

Laura Bergquist Knebel Oral History Interview –JFK#1, 12/8/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Laura Bergquist Knebel

Interviewer: Nelson Aldrich

Date of Interview: December 8, 1965

Length: 25 pages

Biographical Note

Knebel, a journalist for *Look* Magazine (1954-1971), discusses her experiences covering John F. Kennedy (JFK), Jacqueline B. Kennedy, and Robert F. Kennedy during the 1950s and 1960s, including conversations with JFK about Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, JFK's connections with members of the Rafael Trujillo regime, JFK's attitudes towards women, and Theodore C. Sorensen's role in the Kennedy White House, among other issues.

Access Restrictions

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed September 15, 1977, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any materials from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

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

Laura Bergquist Knebel, recorded interview by Nelson Aldrich, December 8, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview
of Laura Bergquist Knebel

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, Laura Bergquist Knebel, of Princeton, New Jersey, 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 December 8, 1965 and prepared for deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the John F. Kennedy Library.
2. The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts; however, access to the tape recording shall be for background use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase, or quote therefrom.
3. Until my death 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.
 - 3a. During my lifetime researchers may not publish quotations without my express written consent in each case.
4. Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Kennedy Library.

Laura Bergquist Knebel
Donor

Sept 6 '77
Date

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

September 15, 1977
Date

Laura Bergquist Knebel—JFK#1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1, 5	Covering John F. Kennedy (JFK) and Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) in the late 1950s
4	JFK and RFK's relationship with Joseph R. McCarthy
6	JFK's fascination with articles about his children
8	JFK's ability to unsettle reporters and "milk" them for information
11	Talking with JFK about Fidel Castro and Che Guevara
13	JFK's association with members of the Rafael Trujillo regime
15	Bay of Pigs Invasion
16	JFK's attitudes towards women
19	Theodore C. Sorensen
21	The "Irish mafia" staff members
23	Richard N. Goodwin
24	Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy

Oral History Interview—JFK#1¹

with

Laura Bergquist Knebel

December 8, 1965

By Nelson Aldrich

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ALDRICH: Laura, the one episode that didn't appear in the book that I think we might talk about first is the trip you took with Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] through the South.

KNEBEL: We went to Columbia, South Carolina, where he was picking up an honorary university degree. He was then being showered with degrees—how many did he collect?—a hundred or so in short order. Ex-Chief Justice Byrnes [James F. Byrnes] of the Supreme Court was getting one, too. What year was this? Well, maybe '57. He was running for a second term for the Senate. He had lost the vice presidential nomination, and now he was obviously going for the big job.

ALDRICH: When you say obviously, how did you come to that conclusion?

KNEBAL: Well, mostly by talking to Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen]. On that trip there was me, the Senator, Ted Sorensen, and a *Look* [Look Magazine] photographer, Doug Jones [Douglas Jones]. I spent time “schmoosing” with Sorensen, who startled me by saying, “You know, he’s going to be the next president of the United States.” I said in effect: “I think Kennedy is a fine fellow, terribly bright and very witty, well informed and outspoken; more serious than people I know in Washington give

¹ The interviewee made many additions to and changes in the transcript.

him credit for. But for president, are you kidding?" My skepticism was shared by a lot of people.

ALDRICH: When did you meet him first?

KNEBEL: I'd corresponded with him when he was a congressman and I was working as an editor on a magazine which shall hereby be nameless. He was then writing popular articles such as "Why Can't Your Boy Get Into West Point?" I wrote to him asking him to do a piece with that

[-1-]

theme. I remember sending back his manuscripts with sage editorial advice: "Well, this is a fine manuscript, however..." Or, "This needs elucidating," or, "Let's rewrite the lead," or whatever. He was very amenable about the changes. The first time I spent any time personally with him was, I guess in 1957, when I did a story on both Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] and the Senator called "The Rise of the Brothers Kennedy" for *Look*. I spent a number of weeks with both of them when they were on the Senate rackets committee [Senate Committee to Investigate Improper Activities in Labor-Management Relations].

ALDRICH: When did you see them? When would you see them?

KNEBEL: When? Any place, off and on for about five, six weeks. Washington, Boston, South Carolina, Hickory Hill, New York; sort of in and out. I recall walking into the Senate dining room once with Kennedy and spying Senator Paul Douglas [Paul H. Douglas], who'd been my professor at the University of Chicago, a classic preoccupied academic and an A-1 senator. Paul was sitting at a table with Senators Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] and Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey]. We went over to Paul to say hello, and he looked up and said, "Well, and here's Jack Kennedy, the next president of the United States." Neither Mr. Johnson nor Mr. Humphrey who were in the running themselves seemed pleased, needless to say, about Paul's greeting.

ALDRICH: Well, now what was your impression from looking at Bobby and Jack on this Senate rackets committee?

KNEBEL: Well, not only the committee per se, but earlier I recall the first time I met Kennedy, in his Senate office. I was impressed right off by how sharp, quick-witted and impatient he was. Doug Jones, the photographer, met him first and warned me about the impatience, and was worried about whether we'd hit it off. After a day or so I could see the Senator was restless with people who were slow or corny or who didn't interest him.... It took time to work in with him, but once you were accepted, he was fine. He was wary at first. He brought up a woman journalist who had done a story on him for a woman's magazine a few months before. He was pissed off at her, because she gossiped about Montgomery Clift, the actor, on whom she'd just done a profile. Her apparent ploy was to titillate her present subject with unprintable, confidential trivia she'd collected about a

previous subject. Kennedy said she'd confided in him that Clift was a bed wetter. (I don't know whether this was true or not). He asked me if I knew her, and said very dryly that her journalistic approach did not "inspire much confidence in a subject." He'd never see her again.

ALDRICH: Well, did you see them in action at all?

KNEBEL: Oh yes, because when you do a picture story, you trail a subject every place short of the john. We trailed him around Washington, to one embassy reception I remember, where he was very bored and

[-2-]

said, "Let's get out of here. Nobody here has a thing to talk about seriously." I sat in on the Senate rackets committee for ten days off and on. What impressed me about him was his unbelievable private candor. He would emerge from the rackets committee, or perhaps we would be in South Carolina, having a beer, and he would tell you straight off exactly what he thought of people he had met that day and what was going on. That quality in a politician left me thunderstruck.

ALDRICH: Did he just leave you to believe that these remarks were off the record, or did he say so explicitly?

#1, 6:40

improved on paper

++

KNEBEL: No, this was one of the curious things about him, and I know other journalists had the same experience. Like any politician there were some journalists he liked better than others, or trusted more—but almost every reporter I know who had had prolonged contact with Kennedy had the same experience. That he would divulge tremendously candid, unexpected, across-the-board facts, personal opinions, which would shake them up. It was miraculous to me that nobody seemed to break the trust, or print these off-the-cuff remarks. I don't think he used candor as a technique, or perhaps he did, but just by his being so frank, you felt honor-bound not to use the confidence. Another thing, I felt I could talk as candidly with him. Working with other subjects who dropped casual remarks, well, you figure they knew you were a journalist, and you might go ahead and print same. But somehow you didn't often do it with Kennedy.

ALDRICH: Because the candor of the remark was so extraordinary...

KNEBEL: Let me give you an example: my husband Fletcher Knebel did a profile on JFK for the book *Candidates 1960*. When Kennedy ran for the Senate, there was really no Massachusetts paper of any substance supporting him. Then all of a sudden the *Boston Post* switched from endorsing Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] to Kennedy. It later came out publicly that the *Boston Post* had been lent money by Ambassador Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], when it was in a precarious financial position. So there was a certain assumption among pols [politicians] and the press that there was a connection between the endorsement for Kennedy and the loan. My husband, who is a very

blunt character, bearded Kennedy about this rumor, and [Kennedy] said: "Listen, that was an absolutely straight business transaction; I think you ought to get my father's side of the story. I will make available all the data." [Then Fletch said as he was leaving, Kennedy looked up and said, "You know we had to buy that paper." As if he just had to level. Fletch didn't print that remark, of course.]

ALDRICH: Can you think of other examples of this, say, from the Senate rackets committee days?

KNEBEL: Not offhand. I came away with assorted impressions. I recall having dinner at his Georgetown house. Young Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] had just come back from Algeria, and Jack queried him

[-3-]

very sharply about what was going on there politically. For some reason, I was surprised at the intensity of Jack's interest, his probing questions. He introduced Teddy by saying "Here's the real politician in the family." I found Bobby infinitely more wary than John Kennedy was. At that point, he also gave me pause. It seemed to me he saw the world in black and white, in terms of goodies and baddies, as his wife Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] would say. Once, I brought up the subject of Joe McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] with Bobby. As a matter of fact, Dick Rovere's [Richard Halworth Rover] book about McCarthy came out of that casual talk. *The Rise and Fall of Joe McCarthy* [Senator Joe McCarthy], or whatever it was. Anyway, we had just left the Senate Office building, and up drove McCarthy's widow Jean [Jean Kerr McCarthy]. Bobby walked over and gave her a big warm personal hello, but the senator held back, which was indicative of the difference in attitude between them.

ALDRICH: Did you ever get into a discussion with the President about McCarthy?

KNEBEL: I mostly discussed McCarthy with Bobby.

ALDRICH: And what was his line there?

KNEBEL: Well, both brothers as you know were tremendously loyal types. What interested me, when Bobby was talking about McCarthy, was that he talked about what happened to him after the Senate censure. How once that happened, McCarthy went to pieces. He'd been a big public figure, and once the limelight was gone, he started drinking, disintegrating. All the air went out of the balloon. Bobby talked, in a kind of objective and compassionate way, about this psychic decline. I intended to do a story about it, didn't have time, turned the idea over to *Esquire* [Esquire magazine], and Richard Rovere did it and turned it into a book.

ALDRICH: A number of stories about his decline? Such as?

KNEBEL: It was mostly this psychological business. What happens to a demagogue like

McCarthy when he's down and out, on the skids.

ALDRICH: When you went down to Columbia there was you, the then-Senator Kennedy and Ted Sorensen and Doug Jones. Could you go into some detail about that trip, since you avoided it in your book?

KNEBEL: I wish I could remember more details. I do recall driving to the Washington airport in Kennedy's convertible, to catch a flight, with him at the wheel. Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] was along and she was amused by my terror at his driving. He drove very fast, as if he were gunning a PT boat, weaving in and out of traffic. I also met his batman "Muggsy" O'Leary [John J. O'Leary], who was quite a character—Kennedy introduced him as "my patronage." Doug Jones had gone up to Boston for a political clambake with the Senator. They had a long personal talk on the train coming back about the problems of being on the road a lot, as a pol or a photographer, its effect on home life. Kennedy

[-4-]

quizzed Doug: Did his wife resent his being away from home so much? How did he cope with it? I can't remember they had any big solution, but it was something on Kennedy's mind.

ALDRICH: Well, what did you do? Did you fly down to Columbia?

KNEBEL: Yes, we flew down to Columbia. One of the characters who was also getting an honorary degree was the publisher of a number of papers in South Carolina and North Carolina. He was one head-on segregationist. He talked to me about *Look* magazine, said he knew the publishing business and that *Look* was run for Jews and Negroes, primarily because the *Post* [*Saturday Evening Post*] and *Life* had cornered the white, Gentile middle-class audience. I was curious because he was also very pro-Kennedy—and I wondered why. Kennedy had just held a press conference that impressed me because, when the southern reporters questioned him sharply about the Supreme Court school desegregation decision, he said "It's the law of the land, it must be upheld," et cetera. He didn't fudge. So I asked the publisher, in the light of Kennedy's position, why he was so pro-Kennedy. He said—and maybe this was typical of certain southern thinking—"Well he's got a very good war record, and besides, his daddy will keep him in line." Jack's father, of course, was then a very controversial issue. There was talk that old Joe was really running the show, and buying his son's election, and that he had great influence on Jack. A lot of important people I knew in Washington—political types or journalists—discounted Kennedy because they thought he was kind of a "golden boy" dominated by Big Daddy. I was very skeptical he would be elected president. I wasn't overwhelmed by him, I would say, but it seemed to me that his critics had a very unfair view of him.

ALDRICH: Well, you said yourself earlier...

KNEBEL: Except he used his “image” very well. He was very savvy about it. He had been a journalist and he knew damn well that media exposure like *Look* picture stories—even though I think they bored him—about the handsome young senator, had value in building him up. Except he seemed to get fed up with the glamour stories about him. He’d say, “They are all writing about my glamorous wife and me, personality stuff. Why doesn’t anybody ever report what I think about issues?”

ALDRICH: He did say that occasionally.

KNEBEL: Yes: again I cite my husband Fletch and his piece in *Candidates, 1960*. Kennedy wrote him a note and said it was an okay piece, but there was an overwhelming flavor of—my French is bad—*jeunesse dorée*, the “golden boy.” “You did not spell out my qualifications as a candidate,” he complained to Fletch.

ALDRICH: That raises an interesting psychological point because on the one hand he was, you would say, inclined to exploit the *jeunesse dorée* and on the other hand he was a little embarrassed about it.

[-5 -]

KNEBEL: Yes, or it was distasteful; personal revelation was distasteful to him. He had a certain Yankee-New England reticence.

ALDRICH: What do you mean, personal stuff?

KNEBEL: I wish I had my notes on this, but on that first story I remember asking him, “I would like to talk to your wife about you and about your life as a senator.” And he said, “What do you want to talk to my wife about? She’s out of it. You’re doing a piece on me.” It irked him, the whole business of being queried about his private life for a personality profile. He knew this kind of coverage was inevitable, but he kind of had a let’s-get-it-over-with attitude.

Once when he was president I interviewed him about his first year in office, and asked him what I knew would be a “corny” question for him, how did it feel to be president? He got restless and said abruptly “I’m not much good at that couch talk.” That was always the way, except about his kids.

ALDRICH: What do you mean there?

KNEBEL: Stanley Tretick and I did so many family stories for *Look*, once he got into the White House. Anything about his children he was fascinated by, especially pictures of them, like the John, junior [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] pictures. Early on, I did a light profile on his daughter Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] and was taken aback when the President said offhand, “Read your piece on Caroline.” He seemed to read everything. I wasn’t overjoyed by writing these kiddie pieces, particularly, but readers ate up Kennedy material. (Others were enraged by the family, and cancelled subscriptions.)

Anyway, the President thought it was a funny piece and added, “But, you know, she really isn’t that smart.”

ALDRICH: Was it just the proud papa who likes to see pretty pictures of...

KNEBEL: I sensed a tribal quality about him which wasn’t evident when I first met him, perhaps because he didn’t have any children then. Jackie had lost one or two children in miscarriages. We would go out to Bobby’s house at McLean, and there were all these nieces and nephews swarming around. Uncle Jack was pleasant with them, but casual. Once he had kids of his own, he became a patriarch, he was fascinated by not only his own children but other kids.

ALDRICH: For instance, it’s somewhat paradoxical, he wanted to keep his own life private, or his own private life private, and yet he seemed to have no realization of what kind of damage this might do to his children, all that publicity.

KNEBEL: I think Jackie Kennedy set up the ground rules about keeping John and Caroline out of the limelight, and he abided by them. As I

[-6-]

told you he sneaked us that story on John, junior, called “The President and His Son,” a few weeks before the assassination. Spookily, it was published the very week he was killed. His wife had gone off to Greece on a cruise, after losing their baby Patrick [Patrick Bouvier Kennedy]. Stanley and I had waited to do that story for months, and we were suddenly called to the White House. The President said: “We’d better get this over with quick because when Mrs. Kennedy is around things get pretty sticky.” Later she said it was a godsend we took them. “Pierre [Pierre G.E. Salinger] and Jack were like two sneaky little boys letting you do the story when I was off on vacation,” she said.

There was terrific pressure from the media for pictures of the Kennedy children. Once Stanley snapped some charming casual photos of Caroline on the Hyannis compound, when he was doing a story on Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.]. We were honor-bound to ask for permission to publish these snaps. I had a set printed up for the President and his wife—she liked them, but said no publishing, please. Then I went at the President, in a Hyannis meeting, asking him if he couldn’t convince his wife to say yes. He said flat-out, “No I can’t.” That was that.

Anyway, he agreed to do the story with John, junior, for assorted reasons, I think. He liked the kind of pictures Tretick took—for instance, the golf cart pictures at Hyannis are now classics. Our working sessions with him were breezy and informal, low-key, I kept him informed and amused while Tretick took the snaps. In most posed pictures, he looked stiff, like a department store dummy, but when he was doing what came natural, he made for fine photos.

Another reason: there was a re-election campaign coming up and I think he knew damn well his image would be burnished by good, heartwarming pictures of the President

and his son. He had assorted motives for doing these stories. As described in the book, he'd been pissed off at us for months, after we finally published the Caroline pictures. But his okay on this project came through and I got a call from Stanley, who'd gotten a call from Pierre, saying we could start immediately on the John, junior, story. I said "I can't do it, I'm up to my eyeballs doing a story on the Quebec revolution." That sounds crazy, the President is available and I'm busy!

Stanley went in to talk to him alone, that first day, and the President said "Okay, what do you want me to do?" Stanley said, "Just what comes naturally with you and John, junior, throughout the day." Then Kennedy said with all the savvy and know-how of a journalist, "Where's the writer on the story?" There aren't many people who know a writer is usually around during a picture story shooting, gathering text material. Stanley explained I was busy, and would catch up later, but Kennedy protested, "How is she going to get the mood of the boy? If she's not here, how is she going to get the mood of the story?" When Stanley called me, I suggested that my now-husband Fletch Knebel stand in for me. He'd done political reporting on Kennedy—stories like the Cuban Missile Crisis—he knew Kennedy and Kennedy liked him. You couldn't send some stranger into the White House. But news came back via

[-7-]

Pierre that Knebel was "out" on this kind of story because, as the President said: "It's not Fletch's kind of story." In short, he was hip about the casting. Doing a story like that involves not only being around for the picture taking, but often being in and out of the President's office—in this case it was four days straight. You hear and see a lot that's going on, and who knows, maybe he thought a reporter like Fletch might pick up inside stuff that...

ALDRICH: ...might not be good for him.

KNEBEL: Right.

ALDRICH: Did you pick up any stuff that might not be good for you? Or were you too concentrated on the father-son relationship?

KNEBEL: A fair amount happened those four days. Gromyko [Andrei Andreevich Gromyko] and Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] suddenly showed up over some crises, an African head of state came to call. But there was a difference. Usually, especially during the first year or two of the New Frontier, when I did stories, including a special *Look* issue on the New Frontier, Kennedy had an amazing amount of time to schmoose and banter and talk. Sometimes I'd go to the White House on a relatively minor job and find myself talking to the President. That unnerved me, taking up his time, but as one staffer assured me, talking to outsiders was relaxing, even stimulating, for the boss. (Mary McGrory said it well: "I felt like Eliza Dolittle in Buckingham Palace.") But this last session he was very busy and preoccupied. I hadn't seen him in some time, and he seemed much more sober, even somber, distant. It was the period just after the death of his son Patrick. I've talked to Jackie about this, and told her my impressions. She said, "Yes, you noticed it,

too”— the vein of somberness or sadness. In any case he had little time for banter those four days.

ALDRICH: What was that story illustrative of his ability to banter about the late Dorothy Kilgallen you told me?

KNEBEL: This was another startling, unsettling thing about him. No matter what I'd planned to talk to him about, I often got derailed very shortly. I'd go in saying to myself, "I'm going to see the President. I've six questions I want to ask him, and I'd better keep them in mind and stick to the subject." I'd start off with my questions, respectfully, and within a few minutes we'd be off on a different tack. He had enormous curiosity. We seldom stuck to the subject at hand. Once, perhaps, when I did a straightforward story about the President after a year in office, and he seriously spelled out the issues, problems.

As for the business about Kilgallen: I'd gone to Palm Beach after his election—just before the inauguration—to do a profile on Jackie, and pick up some background for Richard Avedon's photographs of the new first family. Seems to me I was forever being assigned stories on the first lady, whom I

[-8 -]

didn't know well. The President once said: "I don't see why you're doing a story on Jackie, you don't even know her. You do know me, why not do a story on me?"

Anyway, in Palm Beach I talked to Pierre and asked, "Who shall I talk to about the First Lady?" He said "Talk to the President," which seemed presumptuous. Nevertheless, I wandered over to his father's house, to interview him about Jackie. The Ambassador answered the doorbell, and when he saw me standing there with a notebook, greeted me warmly as the "new secretary." It was the first time I'd seen the President since his election, he wasn't "Jack" any more, I was uneasy about approaching him. He was lounging in a chair, talking on the phone. When I came in he said breezily, "Hi, Laurer," with that Boston accent. He didn't seem a whit changed. He trotted me over to a baby buggy for a peep at John, junior. And then I asked him a question or two about Jackie. "Well," he said, "she has a splendid memory, she speaks many languages," and then he compared her to his sisters, and then that was the end of that.

ALDRICH: Compared to which sister?

KNEBEL: All of them. He said, "My sisters are direct, energetic types and she is more sensitive. You might even call her fey. She's a more indirect sort." I asked him: "Did you read those things that were written about her during the campaign?" For instance, Dorothy Kilgallen had written a number of snide items about Jackie implying that she wasn't really pregnant, that that was just a ruse to keep her out of the campaign because she was so stylish and fey that Americans wouldn't accept her as a first lady. Kennedy cracked, "Oh yeah, but what can you expect of a dame who's in love with Johnny Ray?" That knocked me out because this was New York, Third Avenue, P.J. Clarke

gossip that Miss Kilgallen had a great interest in singer Johnny Ray for some obscure reason. I thought now how in heaven's name, in the midst of a campaign, did he ever find that out?

ALDRICH: Well, he was in the habit, as you told me, of milking anybody who came into the office.

KNEBEL: It occurred to me later that this was a technique of his. He would ask you terribly abrupt, direct, unsettling, sometimes kind of naive questions—not naive questions but....

ALDRICH: Disingenuous questions.

KNEBEL: Yes. That same interview we sat around and schmoosed for about an hour, I suppose. I kept trying to edge out, thinking, "Heavens, he's the President, he's busy. He's got all these characters to interview, the cabinet to put together. With me he often talked about Cuba or, later, about the Dominican Republic because those were places I'd covered as a journalist. I'm sure he did this with other journalists; he'd pick your brains about wherever you'd been or whatever he thought you knew." That day he suddenly asked what seemed to me some very naive questions about

[-9-]

Castro [Fidel Castro]. Such as: "Why does he make those long speeches?" He also talked about his own campaign, how toward the end it got so hysterical and the crowds were frenzied and excited about him. How he really didn't quite understand it. He seemed baffled too about Castro's appeal, why people were so idolatrous of him, what his mystique was. It was as if he was trying to get a handle on Castro, like a political technician.

ALDRICH: Wow you made two very interesting points. He talked to you about himself in the campaign. Go into that a little more.

KNEBEL: "Yes," he said, "I know what it's like, the crowds.... Toward the end of the campaign they got so frenzied." He indicated he knew what it was like to be exposed to mass attention, adulation.

ALDRICH: What was his reaction to it?

KNEBEL: Well, his reaction seemed to me very typical of him. It was a kind of sit-back-and-look-at-himself reaction, detached, analytic, third person. The crowds and the frenzy were interesting phenomena; they'd helped get him elected, but they didn't enchant him that much. It didn't seem his cup of tea. His questions about Castro seemed to me ingenuous—perhaps he meant to get me to talking about Fidel. But I didn't think he really understood a Castro at that point because he was—and in this he changed—a cool, rational cat himself. That's the way he operated. I came away wondering, does this man really know what it's like to be poor and hungry and revolutionary and angry and

nationalistic? Like a lot of people in our contemporary world, a world to which he really hadn't been exposed, or I didn't think he'd been exposed to it, or that he really understood what the revolutionary movements were about. [He quizzed me about Castro's love life, like asking "Who does he sleep with? I hear he doesn't even take his boots off." I said "I haven't a clue," it didn't seem a question of overwhelming importance to me. He said "He runs around making those long speeches, but where are the dames?" That was one of the things he wanted to know about. He was fascinated by people's love lives.]

#1, 31:00

ALDRICH: This is a theoretical question which really has no business on the tape, perhaps, but do you think as an observer of the species [of] politician that this almost schizoid ability to abstract yourself from your own public role...

KNEBEL: ...or to stand off and see yourself with third-person detachment. I think he had this ability, which is difficult, for most pols or plain people to do.

ALDRICH: It's not the sort of trait that one associates with politicians.

KNEBEL: Exactly, that's what made him so remarkable. Because it always seemed to me that...

[-10-]

ALDRICH: And I wonder whether this doesn't in some way explain his, relative to Johnson, ineffectiveness with political types.

++

KNEBEL: I think it explains his ineffectiveness with certain political types, and then there's something else that puzzled me because I thought Kennedy was absolutely at his best in private. He had a tremendous capacity to involve you, interest and stimulate you, even needle you. Gore Vidal once said he wanted to tell him everything, and I certainly felt that way. Even though he was detached, he conveyed a feeling if he liked and trusted you that he listened to what you said, that his interest was genuine, personal. His boredom threshold was low, especially during picture sessions, and I felt I had to be sharp, interesting, informative to keep his attention. I don't know many people who met him who weren't touched not only by his charm, but that personal interest of his. That quality it seemed to me didn't come across publicly. He came across kind of taut, clever, cool, factual. Some critics complained he lacked the charisma of an FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt], that he wasn't getting to people in general. What amazes me is that he did. Now maybe it was because he was assassinated, that created an extraordinary mystique. But even before, it was amazing how he got across to people, not only in the United States but all over the world. As I think I wrote in the book, I'd visit Latin America and talk to barn-burning young revolutionaries who were pro-Castro, and they had surprising feelings of empathy for Kennedy and curiosity about him. Somehow he communicated this quality, that he was open-minded, educable; that he was open to opposing views, willing to absorb new information, that he could learn. I think that's why I felt I had a certain stake in that White House, though I often didn't agree with policy, that my opinions, information would be heard by the

President. He changed in some of his thinking about Latin America, which is my great area of interest. I think Bobby has changed the same way.

ALDRICH: More explicit than that, can you be? You told me once that he began by really hating Castro.

KNEBEL: No, I don't know that he hated him, but I think he was cocky about him, didn't take him seriously. Kennedy by me made an ass of himself on the Cuba issue during the debates. I even wired him to that effect, which Ted Sorensen hasn't forgotten. I faulted him for publicly quoting and endorsing the opinions of people like Earl Smith [Earl E.T. Smith] and Arthur Gardner, who were the U.S. ambassadors to Cuba under Batista [Fulgencio Batista] both big pro-Batista men. I thought he was demagogic about the Cuba issue during the debates. I don't know whether his stand was a campaign gambit, or because he didn't know enough, but he got stuck with his position at the Bay of Pigs. I think the Bay of Pigs shook him up a great, great deal.

ALDRICH: You began asking yourself, had this man ever known what it's like to be poor, revolutionary, totally involved.

[-11-]

KNEBEL: You know I'm making generalizations.

ALDRICH: Okay, make generalizations.

KNEBEL: Going back to when I first met him, I thought he was one of the smartest, quickest, funniest human beings I'd ever met. He worked hard and he did his homework, he was very ambitious, but there seemed to be heart lacking—is that the right way to put it? Like, did he know certain things in his bones because of the way he grew up or the way he was educated, or because of his temperament or whatever it was, I used to wonder about him. I never faulted his intelligence or his wish to be president or do as well as he could. I gather, for instance, when he went to West Virginia and saw the poverty firsthand, that shook him up. Well, if you are as old as I am and you grew up during the Depression in Chicago, this knowledge just comes natural. I gather the poverty was a big shock for him as it was for Jackie. He knew these things in an abstract way because I remember that first trip I took with him, he was then working on a minimum wage bill. He said, "Do you realize that chambermaids in southern hotels only get forty-five cents an hour?" I forget what the actual figure was. This seemed an eye-opening, shocking thing to him. Why it should be news, I don't know.

ALDRICH: Did you ever have any conversations with him about Castro after the Bay of Pigs?

KNEBEL: Yes. We didn't focus on Castro so much because on my visits to Cuba, I didn't try to interview Fidel. I'd listen to him speak but I usually interviewed

Che Guevara, who now seems to be missing.

Kennedy would ask me about the Che, often in a joking manner. Once I went to talk to him about his daughter Caroline, I guess, and we got off on the Che—I have that in the book. He said, “Tell me about the Che.” I guess I’d seen the Che about six months before. I told Kennedy that Guevara was cool and pragmatic and blunt, not unlike Kennedy himself. I thought if they hadn’t been polar opposites politically, they might have struck it off.

When I’d talk to Kennedy, he would ask me about Guevara, and when I went to Cuba, Guevara would talk about Kennedy. As an imperialist, of course. They were both cool, pragmatic very smart characters. That’s when he said, “Something gives me the feeling you’ve got the hots for the Che.” That made me sore as hell. I felt put down. I protested. Hadn’t he seen the photo of me and Che arguing during the interview? “Yeah,” said the President, “but that kind of hostility often leads to something else.” I found out later, this was the time when he was doing research and reading up on guerrilla warfare, organizing the special forces. It was also another example of his brain picking.

Once I was off for Cuba, and went to talk to him, and he said, “Now if I were you”—this was the managing editor in him—“this would be interesting to find out. How do the Cubans live? How do they feel about Castro? How

[-12-]

well are they eating?” Suggesting about ten questions. It wasn’t a directive, but it was like advice from an editor. As a matter of fact, there was a guy by the name of Jean Daniel who published an article which, in *New Republic* or someplace, who went down and interviewed Castro.

ALDRICH: No, he’s with *Express*.

KNEBEL: *Express* but it appeared in an American publication. I think it was the *New Republic*. He indicated in the article that he had gone to Cuba as a kind of semiofficial emissary for the President. I was amused by that. Daniel wrote a piece, but I wondered whether Kennedy had handled him as he did me, which was to say, “Well, if you are going to Cuba, why don’t you investigate this, ask this, poke around, find out,” et cetera. And whether Daniel, as a Frenchman, maybe took this literally as a directive to go down and find things out for the President. Or at least that was the gist of the piece.

ALDRICH: But do you think that in the final analysis Kennedy ever realized the strength of revolutionary movements?

KNEBEL: Yes, I do. I think the Alliance for Progress was a response; I think he really got jolted by the Bay of Pigs fiasco and he certainly was up to his ears in the Dominican mess. Yes, I think he did, perhaps helped by a lot of visits from African leaders, Latin American leaders; he was very quick, and I think he learned a great deal. He was like a sponge.

I think an awful lot of things sobered him, maybe it was being president, but I did have a feeling about him that there was more feeling there than I was aware of. You know,

1/ 41:00

under his cool cat exterior, there was a reservoir of emotion or feeling or ability to empathize with people, I don't know what it was. He didn't grow up in a family given to emotional self-exposure, as a friend said. But one thing about him which I think is important was this business of how involved you felt with him; I felt he was like a contemporary, except he was brighter and he was president, but you vibrated on the same wavelength. And so, even though I was a journalist, I'd fret about him. The president traditionally had been big daddy, Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], somebody you don't know. To suddenly have a very bright person I knew being president was unsettling. I also stewed about some of his buddies, his social companions, because I thought in terms of Latin America, for instance, his hanging around with Earl Smith who was probably one of the most stupid ambassadors to Cuba we ever had.

ALDRICH: Most stupid?

KNEBEL: Incredibly so; a great apologist for Batista. Then there was Senator George Smathers [George A. Smathers] of Florida, and playboy Porfirio Rubirosa. That bothered me because Rubi had been a henchman for dictator Trujillo [Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina], and there he was socializing at the Hyannis compound at a time when Trujillo's Dominican Republic had been expelled from the Organization of American States. I used to think, "Kennedy

[-13-]

is so smart about so many things, doesn't he realize the fact that Rubirosa is a guest at Hyannis, at a time of great turbulence in the Dominican Republic because this is when Ramfis [Ramfis Trujillo], the dictator's son, had taken over, and Porfirio was a Ramfis buddy, and there were murders going on by the score, doesn't he realize that in Latin America this is going to have repercussions?" Okay, I was told by one Kennedy staffer, Rubi and Smathers were just social pals. But the Latins figure, "There Rubi is up at Hyannis, he has the President's ear." And this is going to nullify a great deal of the message Kennedy is trying to get across with the Alliance for Progress, for example. Who knows what Rubirosa tells him or what influence he has, or an Earl Smith or a George Smathers? Even if they had no influence with JFK, just the association was bad news.

ALDRICH: Well, what was his answer to this? Did you ever complain to him?

KNEBEL: Once I talked to Ted Sorensen. I think George Smathers had just gone to Mexico and made some idiot remark that enraged the Mexican government, and I went to talk to Ted and I said, "Doesn't the President realize what having buddies like Smathers around means to the Latins, what the repercussions are down there?" And Ted said, "Why don't you go tell him?" I said, "You're crazy. Why should I tell him, who am I to tell him that he can't hang around with George Smathers?" I mean, he and Smathers had been buddies for years, Smathers was an usher at his wedding. They were kind of young bucks in Congress together. Ted said, in effect, that if I told him, it might have more impact. I was coming from the outside, I'd heard the feedback. "You ought to go in and

tell him what you think about his association with George Smathers.” I gather Ted felt as I did.

Another time I’d just done a piece on the post-Trujillo Dominican Republic; as it turned out, a number of prominent Americans had been on the take from Trujillo, [including Smathers] and the Kennedy buddy Igor Cassini, the gossip columnist, who turned out to be an unregistered agent for the Dominican Republic (a little exposé I helped uncover.) In the article I remarked how shocking it was that a character like Rubirosa, p.r. man for Trujillo, had been a guest of the Kennedys at Hyannis. I don’t know how it ever got into *Look* magazine, but I also wrote about a dwarf named Snowball, of the Trujillo torture chambers, who specialized in biting off men’s genitals. Anyway, I went to the White House to see Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] about something or other, and the President popped out of his office. He said abruptly, “Read your piece on the Dominican Republic,” which as usual startled me. Then he asked, “What’s this about all those Americans being mixed up with Trujillo?” I said, “That’s true, including some of your buddies.” He said, “Well, let’s talk about it,” and then added offhand, “Hey, whatever happened to that dwarf?”

ALDRICH: Well, anyway, what was his reaction when you talked to him about Rubirosa?

KNEBEL: Let me add something else. When I was reporting on the Dominican Republic, I was horrified by what had gone on during the Trujillo regime. After Trujillo was murdered, a special mission went down

[-14-]

to the Dominican Republic—Robert Murphy [Robert D. Murphy] and Igor Cassini. It was when Ramfis, Trujillo’s son took over. This was a kind of fact-finding mission, at the behest of Ambassador Joe Kennedy or the President. And the whole point was that Igor was employed by Ramfis to clean him up, in a p.r. job, make him look like a respectable new strong man, friend of the U.S., and all that business. It bothered me plenty that the President of the U.S. was somehow mixed up with sleazy characters like these. Igor Cassini denied everything, but he finally got indicted for being an unregistered agent.

When I came back from the Dominican Republic I called up Pierre Salinger, once again steaming with indignation. Now why I felt so protective about Kennedy—not protective perhaps, but like, goddamn it, he should know about this dirty business, and if he’s involved knock it off. I said: “Listen, I’ve come back with material on Igor Cassini and Porfirio Rubirosa that will blow your mind. Believe me, this information is going to come out and it’s not going to resound to the President’s credit to be associated with these characters.” Pierre got sore, and said: “Rubirosa is not a friend of the President’s. He’s a buddy of Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] and the Ambassador, an old social friend. The President knocked him off a long time ago. They’re not buddies any more.” Pierre apparently went in and told the President all this because the first thing I knew I got a call from my editor, Dan Mich [Daniel Danforth Mich] who said that my publisher, Gardner Cowles [Gardner A. Cowles, Jr.], had called him and said, “Is Laura doing an exposé of the Cassini brothers?” Dan said, “No, why?” And he said, “Well, I went to a party recently with Oleg Cassini, Igor’s brother and dress designer for Jackie. He said he was up in Hyannis and the

President said to him, “Look out for Laura Berquist. She’s out for bear.” Not a very pleasant anecdote.

ALDRICH: Still, I’m wondering what happened when you spoke to him in this fashion. Did he defend himself, or pooh-pooh you?

KNEBEL: It depended how much time there was, what his mood was. Another Rubirosa anecdote. As you may gather, I was then hooked on the subject of Rubi, because behind that playboy facade lurked such a gangster he’d been a finger man in political murders. I was concerned, generally, with U.S. involvement with Latin dictatorships. Once I read—I think it was in a Cholly Knickerbocker column—that Rubi had been dining at the Steve Smiths’. I fired off a funny wire to Steve saying, “Shame, shame, shame... for associating with the likes of Rubi.” Steve told me later he went to the President and said, “I got a kooky wire from Laura,” and outlined what I’d said. The President said, “I’ve got an idea for you. Just send her a wire saying, ‘Shame, shame, shame on you for associating with the likes of Che Guevara.’”

Cuba seemed a real obsession, problem, with him, especially in that first year or two of his presidency. It had been a campaign issue; then came the Bay of Pigs, and it was as critical and explosive an issue as Vietnam is now.

[-15-]

It was Kennedy’s first big political boo-boo as president, and it rankled. Bobby especially, the Attorney General, was put out by some of my reportage from Cuba after the Bay of Pigs. His aide, Ed Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman], delighted in pointing out a footnote in Haynes Johnson’s book, *The Bay of Pigs*, which had Kennedy backing. It was critical of my reporting on the invaders, and also inaccurate. But Cuba was one touchy subject for the Kennedys.

ALDRICH: Do you think he took this personally? Do you think he reacted personally against Castro for this defeat?

KNEBEL: Not especially. The fiasco was attributed to bad intelligence, but I also think it was bad intuition, judgment on Kennedy’s part. He’d made a campaign promise, in a sense he’d implied he’d get rid of communist Cuba and he was stuck with that. Publisher Gardner Cowles went to the White House for a dinner and Kennedy said, “Everybody has their albatross. Dick Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] had Goody Knight [Goodwin Jess Knight], and I’ve got Cuba.” I remember asking Kennedy once if he’d read a new Herbert Matthews [Herbert L. Matthews] book on Cuba, and of course he had. He read like a bandit. He read Fletch’s book, *Seven Days in May* in galleys. When I asked him about the plot line, a military takeover of the U.S. government, and whether that was possible, he said he knew a few military who might have thoughts like that.

ALDRICH: The last time we talked, you broached an interesting topic which was Kennedy’s attitude toward the mind of a woman.

#1, 53:00

++

KNEBEL: Toward women, period. This is only intuitional. I think Kennedy liked women very much. He was very male, or what the Latins call “macho.” I think, as he grew older he probably would have gotten more like his father. He was getting more patriarchal, more familial. Maybe it was the Irish mick in him, but I don’t think he took women seriously—as human beings, for instance, that you work with casually, as I do in my business. The evidence is that in his administration there were really no important women. I mean Roosevelt had a Frances Perkins. But I think a Frances Perkins or a Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt]—it’s not they would have baffled him, but they wouldn’t have been on the same wavelength at all. He married Jackie who had her own special kind of intelligence, but though she’s very strong, as Bobby once said about her to me, that, “She’s good for Jack because he knows she’s not the kind of wife, when he comes home at night she’s going to say ‘What’s new in Laos?’”

ALDRICH: What did he want, do you think, out of women?

KNEBEL: Oh, I think he liked pretty women, female, female women, clever women, but not somebody in the sense of an equal working partner in the business of government. I think, for instance, of that time when he accused me of having the “hots” for Che. What riled me was that he depreciated my appraisal of Che by that sexual remark. Now partly, he was

[-16-]

giving me the needle, he knew I’d probably rise to the bait and give him a hard time or sputter or something. But that was the way his mind worked. For him, obviously, the Che was this attractive character by whom I’d been beguiled and bedazzled. In essence, what I got mad about was that I was not to be taken seriously because I had let the Che’s male charm somehow befuddle my judgment.

ALDRICH: And by implication all women are subject to the same kind of...

KNEBEL: As a matter of fact I told this to the Che once. I said, “I’m going to tell you something funny that President Kennedy said after my last visit here, when he asked me about you.” The Che was not amused. He was a dedicated revolutionary not given to personal chitchat. He had a wife [Aleida March] to whom he was devoted, and such frivolities as Kennedy’s remark, I think, were beyond him.

ALDRICH: Well, there are all sorts of ways of looking at women, either as objects to be exploited or exploiting creatures, servants...

KNEBEL: Well, you can look at different women in different ways: You can look at one woman as a sexual object; at another woman as a great pal; or as a colleague you work with. There is a whole range of ways that a man can regard women.

ALDRICH: But can you see any consistency in his view?

KNEBEL: Yes, I think it was his old pal Red Fay [Paul B. Fay, Jr.] who said that there was an awful lot of the Irish mick in him about his attitude toward women. And that in marrying Jackie in a sense—was it Red who said this?—he knew that he was outclassed, that he had married above his station. He said to Red—I think it was Red Fay—“She’s everything that a woman ought to be. She’s beautiful, she paints.... What she does, in short, is very graceful and charming and talented, but nothing very major certainly.”

ALDRICH: But neither would he expect anything major of any woman apparently.

KNEBEL: Well, he had major personal relationships with his sisters and with Jackie. But I don’t think he regarded women for their brains—no, that sounds wrong. He was beguiled by women, he loved being around them. But when it came to serious talk, he preferred talking to the guys about politics or whatever. He was kind of a man’s man. There are men who really like women or who think of women as equals, with ability. My editor, Dan Mich, was like that. I mean, whether you are male or female it doesn’t matter so long as you do the job. But I don’t think Kennedy was that way. He was very sexually oriented. Sexually maybe is the wrong word for it, but he was very...

ALDRICH: Well, sexually in the sense that he...

[-17-]

not on tape

KNEBEL: Very male-female oriented. I knew a number of women who worked in the Kennedy White House, as secretaries and aides—very intelligent, competent, incredibly hardworking women. There was a nice camaraderie, sense of equality, on that staff, but still none of the women had very VIP jobs. Once Ted Sorensen, I think it was, or Pierre, told me how lucky I was, in that I was one of the very few women journalists Kennedy saw, or respected.

ALDRICH: I mean, a good analogy—this is off the record—might be certain white liberals’ attitude toward the race problem, which is that we should ignore color differences. However, in this problem, man-woman problem, a sexually oriented man would exaggerate—perhaps not exaggerate, but certainly delight in the differences.

KNEBEL: Yes, which is, of course, also delightful.

ALDRICH: Exactly. And women always present one with this quandary, actually, this dilemma, certain kinds of women. At one time they are asking you to treat them as men, that is, to forget the difference....

KNEBEL: But I think that, for instance, a character like Roosevelt, whom I didn’t know...

ALDRICH: I know very few women who ask you to interest yourself in them as female minds, you know; that they have something special to contribute, some sort of insight that perhaps a man might not be aware of.

KNEBEL: But, for instance, a Roosevelt could appraise a woman like Frances Perkins, who certainly was not a very sexy lady, but a very competent one, and put her in the cabinet and used her and trusted her. I can't imagine Jack Kennedy doing anything like that. I can't even conceive of him spotting a Frances Perkins, someone who wasn't his type personally, but saying, "Okay, this is a competent professional, let's use her in one capacity or other." At a high level, that is.

ALDRICH: Well, let's see, Laura, what else have we got to cover? The people in his administration whom you knew. Begin with the obvious one, Salinger.

KNEBEL: Oh, Pierre. Well, the way you operated around that White House, as probably other journalists have said—told you, or the way I operated anyway—was, if I had a story idea I'd check in with Salinger. As a matter of fact, sometimes I wouldn't tell Salinger if I were trying for an exclusive, because he had a tendency to leave notes around his desk or talk a lot; if you had anything important looking, you went directly to the President. I would go through Mrs. Lincoln or through Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]. Pierre didn't mind because he knew who the President wanted to see. As he said, "The President is his own best public relations man." It was a load off his back.

begin tape #2

[-18-]

ALDRICH: How about Sorensen? What were your relations with him?

KNEBEL: Well, Ted and I were friends. We still are as a matter of fact.

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

ALDRICH: Okay, so you were a great friend of Ted Sorensen.

KNEBEL: Loyalty was characteristic of the whole Kennedy entourage. If you'd known them early, as I had known Ted.... I'd known him when he worked for Senator Paul Douglas, my old friend, before he worked for Kennedy. We had this common bond of being middle western, Protestant, upright types.

ALDRICH: Did you find him somewhat self-righteous?

KNEBEL: Oh indeed. And Ted's memory about slights or insults to the Kennedys was phenomenal. For instance, in the story I did in '57, called "The Rise of the Brothers Kennedy," during the trip to South Carolina when Kennedy was making this commencement address I was talking to Ted and I said, "Well, let's face it.

There are rumors going around in Washington about the Senator and his wife, that they're not getting along, that they've been separated. What about that?" In Washington that was common gossip—the alleged trouble between the Senator and his wife. Ted said rather heatedly, "Well that's not true. As a matter of fact, I can tell you this in confidence, Jackie is pregnant and that's why she's not traveling with him. (This was Caroline.) Now that's in confidence." I said, "Okay."

However, between our talk and the time my story appeared, there were all kinds of items in the paper: like Dorothy Kilgallen saying that Mrs. Kennedy is pregnant, et cetera. So in one two-line caption, along with a picture of the then Senator kissing Jackie goodbye at the airport (which was unusual since he didn't go for pictures like that), I wrote, the reason Mrs. Kennedy wasn't campaigning with him was that she was pregnant. There had been so many items about it, speculation. By the time that caption appeared, I figured her pregnancy was common knowledge. Well, summer before last I saw Ted in Hyannis, when he was working on his memoirs; he brought it up, the fact that I had broken his confidence about Jackie's pregnancy. That one caption. He was still protecting the Kennedy interests.

ALDRICH: Did you ever ask him about his relationship to Kennedy?

KNEBEL: I guess I did. I remember asking him once what he did in the White House, and he said, "I'm a generalist." And I said, "What the hell is a generalist?" And he said, "Well, that means I get consulted about Berlin or the budget, different kinds of things." Ted is an intelligent man, but reserved and not much given to emotional talk or self-revelation. I haven't read all of his book, but what I miss in it is this

[-19-]

very personal relationship, this alter ego relationship he had with Kennedy.

ALDRICH: How do you explain that?

KNEBEL: Well, he's part Swedish and I'm Swedish so I kind of understand it. He's Nebraska Swedish, and Swedes are tight-lipped, nontalking by temperament. He also picked up a lot of Kennedy attitudes and mannerisms along the way. I don't know if that is...

ALDRICH: Self-effacing?

KNEBEL: That passionate self-effacement. It's extraordinary! Total identification of self with the hero is what shows through that book. Now who is it that told me one story about Ted? This shows how history gets made. Ted had left Paul Douglas's office and was looking for another job in the Senate as an assistant to a senator. What do they call them?—administrative assistants. He went to two men: one was Scoop Jackson [Henry M. Jackson] and the other was Kennedy. He went first to Senator Jackson, who said, "I'm very impressed with your credentials, but let me think it over until

tomorrow.” Ted went to Kennedy who hired him on the spot. Now, if Scoop Jackson had said yes, first, Ted probably wouldn’t have gone any further. Where is Scoop Jackson today?

ALDRICH: Defending Boeing [Boeing Company].

KNEBEL: Another amazing attribute—and in Kennedy this, I guess, resembled FDR—was the extraordinary variety of people he surrounded himself with. There were people, for instance, like Sorensen, whom I think he called his “intellectual blood bank.” There was the Irish mafia; old navy pals like Fay; there were newspaper types; there was Jackie and the family. He seemed to have them compartmentalized—is that the right word? I call him a prismatic president because I don’t think anybody knew the total of him. He had many funny facets; certain kinds of people served certain of his needs, or interested him in certain ways, but they never seemed to overlap. For instance, Sorensen didn’t go to intimate social do’s at the White House, that I know of. I don’t think the Irish mafia did either. Whereas a Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] did, that was partly Jackie’s doing. The people he worked with politically he didn’t necessarily socialize with. A Smathers was a social buddy, so was an Earl Smith. It was a very wide span of people. Now you probably know a wide variety of people, and if you have a party, you might get them all together in the same room, no?

ALDRICH: I’ve had fantasies about doing that but...

KNEBEL: Well, I do, you know, mix them all up. Kennedy did that up to a point. But I think in his social life he had his old buddies like Red Fay, people he had known since the navy—and, as somebody said, they were people who didn’t tax the mind—and he would take them up

[-20-]

to Hyannis on the *Honey Fitz*, and they would sit around and yak, you know, they had little to do with politics. They were his relaxing friends. Lem Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings] certainly is an old friend. Charlie Spalding [Charles Spalding], too. Ted Sorensen wasn’t a social friend—they were tremendously close but in a different category.

ALDRICH: Did you ever overhear them talking to one another?

KNEBEL: I did but I can’t recall anything significant. Once I was thinking of doing an article on the sophisticated issues a president deals with, how does he transmit their importance to the electorate. It arose out of something Kennedy said once, as did many ideas for stories. In FDR’s time, the war, the Depression, were real gut issues, but as Kennedy rued: “How do you explain the Common Market or talk about the gold flow?” How do you get those issues across? He tried to educate me about the gold flow. I’d protest, “I can’t even balance my checkbook, much less fathom the gold flow.” Once I was talking to him about assorted subjects, and he suddenly said: “Now check Ted Sorensen on the gold flow.” I called Ted who said, “I don’t understand this. The President called just

after you'd left his office and said I should give you a briefing on the gold flow. What do you want to know about the gold flow for?" I said, "Well, frankly, I don't though I'll be interested to hear about the gold flow. It was the President's idea..." What was interesting was that Kennedy not only advised me I should see Sorensen but immediately got on the phone to Sorensen and told him he should brief me on this. So Sorensen and I schmoozed, and he loaded me up with papers about the gold flow and the statistics. God knows where they are now.

ALDRICH: I mean to say, did you ever see them talking together as though you weren't there?

KNEBEL: I mostly remember from that trip to South Carolina and others that Ted was always discreet, kind of blending into the woodwork, but he had the statistics and the rundown on who was going to be at the meeting and what the local issues were. He was polite and almost totally self-effacing. Everything that an ambitious young senator could wish for in an adviser. I suppose he was like a Louis Howe [Louis McHenry Howe]—no, Louis Howe was a different sort.

ALDRICH: Oh, I think so. Yes, he was much more paternal.

KNEBEL: Much more paternal and had much more of a personality of his own, but it got so entwined with Kennedy's.

ALDRICH: What about the Irish mafia, then? Which of those did you get to know the best, if any?

KNEBEL: Oh, Kenny O'Donnell, I suppose. He was a great buddy of Stanley Tretick's. I always said he looked like somebody in the movie, *The Informer*.

[-21-]

ALDRICH: Oh which side?

KNEBEL: He's very laconic, and he doesn't say very much. And he had this passionate loyalty to Kennedy. As Ted had, in a different way. I think there was underground jealousy among these people. I mean, as long as Kennedy was alive, he was the kingpin who kind of kept them in...

ALDRICH: In their place.

KNEBEL: Not in their place.

ALDRICH: I didn't mean that in a derogatory sense, but just of keeping them in their place in the arch.

KNEBEL: That's right. There was an orbit, like the sun with the planets, and the planets each had their own place. But of course, once the sun is gone, then the whole thing collapses.

ALDRICH: What was O'Donnell's style of thought and behavior?

KNEBEL: Oh, Kenny's great. He's very Irish and funny. Stanley, on his tape for the library, has described the great crisis we had over printing pictures of Caroline, with all the *sturm und drang* and the whole White House shaking. Oh, the repercussions over "breaking a trust"—very typical of Kennedy—were fantastic, and went on and on and on. I remember Stanley talking to Kenny after it all happened. Kenny was reassuring. "Oh, come on..." The President blew his stack, but secretly he loved those pictures. He said, "Jackie was sore. You broke a trust, but don't worry about it." Kenny was straight, a great leveler, a meat-and-potatoes character, whereas Pierre was an operator, a personality. I don't think the Irish mafia appreciated that very much because everybody else was self-effacing around there. And Pierre was kind of a flamboyant star, and I don't think they much cared for that.

ALDRICH: O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien]?

KNEBEL: Oh, very nice, jolly, open. But the two fanatically devoted ones were Kenny O'Donnell and Dave Powers [David F. Powers] those two.

ALDRICH: Did you have much contact with Powers?

KNEBEL: Oh, yes. What was interesting to me was after the assassination—right after, because I went down and spent a couple of weeks there—the two people who seemed to me the most shattered were Kenny and Dave. I guess Mary McGrory said it was like, you know, King Arthur and the Round Table. But they really had this tremendous, fantastic personal devotion to Kennedy. Kenny O'Donnell took it very, very hard. Whereas Larry is more pragmatic. As a matter of fact, after November 22, I made a prediction to somebody about who would be around there the longest afterward which was

[-22-]

just about right, who could adjust to the new regime.

ALDRICH: And it was O'Brien. You said O'Brien?

KNEBEL: I think I said O'Brien. People like Bundy, obviously, Dick Goodwin who lasted quite a while.

ALDRICH: How much contact did you have with Goodwin?

KNEBEL: Very off and on.

ALDRICH: I fail to fathom him.

KNEBEL: Likewise. He is very bright, I guess. Ambitious. As Gore Vidal once said, “An Iago forever in search of an Othello.” Maybe you should never be around any White House, close up, because if you see how things operate it makes you nervous. But all of a sudden there was Dick Goodwin as the number one mentor on Latin America. I don’t know that he’d even been there, at that point. He didn’t speak Spanish. He was learning on the job, which happens to every president and his aides. But you do wonder how an appointment like that gets made.

ALDRICH: There’s a very good reason for learning on the job, I imagine, for the president asking someone to learn on the job.

KNEBEL: Perhaps there’s no other way to do it.

ALDRICH: No, I was thinking of a more practical reason than that, and that is, you aren’t confronted with another set of fixed ideas. The ideas grow up under your shadow, therefore, in some sense they really are your ideas. The man isn’t going to think anything that you are going to disagree with.

KNEBEL: It’s not that so much. Anybody, I think, who is boss of anything whether it is AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph Company, Inc.] or the president has to have people around whom he knows, whom he trusts, who reflects what he’s thinking, and wants done.

ALDRICH: I disagree because if you’re running AT&T you want the best man to solve a problem in...

KNEBEL: That’s another level like Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense. I’m speaking about the White House circle, the inner circle, your appointments secretary, your press secretary.... Like the five or six guys Johnson has now, there’s a Jack Valenti [Jack J. Valenti]—well, you know the group he has. You have a small group whom you have known for some time, can trust...

ALDRICH: Yes, but I don’t think you set them to work on something that’s open to technical and intellectual solution as Latin America.

[-23-]

KNEBEL: Agreed. I think there must have been somebody who knew something about Latin America who could have filled the role. At that point Dick Goodwin was it. And maybe he was less catastrophic than...

ALDRICH: ...Mr. Mann [Thomas Clifton Mann]. Well, who else in the White House, the

coterie there, do you want to talk about?

KNEBEL: Oh dear Mrs. Kennedy? Pamela [Pamela Turnure]?

ALDRICH: Well, let's talk about Mrs. Kennedy for a while.

KNEBEL: For the press, there was the East Wing and the West Wing. There was the President's wing and Mrs. Kennedy's wing, and they were as different for a journalist as night and day. The President, if he had known you for some time and you were a friend or whatever—especially the first year or two—was among the most accessible VIPs I knew in Washington. This always stunned me, that on short notice I could come down on rather trivial errands, and I'd often as not be seeing the President. Sometimes Pierre would say, "Let me go check." And all of a sudden there I'd be with "himself."

Clearing some pictures of Caroline, there was a story on a White House Christmas or, assignments which bored even me. Jackie was the remote fairy queen in that other wing who didn't want to have much truck with us journalist types. All the time she was in the White House, I was often in dutch with her because I was trying for the kind of stories she wanted least. Like stories on her children or...

ALDRICH: Didn't you detect any ambivalence in her attitude toward publicity?

KNEBEL: Yes, because I think she got to where she enjoyed the role of being first lady, and I think she did it very well, even though she gave the press a hard time, she managed to surmount all of us. The working press in the White House, particularly, had a great deal of resentment for Mrs. Kennedy. For instance, two women reporters, Helen Thomas [Helen A. Thomas] of the UPI [United Press International] and Frances Lewine of AP [Associated Press] were professional, competent newspaper types, their job was to cover what goes on in the White House, especially in the First Lady's domain. Jackie would never have anything to do with them. She wouldn't even recognize their existence which was, I thought, unnecessary. You don't have to give them big exclusive interviews, but you can be polite.

ALDRICH: Whereas...

KNEBEL: Whereas, if you were stylish and foreign, an Italian or French photographer or a writer like Romain Gary, these people interested her more; they had much more open entrée; they got invited to dinner; they talked to her. So the working stiffs naturally had a certain amount of resentment about this.

[-24-]

ALDRICH: It was okay if you appeared in *Paris Match* but not in *Life*.

KNEBEL: She had her favorites. There were people she liked and trusted, a different set of people than the President's circle. I had a long talk with her in Hyannis a

year ago this summer—we had a sort of reconciliation meeting—and she said, “You know, you were always part of *his* wing,” indicating she had her concerns in her domain which sometimes worked at cross-purposes with what the President was up to. And you were either in one camp or the other.

ALDRICH: Apart from that, when you did get to see her...

KNEBEL: I first knew her when she was a senator’s wife and liked her very, very much. There was the time when I was doing the story on the senator and he said, “What do you want to talk to my wife for?” I did talk to her, and she was very funny and wry and offbeat, and she said, “I hope to god you’re not going to ask me about Jack’s complexes. Everybody asks me about the family complexes. Doesn’t Jack have a complex about his father? And Bobby a complex about Jack?” The entire time she was in the White House I had very little contact with her, other than through Tish Baldrige [Letitia Baldrige] or Pamela Turnure.

ALDRICH: Did you ask her about his complexes?

KNEBEL: No.

ALDRICH: Chicken.

KNEBEL: I saw a fair amount of her, and worked with her, on *Look*’s memorial issue for JFK. We went up to Hyannis to take pictures of her and the children. This was a year ago this summer. And I also persuaded her to write that tribute to JFK for the memorial issue. She really worked on that. She wrote it and rewrote it. Stanley and I went up to Newport to see her, and we showed her some of the pictures we had taken in Hyannis. There was one she didn’t like particularly, and in the arguing she said to Stanley, “Stanley, you know I’m not a difficult woman.” And Stanley said to her, “Listen, you’re one of the toughest broads I know.” Which she appreciated.

She also said to Stanley once, “Oh, Stanley, remember how all the time in the White House I used to hate you so much? And now we are such good friends.” Stanley is really a kind of straight, meat-and-potatoes, UPI slugging photographer, a type the President liked very much. The very fact that he was candid and honest and ungrammatical, and dogged and persistent, that’s what the President admired. Jackie preferred photographers like Dick Avedon and Mark Shaw. So it was two different camps. You know, Jackie is a source of endless discussion and analysis.

[END OF TAPE; END OF INTERVIEW#1]

Laura Bergquist Knebel Oral History Transcript—JFK#1
Name Index

A

Avedon, Richard, 8, 25

B

Baldrige, Letitia, 25
Batista, Fulgencio, 11, 13
Billings, Kirk LeMoyne, 21
Bundy, McGeorge, 8, 23
Byrnes, James F., 1

C

Cassini, Igor, 14, 15
Cassini, Oleg, 15
Castro, Fidel, 10, 11, 12, 16
Clift, Montgomery, 2
Cowles, Gardner A., Jr., 15, 16

D

Daniel, Jean, 13
Douglas, Paul H., 2, 19, 20

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 13

F

Fay, Paul B. "Red", Jr., 17, 20

G

Gardner, Arthur, 11
Gary, Romain, 24
Goodwin, Richard N., 20, 23, 24
Gromyko, Andrei Andreevich, 8
Guevara, Che, 12, 15, 16, 17
Guthman, Edwin O., 16

H

Howe, Louis McHenry, 21
Humphrey, Hubert H., 2

J

Jackson, Henry M. "Scoop", 20
Johnson, Haynes, 16
Johnson, Lyndon B., 2, 11, 23
Jones, Douglas, 1, 2, 4, 5

K

Kennedy, Caroline Bouvier, 6, 7, 12, 19, 22, 24
Kennedy, Edward M., 3, 4
Kennedy, Ethel Skakel, 4
Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 15,
16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25
Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13,
14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25
Kennedy, John F., Jr., 6, 7, 9
Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr., 3, 5, 9, 15, 16, 25
Kennedy, Patrick Bouvier, 7, 8
Kennedy, Robert F., 2, 4, 6, 16, 25
Kilgallen, Dorothy, 8, 9, 19
Knebel, Fletcher, 3, 5, 7, 8, 16
Knight, Goodwin Jess, 16

L

Lewine, Frances, 24
Lincoln, Evelyn N., 14, 18
Lodge, Henry Cabot, 3

M

Mann, Thomas Clifton, 24
March, Aleida, 17
Matthews, Herbert L., 16
McCarthy, Jean Kerr, 4
McCarthy, Joseph R., 4
McGrory, Mary, 8, 22
Mich, Daniel Danforth, 15, 17
Murphy, Robert D., 15

N

Nixon, Richard M., 16

O

O'Brien, Lawrence F., 22
O'Donnell, Kenneth P., 18, 21, 22

O'Leary, John J. "Muggsy", 4

P

Perkins, Frances, 16, 18

Powers, David F., 22

R

Ray, Johnny, 9

Roosevelt, Eleanor R., 16

Roosevelt, Franklin D., 11, 16, 18, 20, 21

Rovere, Richard Halworth, 4

Rubirosa, Porfirio, 13, 14, 15

S

Salinger, Pierre E.G., 7, 8, 9, 15, 18, 22, 24

Shaw, Mark, 25

Shriver, R. Sargent, Jr., 7

Smathers, George A., 13, 14, 20

Smith, Earl E.T., 11, 13, 14, 20

Smith, Stephen E., 15

Snowball, 14

Sorensen, Theodore C., 1, 4, 11, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21,

22

Spalding, Charles, 21

T

Thomas, Helen A., 24

Tretick, Stanley, 6, 7, 21, 22, 25

Trujillo Molina, Rafael Leonidas, 13, 14, 15

Trujillo, Ramfis, 14, 15

Turnure, Pamela, 24, 25

V

Valenti, Jack J., 23

Vidal, Gore, 11, 23