record about Jack Kennedy, but in both cases the record will be incomplete. One was General Maxwell Taylor; the other was Joseph Alsop. Neither could explain why the president meant so much to him; neither had known the depth of his affection until November 22. Alsop, after finishing a tape, said: "I had no idea that I loved him. I don't go in for loving men. But nothing in my life has moved me as it did, not even the death of my father. And everyone has said the same. Roz Gilpatric - now Roz doesn't go in for men, don't you know - Roz said he's never got over it. And Bob McNamara said the same thing. And Mac Bundy. As though he were the one thing we most valued and could never replace." Joe was walking around the room as he talked, the parrots were squawking, and he took off his glasses angrily to wipe his eyes.

It was different at Ft. Myer. The General was talking about the 22nd of November in his usual, efficient precise way. The tape was on. Suddenly he stopped, sitting very stiffly in his chair and looking out at the flag pole in front of the house. He was crying too much to continue. There is a pause on the tape, and then we go on.

Oral History Interview

With

JOSEPH W. ALSOP

June 18, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Elspeth Rostow

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ROSTOW: Background noises provided by parrots, clocks, a typewriter, and other domestic sounds. Do you recall the first time you met John Kennedy?

ALSOP: Yes, I do. It was the result of having met his sister, [Kathleen Kennedy] Kick Hartington, in London in '46, and we had a good time with one another and she was entertained by me, I guess; certainly I was by her. And as a result, I was asked to dinner when she was here with the president and his other sisters, who were then inhabiting a small and very, very, very disorderly house

[-1-]

near Q Street. I still remember how surprised I was when I arrived on time and found no one at all, living room in complete disorders; some kind of athletic contest had been going on. I think there was a half-eaten hamburger--at any rate, there was some kind of unfinished sandwich on the mantelpiece, and, as I say, no one in sight. Gradually, one by one, everyone appeared, and finally we had dinner. He struck me then as a man of great, great charm and great, great intelligence.

But I didn't know him at all well for a long time because in those days he was so much really younger than I that it wasn't easy to make friends, so to say. I mean by that, that I asked him--an extra man always being at a premium to a dinner here, to what I thought was rather youngish dinner (not here, but when I lived across the street), and he said afterwards

something like, "Don't you ever see anybody but older people?" [Laughter] So it was a long time, it was really not until shortly before he got married that I began to consider him as a friend of mine.

[-2-]

ROSTOW: During this early period did he ever ask you any questions about the Far East or show any particular interest about what you'd been up to during the war?

ALSOP: No, I can't remember talking with him at all in those early days. I never thought--I mean, I can't remember talking politics with him at all. The only thing that I do remember, in fact, is a conversation which struck me very forcibly about his health. He used to turn green at intervals, and I mean really pea soup green; he was about the color of pea soup. And I asked him why, and he told me that he was taking injections for something that he'd gotten in the war and he--I'm sorry, over-dramatized; my memory over-dramatized the occasion. Unless I'm very much mistaken, he said that as a matter of fact, he had a kind of slow acting, very slow acting leukemia and that he did not expect to live more than ten years or so, but there was no use thinking about it and he was going to do the best he could and enjoy himself as much as he could in the time that was give him.

[-3-]

This was a rather shocking thing to hear from a very promising and attractive young fellow.

ROSTOW: This was when he was a congressman?

ALSOP: I'm sure that was before he was in the Senate. I always saw him regretting the time. I've always thought he did not begin to take his own career truly seriously, I mean to have any long range and high aim in his own career, until he went through his very serious illness in 1955, just after his marriage. And I always assumed, I may be quite wrong, that he wasn't seriously ambitious, so to say because he did not think he had very much time. If you don't think you have very much time, there's no use planning an ambitious career. I don't mean by that that he didn't work hard at getting to Congress and that he didn't make a superb campaign for the Senate. I remember that first campaign because I went up to cover it.

ROSTOW: Do you remember the coffee hours on television?

[-4-]

ALSOP: Well, what impressed me most was all the girls. They were exactly like old-fashioned, burlesque pony ballet, wonderfully good looking girls, with their great long legs and great manes of hair, attacking the voters sort of *en masse*. It was an extraordinary performance, I'd never seen any thing like it before in any campaign.

Probably I'm wrong, but I didn't think then, and I still don't think that it even crossed his mind at that time, that he might be more than a senator from Massachusetts and that he might....

ROSTOW: It certainly didn't cross your mind, I gather.

ALSOP: It certainly never crossed my mind. I thought then, and I still think that he was.... That first part of his political career, the exclusion of the Irish in Boston, in old-fashioned Boston, which now hardly exists any longer, had a real role in his approach to politics. I think he was bent on showing that here was a man very different from old-fashioned Boston's view of an Irish politician, if you see what I mean. And

[-5-]

here was a candidate in the quite--I don't quite know how to put it because it sounds sort of snobbish. This is something that was much more on his mind in those days than people imagined.

I remember he was put up for overseer of Harvard while I was on the Board, and he was not elected the first time he was put up--it was just after he had been elected to the Senate. And he minded very much his failure to be elected and took it--I think not incorrectly--as another proof of that kind of act of exclusion against the Irish that the old, cold Bostonians and Harvardians had passed, in effect, in the 19th century and look what it's come to. He was proportionally very pleased, I again remember--as I was on the board at the time, and I went off the board the year he came on--when he was put up again the next year and was elected by a very large majority. I think that was a real desire to sort of.... To raise the Kennedy name in Massachusetts, I think, had a real role in his political career.

[-6-]

But beyond that, before 1955, I think his father, of course, who wanted him very much to be in public life, had a real role. But to be honest, I don't think he would have bothered with public life if it hadn't been for his father.

ROSTOW: And the fact of the death of his brother.

ALSOP: Well, obviously, the death of his brother.

ROSTOW: Do you think if his brother had lived he would have gone into office at all?

ALSOP: No, I don't think so for moment, no. No, not for one moment. Until '55, I had the feeling that he regarded it as a kind of a bother that had to be got through and that if you did something at all, you had to do it well. It did not strike me as being in any sense an absorbing passion to him. Something very important happened inside him, I think, when he had that illness because he came out of it a very much

more serious fellow than We was prior to it. He had gone through the valley of the shadow of death, and he had displayed immense courage, which he'd always had.

[-7-]

It's a very hard problem. I've never seen such.... And then, of course, I've never known a politician like him, so why should one expect to be able to solve the problem by precedent because there isn't anyone I know of.

ROSTOW: Did the change have any effect on his performance as a senator? Do you think he was more seriously involved with issues, spy military and foreign policy, after this period, or simply the dawning of the idea that he might go on to the White House, if you could detect such a thing? How, in short, would you rate him as a senator both before and after?

ALSOP: Well, I think he was a very, very good senator. You know, he had a job to do and he went and did it. And you've got to bear in mind that the Kennedy labor act, which I thought was a very good bill at the time (perhaps a better bill would have been passed if it was closer to the form that he'd originally wanted), stands with the Taft-Hartley law as the only major legislation that I can call

[-8-]

which was originated in Congress since the end of the last war. That is not a small feat, you know. That's just not trivial. He was never a senator's senator, and he never made any attempt to be a senator's senator. I once asked him what was the real ticket of admission to the so-called Senate Club, and he gave that very wry grin of his, and he said that he'd often thought about the problem, and he finally concluded that it was the willingness to do--the ticket of admission was being willing to make deals that you ought to be ashamed of without the smallest sign of shame.

ROSTOW: And that he simply wasn't willing to pay.

ALSOP: That's what he was totally unwilling to pay, I judge. But I think first '55, the first came with his illness in '55, and then, obviously of course, came in the Democratic Convention in 1956. I can't speak with real information about that very critical period because, you see, I went abroad in the autumn of 1956 and lived abroad until the

[-9-]

spring of 1958 when my brother took the job at the *Saturday Evening Post* and our partnership, therefore, dissolved.

When I came back, Stu [Stewart Alsop], my brother, told me that when I went political polling I would find that the strongest Democrat I could use to test sentiment paired against

the obvious Republican nominee, who was of course Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], was nobody else but Jack Kennedy. Well, this absolutely bowled me over because, after all, you don't think that men nearly ten years younger than you are likely to be presidential nominees.

ROSTOW: Come, come, he was only six years younger.

ALSOP: He was nearly ten. I'm 53; he was 46 when he died. Seven years younger, anyway. He seemed much younger than that and looked much younger then. But I tried it, and all I had to do was bang right and let--he had the political properties, so to say, of a fox and....

ROSTOW: This word hadn't filtered abroad to you?

[-10-]

ALSOP: No, I had no idea. Indeed, it hadn't filtered to many people in this country at that time. I think it was in Chicago that Lou Harris and I did our polling. At any rate, we did several days of polling, and this view of Stu's was dramatically confirmed, and I wrote a column or two describing the results in a rather forceful, emphatic fashion. This gave him a great deal of pleasure. Even then, I did not take him seriously as a presidential candidate.

We began to see a lot of one another because every time I saw him I was more impressed by him. He was kind enough to treat me as friend and....

Oh, that summer sometime, it must have been, he came in to have a drink and--I remember it as though it were yesterday, because it was to my complete surprise. It was the time when he was on all the magazine covers, you know; he and Jackie [Jacqueline B. Kennedy] were so good looking it was really quite irresistible to the magazine editors. And that had a lot to do with it, too. We'd been talking about the religious

[-11-]

composition in the country and the Catholic defection from the Democratic Party and the possibility of a Catholic being put on the national ticket, and I said some such thing as he walked in the door with me--he was standing on the stoop, and I said some such thing as, "Well, I'll predict that the next time around you'll be your party's vice presidential nominee." And he turned to me with a grin, and he said, "Well, Joe, we don't want to talk too much about 'VP' until we're quite sure that we can't get just 'P'." I almost fell off the steps.

ROSTOW: Well, what did you say?

ALSOP: Well, I mumbled. I was extremely surprised. Like a fool, I hadn't conceived that he was serious about it. You must realize I'd been away almost for sixteen, eighteen months---sixteen months--and when I thought about it, it seemed to be a first rate idea. I had the highest opinion of his abilities, and I thought he could beat Mr. Nixon, at the time, a prospect I didn't exactly dislike.

[-12-]

When we really became friends was in that short period, end of '58, '59, leading up to the nomination.

ROSTOW: This was when he was running for reelection to the Senate?

ALSOP: Running for reelection in the Senate and when he was running for the nomination, also. I used to see a great, great deal of him, and we talked about every kind of thing, mostly about practical politics, about which he was a delight to talk to. He always reminded me of old. Charley McNary [Charles L. McNary], who used to say, "I hate a man who demagogues when the doors are closed." Well, he never demagogues when the doors were closed, and he always saw the point about politicians. He always saw the practical factors; he never faked or phoned about the impact on him of the practical factors.

ROSTOW: What kinds of issues did you discuss at this stage?

ALSOP: We'd discuss practical politics.

ROSTOW: Why?

[-13-]

ALSOP: You know, I mean how....

ROSTOW: How to wind up.... Well, before the primaries, I presume?

ALSOP: Well, how the various issues affected the electorate, they would affect his chance of being nominated. The characters of the other candidates; he had a very low opinion of all of them except President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], for whose ability he had great admiration that he constantly expressed. Just practical politics. He didn't like abstract discussions, you know.

ROSTOW: Did he ever talk to you about the subjects you'd taken over in your column? And specific discussion of Southeast Asia or Berlin or anything like that?

ALSOP: No, no, not much, not much. I had the impression that he was completely absorbed in those years by his own career, that he'd taken the measure of himself, that he thought he could do a job, and he wanted the job very much. He and I, I think, saw things in very much the same way, and

[-14-]

that was taken for granted. He talked about people in the past he liked to talk about. He was fascinated by the American past. Maybe he did enjoy abstract discussion, but I'm not awfully good at abstract discussion. I loathe the kind of conversation that resembles the *New York Times* editorial, and I always thought he did too. Anyway, we never had it.

ROSTOW: When he talked about the past, which figures did he seem to be most interested in?

ALSOP: Well, he was very interested in Theodore Roosevelt, and he used to ask me about Franklin Roosevelt because I was around in the New Deal time. He would ask me about people who I'd known then. He was a great one for gathering facts and taking assessments from people whose judgment he thought might have some value.

Of course his knowledge of the working of American government was very recent; it made me feel perfectly prehistoric. You see, I started in 1936, in the beginning of '36; he came in in--what

[-15-]

was it, '48?--and should have noticed the way the government worked in the first and second Truman [Harry S. Truman] administration, but he really didn't, you know. He really didn't. His attention to politics, American government, detailed attention to it, really only began in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] administration, I think.

I argued with him about, for example, the role of the secretary of state in the government. At the beginning of his administration he had the conviction that the State Department was a hopeless swamp in any case and that this was a natural state of affairs and that you shouldn't expect to get anything out of the State Department. And I would say, "Well, you're completely wrong because in Truman's time the State Department was the major engine of the American government. Under Byrnes [James F. Byrnes] and Marshall [George C. Marshall] and Acheson [Dean Acheson], not to mention Bob Lovett [Robert A. Lovett], who was the real figure in Marshall's Department, the State Department dominated the government and originated all the great new departures." He'd

[-16-]

forgotten that. He didn't know that. It was just like talking to him about the Roosevelt administration, and yet he'd been there, which again leads me to the conclusion that I offered earlier, that he didn't pay much attention to the government until quite a considerable time after his Congressional career began.

ROSTOW: From what you said, it sounds as though, again, his distaste for abstraction, at least in conversation, led him to regard history as a source from which he could get useful information as to how he might perform and the pitfalls that he might avoid, if he concentrated on the twentieth century and the two Roosevelts....

ALSOP: Well, he was very interested in history, and he was interested in how it had been

done and how it had worked. He was a very extraordinary man. I still don't understand what made him tick, quite. He was terrifically snobbish, you know; but not what people normally call snobbish. He was a frightful snob about--he was terribly old

[-17-]

fashioned, almost like sort of English grandee kind of snobbishness. You know, not about--it was a kind of snobbery of style. You know, in this country people don't say that people had a good war the way they do in England. Well, he thought that way, and he was rather--like all the Kennedys--rather snobbish about people's appearance. He liked people to be good looking and hated people who let themselves go. He was snobbish about courage, and he was snobbish about experience. He didn't want us to be ordinary and routine and kind of suburban, vegetable living. He wanted experience to be intense. Actually, I don't know how to put it, quite.

ROSTOW: Are you saying that the relationship between this form of snobbism and his desire to create a new impression of the Irish-American might in some way be related, do you think, to present anything in his....

ALSOP: No, I think--well, I can't.... I suppose it is. I always felt that that time in England and

[-18-]

Kick, to whom he was closer than any of the rest of his family, all this had more influence on him than most people thought, because to my way of thinking he really wasn't like an American. He wasn't a foreigner either, but the normal, successful American view of life was really not his view at all. But it was the kind of view that Kick took, you see, and was a very uprooted person--Kick, I mean--to the very end. And I've often wondered what would have happened if Kick had not so tragically died, because if she had married as she intended to do, again outside the Church, I have the feeling that there would have been a perfectly hair-raising family row in which the president would have sided with Kick, and I never--you know, can't tell about those things.

ROSTOW: I'm still thinking about your earlier comment about not seeming wholly American. You can certainly contrast the president and the attorney general, the one being much more wholly American....

ALSOP: The attorney general is the most remarkable man

[-19-]

of his age I've ever known. In some respects, he's a more impressive man at his age than his brother was.

ROSTOW: But he's quite different.

ALSOP: But he's totally different. And I think he's a perfectly sort of recognizable American figure.

ROSTOW: And he was much younger during the period when their father was in England, and it didn't influence him in the same way.

ALSOP: And, of course, I think it may have had to do with religion. I don't think that the president had quite the significant--he was a believer, certainly, but I don't think he had quite the same kind of devout, old-fashioned American Catholicism that the attorney general has. What I'm really talking about is a matter of style, of intellectual style, of viewpoint, of what you care most about, of what you like and dislike. It's very hard to pin down, but it's the best I can do after a long life of observing people, and I think it's not inaccurate.

[-20-]

ROSTOW: He certainly demonstrated this style in the primaries, in West Virginia, notably.

ALSOP: Oh, well, once he set out to do anything there was no one I've ever seen who did it more completely, with greater character and with more guts. He interested me more than I can say because for that period I was seeing him, oh, two, three times a week, and you'd watch him calculating the odds, whether to go into Wisconsin, how to handle West Virginia, whether to step up and take on the religious issue squarely once he was in West Virginia. All of those bridges that had to be crossed one by one, and he would always complain a little bit; but he grumped and grouched a bit because he would say it was wrong and irrational and illogical and unfair that this or that or the other bridge should have to be crossed stage 1. Stage 2 would be long mulling over the odds, very careful favoring this or that approach to the bridge, if you see what I mean, which is the best way to do it. And then he'd make a decision, and then, after that, the whole previous argument

[-21-]

would be forgotten and he'd go on from there as though there had never been an argument about whether to do it at all, and then how to do it. It was most remarkable.

ROSTOW: He had a capacity to make decisions which certainly was shown then. Did he seek advice before he made these?

ALSOP: Oh, on an enormous scale, yes.

ROSTOW: And he would listen....

ALSOP: And he must have sought advice on an enormous scale if he could ask my advice, for God's sake. He constantly did. I wasn't such a fool as to suppose that he wasn't asking nine hundred other people's advice if he was asking me. No, of course he took advice on a... I would judge that when a difficult decision came up, before he made his decision he took the opinion of everyone within range. The number of persons within range, of course, was varying as time went on very greatly. But he took the opinion of everyone within range whose opinion he thought was worth having. And

[-22-]

in that period before, you know, when he was going into those primaries, I suppose there were twenty or thirty people in his own sort of organization, two or three newspaper men he was close to like myself, various private friends, his father, a whole series of people.

ROSTOW: The way you used advisors and advice is part of style, and he used them very skillfully; I suspect not simply to get anything like a majority, though I think that Eisenhower....

ALSOP: He didn't go by consensus. He didn't go by consensus at all, and.... No, no, no.

ROSTOW: He could orchestrate this, and....

ALSOP: Yeah. No, no. But he liked to have all the possible views, the views that, so to say, that could be held by persons whose viewer were worth having. Then he had a look at all of them and discarded the ones that he didn't think were any good. I think that's the way to put it.

ROSTOW: It's a mixture of that rather unfortunate concept of varied reasons. He clearly had his

[-23-]

gyroscope, but he used his radar screen to bring in enough returns. But the recent condemnation of the twentieth century is of men who can not make up their minds, clearly....

ALSOP: Totally untrue. It was his habit--and a very good habit for a political leader--not to make very grave decisions until they had to be made. He always left questions open until they were required to be closed, whether by events or because an answer had to be given or some other reason.

There's another thing, Elspeth, when you're discussing how his mind worked: the thing that surprised me most were, first, the matter that I've already referred to, the apparent shortness of his own period of active, close observation of the workings of the American government; and second, his apparent failure prior to his election to calculate the real

dimensions of the burden that he was seeking. I think that he didn't really face up to the appalling moral burden that an

[-24-]

American president now has to carry until Vienna, when he met with Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev], who asked for surrender and threatened war. I saw him immediately after that.

Actually, it was a most extraordinary scene, like something out of a novel, because it was the Radziwill [Stanislas Radziwill] child's christening, and it was really an extraordinary event in itself. It was a frightfully pretty room, lovely afternoon, Prime Minister, the whole damned family, God know who, not the least all these glittering persons, if you see what I mean, all the girls in their prettiest clothes. And in the middle of it all, the president, just barely back from Vienna, sort of shoved me into a corner and talked for fifteen minutes in a tense, new Bray about what he had just been through. I'd had no idea when I was at Vienna how serious it was, and I had the sense that the thing had come to him as a very great shock which he was just beginning to adjust to. And then he responded to it with extraordinary

[-25-]

coolness and resilience. After that, it was when, I think, he really began to be president in the full sense of the word.

ROSTOW: Most people have used the Bay of Pigs as the turning point rather than Vienna.

ALSOP: Well, I don't think the Bay of Pigs--I mean, the Bay of Pigs must certainly have cured any illusions that he had about the certainty of success. And he'd had, after all, a very few failures in his life, and if you've had very few failures you tend to think that you're going to succeed. But learning that you can easily fail in a very big thing if it's done wrong is quite different from taking the measure of the moral burden of the H-bomb button, if you want to put it that way. But after that he'd had the measure of it, and he was, I thought, a very different man.

I remember on that point that he happened to dine here the night the second Cuban crisis really began. I didn't have the faintest idea, of course, that it had begun. And this was a dinner for Chip Bohlen [Charles E. Bohlen], so we had to have the

[-26-]

Alphands [Herve Alphand], much against my will. But, anyway, we were in here after dinner talking about the future, the Chinese and their role in the possible development of the Cold War, all that sort of thing, and he suddenly remarked in a sort of cool, reflected tone that the odds obviously were quite strong that before another decade had passed there would have been an H-bomb war. Well, I very nearly fell off my chair, and that's what Alphand did; you can imagine. I have a very poor memory for what people say; remember what impression they make very clearly. But I always felt that--as soon as I got the news I concluded that this was a sort of fragment of his own internal dialogue about the challenge in Cuba and the need

to take a very great risk in order to meet the challenge; the choice between, in effect, final surrender or running that risk. It was somewhat surprising to hear the president of the United States say this in a perfectly cool tone.

[-27-]

ROSTOW: Earlier you talked about the moment when he grasped the dimensions of the presidency. Did he have any sense of it from that first night after the inaugural when he came here? Did you expect him that evening?

ALSOP: No, not at all. I nearly fell off my chair. [Laughter] I couldn't fall off my chair because I wasn't in a chair. This is very funny. I neither expected him nor had invited him. In fact, it was just sheer accident that I was there myself. But the Inaugural Ball was perfectly awful, and I couldn't--I was bored by it. So I plunged out in the sleet and snow and then couldn't get a ride and finally found young Peter Duchin--I guess he was with Pam Turnure and another couple. And I said that I'll give you a drink if you'll drive me home. I remember it was a frightful night.

I arrived just in time to find a couple of people that I'd seen at one of the earlier parties in a rather lunatic week, hammering on the front door. And I remembered to my horror then that

[-28-]

if there was a light on, there would be champagne going after the inaugural Ball. So I charged up the steps, doing my very best to look hospitable, and fortunately Peter Duchin was very helpful. And suddenly, there I was with ten or twelve or thirteen--I can't remember how many people there were all together--on my hands. Fortunately, there was nothing to eat and everyone was hungry. I'd ordered for once in a way--I never do my own thing--but I'd ordered some terrapin because Susan Mary [Mrs. Joseph W. Alsop] was coming back from Paris to Washington for the first time a little later.

ROSTOW: We weren't; we intended to be. And I was giving a big dinner for her, and there was this terrapin in the icebox, and that was the only thing there was in the icebox. So I started heating up terrapin--even though it's like me to have something to eat, that's funny--but thirteen or fourteen people, and quite unexpectedly. And in the middle of this horrible bustle the doorbell rang

[-29-]

and there he was like a stage set because, because all the lights on the outside were on. The stoop is rather high, and you really don't expect to open the door and see the newly inaugurated president of the United States standing on the doorstep. Well, it's perfectly unimportant. I mean, one of the girls--I'd said there'd be champagne going if there was a light on--must have told him about it, I suppose. He always heard about everything. He came, and then he complained rather because he didn't like terrapin. [Laughter] That's really all I

remember--all I remember about the evening was sort of kitchen work. And the extraordinary spectacle--of course, he looked so young then--of this very young man, about whom you had this very strong feeling, carrying this hideous burden, suddenly standing there in the bright light with the snow behind was like something like on the stage but completely unexpected by me and by everyone also.

ROSTOW: This is on the eve of his first night in the White House?

[-30-]

ALSOP: It was, yes, it was.

ROSTOW: Jackie had already gone?

ALSOP: She was tired and gone to bed. He was excited about the day and wanted to carry it on a little longer. She was very, very tired; she was still quite ill then.

ROSTOW: Did he talk at all about the day?

ALSOP: Everybody told him that he had been a success. I mean, it's totally unimportant, really. The only thing, looking at it, was the joke of all the awful kitchen bustle, of not being able to give him what he wanted to eat. Everybody sort of sat around, paid him compliments which he, being a normal man, enjoyed.

ROSTOW: In a way it sets a tone for that first euphoric period down to the Bay of Pigs.

ALSOP: Yes. He enjoyed pleasure, you know. It was one of his attractive traits. I think it's very unattractive not to enjoy pleasure.

ROSTOW: Certainly none of the New England Calvinists' conscience filtered through to him.

[-31-]

ALSOP: Oh, he had a very strict conscience.

ROSTOW: But not the Calvinist distaste for pleasure.

ALSOP: Oh, no. It was probably "...nothing, petty did nor mean is what Israel..." What is it? What is it? He always made me think of it. It's actually a poem about Charles I, unless I'm mistaken. Some such ridiculous line as, "When from this mortal scene be nothing petty did nor mean," or "nothing common did nor mean." That went to not letting people down, not chickening out, not shuffling off the blame, all those things, not faking, all those things that he never did.

ROSTOW: Always come through gloriously--the Bay of Pigs, when he took it all.

ALSOP: Yes, exactly. Thank God I wasn't here.

ROSTOW: You were in Paris.

ALSOP: Yes. I missed it, thank God! All the people I cared for most, intimately involved. I really think it would have been painful to have been here.

ROSTOW: It was painful even at a distance.

[-32-]

ALSOP: It was very painful at a distance. But he never blamed--I talked to him a couple of times afterwards, and he never blamed anyone but himself.

ROSTOW: You once wrote a book about the men around another president: What was your initial impression of the mix this time, the Cabinet and others?

ALSOP: I thought it was and I still think it was the ablest government that we've ever had in my time. It was head and shoulders above any previous administration except possibly the Roosevelt war time administration. But I wasn't here, so I can't judge. It was much more coherent and had more able men than the peace time Roosevelt Administration.

ROSTOW: I'd agree, but given this to be true, how can you explain then that the Bay of Pigs, where, in effect, he did not use adequate, either...?

ALSOP: I don't know, and I never did understand it. I don't understand it to this day. I don't understand the role of anybody in it. They were all, barring two or three people, among my closest friends. I don't understand the CIA [Central

[-33-]

Intelligence Agency] people not going to the president and saying, "This has been cut down so far we don't think it ought to be done"; I don't understand the president having said, "Well, we'll take this gamble," without being prepared to meet the consequences; I just don't understand anything about it to this day.

ROSTOW: What was the first reaction when you first heard of it?

ALSOP: Well, it was awful, of course. It was awful, of, course. I think a good deal of the responsibility, actually, of the malfunction--and there was a malfunction--has to be explained by the existence of a problem which he never solved, namely the problem of the State Department. He used to think he could be his own secretary of state, and

in a measure, he was. It was a weakness that he tried to be. A modern president can't be his own secretary of state. Franklin Roosevelt tried to be, and the result was that huge areas of policy--I lived in one of them all through the war, in China--were completely neglected. He just didn't

[-34-]

have the time for them. He couldn't get around to them. I think he'd come around to the view that an Acheson-like head of the department was desirable. I think he'd come around to that view before he died. I doubt very much when he took the presidency whether he wanted a really strong secretary of state, because he thought at the outset that he could do it.

ROSTOW: I'm glad, looking back at it, that he did in the OCB [Operation Coordinating Board], that he reproved the NSC [National Security Council]. But this, in one sense, made the task all the more difficult; it made greater responsibility for a lot of people who....

ALSOP: Well, that was good sense. I remember him talking to me about it before the election. You have this vast decision-making machinery, so called, in the Eisenhower administration, which, in effect, became a substitute for decision making. I mean, there were enormous numbers of wheels, all very, very complex mechanisms, vast numbers of very

[-35-]

big wheels all whirling away, all turning around in the most oppressive manner, and it was labeled decision-making machinery, so you'd suppose that decisions were, in fact, being made, whereas, the opposite was occurring. What you were getting was NSC papers saying that the defense of the United States comes first, in paragraph 1. Paragraph 2: "But we can't spend anything on the defense of the United States because the most important element in our defense is a balanced budget." And the president had spotted before he took office that all this apparatus was a substitute for, as I say, for real decision-making. He just got rid of it, which was only sense. It was an illusion, a kind of trick.

ROSTOW: I think I'd agree with you that he'd learned considerably before his death the need for a department. I remember when Walt [Walt Rostow] left the White House, the president said that we could shout all we want at this end of the Avenue, but if they'd put their hands in the department, nothing

[-36-]

will be accomplished, and we need to get more activity within the department, which seems to reflect just what you're saying. He realized that you can't be a substitute for the machinery of the department.

ALSOP: Yes. But he wanted--it was a very complex business, and I have a very high opinion of Dean Rusk as a man. I've known him since the old China days, which is longer than most people have known him around Washington. I remember the president telling me that he hadn't really known what Rusk himself had thought about the Bay of Pigs until twelve hours before the landing on the beaches. And I take it from that and from other evidence that Dean is a man who plays his cards so close to his chest that nobody knows what they are. And if you're not prepared to take a clear and forceful position, point a direction, give an order, you can't lead a great department of the government. I think it's fair to say--I know it's fair to say because I talked to the president at great length about the problem myself--that he

[-37-]

had come to feel that you need a different kind of man at the head of the State Department. But he had a great liking for Dean Rusk. He used to say you know, he was a great gentleman. He was very unruthless about that kind of matter, and so I think he would have liked to make a change, but never made it. I think that is truth of the matter.

ROSTOW: Between the Bay of Pigs and the Missile Crisis, many other issues occurred as a test of his qualities that you've been talking about. Do you recall anything he said about the Berlin crisis? You were back at that stage, weren't you?

ALSOP: Yes, oh yes. I saw him as soon as I got back, which must have been--well, I came back at the same time, if I recall correctly, or a day or so later. Unless I'm mistaken, he asked us to dinner, and we talked about it after dinner. And it was when we were, in effect, mobilizing, and he made it perfectly clear that he'd faced up to the thing and it was better to take the other risk than to

[-38-]

surrender. No, it dwarfed him just then, though, I think. I don't think--at any rate, I had the impression that he'd never quite prefigured to himself what it would be like to have to make that particular kind of choice. Funny thing is, you know, I don't think he was a very imaginative man. He was a man of enormous sympathy and a feeling for other human beings and a tremendous aptitude for facts and a deep interest in how things worked, but he didn't have the kind of imagination which makes a man say, "Well, what will it be like if I have to choose between surrender and using an H-bomb?" That's a different kind of imagination. Maybe it's not desirable to have that kind of an imagination if you're a political leader because it's essentially an apprehensive kind of imagination. You see what I mean?

ROSTOW: I do, and it clears up something for me because I heard him talk between the election and the inaugural about the inheritance that he felt he had

[-39-]

from the Eisenhower administration.

ALSOP: He did not think very highly of it.

ROSTOW: A series of crises is the way he defined it when I was with him, and each one of which could bring us to war. But he said it quite easily, as though he didn't fully believe it.

ALSOP: That's it, you see. [Interruption] That's just what I'm....

ROSTOW: He ticked them off very well: Laos, Vietnam, Congo, Berlin, Cuba. He said no one of these has been in any way resolved. And he used the image of the downward slip that hadn't been arrested could lead to an ultimate confrontation. But it was all said with a scholar's approach rather than a presidential sense of....

ALSOP: That's exactly what I mean. I've often wondered what his response would have been if those first reconnaissance satellites had found that they so easily might have found; namely, the not very large but quite decisive number, potentially decisive number, of Soviet long range missiles which the

[-40-]

Soviets had been perfectly capable of making, but fortunately, thank God, didn't make. That's a very important thing to get on the record, you know; the fact that the president genuinely believed that there probably was a missile gap when he talked about it. I knew because we talked to each other often about it prior to the campaign, and he believed it because he knew, just as I knew, the way the intelligence estimates were formed and the machinery that we had at that time on which to base those estimates. And as the estimates conceded that the Soviets had the capability to produce these wretched objects and producing a very small number of them, about a hundred and fifty would have been enough to be, unless we displayed extraordinary, almost suicidal courage as a nation, this number would have been sufficient to be decisive. If you could not prove that they weren't there, he thought that it was a real, a very real and a very dangerous problem, as indeed did I.

[-41-]

Then, of course, when he took office, he discovered that.... Just before he took office--the first one was in August of the election year--the reconnaissance satellites had given substantial proof of the truth of what up to then was hardly more than an optimistic guess. I think that--I've often wondered what would have happened if it couldn't have been stopped as easily. It would have been exactly the other way around, because a hundred and fifty of these things could have been made, could have been stashed away under a deception or cover flap with very great ease. You can't imagine what he would have done about it because you can't even tell what you would have done about it.

ROSTOW: So many in a way fortuitous results must have helped the president at the time of the Bay of Pigs to take the assumption, which I gather was fed into him, that it would be fine if all the odds broke our way. They'd broken so often

[-42-]

favorably for him; things that might have happened that would have been disastrous had been avoided by a narrow margin. In one sense, up to this point he took the view that I'm afraid no Executive ever should, that the odds would break for him. You can't plan on those assumptions; in fact, you should plan on the opposite, I think. After the Bay of Pigs, the possibility of some unfortunate results certainly had been achieved, and from there on I think he would make assumptions that were far more realistic.

ALSOP: Yes, I think that's quite true.

ROSTOW: Perhaps this explains--I don't know, never thought of it before--why we didn't act more decisively when the Wall was started. We might have anticipated more of a reaction than the Germans, we now believe, were prepared to mount.

ALSOP: No, I don't think that was why we didn't react more decisively. In the first place, I don't think we had foreseen, he had foreseen, any more

[-43-]

than I had foreseen the full measure of the psychological shocks and in the second place, I'm quite sure that living every day with the Berlin problem he viewed the Wall as I viewed the Wall--and, as I must say, I still view the Wall--with some relief because the Berlin problem was genuinely insolvable until there was a Wall. On the hand, Khrushchev could not permit his East German satellite to be destroyed, and his East German satellite couldn't exist indefinitely while there was a continuing hemorrhage of its people into West Berlin and West Germany. You can't run that kind of state in that kind of situation, that's all. It's not possible over a period of time. Something would have been bound to give. The construction of the Wall removed that danger and produced, in effect, a kind of de facto solution, not admitted as such for another two years by Khrushchev, but it was.

ROSTOW: Have you ever discussed this with the president?

[-44-]

ALSOP: Yes, I did. I wrote a column about it at the time which he warmly complimented me on, and I know that was his initial reaction because he talked to me about it at the time. It was Bundy [McGeorge Bundy]. Bundy's initial reaction, too. Why not? I always thought people talked the most terrible and hypocritical nonsense about the Wall that I've heard in many a long year, because it's not our duty to have an H-bomb war in order to support the privilege of emigration for the East Germans. They had the

privilege of emigration for darn near fifteen years, over a decade. It's very ugly, the Wall, and I deplore it, and I deplore East Germany, and no statesman seems to me more odious than Walter Ulbricht, but the fact is that the Wall was the de facto solution of the Berlin crisis, as such, it was darn welcome. [Laughter] I think the president really viewed it that way, too.

ROSTOW: Immediately afterwards he sent the vice president over to say that we'd defend West Berlin with our lives and our fortune and our sacred honor.

[-45-]

ALSOP: We would, and it was his intention to. But defending Berlin with our lives and our sacred honor is one thing and defending the right of emigration of the East Germans is quite another thing. And until there was a Wall, Khrushchev's choice was either to go to war or let East Germany go under eventually, and he couldn't, politically, take the second alternative. See what I mean? And that was apparent. And so the president meant every word that he told the vice president to say. If it hadn't been for the Wall, it has to be noted, the chances would have been much greater, I should think ten times greater, of our eventually being called on to honor the pledge that the vice president made to the people of Berlin. And no one in his senses wants a war if war can be decently avoided.

ROSTOW: I'm rather pleased by the notion of the Wall as one of the early achievements of foreign policy of the Kennedy administration, but your point is....

[-46-]

ALSOP: But it was. It was. You mark my words: If the president did not mobilize that summer and had he shown the smallest sign of give, there wouldn't have been a Wall.

ROSTOW: And again, of course, very well with your notion of when his step upward towards a new concept of the executive came.

ALSOP: Well, he had this idea--which I had, too--before he took office that if you're active and led you could do much more as president than you really can do. His presidency taught me a great, great deal about the American government that I didn't know, because I'd been over-impressed by Truman's ability to carry the country with him on all the great post-war innovations which were the real foundations of the American foreign and world policy and world position. And I rather foolishly thought the president had to be gotten to say that this is the way it has got to be and the country would follow along. And I am quite certain that is what the president thought,

[-47-]

too. We talked in private about what could be done by a really active and determined leader in the presidency, as opposed to Mr. Eisenhower who was one of the most passive, consensus-governing presidents we've ever had. Then he found, of course, that that wasn't true.

ROSTOW: There were many criticisms of his failure to lead. How did he take these? Was he sensitive to the criticism that he did not assert his policies strong enough?

ALSOP: He was very sensitive to criticism, but he was mostly rather scornful of it, too, when it was ignorant criticism, and that was all ignorant criticism. He was very sensitive to criticism. He was very much hurt by criticism if he thought it was informed or accurate. He was very much annoyed by it, worried about its political effects, but he was also rather scornful of it if he thought it was uninformed. When all woolly-minded liberal persons denounced him for not immediately bringing to pass all the often rather silly things they

[-48-]

wanted brought to pass, without the smallest knowledge of lineup in Congress or anything else, it made him scornful.

The thing that's very important to remember about the president was that he was not, in the most marked way, he was not a member of the modern, Democratic, liberal group. He had real--contempt I'm afraid is the right word--for the members of that group in the Senate, or most of them--not for Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] who's a practical politician and a more serious man. What he disliked--and here again we've often talked about it--was the sort of posturing, attitude-striking, never getting anything done liberalism. It's a very curious business, Elspeth. He more than once talked to me about it--we talked about it at great length, never reached any conclusion. I don't understand it to this day. But there's an absolute gulf fixed between the great progressive Senators of my youth in Washington, the Kafolletes [Robert M. Jr. and Sr. Kafolletes], Norris [George W. Norris],

[-49-]

Black [Hugo L. Black], 'Bold' Couzens [James Couzens]--a man very much underestimated, knew more about banking legislation than any man in the country--that group of men who specialized in certain areas of legislation and policy and got things done and left their names on great legislative acts of the utmost importance, and the present crew whose politics always reminds me of ballet dancing in the sense that it's very beautiful but after it's over they've nothing there. They strike all the attitudes that win the plaudits of the *New York Post* and *The New Republic* but nothing is ever accomplished. You can't name a single piece of legislation or even a single major amendment to which a single one of the fashionable, liberal senators of the present time has ever contributed anything at all. You can name quite a number of important steps forward which they have seriously jeopardized by holding up their hands in holy horror and saying, "Oh no, this doesn't go nearly far enough."

[-50-]

This viewpoint was completely foreign to Kennedy, and he regarded it with genuine contempt. Genuine contempt. He really was--contemptuous is the right word for it. He was contemptuous of that attitude in American life, and he was also contemptuous of the now business attitude, and rather openly so. He had no notion of what makes businessmen tick. I can hardly blame him because I don't feel I do, either; but they just bewildered him.

ROSTOW: He also seemed to have a certain distaste, which I can wholly sympathize with, with the science of economics, if that's the proper phrase for it. Economic arguments didn't interest him, particularly, certainly not as much as political arguments. Is that fair? Some have said that he was....

ALSOP: I don't think that's fair, no. I think he had a great distaste for theoretical economics, but I think he was very interested in pragmatic economics, very interested in it.

[-51-]

ROSTOW: Almost as a part of the political process.

ALSOP: As a part of the political process and as a very major part of his own job. After all, it's very easy to forget, but it should not be forgotten, that the economic record of the Kennedy administration, as one looks back from the present standpoint, at any rate, is one of the finest parts of the whole record. What characterized it, I would say, and what characterized his approach to those problems was a severe pragmatism. He didn't believe in any of the ideologies, either of the idea of the left or the ideology of the businessman. He thought that was all a lot of twaddle, theoretical twaddle. All that interested him: Will it work, if so, why? If it won't work, why not? He was a severely pragmatic man.

ROSTOW: We got onto this out of your comments about his leadership, so if I understand you correctly, you believe not only after observing him that the possibility for the president is less in asserting continuous leadership, perhaps, between crises,

[-52-]

and that Congress has failed in living up to the tradition of leadership which some of its better members have had. You hold this true not only of progressives but of conservatives in times?

ALSOP: No, it didn't have to do with Congress, really: it had to do with the country. Congress, as you know, is like a cork in a bowl of water; it's never much below or above the water level of the water in the bowl.

ROSTOW: What's wrong with the country?

ALSOP: Well, it's too comfortable. I mean, when Franklin Roosevelt took office, the whole country was on its knees and begging to be led and didn't even ask where it was being led. His first banking act was introduced in the House of Representatives and passed almost unanimously in the form of a roll of newspaper. And it was. It hadn't been engrossed. The members of the House didn't know what was in it, more than a vague summary. When President Kennedy took office, with the country, despite the kind of rather draggy economy, on the

[-53-]

whole we were very prosperous, except for the submerged tenth that nobody noticed. Complacency had been industriously encouraged by his predecessor. Mr. Eisenhower's administration had been like an enormous national tranquilizer. Nobody was begging for leadership; everybody was saying just leave us alone, don't bother us. To start, as Kennedy did start, the country down a new path in those circumstances was a most extraordinary feat. And he did. He made us think about a whole series of things that I'm very confident will be done about now, dealt with, not by something small like this poverty program; something big will be done. This is genius of leadership, but in those political circumstances you don't just send a bill up to the House and Senate and get it passed. You got to be patient, peg away and talk to the country, talk to Congress and keep pointing your direction and keep explaining and peg away, as I say. He used to complain about that, actually, that Roosevelt's problems of leadership were so much less massive than his.

[-54-]

ROSTOW: It's certainly true. Well, historians like to play with assessment of presidents, and the ones they define as great are almost all presidents who have had a moment when the country is terrified or disturbed and it will allow them to assert....

ALSOP: When it's malleable and it's calling out for leadership. Well, I'm very confident that Kennedy will be remembered as a great president, although the whole thing, everything he accomplished abroad, can go down the drain in Vietnam in the next six months.

ROSTOW: I was going to ask if you think that he will go down in history as a great president, on what will his reputation be based?

ALSOP: It will be based, in my judgment, on a perfectly solid foundation, namely, that is, with great risk and with great pain he set upon a new course both at home and abroad, a very new course, and a much more hopeful one.

ROSTOW: This as course being....

[-55-]

ALSOP: This new course at home consisting of the progressive identification of the great new problems, great new social problems which have nothing to do with old, dreary, left over, New Deliberalism. You know, it was the period just after the war--it used to drive me mad--American liberalism seemed largely to consist of shouting "Revive the OPA [Office of Price Administration]." Anyone could see this was as close to lunacy as it was possible to get. Suddenly, at home, being a liberal is beginning again to acquire some practical content: the problems of poverty, of racial discrimination, the new, hideous, urban civilization in which we now live. All of these things are beginning to be identified, and they're beginning to be dealt with, and above all, they're being thought about. And he made us look at them. He made them--partly, of course, in the case of the race problem, it boiled up of itself and forced itself on our attention, but....

ROSTOW: That's what his critics said; that he, in a

[-56-]

sense, lagged and that he had this issue dumped on him and....

ALSOP: Nothing could have been more ridiculous than to say that. If you pass the civil rights bill, it's his bill. It's a perfect, goddamn bloody miracle that the damn bill is passed, and I don't think it's going to solve the problem, not for a minute--nor did he--but it's the best you can do now, and it's a miracle that you've done that. And if he'd introduced that bill one second before he did there would have been no more chance of passing it than there would be in my jumping over the moon. I was astonished; I'm still incredulous that it did pass when it passed. No, that's very false.

Then the new course abroad is obvious. I mean now, for the first time since 1958, we don't live in the shadow of a possible H-bomb war, and the relations between the two blocs are beginning to move in a much more sane direction. And that's why I say that the whole thing could go down the

[-57-]

drain in Vietnam, because if we drop the ball in Vietnam and concede to China--because it will be to China that we will make this concession, essentially, not to North Vietnam--a gigantic victory, then the other bloc will be radically changed and that whole tendency towards more sane world relationships will be reversed.

ROSTOW: And your views of this would be a wholly unearned and unwarranted victory for the other side in view of the fact that a positive stance now could we keep this from happening and consolidate....

ALSOP: That's what I think; you never can tell. I don't underestimate the fearful risks, but I can tell what the consequences will be if we don't run the necessary risks.

[-58-]

[END OF INTERVIEW - JFK#1, 6/18/1964]

Joseph W. Alsop Oral History Interview
Name List

Kick Hartington	Kennedy, Kathleen
John	Kennedy, John F.
Stu	Alsop, Stewart
Nixon	Nixon, Richard M.
Jackie	Kennedy, Jacqueline B.
Charley	McNary, Charles L.
Johnson	Johnson, Lyndon B.
Roosevelt	Roosevelt, Theodore
Roosevelt	Roosevelt, Franklin D.
Eisenhower	Eisenhower, Dwight D.
Truman	Truman, Harry S.
Byrnes	Byrnes, James F.
Marshall	Marshall, George C.
Acheson	Acheson, Dean
Bob	Lovett, Robert A.
Radziwill	Radziwill, Stanislas
Khrushchev	Khrushchev, Nikita S.
Chip	Bohlen, Charles E.
Alphand	Alphand, Herve
Duchin	Duchin, Peter
Pam	Turnure, Pam
Walt	Rostow, Walt
Rusk	Rusk, Dean
Bundy	Bundy, McGeorge
Kafollete	Kafollete, Robert M. Sr.
Kafollete	Kafollete, Robert M. Jr.
Humphrey	Humphrey, Hubert H.
Norris	Norris, George W.
Black	Black, Hugo L.
Couzens	Couzens, James
Evelyn	Lincoln, Evelyn N.
Phil	Graham, Philip L.
Abe	Ribicoff, Abraham A.
John	Bailey, John M.
Bobby	Baker, Robert G.
Kerr	Kerr, Robert S.
Dulles	Dulles, Allen
Engine Charlie	Wilson, Charles
McCone	McCone, John
Doug	Dillon, Douglas
McNamara	McNamara, Robert S.
Stevenson	Stevenson, Adlai E.

Bill	Martin, William McChesney Jr.
Walter	Heller, Walter
Alice	Longworth, Alice Roosevelt
Lem	Billings, K. LeMoyne
Harry	Hopkins, Harry
Louie	Hopkins, Louise M.
Ros	Gilpatric, Roswell L.
Churchill	Churchill, Winston S.
Lincoln	Lincoln, Abraham
Macmillan	Macmillan, Harold
Lady Dorothy	Macmillan, Dorothy Cavendish
Cecil	Cecil, David
Bowles	Bowles, Chester B. **
Arthur	Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr.
Sorensen	Sorensen, Theodore C.
DeGaulle	DeGaulle, Charles
McMahon	McMahon, Brien
Maurice	Couve de Murville, Maurice
Jean	Monnet, Jean
Puruis	Puruis, Arthur B.
Foster	Dulles, John Foster

Joseph W. Alsop Oral History Interview – JFK #2, 6/26/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Joseph W. Alsop
Interviewer: Elspeth Rostow
Date of Interview: June 26, 1964
Length: 45 pp.

Biographical Note

Alsop, a journalist, author, Kennedy friend and associate, discusses his relationship with John F. Kennedy, reflects upon the Kennedy administration regarding issues such as White House staff, political appointments, White House dinners, and the President's relationship with Charles de Gaulle, among other issues.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed December 13, 1988, copyright of these materials has been passed to the United States Government upon the death of the donor.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Joseph W. Alsop, recorded interview by Elspeth Rostow, June 26, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of
Joseph W. Alsop

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Joseph W. Alsop, of Washington, D.C., do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of a personal interview conducted on October 20, 1979 at Washington, D.C., and prepared for deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

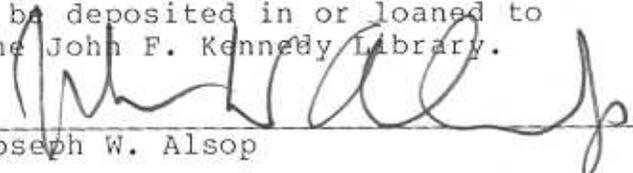
(1) During my lifetime, the transcript shall be available only to those researchers who have secured my written authorization. Thereafter, the transcript shall be available to all researchers.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript; however, access to the tape recording shall be for background use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase, or quote therefrom.

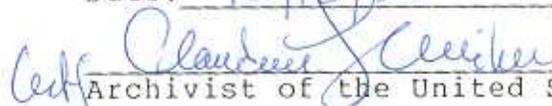
(3) During my lifetime, I retain all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter the copyright in both the transcript and tape recording shall pass to the United States Government. During my lifetime, researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations from the transcript and tape recording without my express consent in each case.

(4) During my lifetime, copies of the interview transcript or tape recording may not be provided to researchers except upon the donor's written authorization. Thereafter, copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the library to researchers upon request.

(5) During my lifetime, copies of the interview transcript or tape recording may not be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.


Joseph W. Alsop

Date: 12/13/88


Archivist of the United States

Date: 12/28/88

JOSEPH W. ALSOP
JFK #2

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
59	Nomination of Lyndon Johnson for vice president
62	Kennedy's relationship with Johnson
67	Reappointment of Allen Dulles
72	Appointment of McNamara
73	Kennedy administration
76	Alice [Roosevelt] Longworth's relationship with the Kennedy family
79	White House dinners
89	White House staff's feelings towards Kennedy
93	The President and gossip
99	Kennedy's opinion of Charles de Gaulle
101	Laos
103	Jean Monnet's influence

Second Oral History Interview

With

JOSEPH W. ALSOP

June 26, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Elspeth Rostow

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ROSTOW: Let's begin with your recollections of the choice of Lyndon Johnson as vice presidential nominee in 1960.

ALSOP: I've already given you some papers bearing on what I know about the choice of President Johnson for the vice presidency, and I don't think it's necessary to go further into the detail of that episode, in which I had a certain share, except as it's worth describing briefly the president's suite when Phil Graham [Philip L. Graham] and I got there. All the politicians--or rather, several

[-59-]

of the politicians, particularly John Bailey [John M. Bailey] and Abe Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff], were biting their nails in the outside room. I'd already talked to Abe and John, who of course come from my state, about my intention to go to the president and say that he must choose the present president. Phil Graham later formed the impression that the president's mind was by then made up, but I must say that my political friends were very far from sure that it was made up, because we got an enormous welcome.

The whole room was full of John Bailey's cigar smoke, general disorder, and a certain atmosphere of triumph as well, and in the middle of it, Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln], looking very cool and rather undernourished as usual. She put us right in the president's bedroom, or the candidate's bedroom, and there he was, looking as he did in those days,

ridiculously young, not particularly tense, not even particularly overdriven in a fairly disorderly room. That gift

[-60-]

that he had for making you come to the point--naturally we wanted to come to the point--that gift which he also had of making you come to the point, we plunged right in and made the pitch that I've described. I think that the Oral History Project ought certainly to ask Kay Graham [Katharine Graham] for the memorandum on all these matters that Phil Graham dictated before he died.

There's only one other detail that I can add, which is somewhat amusing. Before his fall, Bobby Baker [Robert G. Baker] told me something of what had passed in President Johnson's suite where the atmosphere, of course, was very different. Bobby, I would judge, had started out like all the other Southerners, opposed to the president accepting the vice presidency--the present president accepting the vice presidency. At some point along the road, he evidently changed. I would judge, again, because he thought that President Johnson was going to change, was going to accept, and he wanted to be on the winning side. At any rate, he told me

[-61-]

that Senator Kerr [Robert S. Kerr], to whose protection he subsequently transferred, actually took him into that bathroom and gave him (and I quote) "a hiding as though he were a high school boy" (unquote).

I think it's worth saying something, too, about the president's relationship with President Johnson as I saw it through President Kennedy's eyes, at least from what he said to me during the period of President Kennedy's presidency. It had three aspects: (1) A rather humorous insistence on the constant need to humor and consider the then vice president. President Kennedy was well aware of the power of that particular ego and its tendency to inflammation, so he was quite frank about making a very conscious effort to consult at all times, to include the vice president at all times, and to treat him indeed as a vice president ought to be treated but often is not treated. Once or twice, no more than once or twice, he indicated a certain impatience to me

[-62-]

because he could not get the vice president to voice a positive opinion of his own in the many meetings to discuss policy, particularly foreign policy, in which, of course, they both participated. It was apparently President Johnson's habit when he was vice president to listen and to say, in effect, that he is vice president and that he fully supported the president's policy whatever it was going to be or whatever it was. He did not choose--in my opinion, did rightly--to take an independent position.

ROSTOW: Does this hold true for space, in which he had an independent authorization from the president....

ALSOP: I have no idea whether it held true for space. These were larger policy issues than space was under consideration and more controversial. In my opinion, in this case Vice President Johnson was right and President Kennedy was wrong. It was a reflection of President Kennedy's too short observation of the real workings of the American government that he should expect the vice president to have or want the vice president to have

[-63-]

powerful opinions of his own. The job of a vice president is to be a spare part, and who can replace the president with the minimum of disruption and difficulty if something happens to the president. And if the vice president is included and informed, he'll be a good spare part, but if he's included and informed and develops an independent policy so that he's constantly saying, "Well, I thought that, and he did this," he's obviously going to be a very bad spare part. It's of a piece with the misjudgment of the State Department and the role of the secretary of state, of which we spoke previously....

ROSTOW: Could the president perhaps have in mind President Eisenhower's difficulty when asked whether Vice President Nixon had participated in decisions and said he could perhaps think of one if he were given a week? He was really trying to defend the vice presidency, was he not?

ALSOP: No, no, no. It was a genuine---it wasn't very important, but it was a genuine impatience, and,

[-64-]

I think, because he really valued his vice president's opinion. He thought very, very, very highly of Johnson. He'd laugh about him because he is a strange figure as a man, not like anyone I've ever known, and certainly, the president, used to say, wasn't like anyone he'd ever known. And anyone who has this, if you want, somewhat monstrous, more larger than life-size configuration, has this comic side, but he had a very, very high admiration for him. He said he was unquestionably the strongest and best man in the Democratic Party, barring himself, and the natural replacement if anything happened to him.

To these two little points that I've already made, neither of which should be at all overstressed, one should add a very important further point, that with the slightly wry, dry humor and with the occasional impatience and with the constant effort to keep the vice president happy, the president also said again and again that his vice president could not be playing it straighter,

[-65-]

that he couldn't be behaving better. And, of course, with his knowledge of the character of the man, with his knowledge of President Johnson's passion for action, passion for power, he

genuinely admired his ability to control himself in a job in which there was neither action nor power, not to whine and not to develop grievances and so on.

There were always, of course, people trying to make bad blood in one way or another. And as I knew both men quite well, I used to try every month or so to go and make a little bit of good blood, and sometimes it was not so very easy because someone would have told President Johnson some perfect lie about what Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] had said there would be some other wretched, silly, imaginary crime in his head that would be making him miserable. It wasn't, of course, necessary to make good blood on the other side because the president had too much work to do to be worrying. It's remarkable to me, given the nature of the dynamics of the situation and the amount of bad blood making that was indulging in Washington and the

[-66-]

hostility between the kind of people that President Johnson evidently saw and many of the people close to the president, it's remarkable to me that that relationship always did hold up. And I think it's fair to say that with all their....

But two very powerful men, essentially in competition and very ambitious, simply cannot be close friends; it's not a physically possible thing. It's remarkable to me that given that, each behaved on his side in this difficult relationship so well, and this is a point that President Kennedy was well aware of. On the matter of personalities in the president's administration, I think maybe it has a little bit more that's worth saying.

He used to talk very frankly to me, I'm proud to say. First of all, I think I may have had a minor role in the reappointment of Allen Dulles. Bobby Kennedy came to me at dinner here, rather early in the campaign, sometime in August I would guess,

[-67-]

and talked casually about who would make a good new head of the CIA. And I was actually profoundly shocked, because I don't regard the head of the CIA as an essentially political appointee that changes every time there's a change in party in power. Furthermore, I had a great admiration for Allen Dulles and still do. And I made a bit of a fuss about continuity and also said what I still believe, that Allen Dulles had done a damn good job as the head of the CIA. Bobby said, "Well, what about the new face that the administration wants to present to the world?" And I said, "Well, the hell with the new face. That matters much less than the continuity and good mean receiving their desserts." And I subsequently said that to the president when got an opportunity during the campaign. And Bobby, who is the only one I can judge by, has told me that this had a certain influence. I don't know whether they in the end were very grateful for that or not, but there it is. [Interruption]

[-68-]

ROSTOW: Had the president anyone in mind to replace Allen Dulles?

ALSOP: I never did find out. Then there was another incident of minor interest, in which

Phil, again, played a more active role than I did. I knew, because the president had told me, that he was very anxious to make one big, conspicuously bipartisan appointment, and he asked me about it. His mind was running on people like Jack McCloy [John J. McCloy], and I ventured the opinion, which I still think was correct, that if he wanted the appointment to look truly bipartisan, it was quite fruitless to reach back to the great men who had served Mr. Truman, although they were Republicans. I told him the famous story of John McCone, who had supported Mr. Eisenhower very ardently, both with money and in every other possible way, in 1952. Conscious of all he had done, he then came on to Washington, hoping, I would guess, to be at least Secretary of the Air Force. He reported into Mr. Charles (Engine Charlie) Wilson, and Mr. Wilson told him in a somewhat arrogant tone,

[-69-]

which did not at all please Mr. McCone, that he, McCone, was (quote) “taken with Trumanism” (unquote) and therefore unemployable. [Laughter]

I pointed out to the president that this really in a ridiculous way applied to most of these men who would serve their stint in anyway in any case, and that the practical politics of the matter was that he had to get someone who had served President Eisenhower with distinction if he wanted to seem bipartisan, which I believe very strongly he needed to do. He said he'd been thinking pretty much along those lines himself, but he couldn't--among the people who were serving Mr. Eisenhower--he couldn't think of anyone whom he really wanted to employ, except perhaps Doug Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], and he wasn't quite sure whether Doug would be loyal, as he put it. It was very, very easy for anyone who knew Doug Dillon to assure the president that loyal was one thing that he certainly would be; if the president gave him a job, that he would be loyal to the man that he served until he resigned the job.

[-70-]

After this conversation I got hold of Phil--he and I were acting as sort of partners in those days--and Phil called the president up and made a strong pitch in Doug's favor. We both had thought that Doug was far and away, of the younger and more energetic Eisenhower officials, was far and away the ablest and most national minded. So Phil made a big pitch for Doug, too. And unless I'm mistaken, Phil actually made the telephone call to Doug which prepared Doug for the evening visit he received from the president--he practically came in through the window in the middle of a dinner party offering the secretary of the Treasury. [Laughter] I only say all this because there again Bobby told Doug much later, who then, very much moved, told me, that this had an influence on the president's decision. I can't see why in God's creation it should have, but it's interesting and curious and shows the odd way things happen.

ROSTOW: May I ask whether the president regarded the appointment of McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] as an act of

[-71-]

bipartisanship or did he simply choose him on quality grounds?

ALSOP: I didn't know at all; you see, I knew nothing about the McNamara appointment. I went abroad almost immediately after the election because I didn't want to be entangled in all that; in my business you either use up your credit trying to find out who's going to get what job or, you go away. It's better not to use up your credit because everybody forgets that you've been the first to find out and you need credit later. So I don't know anything about McNamara. I do know that the president came to admire McNamara extravagantly and to regard him as his very best of all his appointments.

He was also deeply satisfied by his appointment of Doug Dillon. And I must say, I think when you consider all the different points of view about fiscal policy and economics, that economic policy was tranquilly reconciled without any real friction--although people were constantly trying to create it, God knows--and that a meeting

[-72-]

of minds was achieved between as strangely an assorted group as Bill Martin [William McChesney Martin, Jr.] and Walter Heller and Doug Dillon, of course, by the president's presidency. When you think of all that, it turned out pretty damn well, particularly in view of the great success that the Kennedy administration had with an intelligent, active, but (in my opinion) conservative fiscal-economic policy. It was one of the president's most underestimated successes. It's a success, in turn, which, in my judgment will contribute greatly to President Johnson's reelection.

ROSTOW: What about other people around the president?

ALSOP: What about other people? He was openly, I regret to say, contemptuous of Governor Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson].

ROSTOW: Always?

ALSOP: Always. He loved to hear jokes made about him, and I was only too eager to make them.

ROSTOW: On what grounds did he....

[-73-]

ALSOP: He saw him as a self-regarding, posturing fellow. He came under the--he came more than will within the category that the president disliked the sort of attitudinizing liberal. I can't recall precisely any specific thing the president said about Governor Stevenson, but I've never heard him say anything about him except in the tone of irony, and I certainly have heard him say more than once--after the second Cuba, for

example--things that revealed a marked lack of admiration both for his judgment and degree of resolution. It was terribly funny, actually, because his relationship with--I'm afraid the secret of a good relationship with Governor Stevenson is gross flattery thickly laid on, and the president couldn't ever really bring himself to flatter Stevenson in the way Stevenson wanted to be flattered. He used to make Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] call him up and tell him he was doing a wonderful job and kind of massage his ego. But of course that wasn't nearly good enough, particularly if he was also

[-74-]

quite often making Mac Bundy call him up and tell him to stop doing something or other or not to come or something else. [Laughter] So that I think it's fair to say that Governor Stevenson really didn't like the president, and I'm quite sure the president didn't much like Governor Stevenson. On the other hand, President Johnson, who has never had any hesitation about gross flattery thickly laid on if he thought it was the smallest degree useful, did what was indicated, and I'm told the relationship is sweet evening breeze.

It's very funny, because there were certain kinds of things the president couldn't bring himself to indulge in false patriotism or false religion or false appeals, in general, in public. Certain kinds of duplicity---he could be very rough, very ruthless, very tough: he could deceive an enemy, but phony slaving, with phony compliments of someone whom he really didn't have a high opinion really stuck in his throat like a fishbone; it wouldn't come out.

[-75-]

ROSTOW: It's in a sense, similar to his reluctance--not reluctance, inability to put on funny hats or in any way....

ALSOP: It was a sort of sense of his own business of "nothing common nor mean." He just couldn't bring himself to doing certain kinds of things that he regarded as.... I don't know exactly what, infra dig or bad style or what. We've discussed the State Department already.

ROSTOW: Well, just another point on this: At the same time, his manners towards older people were always impeccable, I gather, and he behaved himself extremely well towards people senior in age around town for whom he had no great warmth. So in a sense he....

ALSOP: No, but he had beautiful manners with elderly people, of course. And then he was interested in them if they had anything to tell him. It always moved me very much that Alice [Roosevelt] Longworth, who's, of course, my cousin and my dear friend--her relationship with this very young

[-76-]

administration. She has never liked any administration since her father [Theodore Roosevelt] went out of office. The president and Jackie, I think it's fair to say, admired her because she has a great deal of style in many different ways and, also, a little bit as a kind of monument, a very vivid and lively monument. They were very nice to her, and she really fell in love with the Kennedy administration. She was prepared to vote for him, the first Democratic vote she would ever have cast in her life. They were very fond of her. She really liked Bobby, I think, better than she liked the president. It always amused me in the sort of high period of the Kennedy administration it was wonderfully intense and full of life and really very dashing. You remember at those big dinners that Kay Graham or the Dillons or somebody like that--they were always turning up. And they were always very gay, and everyone was very young, and most people were rather good looking, and it was really wildly unlike any

[-77-]

ordinary administration rally. All the other ladies would be grinding their teeth because there would be Alice Longworth invariably--or almost invariably--sitting between Bobby and Mac Bundy and the three of them making so much noise that you really almost had to stop short. They were topped by someone of eighty. All these people, including the president, could have very easily been her sons, and I think if you really work at it, Bobby might have been her grandson. So that's one aspect of the....

ROSTOW: She once said she had an "incredible appetite" for Kennedy, if I remember the phrase.

ALSOP: She really adored them, and they really adored her, it seemed to me. They were very nice to her. It meant a great deal. She was--it was very moving to me, because I admire her extremely, but she's had, in many respects, a very successful but not a very happy life. It was wonderfully sort of sweetening and cheering when you're suddenly seventy-six to have--wonderful kind of

[-78-]

last flowering, if you see what I mean.

ROSTOW: Yes, I believe so. You mentioned dinners. Do you recall your first dinner at the White House?

ALSOP: That was terribly, terribly funny. Finished me for caviar; never liked it since. Arkady [Inaudible] who's a very nice man, had sent the president and Mrs. Kennedy the nicest Inauguration present I've ever seen in my life, ten pounds of caviar. Rather imposing. And they were kind enough to ask me and the Franklin Roosevelts, I remember--I don't remember anyone else, but I think there was one other couple--to dinner on Sunday night; the first time they'd ever had anyone in the White House.

ROSTOW: It was the night of the first reception in the White House which took place that Sunday afternoon after the Inaugural.

ALSOP: I expect so, yes. Anyway, the House was empty, and I remember they were very far from settled in. I remember Jackie saying, "Oh, Joe, do you know what I've just discovered? There are

[-79-]

twenty calligraphers, all writing away in the cellar." And sure enough there were, because they'd stopped doing that for very small dinners a little later, but all those copperplate place cards, copperplate menus, the whole thing was there.

And it was a great shock to me, because I hadn't seen the White House since Franklin Roosevelt's time, when I knew it very well. And in those days it was what I would describe as sort of an old-fashioned gentleman's house: I mean by that it was what the French would call *digne*; it was suitable, very handsome, a lot of hideously ugly things, some very pretty things, all mingled together. It was just like a house a sort of nice family had been living in for a great many years. When I went back, I found that it looked precisely like the presidential suite in the Muehlebach Hotel, only not quite as nice. There wasn't a single pretty thing in it, and there wasn't anything that wasn't fake or phony. I have never seen anything like it. It made you want to sink through the floor it was so awful. I was genuinely upset.

[-80-]

Here was all this caviar, and it was very, very gay--a lot of champagne before dinner. I remember they took us on a tour of the House, and the first noteworthy item was in the Oval Room upstairs, there were a pair of things like portholes, which I noticed; no one had noticed them.

ROSTOW: Portholes leading where?

ALSOP: Well, that's it. I said, "Well, what the devil are those?" They were on either side of the door. The usher came in, and the president asked, "What are these portholes?" And the usher opened them, and what they were, were Mr. and Mrs. Eisenhower's his and her television sets. The usher explained that Mr. and Mrs. Eisenhower didn't like to look at the same programs but liked to look at their programs together, so they'd have their dinner on trays, one here, one there, and the portholes would be opened and they'd watch--one a Western, I suppose, and one something else, I don't know what. At any rate, there were these

[-81-]

portholes with built-in televisions.

Then he went into the--you remember, the president's bedroom is just next door to the Oval Room--and he took us first into his bedroom, and there was this gigantic piece of furniture, a huge highboy. I think it was given by David Finley, and it was really the only good piece of furniture that was still visible anywhere. It was backed up against the door. The president gave a rather wicked, wry grin, jerked his finger at the highboy and said, "That's the door to Mamie's room." [Laughter] It hid the door. It was so silly. You know, we ate ourselves silly with caviar. They didn't want, you know--and this is also worth knowing--they didn't want to have it changed at all just because they were president and Mrs. Kennedy instead of Jack and Jackie.

ROSTOW: But they did change it, certainly.

ALSOP: The president, I was even told, was quite offended because I wrote him a letter as soon as he was elected saying, "Dear Mr. President," and something

[-82-]

about, "I want to be the first to call you this. I want to tell you that I view your election with mixed feelings; I've never been more happy about any president's election in my time, but it's always been my observation that the president of the United States has no friends but history, and he's very lucky if he has history. There is nothing more I value in these last years than our friendship, and I do feel that I've lost a friend while I've gained a president." And roughly speaking, "I'll see you when you're through with your present job." I did this partly from genuine emotion and partly because I wanted him above all not to feel that I was going to try and presume, in fact, on our past friendship. He never answered the letter. Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] subsequently told me that he was quite offended by it when he received it.

By the same token, that evening Franklin was calling him Jack still, which shocked the life

[-83-]

out of me. In fact, I told him to stop. At some point in that period, very early period, still saw quite a lot of them, Jackie told me I was being too respectful. And I wrote her a letter and said, "Well, now, damn it, you have to treat the president of the United States, whoever he is, that way. You've got to bear in mind for all of us not just our old friend; once he's president, he's the repository of all our hopes and fears and, therefore, in some sense a sacred object, and you can't not treat him that way. It's quite false and wrong to do anything else." I think she was quite cross.

ROSTOW: Did they understand later?

ALSOP: Well, I think they both came to understand, and I think they both came--I'm quite certain they both came to feel that I was right. Whether they remembered

what I'd said or not is quite another thing. But I think they did remember, at any rate, in a kind of a general way, because unless I'm very much mistaken, this is the last private

[-84-]

house that they more or less regularly and willingly came to. And sometimes he would even ask if they could come, and this is because--it's the result of being an old man with lots of experience--I never forgot what was not due to him but due to his office. I never did anything except work very hard to--Susan Mary, too--worked very hard to keep anytime they came completely quiet and very hard to make sure that anyone you asked was just asked because it would give him pleasure rather than doing you good or please another old friend or something else like that. Sometimes you had to be quite ruthless about that. But once a man occupies that office, you have to be ruthless if you're going to take his time at all. You have to consider him and not anybody else. And so they used to come here, and I was always very proud of it.

ALSOP: Presidents with quite different personalities than President Kennedy have had cronies; did anyone fall into that rather rewarding role in this administration?

[-85-]

ALSOP: No, he had in some sense a kind of court, if you want. All presidents have courts and a lot have cronies. But the people who belonged to this court, most of whom were men I liked very much and still do like very much, were people with no political role whatever. And if you're a newspaperman, you can't not have a political role; I mean, you can't suddenly stop being a newspaperman, and so you can't join a court in that kind of way. You can't just be the cozy old thing that any old thing can be said to; you know, it's not possible to do. This is true with politicians and some kinds of businessmen and so forth. But if you're nice and Lem Billings [K. LeMoyné Billings] or Bill Walton or Chuck Spalding, it's quite different. Those are people with a deep devotion to him with whom he could relax, who weren't cronies exactly, but.... I don't know how to describe them. I would not say that they went on being his friends because they never, never, never once forgot, and after the first six months he never once forgot, he was president of the United States.

[-86-]

ROSTOW: Despite all this, don't you think that he had a quite remarkable capacity for, not only for friendship, but for holding the loyalty of people? It struck me....

ALSOP: Of course this was the extraordinary; this was, indeed, the unique thing about President Kennedy. Because if you think about it, great men are not loved, at any rate, by the people who are close to them. Roosevelt was not loved.

ROSTOW: Not even by Harry Hopkins?

ALSOP: Harry Hopkins didn't love Roosevelt. He greatly admired him; he wanted to help him; he thought he could be useful to him. He was his weaknesses. He was bored to death by him quite often. I remember dining there--the last night I ever dined there was in the war in '43--and Harry and Louie Hopkins [Louise M. Hopkins] were living in the White House. And there was a lot of female royalty there and Alex Wilkert and me. And the president was tired and didn't want to--tried to make other people talk but all the female royalty

[-87-]

only wanted him to talk. So he started off on the kind of thing that, you know, he could say without even thinking--like toothpaste from a tube, sort of like automatic racking. It was the most boring 1910 Racket Club stories about Mr. Freddy Cabar and such New York personalities. I thought both Harry and Louie looked exactly like things in Aspic--glazed with boredom. Harry contrived to get around Roosevelt. He knew his character. He knew if the thing was presented this way, he would be impressed; if it was presented that way, he would not be impressed.

This was not, as far as I could see, ever the case with Kennedy. On the other hand, I think the common attitude is a story that's hard to tell now days without giving what might seem to be a false meaning to it. I remember lunching with Ros Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric], who is, after all, not a very emotional man and a man with a very long experience in the world, just a day or so after the president died. We had a long standing luncheon

[-88-]

engagement, and for some reason we didn't break it. We were talking about it, and Ros suddenly burst out and said, "You know, Joe, when the president died, I suddenly realized that I felt about him as I've never felt about another man in my life." What he meant was, of course, in a kind of way--as I say, now days it's difficult to use that word--but in a kind of way he loved him, and I think that this was true of an enormous number of people who were exposed to President Kennedy. I know it was true of myself. I never minded anything as much as his death, even my own father's death. I remember Mac Bundy saying the same thing to me; his father had died only a few months before, and he was deeply attached to him. And it wasn't, you see--the great point is, it was not because he had great powers it was because he was what he was in some sort of way, because of "nothing common did nor mean," you know. Well, go ask Doug Dillon. I'm sure Doug will tell you that no relationship that he's ever had with

[-89-]

anyone has ever meant so much to him as his relationship with the president, and yet it wasn't a very intimate relationship.

ROSTOW: Do you think this was realized by most of us before November?

ALSOP: In a measure, surely; but not how much it was.

ROSTOW: Exactly.

ALSOP: I mean, I didn't realize--if you asked me, "How would you feel if the president should die?" I would have said it would be bloody awful; the worst thing that I could possibly think of. But I wouldn't have thought that it would practically send me off my rocker. I wouldn't have expected Ros Gilpatric suddenly to say out of the blue the kind of thing that he said to me, and above all the rest, what we both remember. This is a very puzzling thing about President Kennedy because, you know, I've been around an awfully long time and I've seen a fair number of fairly big men, and none of them had this capacity, with the possible exception of Churchill [Winston S. Churchill]. I've always wondered--I think he probably did have it.

[-90-]

But no one else that I've ever known in public life had it. It was of crucial importance. I'm not at all sure that it wasn't, in some measure, a handicap to him.

ROSTOW: Why?

ALSOP: Well, because you have this sort of--people like the group that saw him.... Well, because it's much more important to be adored by--for a political leader, it's much more important to be adored by the Congress and by the people who don't know him than to be adored by the people who do know him. You see what I mean?

ROSTOW: The unhappy phrase: the images that one....

ALSOP: There's one other thing about his life that may be worth mentioning: They always gave you too much to drink. They had the best wine I've ever had in any house in Washington, including the French embassy, very markedly including the French Embassy. They may have, I think, perhaps, made a special effort when Susan Mary and I went there because the president thought we had good wine

[-91-]

and knew something about it. But they always gave you too much to drink. It was very hard not to take that one extra glass that didn't make you drunk but it made you wake up the next morning without a very clear recollection of anything except of having had a darn good time. You couldn't do a sort of play by play conversation. Maybe that was why I....

ROSTOW: You're not stressing this as a subtle security device?

ALSOP: I'm sure it wasn't. [Laughter] That's very funny because neither of them drink

very much. We'd start off with this perfectly wonderful white burgundy which is--you might just as well put an ice pick in you liver as to drink any quantity of it, but it was so good you couldn't resist. And then along comes superb claret and then that champagne that he was so fond of that I always thought was overrated. You really had to use great self-control not to take that extra glass and a half--always amused me. Of course, I never

[-92-]

knew quite why that was true, but it was undoubtedly true.

ROSTOW: You've not mentioned daiquiris; I gather they didn't tempt you as much?

ALSOP: No, no, no. They used to give me--well they'd give me a double shot right before dinner.

ROSTOW: It seems to me that we've covered a good many aspects of the president as a man. We have other....

ALSOP: Oh, yes. Let's do five more minutes about the president and gossip. He told stories marvelously. I never can remember stories so I don't remember the stories he told, but he was a wonderfully funny storyteller. In fact, he was a very, very funny man.

ROSTOW: Was he a mimic at all?

ALSOP: No. President Johnson is a marvelous mimic, but President Kennedy was a wit, genuine humor. I wrote, and I still think, he was first humorous president since Lincoln. He was humorous about himself. He was very, very, very, very funny and not often and in a very kind of piano, wry

[-93-]

way. But it gave salt to everything. Of course, he adored gossip. There is a grave shortage of gossip in Washington because, as I always say, real estate replaces sex in this city, and he wasn't very interested in discussing virility. [Laughter] He loved gossip, and we'd get back from abroad--there's always a little gossip in London, after all--and he'd ask, "What's the news?" He had a very human fondness for gossip and all that.

ROSTOW: Did he tell or just received gossip?

ALSOP: Yes, he'd tell it if he had any. Or I would say sometimes he'd tell it. But he loved it. I remember the first time he dined here with Susan Mary. Susan Mary had a great success with him because he asked her what Macmillan [Harold Macmillan] was like, and Susan Mary told him David Cecil's story about Macmillan when

Lady Dorothy [Dorothy Cavendish Macmillan] was having her famous walkout with [Inaudible]. The whole Cecil clan and Cavendish clan formed up in a body and married off [Inaudible] to Lady Dorothy's cousin, I

[-94-]

think it was. Everyone said, "Well, that's out of the way, and this terrible problem is over," instead of which Lady Dorothy went along on the honeymoon. And David Cecil said, "Shows what a strange man he really is, because all he did about his wife going along on this honeymoon was to go away for the weekend to the country and be sick, out the railroad train window." [Laughter] It's a true story, by the way. He remembered that story. He got very fond of him in London, I think, but he remembered the story always. He loved stories like that.

ROSTOW: Did he allow himself to gossip about the many transients all through the town after his presidency?

ALSOP: Well, after all these transients didn't provide much material for gossip, you know. Not a great deal. But he was very frank about people. You always knew what he thought about people pretty well (at least I thought I did): who he was impatient with; by whom he was impressed, that sort of thing.

[-95-]

ROSTOW: What qualities in people do you think made him most impatient?

ALSOP: Twaddle and cowardice.

ROSTOW: Cant, too, perhaps.

ALSOP: Cant is what I mean by twaddle. Cant, he couldn't bear cant. He couldn't stand demagoguing when they are closed.

ROSTOW: Ever discuss Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] with you?

ALSOP: He couldn't stand Bowles. He couldn't stand any front. Then, of course, he didn't have the guts to deal with him the first time. That was a ridiculous episode.

ROSTOW: How do you explain his gentleness in dealing with people and dislike of firing them?

ALSOP: I never did understand it because he looked kind of ruthless but he really wasn't at all. They sent young Arthur [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] over to

make peace with Bowles. I can remember it. Of course, the proposal that was made to the president filled him with perfect contempt. "Imagine suggesting that," he said to me.

ROSTOW: Which proposal?

[-96-]

ALSOP: Well, because, you see, the first Bowles crisis, which I guess I had a minor role in settling, Bowles was in great agony and telling everyone and sundry that only he had been right about Cuba and other endearing things of that kind. Young Arthur was sent over to pacify him and--I've always wondered whether it wasn't because Bowles spent such a lot on his house in Georgetown and didn't wish to vacate it; I didn't understand what was behind it all. At any rate, Bowles literally proposed to young Arthur that they put George Ball up one and give him the substantive authority that had belonged to Bowles, but leave Bowles the perfectly empty title of Under Secretary with none of the authority. It's an extraordinary arrangement, if you think about it, for a man to suggest and to accept, but young Arthur duly brought back this message and the president accepted it and Bowles stayed on I can't remember how many months, until the second Bowles crisis, which was handled by

[-97-]

Mr. Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] rather more ruthlessly. But again, it was Sorensen that was sent to see Bowles the second time, not the president.

ROSTOW: As I've been re-reading your columns this time, you'd been writing roughly on the level of Chester *delindus est*....

ALSOP: You see, there was quite a business at the beginning of the administration between all the sort of Stevensonites, who kept trying to capture the administration in one way or another, and the sort of hard-headed persons like, if you want, Bob McNamara, Mac Bundy, and Walt--very much Walt--and others who didn't want the administration captured by the Stevenson world opinion viewpoint. The president had a certain weakness for sort of virtuous intellectuals.

ROSTOW: Maybe the explanation--could it also be that he felt that he wasn't sufficiently secure within the party and needed that wing for awhile longer?

ALSOP: No, I don't think so. I don't think that he ever thought that they brought many votes.

[-98-]

He never thought that.

ROSTOW: If these were the qualities that annoyed the president the opposite are obviously the qualities that he admired. Of whom did he speak most enthusiastically from '61 on among those around him?

ALSOP: I suppose McNamara.

ROSTOW: You say he admired Macmillan. Did he talk to you about de Gaulle [Charles de Gaulle] at all?

ALSOP: He used to say about Macmillan that he was a gentleman, that he was a real gentleman.

ROSTOW: You mentioned last time, he also used the phrase about the secretary of state.

ALSOP: Yes. I'm not sure that he admired him, but he liked him.

ROSTOW: What did he say about that great gentleman, Charles de Gaulle?

ALSOP: He couldn't understand him. I used to tell him (and he, again, would say I was right) you can't understand de Gaulle--no American can understand de Gaulle, because no American can understand making

[-99-]

vicious public rows about where you sit at the table, and unless you understand that and, indeed, sympathize with it, you can't really understand de Gaulle.

ROSTOW: True.

ALSOP: And it's worth noting that he was.... I thought at the beginning that he was wrong. I used to talk to him a lot about the French relationship. I thought we ought to try and do something on the nuclear front, try and establish some kind of relationship with de Gaulle. I now think I was wrong in urging that; no one will ever know. The president, you know, was like an Irish gombeen, an Irish money lender, about that nuclear authority, and he wasn't about to share it if he possibly could.

ROSTOW: He had the McMahan [Brien McMahan] act, also.

ALSOP: He had the McMahan act, but it was quite possible to get around that. That was the first phase. And then our discussions of de Gaulle. And then I went to Paris after the last crisis. This is

[-100-]

interesting, I think--my experiences are of no importance, but it's interesting, I think, because my account of this experience came up three or four times subsequently in conversations with the president, and I think it might have had a great effect on him.

I had lunched with Maurice Couve de Murville privately, who was in those days a very close and old friend of mine. (We're not friends any longer). It was after Laos, and I suppose I annoyed him--after the first Laos crisis--I suppose I annoyed him by quite accurately pointing out to him that the French Secret Service apparatus in the Far East was a very undependable source of information because: (a) they were money corrupt; and (b) they were viciously anti-American because in various conjunctures, particularly in 1954, we blocked their way to making a great deal of money. They were going to sell South Vietnam to a local Al Capone, General [Inaudible]. Having installed him in charge,

[-101-]

they were going to clear out every drawer and then clear out with him. And we stopped that. At any rate, I said something about this, warned Couve as a friend. But he didn't know these people; I knew them. And I suppose he didn't know anything.

Anyway, what climaxed--you know, we talked about American policy: I said I thought American policy would develop and has developed, and we weren't about to give in. And he suddenly screwed up his face in an expression of absolute hatred and said, "You can't have your way everywhere in the world. To begin with, you're not rich enough anymore."

I told the president about that because it struck me as the most extraordinary dropping of the mast that I'd ever seen--or seen in a very long time. And he used to bring it up again in discussions with France, and it helped to make him aware that there was a genuine, genuine deep resentment, sort of a sense of rivalry, dislike

[-102-]

and all that. By the end, he had wholly given up; I mean, here was no thought in his mind that any dialogue with de Gaulle was even remotely possible and all you could do was confront him with facts.

They were all to optimistic, of course, about making Europe--mostly on account of Jean Monnet, in my opinion.

ROSTOW: What do you mean by that?

ALSOP: Well, Monnet has this power to mesmerize Americans. I never understood it. I saw it work since the second day he came here when he started to work on me.

I don't mesmerize very easily, and he never really mesmerized me, but I guess I introduced Jean to the American political community. He came over here on the purchasing commission [British Supply Commission] in the war, and I had lunch with Purvis [Arthur B. Purvis] that day and saw Jean, immensely impressed by him, introduced him to all the people who were then my close friends and sort of partners in the awful interventionist group--I was a very junior partner--such

[-103-]

as Dean Felix Frankfurter, all of whom he proceeded to mesmerize. I think he rather mesmerized Dean Rusk; he mesmerized Foster Dulles [John Foster Dulles] for that matter; I think he rather mesmerized Mac [McGeorge Bundy] for awhile; And it even, to an extent, alarmed me because they were taking advice about American policy from a foreigner who, after all, had a quite strong and very obvious *parti pris* of his own. This same thing happened over the EDC [Economic Development Council]--I had seen all that. But it was very interesting.

[-104-]

[END OF INTERVIEW - JFK #2, 6/26/1964]

Letter #1:

Dear Mr. President,

Until Charles Bartlett's column of yesterday burst on my attention, I had always thought that nothing could drive me to mention to you my own small share in your nomination at Los Angeles. But Charley's nonsense now drives me to do what I had never before imagined doing, simply because I think you ought to have the real facts, and I am a first hand witness who can give them to you.

In brief, the story starts when I ran into Phil Graham at luncheon, on the day when President Kennedy was making his decision about the vice presidency. I had already made up my mind to put in my two-bits worth in favor of a Johnson nomination; and I asked Phil to come along, since I felt his support would increase the effect very greatly; and we had a way of acting in partnership until his tragic loss. He did not know President Kennedy nearly as well as I did at that time, and at first he was hesitant; but I told him not to be an idiot, and went up to the main Kennedy suite to ask Evelyn Lincoln for an appointment. She said "the Senator" would see us in a few minutes; and we sat about talking with John Bailey. He was pleased when I told him Phil's and my intention, because he thought that our advice, coming from outsiders with alleged intellectual tendencies, would add some weight to the recommendation already made by most of the senior political leaders, like himself. Subsequently he was told, as Bobby has told me, that this was indeed the result.

Before very long, we were admitted to President Kennedy's room. I told Phil I intended to leave the main sales talk to him, but wished to make the introduction, so to say. I said, in brief, that Kennedy "couldn't not" offer you the vice presidency for two very good reasons; first, you were bigger by head and shoulders than any of the other possibilities; and second, he had to think of the country's interests if anything should happen to him. At this point, he put in: "That's right. I've got to think of that, and Lyndon is the best qualified for the job by a very long shot," or words to this effect--I didn't write them down at the time but remember the sense. I added only one other point; and this was for two reasons. First, Herman Talmadge, who did not want to accept the vice presidential nomination, had non the less warned me, with some bitterness, that you would do so. Second, I had concluded that it would be your duty to accept, and knowing you, I thought you would reach the same conclusion and would do your duty. So I finished with great emphasis: "But I want to warn you, don't make the offer to Lyndon Johnson just as a gesture, in the expectation that he will refuse. I think he will accept, and you should not make the offer, therefore, unless you truly want him on the ticket." To this the president replied, with equal emphasis, "Of course he will accept, if the offer is made to him. I've figured that much out." Phil then made a longer, and I must add, much more moving plea than mine.

There is no question, in short, that the offer to you at Los Angeles was made in the expectation of a refusal. The opposite is the case, as I can testify without hesitation.

Letter #2:

March 25, 1964

Thanks for your kind note. I am so happy that you were pleased to have the facts that I was able to supply.

There were two points which I should have included, if they had not slipped my memory. Since writing my letter to you I have talked to Kay Graham, and since she has a very long memorandum contemporaneously prepared by Phil (whom I miss more and more every day) she was able to refresh my memory on these points.

To begin with, Phil got the impression in that first talk in President Kennedy's hotel room that he had already made up his mind to offer you the nomination. I thought he was only leaning that way and had not reached a final decision. Phil's impression was perhaps correct; but in any case it clearly proves the nonsensical silliness of the story that he had made up his mind to chose someone else.

Secondly, I know that when I begged the president to think of the future, I added, "You can't risk leaving this country to Stu Symington; you know perfectly well he's too shallow a puddle to dive into." Whereat your predecessor who had heard me make this unkind but unhappily accurate joke before, grinned broadly and said "You know damn well I'd never do that."

I may add that after writing you, I ran into Bobby Kennedy and discovered that he was as much upset by Bartlett's "damn fool, totally inaccurate piece" as I was. I note this in passing because I am normally sure that some of the rather nasty people in Washington who so much enjoy making bad blood will have told you, with much circumstantial detail, that Bobby was the sole source and inspirer of Bartlett's piece. Similar people, perhaps identically the same people, told Bobby that you had personally commanded Bill White to write his piece denouncing the Justice Department for wire tapping and other evil practices. Bobby did not believe them; yet all of this impels me reflect that we live in a most imperfect world.

The President
The White House
Washington 25, D.C.

Letter #3:

June 9, 1964

Just a line to say that your piece in "The Reporter" is the first genuinely accurate account of Lyndon Johnson's nomination in 1960 that I have seen anywhere. Furthermore, it is admirably concise and well written.

For once in a way, it is a story I know pretty well because I was responsible for getting Phil Graham into the act. He did not know President Kennedy very well at that time, and he was reluctant to go with me when I suggested that we visit the just chosen nominee to tell him jointly that the vice presidential place must be offered to Johnson. But he came anyway, and Evelyn Lincoln found a little time for us without much delay.

At that time, the president had already been advised by Dave Lawrence, John Bailey and some of the other party bosses to make the offer to Johnson, but I think he was still rather worried about the effect on his Northern supporters. At any rate, John Bailey and Bobby Kennedy both told me, as did the president himself, that Phil and I played a certain role in the final decision, as non-bosses and non-organization Democrats, so to say, who were proffering the same advice as Lawrence, Bailey et al. I let Phil do most of the talking, but I made an interruption, insisting above all on two points. First, I said that he must above all consider the chance that "something might happen to him" and he could not risk leaving the country in the hands of Stu Symington or Scoop Jackson, of whom I knew he did not have a high opinion. Second, I warned him that he should not make the offer to Johnson with the mere intention of going through the motions. This was because, Herman Talmadge, the shrewdest of the Southerners, in my opinion, had told me with great bitterness that Johnson would accept if the offer were made to him. I quoted Talmadge. On both points, the president voiced strong agreement with me remarking of Stu Symington, I am sorry to say, that "he was a pretty shallow puddle to dive into."

The president finally asked Phil and me to stick around "until this thing is over". But as a reporter, I have never like being too engaged in such matters so I begged Phil to go and see Johnson and bowed out myself. This was, I would guess, a contribution of some importance; for the one thing that is missing from your story is the role that Phil played, not just on the occasion that you describe, but on several different occasions, of keeping the thing glued together despite the bitterness and suspicions that divided the two camps. From our meeting with Kennedy until the announcement of the vice presidential choice, Phil actually spent almost all his time in the Johnson suite, and unless I am mistaken, he called President Kennedy quite a number of times from there, to straighten out problems as they arose.

The real interest in all this, of course, that I can testify as a first hand witness that the president had not the smallest intention of offering the vice presidency to either Jackson or Symington, on the ground that he did not think they qualified for the presidency in case something happened. But the... I think you have got slightly out of... in your piece is the degree to which President Kennedy was influenced by his opinion, stated several times to Phil and me that "Johnson is much the best man if anything should happen to me." It seemed

to me at the time and I still believe, that this opinion had quite as much a role in his decision as the political factors which you rightly stress.

Philip Potter, Esq.
The Baltimore Sun
National Press Bldg.
Washington, D.C.

Joseph W. Alsop Oral History Interview
Name List

Kick Hartington	Kennedy, Kathleen
John	Kennedy, John F.
Stu	Alsop, Stewart
Nixon	Nixon, Richard M.
Jackie	Kennedy, Jacqueline B.
Charley	McNary, Charles L.
Johnson	Johnson, Lyndon B.
Roosevelt	Roosevelt, Theodore
Roosevelt	Roosevelt, Franklin D.
Eisenhower	Eisenhower, Dwight D.
Truman	Truman, Harry S.
Byrnes	Byrnes, James F.
Marshall	Marshall, George C.
Acheson	Acheson, Dean
Bob	Lovett, Robert A.
Radziwill	Radziwill, Stanislas
Khrushchev	Khrushchev, Nikita S.
Chip	Bohlen, Charles E.
Alphand	Alphand, Herve
Duchin	Duchin, Peter
Pam	Turnure, Pam
Walt	Rostow, Walt
Rusk	Rusk, Dean
Bundy	Bundy, McGeorge
Kafollete	Kafollete, Robert M. Sr.
Kafollete	Kafollete, Robert M. Jr.
Humphrey	Humphrey, Hubert H.
Norris	Norris, George W.
Black	Black, Hugo L.
Couzens	Couzens, James
Evelyn	Lincoln, Evelyn N.
Phil	Graham, Philip L.
Abe	Ribicoff, Abraham A.
John	Bailey, John M.
Bobby	Baker, Robert G.
Kerr	Kerr, Robert S.
Dulles	Dulles, Allen
Engine Charlie	Wilson, Charles
McCone	McCone, John
Doug	Dillon, Douglas
McNamara	McNamara, Robert S.
Stevenson	Stevenson, Adlai E.

Bill	Martin, William McChesney Jr.
Walter	Heller, Walter
Alice	Longworth, Alice Roosevelt
Lem	Billings, K. LeMoyne
Harry	Hopkins, Harry
Louie	Hopkins, Louise M.
Ros	Gilpatric, Roswell L.
Churchill	Churchill, Winston S.
Lincoln	Lincoln, Abraham
Macmillan	Macmillan, Harold
Lady Dorothy	Macmillan, Dorothy Cavendish
Cecil	Cecil, David
Bowles	Bowles, Chester B. **
Arthur	Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr.
Sorensen	Sorensen, Theodore C.
DeGaulle	DeGaulle, Charles
McMahon	McMahon, Brien
Maurice	Couve de Murville, Maurice
Jean	Monnet, Jean
Puruis	Puruis, Arthur B.
Foster	Dulles, John Foster