

Walter Cronkite, Oral History Interview - 4/14/2004
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Biographical Note

Cronkite, a journalist and broadcaster for United Press International (UPI) from 1941-1948; and for CBS Evening News from 1951-1991, discusses his first impressions of John F. Kennedy's (JFK), his one-on-one interviews with JFK, as well as reporting on the assassination and announcing JFK's death, and covering the 1969 moon landing, among other issues.

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Walter Cronkite

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Oral History Interview

with

Walter Cronkite

April 14, 2004
New York, New York

by Steven Fagan and Vicki Daitch

For the John F. Kennedy Library

FAGAN: Today is Wednesday, April 14, 2004. This is Steven Fagan with the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas. I'm here with Vicki Daitch from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston. The interview we are doing today is part of our respective museums' oral history projects. Today we're very honored to be talking to Mr. Walter Cronkite in his office in New York City.

CRONKITE: Thank you. I'm honored to be invited to do this with you. It's important work for you, I know, and the future, I suppose.

FAGAN: I'm going to turn the interview over to Vicki; she's going to get started.

DAITCH: It is indeed. And thank you again for being with us. First of all, if you don't mind, we'd like to just ask what some of your early memories of Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] would have been. Did you actually meet him before you did the campaign interview in 1960?

CRONKITE: Oh, yes, yes. I met him earlier in 1960. I had seen him on the Senate floor and around in the Senate restaurant. But I had not really gotten to know him much at all. I really didn't know him. I think we'd met probably to shake hands, but nothing more than that. He was just a young senator from Massachusetts, of

course, of no particular importance at that moment at all. And then he tossed his hat in the ring.

His first appearance before the Democratic members who would be at the convention was in New Mexico, and I went out there for that. His principal competitor was expected to sweep the nomination with virtually no problem from Kennedy. That was Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], who was much beloved by nearly all of the Democratic leaders. And it was expected that he would get the nomination with no competition.

When the two of them made separate appearances a couple of days apart in New Mexico, it seemed to reconfirm for most of us that Humphrey would sweep into power. Kennedy's speech to the New Mexico committee people was very poorly done. Humphrey came in. They were all for him already. His speech, as most of his speeches were, was really great crowd raisers for the party, for what he believed in, which was fairly liberal democracy. And he had the New Mexico candidates standing on the folding chairs that they--I thought all of them would topple over certainly--cheering, yelling, hollering their enthusiasm after his speech.

Kennedy spoke after that, and it just fell flat, absolutely flat. He just didn't have the enthusiasm, it seemed, for the job. Or really much reason why he was running for the job. He didn't have a platform to take to them in any way. And as a consequence, we went away from New Mexico convinced that this was no campaign whatsoever. Of course, history proved us vastly wrong.

DAITCH: Right. Did you get the feeling that maybe he was not serious? You suggested

that his speech wasn't all that enthusiastic or vigorous. Maybe he wasn't all that serious about the vice presidential nomination?

CRONKITE: The vice presidential nomination? No, I don't think that even came up, as far

as I know. He was thinking only of the presidential nomination.

DAITCH: I was thinking about in '56 when his hat was in the ring for the vice presidential nomination.

CRONKITE: Oh, that. No, this was for the presidential nomination in '60.

DAITCH: Right, right.

CRONKITE: Alright? And it was a vastly different situation.

DAITCH: So that was a tepid speech at that time then.

CRONKITE: That's right. Indeed. I think I've got the date right of it. I don't think it was.... I don't believe that was the vice presidential nomination at all. I'm quite convinced it was the presidential nomination.

DAITCH: It might have been. And you heard him give other speeches along the course of the campaign no doubt.

CRONKITE: Oh, it changed vastly. It changed vastly. He got into his swing, and his speeches were far more commanding certainly than that one. That was just a very low point, I think. It almost was like a freshman testing the water to see how it all went and not very well prepared. I think that was the major impression that they got. That he wasn't really terribly serious about wooing the New Mexican delegation. That he perhaps, you know, the one thing about Kennedy, and all the Kennedys, is a certain sense of arrogance, as we know.

They may have gotten the impression his coming out there from Washington, they didn't know him well from his senatorial experience, coming out there and making a speech now to them in New Mexico, he might very well, because the speech gave the impression to me, not very serious about needing New Mexico. He wasn't asking them to come aboard because he desperately needed them: I need you on my team, that kind of thing. That wasn't the speech. It was just a very cool speech about democracy and the Democratic Party, and it wasn't much.

DAITCH: Now one of the things that I have often heard about Kennedy was his ability to absorb information and analyze it quickly. And that would have served him well to avoid exactly the kind of situation you're describing. Did you see later events where he was better prepared with the details of the local....

CRONKITE: Oh, nearly always. This was the sort of thing that made you think, was he really serious, or was this the idea of a freshman senator standing up there and gaining some national fame and notoriety and not really expecting any positive results from it? That's kind of the attitude he seemed to have.

DAITCH: Right. Now the campaign interview shortly before the election in 1960, was that your first one-on-one interview with him?

CRONKITE: Yes, it was.

DAITCH: And how did that get set up?

CRONKITE: Well, that's a long story actually. The Westinghouse Company sponsored our convention coverage and thereafter the campaign and the election night. They wanted there, that year, 1960, something special as a series of bridge weekly programs between the convention and the election. I came up with the idea that we do an interview, one-on-one interview with each of the candidates, the four candidates, the presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

DAITCH: Oh, that was your idea? That's great.

CRONKITE: Everybody said, oh, they're never going to agree to do that. Television

hadn't gained that impact yet. They're not going to do that, that kind of thing. They're not going to do it. And they said, "But if you want to try, if you got them, of course we'd do it."

Well, I decided that I was much more likely to get Kennedy to agree than Vice President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]. So I went up to Capitol Hill to see the Senator, and I explained the idea. He said, "You're out of your mind. Get out of here! I'm not going to do that. That's ridiculous. No, no, no. I'm not going to do it." So as I was leaving, I said, "You know, if I got Vice President Nixon, you're almost going to have to come aboard, aren't you?" He said, "You wouldn't dare." Not too friendly. You wouldn't dare.

I went out, and I went right downtown to Nixon's campaign office on K Street, and I went in to see the Vice President. Got in to see him. And I explained the project. He said, "I'd love to do that. I'd love to do that." Now what I was telling them was something which sounds so strange today. But you've got to understand that we were still in our freshman years in doing this kind of thing on television. Television interviews were pretty pallid in those days. Even sometimes the subjects were given questions in advance and that kind of thing.

I told both of them in making these presentations to them, first with Kennedy and then Nixon, that we were going to come in from either side of the room. We're not going to have met before except in setting this up. But no previous questions; that will be made perfectly clear. The questions will be absolutely new. We'll come in, we'll greet each other hello. You'll invite me to sit down. I'll sit down, I'll start throwing these questions at you, tough questions you will not have in advance and no knowledge of them whatsoever.

Nixon agreed to all of this, and I was very surprised. But when he did, I went right back downstairs, got another cab, went back up to Capitol Hill. I got about half way up the Hill, and I suddenly thought, wait a minute. Wait a minute. I left out one of the principal problems here perhaps. The person that goes first is going to be at a great disadvantage. The person who goes up second is going to see how this thing plays out and prepare for it, have a week to prepare for it. So I had the cab turn around and went back to see Nixon, expecting now to run into serious problems. I explained it to Nixon. He said, "That's alright. I'd be glad to go first. Perfectly alright."

DAITCH: Really!

CRONKITE: Amazing! So now I'm up to the Hill. I go in to see Kennedy. And I said, "Well, Vice President Nixon has agreed to do it, and he's agreed to go first." He said, "He hasn't agreed to it. What are you telling me?" I said, "I just came from his office. If you wish to call his office or have your people do so, he has agreed to do it." "Well, I'm not going to do it. I've talked to my people, and I'm not going to do this thing." Well, they did, of course, agree to do it. They said, "Well, you've just got to. You can't let this major program go like that and let him stand alone and you refused to do an interview." So that is the way it was set up.

Then when we did it, my Nixon interview was very tough, as I expected it to be. My first question was to him, I said, "Mr. Vice President, you've been in politics a while now. You certainly are well aware of the fact that a lot of people say, 'I don't know what it is about the man. I just don't like him.' What do you think it is they don't like about you?"

Well, Nixon was just like he was reading it off a teleprompt. It was almost embarrassing. He said, "Well, I think you'll find it's three things primarily. One is my physiognomy. I do have this rather low hairline and a very heavy beard. I can't shave enough to get rid of that shadow on my beard, and that doesn't help in the first place."

But said, "Then, more than that, I think that my leadership of the House Un-American Activities Committee," which, of course, was no leadership at all; he appeared there, but he said, "my leadership of the House Un-American Activities Committee, a lot of people think that our anti-Communist campaign was overdone. I fully disagree with that view. We did some very essential work."

Then he said, "My campaign against Helen Gahagan Douglas in California for the Senate." He said, "I will admit now that I was a little rough. I'm sorry that I was. I've tried to apologize to her. I've apologized publicly for some of those things. But the stain is there. I think those are the things." That was the kind of interview I had with him. And it was all the questions I mean just came back as if they'd been written out in advance. Which kind of ruined the impression. I'd expected some hemming and hawing. There wasn't any at all from him. I was rather impressed. I was quite impressed, as a matter of fact.

Well, the next week it's Kennedy, and we're doing Kennedy at his Georgetown home. We have him seated on a couch, and he's perfectly comfortable, and I'm interviewing him. The interview goes quite well. Not distinguished, I wouldn't say, particularly, but it went well. There were no problems in it that I could see. I think he would have liked to have said some things differently. But we got to the last question, and my last question to him was: "Senator, of all the people in the United States, why do you think you are the one person best qualified to be president of this country?" And he said, "Well, I think it's ... well, I think you would find probably ... well, I think you'd probably find my sense of history. It's my sense of history. I have a sense of history." I mean it was a terrible, badly-done thing.

So I thanked him, and he got up and went up the stairs to go somewhere, and I went out to the truck where we'd been taping this for a few hours later on Sunday. The tape, not to be edited in any way, was to be shown on Sunday a little later.

I was about to get out of the truck and leave, and our producer came back downstairs. Kennedy had called him upstairs. And the producer said, "Well, the senator says we have to do it over again." And I said, "What do you mean? We can't do that. We set it up, we told the people the set-up before Nixon. He did it one time through and no rehearsals. Now he's [Kennedy] going to take a full rehearsal and do it over again? That's not fair. He can't do that." And he said, "But he says either you do that or he won't be on the air."

I said, "Well, that's certainly not the agreement. I just don't see what we do. We're going to have to make all kinds of disclaimers. We're going to have to say he insisted on redoing it after going through it once. These questions therefore have been rehearsed. They were not rehearsed by Vice President Nixon." I said, "That's going to be a...." He said, "You go up and tell him that. I've been telling him that for the last fifteen minutes."

So I went upstairs, and he was in a bedroom, kind of a boys' dormitory room, a strange room, but it may have been his private little bedroom or something. Twin beds, Harvard banners and sports pictures on the wall, Harvard sports pictures. And he was lying there with his jacket off on one bed, and Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorenson], his great friend and closest advisor, on the other. And they were lying there chatting. I came in, and he said, "Well, are you ready to go?" I said, "No, I'm not ready to go at all." And I went

through the whole argument all over again. He said, "I don't care about all that. I'm telling you what we're going to do." I said, "Well, you know, if you're telling us what to do, I suppose that we will go ahead and do it. My recommendation will be to the company after we've done it that we don't show it, quite honestly." And he said, "Well, you wouldn't dare do that. If you have me on there, you're going to use it." I said, "Well, that may be the answer." But I said, "Alright, if you insist, I guess we're going to do it."

And I started out, and I got almost to the door, and I turned, and I said, "Let me tell you, Senator, we're going to do this. But I think this is the lousiest bit of sportsmanship I've ever seen in my life," and turned and walked out the door. Before I got through the door, he said, "Wait a minute! Wait a minute. Go ahead and use it." One thing with a Kennedy, you can't accuse them of bad sportsmanship. And that hit him. I didn't know how powerful that little speech of mine would be. I hadn't intended it to work. I was just mad, angry. But it worked, and we used it, and it was a very poorly-received speech ... I mean interview. It wasn't very good, very good at all. Most surprisingly, when Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] was running, Roger Mudd was interviewing him out at Hickory Hill. And Roger Mudd asked him the same question at the end. And by gosh, if Bobby didn't flub it.

DAITCH: Really!

CRONKITE: Yes. That wasn't very well done either. It was better than his brother did, but

it was as if he'd never looked at that one, even as [John] Kennedy apparently, never looked at the Nixon one. And his whole staff was so arrogant, apparently, that they didn't even think of briefing him on what Nixon said. Incredible! I should have thought that would be the first thing they'd do is look at the Nixon thing.

DAITCH: Sure.

CRONKITE: Made no impression on them.

DAITCH: Now why do you think that Nixon was so.... I mean someone who doesn't appear very well on the camera, why was he so eager and amenable to doing it the way that you wanted to do it? And Kennedy, who has a reputation for looking wonderful on the camera...?

CRONKITE: Well, I have no idea. Of course, Kennedy didn't have such a reputation at that time, you understand. He'd had very little national exposure really. Nixon, of course, had had this considerable exposure as the vice president of the United States. So I suppose Nixon felt more confident that he could handle it, and he put forward.... After all, he was getting an hour of time to put his program forward to the American people. So he took it.

DAITCH: Yes. When I watched that video from that....

CRONKITE: Beg pardon?

DAITCH: When I watched the video from your interview with Kennedy, I noticed two things in particular that I wanted to ask you about. One of them was this sort of.... I don't know if it was something that he just donned for the camera persona, but he was almost – I can't help but describe it as "aw shucks." He would just sort of be almost shy, he would look down when he was answering a question. Did that seem real to you? Was that just who he was, or was that some kind of character?

CRONKITE: Well, it seemed real to me at the time because I hadn't been exposed to Kennedy myself that much at that point. As far as I knew, this was his character. So it didn't make any particular impression. Incidentally, the excuse he used, the reason he used that we had to redo it was that we had put him on this soft sofa so that he was crumpled up and did not look at all presidential or important in any way. And that we had deliberately done this. That was.... We had deliberately done this, put him in this unfavorable position. We didn't see it that way, and that had nothing to do with the question. The question was his failure at the last.

DAITCH: Well, the other thing that I noticed, and I wondered whether you noticed this or if this is common in your interviews; he would very often, and he did this in subsequent interviews, he would very often start speaking before you had finished your question. And I didn't know if that....

CRONKITE: Well, that I think bothered me a little bit, of course. But on the other hand, that's not unusual with people with quick minds, very quick minds. They, as you launch into the dissertation that leads to the question, most smart people, and particularly politicians, know exactly where you're going, and they're anxious to get to the answer.

DAITCH: Right.

CRONKITE: Perhaps in some ways they are unconsciously trying to outsmart you by getting to the answer before you change the direction of the question. They now know what they really want to say to that, and they want to get right to it.

DAITCH: Right. He had a reputation for having a particularly agile mind. And having known so many other presidents, did you think that he was unusually smart, gifted, quick?

CRONKITE: He was particularly so. He had a great sense of humor, and he employed it frequently, very well. It was a very controlled sense of humor. He never got out of line with it, which some people do who have a sense of humor. They overdo it, and it destroys the whole impact. He did not. He used it well. He had a great gift of language. And, of course, was exceedingly bright. All of that put together made him a very

powerful speaker. Now whether it was in an extemporaneous situation or a prepared address, he had it. There was no question about it. And, of course, he was a handsome man. He was a guy of great personality, for heaven's sake. Really it was very difficult to help from liking him. I mean the Republicans had a great deal of trouble kind of getting their steel together to attack him. It was tough to do. He was just so good at it.

DAITCH: Right. Well, you were quite.... You stood up against him on this, with the unsportsman-like comment and that sort of thing. Did that color your relationship in later years?

CRONKITE: No. Our relationship was steady throughout his unfortunately short presidency and the campaign. We had, of course, the usual little momentary tiffs that everybody had with him one time or another. He was quite critical of the press. At one time, you know, he banned the *New York Herald Tribune* from the White House. I mean silly kind of reaction. He must have been awfully unhappy with a piece that day in the paper. But we got along all right.

One of the most difficult times I really had with him was not with him so much. But he granted me an interview for the first hour, or rather half hour, news broadcast, evening news broadcast. We only had fifteen minutes before that, a ridiculously short time for a nationwide newscast. A half hour isn't enough, but we thought we were making great progress by getting a half hour, and we got it first at CBS. So when we got it, I asked for an interview on that one day, and he was up at Hyannis Port, and we did it. This is rather a lengthy story, but it's somewhat indicative.

I got up to Hyannis Port. Drove up with the press corps and was in a tourist lodge there in Hyannis. Drove up to it. And when I drove up, our White House correspondent, Bob Pierpoint [Robert C. Pierpoint], a fine White House correspondent, one of the best, and Bob was on duty as the White House correspondent. He was there standing on the veranda waiting for me to arrive. And he was furious, absolutely furious with me as I got out of the car. He said, "Why don't you tell your own man at the White House what's going on, for heaven's sakes! I mean why do you tell AP these things?" I said, "What thing? What are you talking about?" He said, "Well, the AP's got this big story out tonight that the President's going to make an important statement on Vietnam on your broadcast tomorrow night." And I said, "Well, I don't know anything about that. Never heard anything about it." Which I hadn't. I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "Well, it's all over here, and the AP's got it. And I'm just sitting here dumb. I don't know anything about it. At least you could tell your White House man what you're doing with the President."

Well, I went in, and he said, Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger], who was the President's press spokesman, a good friend of his, all of ours, he said, "Pierre Salinger's got the story. He's telling everybody he's going to make this big statement." So I went in and said to Pierre, "What is this you're telling?" He said, "Well, to tell the truth, the President's all set to make a big statement." I said, "You know, you've just made a famous error that's going to go down in the history of journalism. We don't give questions in advance. We don't make arrangements with people in advance as to what they're going to say on interview programs. If he's got something to say, maybe he'll say it and maybe he won't because I'm not going to ask the question now. I'm *not* going to bring up Vietnam!"

It wasn't that big. There were a lot of other big stories at the moment. We were just getting involved in Vietnam. And I said, "So how about *that*?" He said, "Come on now, don't cut off your nose to spite your face. He's got an important...." I said, "But you told people that I'm going to ask him that question. You told them that I'm making it possible for him to do this. This is an extemporaneous interview. That's the only thing we do at CBS. No questions in advance. You make it appear that we're violating that in the case of the President. So I'm not asking him the question."

Well, Pierre kept after me the rest of the evening while I tried to have a drink with the press corps, get a little sleep. The next morning he was taking me out to their house at Hyannis Port, and all the way in the car he said, "You've got to do this." I said, "I don't have to do it. The mere fact that you're urging me to do it makes me even more certain I'm not going to do it."

Well, of course, Pierre even wasn't skilled enough to know or to recognize, and I didn't know it at that point. I should have. I mean it was perfectly clear. The interviewer doesn't control the interview. And as a consequence, midway in this thing, we were talking about something else, and the President said, "And by the way, let me tell you something else about Vietnam." [Laughter]

And he makes his little statement, which was quite important, and it was important. It was something that the White House wanted to get on the record. Which was that this has got to be their war. We can't fight and win this war for them. This has got to be the war of Vietnam. And we've got problems with Chairman Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] and that sort of thing. Went into the problems. And he said, "So they've got to understand that this can't be our war." Well, terribly important statement at that point.

DAITCH: Absolutely.

CRONKITE: And, of course, he violated himself and went ahead and did otherwise, made it our war. But it was rather amusing.

DAITCH: Well, Pierre should have known better than to try to force you into that situation.

CRONKITE: Well, he should have, but of course he didn't think he was forcing me. He thought he was setting something up for me. He didn't understand what my reaction would be.

DAITCH: Right. Well, it's almost a favor because this is an important announcement.

CRONKITE: It probably wouldn't have been his. Pierre wasn't that skilled and such a veteran correspondent as the others of us.

DAITCH: The statement that President Kennedy made about Vietnam at that time could be interpreted in two ways: I mean on the one hand he said very clearly this is their war, we can't win it for them. On the other hand, he also said very clearly that he was not in favor of withdrawing from Vietnam.

CRONKITE: That's right.

DAITCH: In your book you mentioned that your....

CRONKITE: We know that problem from presidents, don't we?

DAITCH: I know. In your book you mentioned and in your memoir you mentioned that

you thought that he probably would not have escalated the war. And, of course, this is a big historical question that historians are still debating. But could you say a little bit about why you thought that he wouldn't have?

CRONKITE: Well, I thought that everything he said kind of indicated his sense that he had made a mistake getting into the war in the first place. That this thing was deeper and more difficult than he had understood, and that perhaps he felt his advisors misadvised him. I don't know where he put the blame for that. But his biggest disappointment, you see, was with the leadership in South Vietnam. Diem was just.... He couldn't get along with Diem. We weren't able to get along with any of the successors to Diem.

We weren't there defending a democracy. We were there having to get rid of the management of the country and turn it into a democracy. What our chore became, as I'm sure he realized as well, became holding onto a piece of property where we might be able to save a little seed room for democracy in Southeast Asia. All of the neighboring countries had gone communist. This was the last foothold. But, unfortunately, it wasn't a democracy. And that we now realize. So the chore was much greater than we thought.

In a sense, when people ask today about, "Isn't this like Vietnam?" they don't talk about how we got into Vietnam, which is where they should talk about. Because the parallel is almost exact. Not enough planning. We didn't really understand the depth of the problem. And in some ways even the motive for going was somewhat similar. I mean the motive here [Iraq War] was the hidden weapons and the dangerous leadership. There it was the hidden force of the Communists to take over that corner of the world, a very important corner of the world.

So the parallels were very similar. And then we got our troops in there and put more and more troops in there, and it just escalated in that regard. Escalated in loss of blood and money. But did not escalate in any improvement of the situation or hope for improvement in Vietnam.

DAITCH: Do you think Kennedy's experience with the Bay of Pigs, which was a fiasco.... I had looked at your coverage of the Bay of Pigs, and there's this marvelous line where you're talking about how Kennedy tried to take a middle path, a compromise between a full-scale invasion with the United States involved and doing nothing. And so he took this middle path, and you said, "It didn't work." And I thought that's the biggest understatement I've ever heard.

CRONKITE: [Chuckles] I didn't realize I'd said that. Well, it didn't certainly. And, of course, not having worked, it established this enmity between Kennedy and Castro [Fidel Castro] personally, personal enmity as well as the political enmity. And, of course, that enmity carried through 'til after the assassination and led to much of the theorizing that Castro plotted the assassination of the President. Although that was never established or proved.

DAITCH: Right, right.

CRONKITE: I think it's something that President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] thought. I believe he thought it was engineered by Castro.

DAITCH: Well, certainly, and Steven will talk to you a little bit more about this, but certainly we know that Oswald [Lee Harvey Oswald] was influenced by all that, at least indirectly.

CRONKITE: And also of course what the American people never knew, including the Warren Commission, was denied the information by the CIA and the FBI that they had planned the assassination of Castro, and Castro knew this. The American people didn't know it, which shows the very great danger of not opening up to the American people these actions of a democracy.

DAITCH: Absolutely. I want to ask you one other question before we let Steven talk to you about the assassination. And I wanted to ask you about the Cuban Missile Crisis which must have been a terrible thing to try to report. Can you tell us a little bit about what that experience was like for you?

CRONKITE: Well, yes. It was a very delicate situation, of course. Here we had to keep the American people advised of what seemed to be an imminent exchange of nuclear weapons, and, you know, the horror of that was clearly evident. We had caused the situation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We knew what could happen. And this all began really, and I was there at what was the beginning of it, was the Vienna Conference. When just a few months in office, he was very anxious, Kennedy, a little bit naive, I think, in believing he could sit down with Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] and together they could settle things.

Well, he didn't reckon on the bombast of Mr. Khrushchev, and Khrushchev shouted at him and all this and dominated their meeting there in Vienna. When they came out of the meetings after a couple of days, there was no question that Kennedy was very, very down. He looked defeated. He smiled for the cameras, but it was a very forced smile.

DAITCH: You were there in Vienna?

CRONKITE: I was there, yes. I was there. He had failed. Not only had he failed, but he was now aware of the nature of the enemy and the realization that any hope

of sitting down and patting each other's back and working out some solution as informed and responsible heads of their governments was not likely to happen. He understood the real nature of the Cold War, the real threat of it.

Therefore, when the missile crisis came just a few short months later, this seemed to be the confirmation that, as some of the pundits said in Vienna, the President lost a round here in that Khrushchev was not impressed with him, impressed with his strength or his knowledge or even probably his leadership. And therefore he dared to start this missile program in Cuba. So these things were very much related and all part of the learning curve for Kennedy.

Then when Khrushchev was going to reinforce the missiles with further shipments, that was when Kennedy, of course, took the upper hand, put in the blockade of Cuba, told Khrushchev he had to get out or we were going in. Of course then we had the stalemate. That's when Khrushchev said, "Yes, and you go in, we bomb you. We fire the missiles." Boy, that was a seven-day crisis. And in reporting that.... We couldn't report it to the American people to the depths it really went. If we had, I don't know what would have happened.

DAITCH: Did you know, though, did the press know what the actual situation was?

CRONKITE: You know, it's hard for me to recall whether we knew the actual situation down to the little nitty gritty. We sure knew that there was a missile standoff, that the missiles were down there to be fired, and the Russians were coming, and we had to stop them.

DAITCH: Right.

CRONKITE: The idea of what would happen when we tried to stop them was just too horrible to even contemplate. But we were digging air raid shelters. We were

preparing for the worst, teaching our children what to do in school, how to duck under the desks as if that was going to help at all. I know that we had a brownstone house up at Eighty-fourth Street, and there was room in the basement area to build a shelter of some kind.

So I had people in looking into building one right away, of course, and trying to get these helpers was difficult. But I decided that maybe I didn't want to do that so much. Our youngest child was a boy, five years old at that time, and we had birthday parties and parties for him, just impromptu things. And I said, "You know, it would be just our luck that we'd be having a party for twelve five-year-olds when the sirens go." I said, "I don't know that I want to be locked up with twelve five-year-olds for the next two weeks in this cellar. Maybe we shouldn't build a shelter." [Laughter] But I was only half joking.

DAITCH: Right. So how did you.... I mean what is the approach to trying to tell the American public that something so horrible is possibly imminent, but at the same time avoiding chaos or panic?

CRONKITE: Well, we didn't put it in the phrasing that this is imminent. We put it in the phrasing that the crisis, the President's working on the crisis. We have a crisis. We didn't amplify what would happen in the crisis except that Khrushchev was threatening to fire the missiles. Well, that was enough. We didn't have to expand on that. The danger was there. We just let it lie at that point. Nobody was saying: And therefore we're going to burn – or their cities are going to be destroyed. Or with the nuclear rays we're all going to die. We didn't do that kind of thing. The lessons were there.

DAITCH: Right. And obviously Kennedy was closeted with his advisors and so forth during the crisis. But overall, what was the impression that you as a journalist got of the way in which Kennedy handled things at the time?

CRONKITE: The way he handled that?

DAITCH: Mmmm hmmm.

CRONKITE: Well, the impression was hurrah! We'd won. This was an incredible thing. We came out of that crisis thanks to the standards of the President of the United States, that he did not yield. And the banner continued to fly high in his hands. This established his authority as the president of the United States not only in the United States, but in the world, to Khrushchev. This was a very important point, that right away Khrushchev backed down. Kennedy, whom he'd thought was a weakling at Vienna, proved to be the stronger of the two of them. And that was very important for the whole rest of the Cold War.

DAITCH: And the rest of the country.

CRONKITE: The rest of the country and our future, of course.

DAITCH: After that you had other interviews with Kennedy. Did you have any other one-on-one interviews before the one shortly before his assassination at Hyannis?

CRONKITE: No.

DAITCH: And just personally, did you feel that... I mean you had had this experience with Kennedy at first as a young senator almost what you might call an upstart, and he's a little demanding with you during this other interview in Georgetown. What was your sense of him – and clearly you saw him, had a long interview with him before he became president – what was your sense of his growth or what had changed about the man in those eventful years from the interview in Georgetown to the interview at Hyannis?

CRONKITE: Well, he learned quickly in office, and he became presidential much more rapidly than might have been expected. Kennedy's problem, of course,

throughout his too short term in office was that there was this arrogance to run for office in the first place. Every senator thinks of himself as potential presidential material. And to have this young man come and jump the line, as it were, go right to the head of the line and say, "I'm running for the presidency," it didn't make many friends up on Capitol Hill. The consequence was clear throughout his presidency, and he did not have a very cooperative Congress. And that was the reason. It was simply that he had jumped the line.

He never had the time then unfortunately to mend all those fences. It almost required one-on-one relationships to build back the kind of confidence in the Senate that was going to aid him and put through his program. This was one of the things that delayed him, I think, on the whole civil rights issue. He knew it was right, and he wanted to do what was right. But he couldn't bring that majority together with all those senators, Southern senators, including his Vice President, to put together a civil rights program.

And, of course, it was not until Lyndon Johnson with that amazing, amazing turn for him; which was one of the bravest things I think any politician has ever done, was realize that now with the assassination he was no longer a Southern representative as he was chosen to be when he took the Vice Presidential nomination. But now he was the President of all the people, the blacks as well as the whites. And he turned 180 degrees and pushed through that civil rights thing as a tribute to the fallen leader. And that was an amazing turn, with a very grateful nation, I think, as a result of that.

DAITCH: Absolutely.

CRONKITE: But, you see, that was Kennedy's leadership in bringing the administration around to that point where even without the help of Congress, necessarily, Johnson could marshal the strength to get the civil rights bill through.

DAITCH: That's a good place for me to stop.

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

FAGAN: When did you first hear about the President planning a trip to Texas? And what was the reason that the White House was giving for that trip in 1963?

CRONKITE: I don't have any idea when I first heard it. I'm sure I first heard it when they announced it. I wasn't covering the White House personally in those days. If our people said he's thinking of this, it wouldn't have made any impression on me particularly. He made many trips around the country marshaling political support, of course, naturally, the principal idea. I was excited about the idea he was going to Texas. I wanted to go myself, having the Texas background quite clearly. It would have been a great deal of fun, I thought. It certainly would have been a different trip than the one I would have expected. But I don't recall any particular thoughts about it.

The first time I began to think of the nature of the trip was that full-page *Dallas Morning News* thing that he wasn't welcomed in Dallas, an incredible, incredible situation. I

didn't think of any danger to him necessarily. I wasn't thinking of assassination. But I was thinking of how rude could my fellow Texans be even if they lived in Dallas? [Laughter] (I'm a Houstonian.) At any rate, it was a most unfortunate episode.

FAGAN: On the morning of the 22nd that started like a normal workday for you. Talk about how the day began and how those events unfolded, if you would, please.

CRONKITE: Well, the day began, as all days began for me. I'm in my shirtsleeves at the center of my horseshoe-shaped editor's desk where I was actually photographed. And I started reading the day's news wires, the newspapers, the news wires, reading the reports from our correspondents, conferring with our producer on what our correspondents were offering that day for the evening news, what the shape of the news was likely to look like. And I was always fighting for more time on air to describe the news rather than the picture, pictorial news. There was always this battle between pictorial and the news copy itself. I was in that role at the time that the five bells rang on the United Press wire indicating a bulletin.

Our chief editor, a guy named Bliss [Edward Bliss], Ed Bliss, a marvelous editor, was standing at the teleprinters at that time; they were over on the side of the room. And he said, "There's a bulletin, UP bulletin. They say shots rang out in Dallas as the President's motorcade was going through the city." I said, "Oh, my God! Stay on that." I got up to go over to the wire myself. By that time another five bells. It said, apparently the President was hit today, and the motorcade was on the way to a hospital.

Well, of course, we immediately went into action to get on the air. We did not have a live camera, and in those days – we've had a live camera in the newsroom ever since – in those days it took about fifteen minutes to get a camera warmed up to go. And, in fact, we had to bring one into the newsroom, which we did each evening. So I went into an "announce booth," we called it, which was only an audio booth. And we interrupted on the television ... a soap opera was on the air, and we interrupted it with the bulletin that apparently there was an attempt at assassination of the President. The few details we had kept coming back for two or three of those until the camera arrived. From there on out it was on the camera for another two and a half or three hours until the death was announced. And then the rest of the day. I was there from... well, I'd been sitting at that desk since about ten a.m. But the shots were around noon, and then the assassination story the rest of the day until around six-thirty in the evening when Charles Collingwood [Charles Cummings Collingwood] came and offered me relief if I wanted to leave the desk for a little while.

And I accepted it. Mostly I wanted to get on the phone in my office, which was a glass-enclosed office, on the edge of the newsroom to talk to Betsy, my wife. I hadn't talked to a non-professional all day. And I didn't know how much she knew because she was not a daytime television viewer and she could very well have been there at home and not even known much about it.

When I got into my office, I had two banks of six phone lines each coming in, and they were all busy. And I realized I'd been reporting all afternoon how the telephone circuits were tied up all over the nation as people called one another. And here I was blocked the same way, all lines were busy. Well, as you know, on automatic telephone exchange boards,

the lines go right through and they don't go through any board when they're that busy. So when people pick up the phone, if they got any number other than a busy number at CBS, it would be some extension.

Well, just as I sat there, one of them went black, and I grabbed it quickly, and sure enough, there was a woman on the phone with a very, I thought, phony English accent. "Hello, hello, hello. Is this CBS?" I said, "Well, yes, this is CBS." "I'd like to speak to someone in the news. This is Mrs. Henry-Johnson-Jones." I mean at least three hyphens in the name and gave a Park Avenue address, and said, "I want to complain to somebody at CBS News." I said, "You're speaking to someone at CBS News." She said, "Well, I want to complain about your having that Walter Cronkite on the camera at a time like this, crying his crocodile tears when everybody knows he hated John Kennedy." Well, of course, I certainly didn't hate John Kennedy, and that was something I didn't want to hear in the first place, and I was furious. I said, "Madam, you are speaking to Walter Cronkite. And you, madam, are a damned idiot." Slammed down the phone. As I did, I thought of myself, oh oh, that address, English, Park Avenue, she's bound to be a dear social friend of Bill Paley's [William S. Paley], the president of CBS. This was probably my last phone call at CBS.

FAGAN: Why would she have said that to you?

CRONKITE: Well, she must have believed it. She must have thought so. Who knows?

FAGAN: The moment when you announced the President's death and you became emotional, that's a moment which has become etched in the collective consciousness of the country.

CRONKITE: Well, it partly is because everybody plays it every time they talk about the assassination. I don't know why that picture is so dramatic. There were other people.

FAGAN: I have to ask you, what was going through your mind at that time? What were you thinking about when that occurred? Was there an image that flashed in your head when that news came across the wire?

CRONKITE: Well, it was the image of what I was saying. For the first time I realized the enormity of what we'd been reporting for a couple of hours anyway. I was announcing the death of this young president of the United States, this horrible death by madness of some individual or group of individuals; we didn't know yet. I have learned something about myself and drew a very quick comparison, not at that moment but as I had to review the day and how it all went. We were finding out just about that time that there was a great trauma among emergency workers, firemen, policemen, emergency hospital workers, those who see the blood and the gore and the horror of the accident or tragedy. They were having this trauma, traumatic repercussions. Weeks and sometimes months later they would suddenly have psychological impact from what they had seen, and it came much later.

I realized that what we all were doing, putting myself in that same category, we newsmen, in the same category, seeing the horror, we were busy at the time, we were kept very busy doing just our job. The firemen doing theirs, the police. And we newsmen were trying to cover. I was working every second of that two hours, filling in background, dragging up what my memory could supply, getting every fact as we got it from the police department dribbling into us. Eddie Barker [Edward Barker], KRLD, was our news editor there and a huge help to us. He had such great contacts with the police and fire people all over town. A very big help. And all of us were so busy that not until I had to say the President was dead did that word “dead” come flashing at me, and that was the moment when I almost lost it.

FAGAN: Do you think that the role of a news broadcaster changed that day in the way in which they were kind of brought out to console the nation? I mean we’ve seen that in the years after that with 9/11. Do you think that that’s the moment where it really changed?

CRONKITE: Changed from what?

FAGAN: Well, sort of, you know, the way in which you’re brought out to kind of bring the country together. This was our first collective tragedy, and Kennedy was the first television President. Do you think that the role of a news broadcaster changed as a result of the Kennedy assassination?

CRONKITE: Oh, I don’t know. I suppose in the minds of some people they felt a closer link to the news organizations and particularly the individual broadcasters, the anchor people. That must have been, I suppose. I wasn’t particularly conscious of it at the moment. There wasn’t any way it would express itself exactly at that time anyway.

FAGAN: What about the news in general? It’s been said in the forty years since the assassination that this was the moment when television news came of age, or this was the watershed moment. Do you agree with that?

CRONKITE: Not entirely, not entirely. We were edging up into that anyway. Now don’t forget radio preceded television. Radio was bringing the people together. Radio brought the people together at the time of Pearl Harbor. We’d had that experience. Television wasn’t new to us. The picture, of course, added to the vocal reports was quite important, very important. But at the same time, the impact of the medium was not something so exceptional.

FAGAN: Dallas and the State of Texas, in particular, was blamed in many ways for the assassination. Dallas was vilified and called a “city of hate.” What were your thoughts on the City of Dallas, and what were you hearing around CBS, around New York? What were you hearing about the City of Dallas after the

assassination?

CRONKITE: You know, I don't think very much. I don't think very much. It was perfectly

clear that the people of Dallas suffered as much, perhaps more, because of the locale of the disaster than others. I don't think there was any hate Dallas attitude across the country. I just didn't feel it. And I didn't have any reaction as a Texan. Most people knew I was a Texan. I didn't feel any personal reaction.

FAGAN: CBS did some investigating after the assassination alongside the Warren Commission as they were doing that. Can you talk about your involvement in some of their work and your reporting the story as it unfolded?

CRONKITE: Very much so. When the Warren Commission report came out and, of course, did not have any findings for us as to who might have been responsible ... it did not even eliminate who might not have been responsible ... we got nowhere with the Warren Commission report, we decided that we were going to do our own investigation. And we spent over a million dollars when a million dollars was a million dollars to CBS, and particularly when that kind of money had never been spent by a network investigation of this kind.

We duplicated everything we possibly could. We duplicated the use of the rifle. Some gun expert said you couldn't get all three shots like that that quickly. We proved you could. We brought experts in with the same kind of rifle, and they got the shots. You couldn't see through the street sign and the bushes; you couldn't have seen. We could. We went up to the sixth floor, we shot the same angle and everything. Well, of course you could. There was no question you could get the thing. So we put to rest an awful lot of that thing. We put to rest the idea of what we thought of the several ... of the shots from the front, from the grassy knoll. We established that there were echoes from the other ... from the shots from the depository building that sounded like they came from the grassy knoll. We actually repeated that. And indeed, there was an echo there. So we took every one of these issues.

Now, what we did not know was the same thing that the Warren Commission did not know because the FBI and the CIA never told the Warren Commission that they had plotted the assassination of Castro. This was motive enough for the Warren Commission to have spent much more time on that possible aspect of the assassination than they did and misled them. It's interesting. Perhaps we ought to review that now as we talk about 9/11 and the FBI's and the CIA's roles in that. We ought to maybe review the Castro plot and the fact that they did not level with the Warren Commission on that. At any rate, that was the status of things.

We really thought, of course, that with our million dollars we might break the story as to who assassinated our president. Instead, all we did was establish that the Warren Commission had done its job well. And that indeed you could not ... there were not these holes in the story, that everything could be explained. And that was what we established with our piece.

FAGAN: As someone so dedicated to getting the truth out, I'd like to get your opinion

on the forty years of books and documentaries and Oliver Stone's film and the variety of material that has come out relating to the assassination over the years.

CRONKITE: Oliver Stone's film was an abomination, an absolute abomination. If there is any reason in the world for press censorship, that film would go right to the top of the evidence. For heaven's sakes! That entirely phony, novelesque thing that he produced, even suggesting that Lyndon Johnson had a hand in it simply to become President of the United States. The way he pilloried that poor guy down in New Orleans that had absolutely nothing to do with any part of it. But just the social enmity that he had created with him, I mean that the district attorney created caused all of that thing. The story was so badly mangled. And to give that to another generation of Americans as history was just, as I say, to my mind abominable.

FAGAN: Shifting gears, I'd like to briefly talk about the space program, if you wouldn't mind, just for a second. What do you think was President Kennedy's involvement in the space program during his brief presidency?

CRONKITE: Well, of course, he inspired it. I mean that was his inaugural speech, that we should put a man on the moon and return him safely. That was the launch of the space program. It is one of the travesties is that he did not live to see the success of that program. He would have understood it almost more than the rest of us could what it had done in history. We had escaped our environment on earth for the first time. This date that he had helped set for man to land on a distant orb, on the moon, is the date that 500 years from now will be remembered by school children, however they absorb their learning at that time. They'll be living on the planets. They'll be living in the artificial cities in space.

That will be an important date to them, even to our children. They memorize a date 500 years in the past: October 12, 1492, the day that this continent was discovered. That man knew that there was something else than Europe and the Mediterranean. That there was a whole other world out there. That's what we found by putting a man on the moon. And they will have exploited it for five centuries, and the importance will be obvious to them.

FAGAN: Could you talk about reporting that on July 20, 1969? Because that was another memorable moment in your career.

CRONKITE: Yes, that was certain a memorable moment. I'd had just as long to prepare for that moon landing as NASA had. I'd been in on the coverage from the very beginning of our missile program. I'd even seen the use of the missiles in Europe, as very few of our allies did, as Americans did. I was in Holland when they were launching, the Germans were launching from the west coast of Holland. I was on the east coast, and that flat country, I could see the contrails of the U-2's going up.

At any rate, I'd followed the space program all the way. And here when man landed on the moon, I was speechless. Wally Schirra [Walter M. Schirra, Jr.], the astronaut who was my sidekick, my technical consultant on the anchor desk, and all morning long he kept saying, "What are you going to say? What are you going to say?" Trying to figure out what

he was going to say. And I said, "I don't know. I never really plan these things in advance. I never have a script. It comes from the heart, whatever it is." He kept saying, "Give me some guidance on it." I said, "I can't, Wally, I just don't know." Well, I surely didn't know. When he said, "Man on the moon," I said, "Man on the moon? Golly! Wow!" Boy, talk about immortal sayings at immortal moments, that was it.

FAGAN: Well, I'm about finished. Do you have anything else?

DAITCH: No. Marlene has asked us to cut off the interview here. I hate to do that because I have a hundred more things I'd like to ask. But we'll honor your time restrictions.

FAGAN: Well, I hope I've given you something you can use there.

DAITCH: Oh, yes, I think it was wonderful.

FAGAN: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. We really appreciate it.

CRONKITE: Do you live in Dallas?

FAGAN: I do, sir. Born and raised there.

CRONKITE: Oh, really....

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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