

Helen A. Thomas Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 06/19/03
Administrative Information

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Interviewer: Vicki Daitch
Date of Interview: June 19, 2003
Place of Interview: Washington D.C.
Length: 32 pages

Biographical Note

White House Correspondent, United Press International, 1961 - 1973; White House Bureau Chief, United Press International, 1974-2000. In this interview, Thomas discusses the scope of her coverage of the White House during John F. Kennedy's administration, how he compares with other leaders, and how he handled major foreign conflict, among other issues.

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Helen A. Thomas, recorded interview by Vicki Daitch, June 19, 2003, (page number),
John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.



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Helen A. Thomas – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

HELEN A. THOMAS

June 19, 2003
Washington, D.C.

By Vicki Daitch

For the John F. Kennedy Library

DAITCH: ...by saying that I'm Vicki Daitch, and I'm speaking with Helen Thomas. We're in Washington, D.C., and we're talking about the Kennedy Era for the Kennedy Library. First of all, I'll try to keep it as specific to the Kennedy topic as I can. But obviously I'm interested in your sort of general observations of the period as well. You were reporting in Washington before Kennedy ever became president.

THOMAS: Yes.

DAITCH: Did you cover him as a senator?

THOMAS: No, I was mainly covering Justice Department and HEW [Health, Education & Welfare], which later became HHS, Health & Human Services, and all the small departments and agencies like the FCC, ICC, everything downtown. Ran the gamut.

DAITCH: Right. Which would have been interesting in itself. What made you decide to sort of switch to the White House?

THOMAS: Well, the White House is the Top of the Mark. It's nirvana, I think, of covering because everything comes through the White House. So it was a great opportunity for me to get on the campaign trail at sort of the tail end of the campaign in 1960 when there was a great interest in Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] and the family and so forth. I went to Palm Beach during the president-elect days and started covering the President and everybody else: animals, children, the whole gamut. So then on Inauguration Day I went over to the White House to cover, and I just stayed. I was the man who came to dinner. But I figured this is really a great beat, and I've always thought so.

DAITCH: Now, when you covered the inauguration, or the campaign toward the end, were you sent to cover that? Or was that just something that you...?

THOMAS: Oh, yes. Absolutely. You got sent by the United Press International. You get assigned.

DAITCH: Right. Okay. So now that was toward the end of the campaign. Did you actually travel with the campaign any?

THOMAS: No, not too much. But in the president-elect days I was with them every day. In Palm Beach and in Washington and....

DAITCH: Oh, really. So, once he was elected.... Well, first of all, how did you picture him at that time? I've heard all these different images: he looked like a kid or....

THOMAS: I had met him.... I've written three books, and I had met him at an embassy party, and he had taken me home in one of the flivvers, I would call them. My girlfriend who introduced me, she was a good friend of Senator Jackson [Henry "Scoop" Jackson] of Washington State, and both he and Kennedy were bachelors, I think, at that time. Yes. And he took me home. She called me the next day, and she said, "What did you think?" I said, "I thought he was very dull."

DAITCH: Really!

THOMAS: Well, those were words I had to really long regret. I admired him very much. He was my favorite president of nine I've covered. He was my favorite because I thought he was the most inspired of all the presidents I have covered. I thought he had great ideals and really tried to fulfill them in the time that he had. And I also had a sense about him that he had a sense of destiny and his time -- I think he definitely knew his time was short. It was a very subjective feeling. I didn't have any word. But there was something about him that was exhilarating or sad.

DAITCH: I know it's hard to elaborate on something that's so sort of abstract. But can you describe that a little more?

THOMAS: Well, he had picked up the ball from the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration, which was, in my opinion, fairly good but very private. It was good to me because he was a man of war who wanted peace. Eisenhower knew the horror of war, he knew what D-Day was, and he did not seek war as some of our presidents who've never been to war don't mind going and bombing other people to kingdom come.

DAITCH: Exactly.

THOMAS: So it was a period.... But the fifties, they weren't too quiet. I mean there were different incidents. We sent troops to Lebanon and so forth. But it was not this rampageous violence that you had this sense of. But you also didn't have the sense of moving off the dime. And it was kind of the cusp of the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] Era, which was horrendous for all of us, but circumscribed in a sense of the tyranny and the oppression that it indicated versus the war against terrorism, where people's rights are being stomped on and nobody cares and nobody understands. That nation-wide feeling of fear, that was not.... In the case of McCarthyism, it was really just limited to Washington, New York, Hollywood. I mean, that's right, that's what McCarthyism was.

So the difference was that when Kennedy came in with the New Frontier and they were going to move forward with a new sense of vigor, there's no question that people felt good about it again and they had a tremendous sense of hope. And that's the one thing that we lost when Kennedy died. The world lost that. I mean people who had never known him in the darkest of Africa, Mexico, the world stood still for a moment when he died simply because they knew they had lost something.

Someone said they didn't mourn the death of their parents so much because that would be mourning the past. But they found they were more struck by Kennedy's death because it was the loss of the future and the hope. And I think that proved to be very prophetic and true because we have not had a president since then who was as inspired.

DAITCH: And inspiring.

THOMAS: Inspiring and as eloquent. Sure a lot of speeches were written, but you've got to know what you want to say. You can't say it otherwise. You cannot give a good speech unless you had a hand in it yourself. So those are the things I belabor and mourn the loss of because I think this country should never have to operate in such a pragmatic way and now imperialistic. We're calling our governor in Iraq a viceroy?

DAITCH: Oh, no.

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THOMAS: The 19th century Brits.

DAITCH: Something Kennedy would never have probably gotten into.

THOMAS: He would have laughed.

DAITCH: You used the word “pragmatic.” Kennedy was pragmatic.

THOMAS: Yes. He was pragmatic when the chips were down. But he also had tremendous ideals, and I think that’s what remains. I think anyone who would say we’re going to land men on the moon is either reading science -- in a decade -- science fiction or really thinks this is possible. And I love the story that Al Neuharth [Allen H. Neuharth]. Al Neuharth is the founder of *U.S.A. Today* and Gannett Papers and a wonderful newsman. He lives at Cape Canaveral. He got acquainted with a lot of the astronauts, former, present, and so forth.

They told him about the story of the first class of astronauts. Kennedy invited them to an informal dinner at the White House with their wives. In the mix and mingle he said to them, “Do you think we could land on the moon?” And they said, “Sure. Absolutely. What do you think?” Because you never say “no” to a president. When they left the White House, they said, “Is this guy nuts? Is he crazy? Land on the moon?” Well, he didn’t live to see it. Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson], his successor, certainly pushed the Space Program and made it into a reality. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] got the credit. But anyway, we did it, and he did set the goal. In 1969 we landed on the moon, and Neil Armstrong [Neil A. Armstrong] did set a first foot on the moon.

DAITCH: But again, that was not just idealistic.

THOMAS: He created the Peace Corps. He knew the difference between war and peace. He knew that we could no longer be isolationist, that we had to reach out to our fellow man all over the world. He believed in collective security. He also knew the horror of the atomic nuclear bomb, and he signed the first Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Russians, even though they were Cold War antagonists by then. And so forth. So I think he definitely thought about the future. And I guess one of the most telling things is he told young people to go into public service, that it could be the crown of their careers, that they should give something back to their country. It was a very enlightened approach, you know. He didn’t say, “Drop everything.” But he said at some point in your lives.

DAITCH: I’ve heard a lot of people say that one of his major contributions was that inspiration to young people to get into politics.

THOMAS: I heard him so often in the Rose Garden. I think it was either '62 or '63 whenever Bill Clinton [William J. Clinton] was 16 years old and came to the

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White House with Boys' Nation. And when he shook hands with President Kennedy, he decided then and there he wanted to run for president, to be president. I have a photograph that was sent to me where he is shaking hands with the President, and I'm in the press corps over in the corner.

DAITCH: Really! Oh, that's great!

THOMAS: With a group of reporters.

DAITCH: That's great. Neat. Two presidents, and you in the background.

THOMAS: And little did I know that this young man shaking hands with the President.... Although he always encouraged young people to run, to run for president, you can be a president. I think that he did live in a way that you live when you know you're on borrowed time. I think that was inspiring in itself because it's another way to look rather than taking each day. I mean making the most of.... He made more than the most of each day.

DAITCH: Right. Some of these things we think about in retrospect about Kennedy, you know, after we've learned that he had these terrible health problems and all of that, but even at the time did you have the feeling that he was definitely pushing a limit every day and trying to do the utmost everyday?

THOMAS: No, I didn't see that limit. I did have the sense that he had a joie de vivre, a sense of life, time out for wit. He recognized moments for what they were, and reacted with great, I thought.... Of course he probably blew his stack many times in the Oval Office and at the press when things went wrong. But publicly he had kind of an even keel and wit about him that showed a lot of balance.

DAITCH: For such a young man, too. I've been amazed by that. He was hardly more than my age when he took office.

THOMAS: But he'd had vast experience. When you've been given the Last Rites a couple of times or three times, you view life in a different way. You realize there's a limit. I mean you don't realize it actively. But you realize it in terms of your own sensitivities. I think that certainly contributed. And, you know, his father had been ambassador to England. He had been in the war. He had suffered the loss of a

brother and a sister. Tragedy. Another child in the family who was retarded or whatever they call it now. I think there was a sadness there.

DAITCH: Now, when you first started covering him when he was elected, were you sent more to.... I know as a woman in that period probably they were more

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expecting you to cover the wife and the kids and that sort of thing. Was that true or not?

THOMAS: Yes. When you're a wire service reporter, you cover everything. I suppose basically I was expected to, but there I am alone in the White House, and they're dropping another bomb. No, no. So once you're wire service, you cover everything: men, woman, children, you're there. The president's going out here. Get in the motorcade. So, it wasn't what I expected. It's what I did. And we were three people at the White House, two wonderful and brilliant reporters: Merriman Smith [Albert Merriman Smith], who won the Pulitzer in Dallas; he was an incredible reporter. He'd covered back since Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] and Eisenhower and so forth. And then Alvin Spivak [Alvin A. Spivak], who was also excellent.

So I did a lot of the women's stories, Jackie's stories, and everything. But I still was covering the President. I know that sounds defensive, but it's the truth. When you work for a wire service you are the giant street cleaner.

DAITCH: Right. So you just cover whatever comes up.

THOMAS: Everything, from tricky track, the most trivial story, to war and peace. But everything, one way or another, that affects this nation comes through the White House if it has any import at all. It can be in Paducah, you know, or Pocatello, or anything else, you say, it's at the White House, it really is because it has come here. And I found the same thing was true at the Justice Department. The range was just unbelievable of what could actually come to Justice or the White House. Everything that affects the nation.

DAITCH: Having covered both Justice and the White House, what was your impression of the way that the Kennedy Brothers worked together, as compared to the way another White House and Justice might interact?

THOMAS: I think they worked in tandem because Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] could pop in at the Oval Office anytime. And when they began to take up and realize what both of them had not realized before -- they were kind of johnny-come-latelies. But when they found out and realized what was happening on the civil rights, then they started moving into high gear. And it was about time, but they did. Bobby certainly did take the mantle, you know, on and pushing civil rights, and certainly Kennedy

got on board. They realized the challenges to them and the whole black-white issue was there, and it couldn't be avoided, and racism was rampant, and the South had to change, that's all.

DAITCH: Now, they took a lot of criticism because the civil rights leaders felt that they were dragging their feet.

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THOMAS: That's right. And they probably did. But it's a learning game. Once they got into it, they realized they had to do something. In politics you don't always grab onto the hottest issue that's the most controversial in the sense that you're going to have a lot of opposition. You like to sidestep that stuff if you can. But once it's there and on the table and in front of you, you can't avoid it.

DAITCH: While you were covering the Kennedy White House, did you cover any of the civil rights events, the March on Washington?

THOMAS: I was at the Justice Department when Eisenhower sent troops to Little Rock.

DAITCH: Oh, you were!

THOMAS: But he was very unhappy with his attorney general, Herbert Brownell, from Upstate New York, who did send the troops, and he had to sign off on it. Eisenhower was not a great civil rights man. It was Truman [Harry S. Truman] who integrated the Army and so forth. And they could never get....

In 1954 [May 31, 1955] to me the greatest story I ever covered, being a presence and being only a gofer really, I was in the Supreme Court when they handed down the decision on *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. I was just kind of a runner because UPI sent about four or five people over, and I was among them, and was helping out where I can. And I saw our magnificent reporter, he was our religious editor really, but he was a great reporter, too. He pulled open that decision and called in a flash: separate but equal is not equal. It was, I think, one of the most exhilarating moments. But I had no idea, nobody had any idea, the ripple effect of what would happen in all things, in public facilities, everything else. That it would turn this country upside down in terms of the question of discrimination and segregation. It was a magnificent decision and a long time in coming.

DAITCH: It was brilliant. Did you read Richard Kruger's book, *Simple Justice*?

THOMAS: No.

DAITCH: I remember reading it. It's a really good account of the whole, you know, the entire process behind getting the Brown decision, and how

elegantly....

THOMAS: Thurgood Marshall was calm and reasonable, and just unbelievable what this country had represented. Now I hope this Michigan decision, the university.... But this Court, I wouldn't trust it to come up with any liberal decisions.

DAITCH: No. This is sort of off the wall and you don't have to talk about this on tape if you don't want to, but I like to ask people who are in the know. Do you see anybody coming up through the political ranks or system that...?
Not another

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Kennedy because there isn't another Kennedy. But another person who is charismatic and idealistic and might be a leader in sort of the sense that he was?

THOMAS: I'd say no, but I didn't see Kennedy in that realm until he got into the position, you know, where the decisions had to be made and he grew. Justice Black [Hugo L. Black] on the Supreme Court had been, I think, in the Klu Klux Klan, and he became one of the most liberal on the Court. Frankfurter [Felix Frankfurter], who started out as a liberal, became conservative. So maybe the office can change you. I don't think Truman was the great liberal when he went in either.

But to answer your question, I don't even see anyone with great potential. Because something has happened to idealism. And the major assault on liberalism, which the word was hissed, not spoken by Reagan [Ronald W. Reagan] and Bush I [George H. W. Bush], and demonized by the neo-Cons and the people who want to destroy our whole sense of humanity: we're on top, might is right, and so forth. That's what we've evolved to. And if somebody has the guts to break out of that....

DAITCH: No one defended the word, the ideals, nobody defended it successfully, though, either.

THOMAS: They ran scared. Women who had been in the women's movement hit a plateau, and they didn't break out and say, "Hell no! We won't go!" I've been announcing myself as a liberal since the day I was born and will remain so. What is a liberal? We care. We care about people. I can't believe the people in power today who would deny medical, deny drugs at \$400 a bottle of pills. I'm exaggerating, but what is this? Who are these people?

DAITCH: And why are we accepting it?

THOMAS: Why do they go to church? WHY do they keep espousing faith? Who is their god if they don't...? I mean they're so mean and selfish and

aggressive and taking what doesn't belong to them, bombing women and children, bombing people in their homes who never did anything to them. No, I haven't seen anybody coming on the horizon, but that doesn't mean they don't exist.

DAITCH: I hope they do. About Kennedy, people would have said that he didn't have any, not necessarily that he was mean and greedy in the way that we might describe some other people, but certainly that he didn't have a clue about the way that sort of normal, everyday people lived. He grew up in an enchanted world of wealth and privilege. But at the same time...

THOMAS: At the same time there was never a time when he didn't mention the fact that he used to see the signs, "No Irish need apply." He was very aware of the

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difference between the so-called shanty Irish and the lace-curtain and how they were treated. No. I think his illnesses certainly made him much more -- as did FDR who had a silver spoon in his mouth and to the manner born and so forth. But I think when they suffer these terrible illnesses and they do a retrospective on their lives, something happens in terms of.... I hope you don't have to have a fatal illness to become aware. But what I think is that he was not unaware. He knew that a lot of people were discriminated against as he kept mentioning, "No Irish need apply." He took it very personally, these signs in Boston.

DAITCH: Did you cover the West Virginia Primary? I've heard that.... You probably know....

THOMAS: No, I didn't. But I certainly read about it, and I think that the money was handed out in a, you know, when his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] said, "I didn't pay for a landslide...." I don't know if he said it at that particular time, but Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] certainly felt money counted, you know. He would have been more their boy.

DAITCH: Yes. But in West Virginia I was thinking about the poverty that he saw there. I've heard many people say that he was affected by that.

THOMAS: I'm sure. I mean you've got to be blind not to. And in that particular case, I think that's probably right. But I do think a lot of candidates come through like.... I remember when Reagan went to call at Fort Apache in New York, a devastated area. Put his foot up on some rubble and turned around and, "Do something about it," but they never did anything much. And this happened to Nixon when he went to 14th Street after it had been burned in '68. "We're going to do something about this." They didn't.

DAITCH: When Kennedy was elected, were you already at that time sort of having high hopes for him? Or were you kind of just waiting to see because you weren't sure what he was going to stand for?

THOMAS: I was glad he beat Nixon because I had covered Nixon on the fringes, never at the White House or anything. But I remember someone at the height of the Watergate -- this is going much further afterwards -- but at the height of Watergate it was so clear the other shoe was going to fall. It was inexorable as a Greek tragedy. And I was sent to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, to make a speech at their celebration, Chambersburg, the one newspaper in the town, the 100th anniversary of the one newspaper in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

I gave this speech, and I basically said that it was inevitable that Nixon would go. I mean it fell like a lead balloon. But it was clear. I mean nothing he could do could change it. But one man, the first question I got was, "When did you first know that Nixon was lying?" And I said, "Nineteen forty-six." I shocked myself because I didn't say, now, let me think. It

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just came off the top of my head. Because I had been in Washington during his whole career, during the Pumpkin Papers, the McCarthy Era, the things.... No, no I did not want Nixon to win. And I didn't want him to win in '68 either.

DAITCH: Right. So Kennedy won, and people like you, liberals, would have been glad that he won. But I'm thinking about....

THOMAS: We didn't think of him as a great liberal at the time.

DAITCH: Right. Because there were a certain number of liberals who were not happy with him.

THOMAS: And also he ducked out on the McCarthy vote, which he forever -- I think he was forever ashamed of that. It was a black mark on his escutcheon in many ways. But I think that the guilt from that led him to do good things afterwards. Because you can't bear that kind of scar.

DAITCH: Right. Well, and speaking of that, you know, thinking in terms of the Bay of Pigs. Almost the first thing that happens when he comes into office is that terrible fiasco. It must have been such a letdown for anyone who had hopes for the presidency.

THOMAS: It wasn't for me.

DAITCH: Really!

THOMAS: I was glad we didn't go into Cuba and bomb those people. I felt we had no right to go into another country. There were communist countries all over the world. SO what are we supposed to do?

DAITCH: Right.

THOMAS: We had missiles pointed at the Russians and vice versa and so forth. I thought it was wrong to go in and to sponsor.... You know, the *Miami Herald* and the *New York Times* both got onto the fact that these rebel Cubans were being trained by the CIA to go in and so forth. They were about to write stories, and Kennedy called them and urged them not to write it. Later he was sorry he had dissuaded them. Because if he had read the stories he might have realized he shouldn't go in.

But they made the decision about ten days after he came into office. All these plans were on the drawing board from the Nixon-Eisenhower Era, and I never heard him blame them. But everybody who comes into power says, "Well, this was someone else's." These people everyday blame Clinto for anything that happens, you know. He didn't do this, he

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didn't do that. Kennedy rose to the occasion. I was so glad. He stopped the whole thing. Although it was considered a terrible mistake, it wasn't a mistake in my opinion. You don't invade somebody else's country, whether you like it.... You try to help the people, you do everything you can. But you don't bomb them. You know, the Grateful Dead. There's nothing like being a free Cuban but dead. So I was glad that he pulled out of that, even though most people would say, America, you know, is supposed to.... He took the responsibility, and his polls shot up.

DAITCH: So after that, well, even during that period....

THOMAS: So he learned a tremendous lesson: read the fine print. And he also started looking at the CIA in a different way. It prepared him for the Cuban Missile Crisis. He knew he couldn't pull out then again. He couldn't do it again.

DAITCH: Tell me about your life, what you were doing. Say, your day to day, what would a typical day be like for you?

THOMAS: Well, early in the morning I'd go to the White House, grab some coffee, had the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* under my arm, give them a cursory glance at the lead or the headlines. Look at the wires, the AP and UPI, see what the AP had and groan that you'd missed a story. Call your office, find out if any wars, any coup d'etats while we're sleeping. What else has happened. So then we would have briefings with Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] in the morning and in the afternoon two briefings a day. And anything that they allowed us to cover in the Oval Office,

we'd go in and out or in the Rose Garden. Or if Kennedy was going anywhere, the wire services were always on the body watch so we would always go with him in the motorcade.

DAITCH: The body watch?

THOMAS: Mmmm hmmm.

DAITCH: Is that what it was called?

THOMAS: Mmmm hmmm. See that they're still alive.

DAITCH: I had heard somewhere that there was like an East Wing and a West Wing kind of coverage. Was there any distinction?

THOMAS: Well, a lot of women reporters in those days they had much more, and the *Washington Post's* focus, you know, they had a woman's page per se. And they also had two other papers: They had the *Daily News*, and they had the *Washington Star*. So there were women reporters who were basically covering, in this case,

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Jackie and the family. Then they had covered Roosevelt and Mrs. Roosevelt [Anna Eleanor Roosevelt] and the woman's side. But a lot would interchange, too.

DAITCH: Were you like sort of... I don't know. I guess what I'm driving at is as a woman, were you sort of ever... Did you ever get the feeling that you were being shunted or shuttled from one place to the next or sort of directed more toward the women?

THOMAS: Well, women were definitely discriminated against in journalism and everything. World War II was a turning point for women to fill some of these slots for hard news. They were drafting every young man who had a pulse. If he was breathing, he was going to war. We had 16 million people in uniform. But when the war was over, publishers and so forth with no vision, no sense of the growing pains of what would happen to our country that we'd become number one in technology. And these young men, who had been reporters, 21, 22 years old, and so forth, would come back as colonels and majors, and had learned about the chip, and went to Rand Corporation, and did not want to come back for \$24 a week.

But the publishers had no vision on that score, and they fired most of the women who had been doing the jobs during World War II, covering the Pentagon -- well, it wasn't the Pentagon. The War Department, State Department, White House. All of these women, I mean in and out, were let go. I was so low on the totem pole that I survived because I was writing local radio news and that sort of thing. And a couple of others survived. But some great women reporters were let go on the assumption these young men would come back. As I say,

they had risen in the ranks and weren't about to come back. They already saw what's happening to our world.

DAITCH: Who were some of the women that you admired at that time and some of them that maybe did survive?

THOMAS: Oh, there were some great; I mean some women had already made it like Sarah McClendon, but she had been in the WACS. May Craig [Elizabeth May Craig], Martha Gellhorn [Martha Ellis Gellhorn]; they weren't in Washington. But a lot of good women lost out.

DAITCH: Did they just sort of disappear, those women?

THOMAS: Well, a lot of them lost their jobs, and they didn't come back. Some got other jobs with newspapers and so on. But it was very, very sad because of the lack of vision.

DAITCH: Definitely. So what about your...? You're in the White House then. I suppose in

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later years....

THOMAS: I didn't go to the White House 'til '61. I mean, I was nothing in that era.

DAITCH: But still in '60, women were not reporting on major issues so much.

THOMAS: Well, there were some.

DAITCH: Well, you were in a minority, though.

THOMAS: Yes.

DAITCH: You and a couple of other people? Who else was by that time?

THOMAS: Well, then when UPI had me assigned there, then AP realized they had to get a woman over. They got Frances Lewine to come over. She sort of was on a par with me. She's with CNN now. In fact, you ought to, if you interview her, L-E-W-I-N-E, and she covered the Kennedy Era. In fact, he made a speech, and she got the notes. She might have sent them to the LBJ Library, but they have all of her things now. But she's worth talking to.

DAITCH: Oh, that's great. Sure. Absolutely.

THOMAS: CNN in Washington. She works from Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

DAITCH: I take it you're still friendly with her.

THOMAS: Oh, we're pals.

DAITCH: Oh, that's great.

THOMAS: We were rivals and pals since the fifties. Since she came from New York and Newark.

DAITCH: Now, I heard some quote somewhere that was very nasty from Jacqueline Kennedy who called you guys something.

THOMAS: The Harpies.

DAITCH: The Harpies! That's not nice.

THOMAS: Well, in retrospect I realize how young she was, and how resentful she was of

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our intrusion, and how resentful she was of her role. She only realized who she was on the day he died. Then she rose to the occasion of all her childhood dreams. She was always the queen, she was always.... Then she became the queen.

DAITCH: Did you have interactions with her?

THOMAS: Yes. Mostly spit in my eye.

DAITCH: Really!

THOMAS: No, no, not really.

DAITCH: I don't mean literally, but....

THOMAS: We knew that she did not like the press. She was very unhappy when we would be writing about the kids. She was very protective of her children and rightfully so. She was unhappy with the photos that were take of.... Well, Kennedy loved, I mean he let the photographers in, take John-John [John F. Kennedy,

Jr.] and Caroline [Caroline B. Kennedy]. But then she would love the photos and want extra copies. And also of herself. It was very human, very natural. I mean she resented us, but at the same time.... She never really took unto us as a necessary evil.

What I feel bad about is that she locked up her basic interviews about the assassination and everything else for 50 years. I just think that's too bad. Because she certainly understood history, loved the arts, and understood, you know, gave this country so much. She transformed the White House to its colonial era, elegant and so forth. I just wish she had had more maturity and understanding of why it wasn't just curiosity; it was the real contribution of what her feelings were that day.

DAITCH: Absolutely.

THOMAS: She had some women friends, I think, in the press. But even they couldn't get great interviews. I had one interview with her, which was written in, which was carried in the.... I sent it in, and it's in the traveling exhibit, just questions. It was written. I had to submit the written questions, and she wrote the answers. So they have the original copy; it's part of the exhibit with her costumes and her.... She never came to terms with us.

DAITCH: But wasn't she a bit of a photographer or something before...?

THOMAS: Yes, a bit of one. But when it came to her and her children, then she, I mean it was a different story.

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DAITCH: So had you ever come across her before in Washington while she was working?

THOMAS: Well, when I was president of the Women's National Press Club, he was senator. She came as a wife. Then I played her in our version of the Gridiron Club, Gridiron Show, which is, you know, a spoof and songs and dances, lampooning the politicians. And it was the Women's National Press Club because we couldn't get into the National Press Club. We couldn't get into the Gridiron, we couldn't get into any of these. So I played Jackie and I sang a song, an original song that was written by a newspaperwoman, Gwen Gibson, and it went like this:

If I want to fly away
Without taking JFK
That's me, Jackie...

If I want to give a ball
For just me and Charles DeGaulle,
I have absolutely all

The gall I need.

If I like to water ski
And I want my privacy,
Who am I to blame,
You'd do the same,
If you were me, Jackie....

Those are the words. So I saw Kennedy in the Rose Garden the next day after the papers flashed our big show. He said, "I've been reading all about you." And I said, "It's all true." I'm standing there like this, and he's standing there like this, with our arms crossed, facing one another. There was lots of bantering and teasing.

DAITCH: Yes. So he just took it all in good stride?

THOMAS: Yes.

DAITCH: You don't think she did? Or do you think she was a little more sensitive?

THOMAS: She had a good sense of humor, but it was a little more biting. And I do think she resented us. She was very young. I kept forgetting that. She was First Lady and I thought she ought to understand this is a public house, every president says, "This house belongs to the American people." I think she made a great contribution to the country. She was a leader, and she set a tone of elegance and so forth. But at the same time, she was very elusive and not above a little deception here and there.

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DAITCH: Oh, really!

THOMAS: I suppose everybody does that to protect themselves. She didn't try to be liked by us. She didn't care really. I mean she didn't ingratiate herself. I think she basically resented us, and maybe she had reason. In retrospect, I thought she could have done better...

DAITCH: You know, she had such very young children.

THOMAS: ...done better by people. I mean she did beautifully in a lot of things. Things, children, animals.

DAITCH: What about the animals. You've mentioned that a couple of times and not many people do. I'm an animal person.

THOMAS: Well, she had them. They used them as props.

DAITCH: Props?

THOMAS: Presidents use animals as props. She had the dog run ahead to the helicopter so they can run the gauntlet of the TV cameras.

DAITCH: Right. Did she and Jack...? Because they had a lot of animals?

THOMAS: She knew the kids would like them. She loved horses, of course, riding, and so forth. But I think she wanted the children to have as natural a childhood as possible.

DAITCH: I had remembered seeing somewhere a picture of them with half a dozen dogs around or something.

THOMAS: I think they engulfed life.

DAITCH: You were talking about Jackie sort of holding reporters at arm's length, but yet, you know, you happened to see President Kennedy the next day after the spoo. Would you see him sort of one on one or face to face fairly often, or was that sort of a rare occasion?

THOMAS: Not one on one, usually with groups and.... He did a lot of things in the Rose Garden, we'd cover, you know, and we were allowed to cover a lot of things, but not everything.

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DAITCH: What about the meetings where he would brief the press on various things, and you could ask him questions? What were those like? Because that was sort of not brand new but that was sort of a new thing to do on a regular basis.

THOMAS: He had news conferences.

DAITCH: The conferences, yes.

THOMAS: Pierre Salinger, his press secretary, would have the briefing. His were the first to be televised live. That's when the American people became aware of a news conference.... [CHANGE TO SIDE B OF TAPE].... at times, but always with wit and warmth, and that came across. So he really got people quite interested in the White House.

DAITCH: Well, and this is sort of where you.... I mean everybody knows who you

are because we've all seen you on these things.

THOMAS: Yes. You can write for a newspaper 50 years and people, your family and friends, know your byline. Here's a photo taken when you were 20 years old. But TV is the big ID. If you're on television a couple of times, you have identity. People recognize you. Haven't I seen you somewhere before? And so forth. The difference is the recognition as a result of the camera.

DAITCH: What did that feel like? I mean at the time, did it seem like something new, or was it just this is what we're doing? Because now it seems very dramatic.

THOMAS: I think it was quite shocking to be recognized beyond your profession. But I wasn't on TV that much in those days because, of course, the briefings were not televised. Now the briefings are televised. So everyday you're the enfant terrible asking those mean questions and stuff. I have gathered more enemies in the last two years than in a lifetime.

DAITCH: Did you see the *Saturday Night Live* skit?

THOMAS: No, but I heard many times about it.

DAITCH: It's pretty much the way it is, I think.

THOMAS: Well, I'm the great dissenter.

DAITCH: Somebody has to do it.

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THOMAS: But not enough people are. Letting the obvious go by.

DAITCH: Do you think that the Kennedy conferences were different in that way? I mean people asking more difficult questions?

THOMAS: Oh, Kennedy held more news conferences. President Bush [George W. Bush] has not held a news conference since March 6th or something like that, the first weekend of March. It's a long time between drinks when your country's engaged in momentous situations, war and peace, threatening other countries and so forth, in very dubious positions on statements he made to go to war. He should be nailed on those things.

DAITCH: Absolutely. Did you get the feeling that...? I mean obviously the Kennedy period was just full of sort of incredibly important events.

THOMAS: They weren't always forthcoming. Secrecy is endemic in the White House in every administration. But you did have more of a sense of knowing what was... I mean, it was a much smaller press corps. You didn't have cable, you didn't have 50 cameras and so forth. In fact, it was sort of just the beginning of the introduction of the camera at the White House. Now it's 24 hours. It isn't 24 hours, but it's constant. The press corps has just grown by leaps and bounds. A very different world. You had much more sense of the President because you were closer to him.

DAITCH: Did you feel that you had, I don't know if relationship is too strong a word, but did you feel that you had a relationship with President Kennedy?

THOMAS: I thought that I was recognized by him. He knew my name. I mean he knew "that woman would be nice if she'd take that pen and pad out of her hand," he told Salinger. He knew it because once in a while I'd be one of two or three reporters covering him at church in esoteric moments or at Middleburg or Camp David. So the wire service, we were always there. When they're in public, we're there. Or were. I'm not there anymore. But I was. So, yes, he recognized the regular reporters that would come in.

DAITCH: Did you get the feeling that he treated you differently because you are a woman?

THOMAS: No, not really. I certainly was... I admired him. I certainly did not fall for him in any sense of the word. He obviously had an eye for women; women had an eye for him. He was very attractive. But I never had the feeling about him. But I liked him because I thought he's trying to do something in the right way. I really did feel that. Not everything, of course. And he was always mad at the press, you know. He cancelled

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his subscription to the *Herald Tribune* and so forth. But basically I felt that, and I think he knew, that I thought he was on the right track. When you're writing for a wire service, you're writing it straight, just the facts and so forth. But I think he had the feeling that the press gave him a lot of benefit of the doubt.

DAITCH: And they did.

THOMAS: Mmmm hmmm. He had a lot of friends among the men.

DAITCH: Did you ever get the feeling that -- because I know he was very friendly, literally friends and not just friendly, with some of the male journalists --

did you ever get the feeling that you were shut out of anything because you were a woman in terms of your professional ability to cover him?

THOMAS: Well, there were different trips where I think the women were not encouraged to go. Let's say if there was a trip on a ship or things like that where they felt.... In that era.... But that's changed now. There's no.... A woman reporter will get on the.... I've been on aircraft carriers and so forth as part of a pool. But in that era I guess there was some. But I didn't have any feeling, once you were there, that you didn't have the right to ask a question because you were a woman or anything else. We were basically on a par. Men were more patronizing in a way. But gradually, you know, they began the acceptance of, just another....

DAITCH: Yes. Just another journalist. You know, obviously he has this reputation for womanizing, and I can't -- it's hard to imagine him on the one hand being respectful of a woman professional of any kind, but on the other hand, it's hard to imagine him being disrespectful to a woman professional. What was your experience?

THOMAS: He had a lot of sisters, and they were doing things. I don't think he disrespected. I think he understood women were in the profession and so forth. But he also had an eye for women. You know, I was asked 50,000 times, why didn't you write about it? I said, "I only heard rumors." In that day mainstream didn't follow up on a rumor unless it impacted on their official duties. My other line was, "Dead men can't defend themselves," you know. He has no way to answer all this. Sure, we heard a lot of things and so forth. He liked women, he liked to go to bed with women, I guess.

DAITCH: Did that bother you at the time? Do you remember thinking that it sort of affected your respect for him in anyway? Or you just sort of, everybody in Washington did that....

THOMAS: I didn't know if it was true or not. And I thought it was foolhardy taking chances and not right to betray your wife. But I never followed up on it. The men knew

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because men talk to men. In those days Secret Service agents were friendlier, and I'm sure the guys would chat. In retrospect you think, why did he take those chances?

DAITCH: Why do any of them? It's an odd thing. But it just seems so, you know, in retrospect it seems so obvious and it's interesting that no one wrote about it or talked about it in the way that they do now. In the new biography of Kennedy, he actually talks about that Kennedy was more concerned about the -- Bob Dallek's

[Robert Dallek] biography -- he talks about the fact that Kennedy was more concerned about his health issues getting publicized than he was about any womanizing. Did the press corps sort of have any sense of his health issues and how severe they were?

THOMAS: I think that people realized he was hurting, his back, when he hurt his back in Canada. They could see the cortisone. They could see his puffiness at times that darkened his skin. And then you could see things. Then we knew Dr. Janet Travell was always around. We didn't know the extent, I didn't know the extent. And the Addison's Disease charge came out during the '60 campaign. It was supposed to have been -- it emanated from the Johnson camp. And it wasn't that it wasn't given credence. But it was certainly considered a rival's attempt to, you know.... So it sort of died very quickly. So I think we all knew that he probably had some problems.

DAITCH: But again, nothing that was made a big fuss about.

THOMAS: No.

DAITCH: It seems that the media gave him a fair amount of latitude. Or, as you said....

THOMAS: Well, they're giving this guy latitude. He won't answer the question on drugs. He won't answer, you know. And the drinking, when I was young and irresponsible, and you can kiss that off. But the drug question he will not answer. So therefore, what does it mean? And he's not pressed. A lot of presidents are not pressed on issues.

DAITCH: You tend to press every president. But I find that to be kind of an interesting question, why some presidents are just -- and it doesn't even seem to necessarily be something having to do with whether they're Democrat or Republican. It's almost more about the individual, why some of them are pressed for answers and pushed, and some are not, some are given so much latitude.

THOMAS: Sometimes political opposition forces you to do it. Clinton did not have one second, I didn't see a minute, one second in the White House where he was given legitimacy as President by the conservatives and the ultra-right. From the

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moment he stepped in, they were determined -- determined! -- to tarnish him and get him out. He helped them a lot. He gave them ammunition all over the place. But they were as relentless as Inspector Janvier in *Les Miserables*. They just would not give up. They had held the White House 12 years, and it belonged to them. The difference is they didn't do that to a lot of presidents.

DAITCH: Exactly. What do you think is the role of the press in that kind of thing? Because the media can sort of...

THOMAS: Well, you can't ignore charges, especially when they turn out to be true. But you can't be the handmaiden for people out to do a hatchet job. I mean you've got to try to find some balance and find some understanding of motivation, and not just take it wholehearted on the silver platter that they want to give it to you.

DAITCH: I want to go back to -- that was a little bit of diversion. But did you take trips to Kennedy when he went, say, to Europe, for example?

THOMAS: I didn't travel abroad with him. I started traveling abroad.... I traveled to Hyannis Port with him on the same plane, Palm Beach, that sort of thing, but not abroad. My two colleagues would take those trips. But then I started traveling abroad with Johnson then.

DAITCH: What was Johnson like? I mean as compared to Kennedy who was your first president that you actually covered at the White House, how would you...?

THOMAS: Well, he was a man who worked 18 hours a day. Took a nap in between. And he was the can-do president. He moved the mountain. In two years he got everything, incredible, incredible bills, many of which Kennedy had started. But he knew where the bodies were buried. He knew how to twist arms and got so much through: Medicare, the Civil Rights Act, voting rights for blacks for the first time in the South, federal aid to education from Head Start -- Head Start, he created it -- through college. Public health, child and maternal health, national parks. I said public housing, didn't I? Environmental laws. Unbelievable!

DAITCH: Do you think if, and again, I'm asking you to speculate a little bit, but do you think if Kennedy had lived and been reelected, would he have been able to do those things?

THOMAS: I think he would have gotten a lot through, but nothing like that. Johnson was just so dedicated to the poor, the sick, and the maimed to create this Great Society. If he had enlisted Johnson's help and let him go for it, yes, of course. Johnson knew the Hill.

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DAITCH: What was he like, I mean as far as being a journalist and trying to report?

Was he forthcoming? Was he easy to report on?

THOMAS: It was a love-hate relationship. He wanted to be on the front page every day with a good story praising him. He got very angry when he was not being praised. We had more access to him than any president I've ever covered, mainly because he always -- he was a people person. And when no one else was around, reporter's became people. Well, you're the only ones here.

DAITCH: Yes, and I want to talk.

THOMAS: I rode in a limousine with him a couple of times. He beckoned to us senior reporters to go with him. And he walked into the press room one day and said, "Have you had lunch?" "No, sir." And he took me up to the.... So those things haven't happened again.

DAITCH: Comparing that to Kennedy, you would have never had that kind of....

THOMAS: Well, we were close to Kennedy because it was such a small coterie. But not in that sense exactly. But we were invited to parties in their homes and....

DAITCH: Do you think any of this had to do, you know, the difference in the ability or access to the President, had anything to do with the White House, the structure of the staff itself? That, you know, the Kennedy White House was fairly small in terms of the number of support people that he had around him.

THOMAS: True.

DAITCH: Does that make a difference?

THOMAS: Well, it makes a difference in what kind of access you have. I think that when you're a small part of a coterie it's different. When you have 12 agents surrounding a president every time he makes a move and you practically bar any kind of coverage by walking right behind him going into hotels or anything else, then it's not the same league.

DAITCH: What was it like to work with Pierre Salinger? Was he a good facilitator?

THOMAS: I liked him a lot. I thought he had.... He never misguided me. He wouldn't always tell you exactly what you wanted to know. But he would give you a lift of an eyebrow or something that you were on the right track, and he could be

trusted.

DAITCH: Did you feel that way about Kennedy as well? I mean was he...?

THOMAS: Yes. I don't think he deliberately deceived. I don't think that was in him at all. He would just slough it off with a joke if he was trying to evade or gloss over something.

DAITCH: Right. Yes. Were you around the kids very much? What was that kind of...

THOMAS: Was I what?

DAITCH: Were you around the children very much? How did you get a feeling for the family as a group?

THOMAS: Well, we didn't get to be around them very much, but we saw them a lot. We saw them in different situations.

DAITCH: More at a distance?

THOMAS: Well, basically not that much of a distance because, as I say, it was a smaller White House. You might run into them.

DAITCH: But you wouldn't badger the children with questions.

THOMAS: Well, I did ask Caroline, what's your name? I caused a major conflagration.

DAITCH: Really!

THOMAS: Kennedy knew his wife would be terribly upset. She told me what her name was.

DAITCH: State secrets and all.

THOMAS: "Caroline."

DAITCH: Must have been interesting to see small children at the White House like that.

THOMAS: It was. It was a very happy time.

DAITCH: What was the assassination like for you?

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THOMAS: Well, I was not in Dallas. My boss was, and he did the brilliant job. He was in the third car. But from the moment we heard about it, you know, I rushed to the office. I was supposed to go on vacation. Of course I didn't. I was sent to Andrews Air Force Base to go to Dallas. He was still alive. But on the way we heard that he had died. I had gone to the office, and I saw the bulletin that my boss Merriman Smith had written. He talked to Jackie's chief Secret Service agent, and he said, "He's dead." So that was about an hour before it was officially announced. But we knew then. And it was four days of covering the White House, the East Room. Covering the Rotunda where they'd taken him. Covering outside, asking people why they had come there. Because they loved Kennedy, and so forth. Covering the funeral. And covering the very smooth transition to a new president.

DAITCH: That part was really impressive. I talked to Sid Davis about being on *Air Force One* when Johnson was sworn in.

THOMAS: Yes, he was fantastic.

DAITCH: What was your impression of Mrs. Kennedy at the time?

THOMAS: The fact that she certainly rose to the occasion, and everyone loved her leadership. She walks in at three o'clock in the morning with the body. And when the chief of protocol says, "Mrs. Kennedy, what can I do for you?" she said, "Find out how Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln] was buried." I mean she was in control. I'm sure they gave her some sleeping pills or whatever they give you and so forth. But basically she was a planner. She used to plan Christmas in July. She was always thinking ahead.

So this was the moment, and it came naturally, to make sure that everything went right and she knew that Jack would like it, you know, and the sense of things. She gave him probably a tremendous, graceful farewell and very highly visible for everybody to see, and he was so honored. So many people came. The tops of many, not all, but certainly many government heads.

DAITCH: It was very.... You know, I've seen the footage, and I've looked at the photos and...

THOMAS: And having the riderless horse. Another planner, you see, really. They understand drama.

DAITCH: But it was an outstanding job for that sort of thing; it was closure. And the drama, it seems to me, was a good thing. Did it feel that way at the time?

THOMAS: Oh, very much so. She was in command.

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DAITCH: And you were definitely under the impression that those things were her wishes and her....

THOMAS: Definitely. Yes. You never had any doubt when she gave an order that it was an order.

DAITCH: So young a woman. I've always thought how terrible it must have been for her.

THOMAS: But I just think she had been the queen, always fancied herself in that role, I think.

DAITCH: So it was a moment she could rise to fairly easily. What about Bob Kennedy in terms of his work with his brother?

THOMAS: I think he took it the hardest of all. This was a tremendous loss. Visibly he took it the hardest. Of course Jackie took it very hard, too. I'm not mitigating in any way. But he lost his brother, his bosom buddy, his soul, really.

DAITCH: I'm told that, several people have told me that he changed, for whatever that's worth and whatever it means, not necessarily just because his brother was assassinated. But, you know, years going by and his own maturing. Did you see that in him? Or did you continue to cover what he was doing at all after...?

THOMAS: Who, Bobby?

DAITCH: Bob, yes.

THOMAS: Well, yes, then he picked up the torch. I think it sort of led him to consider running for the presidency and so forth. When his opportunity came along in '68, he decided to do it. And he had great rivalry with Johnson. They hated each other. So those were tense times. He got out of the cabinet. Johnson considered him a rival.

DAITCH: You could visibly see that there was that tension between the two of them?

THOMAS: Oh, you knew it in every way. I mean there are all kinds of stories.

DAITCH: So that's not just retrospect.

THOMAS: Johnson fired the whole cabinet to tell them nobody could run because he needed them because he was so afraid Bobby was going to challenge him. So he fired the whole cabinet, none of whom had ever contemplated running for the presidency. Or, he didn't fire them. He told them they couldn't run, that he needed them.

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DAITCH: What did you see in terms of.... Or did you even cover or pay much attention to the campaign when Bob Kennedy was campaigning for the nomination? Were you following him or his developing platform or his thoughts?

THOMAS: Bobby, you mean?

DAITCH: Yes.

THOMAS: No, I didn't. No, it was kind of remote because I was at the White House. I was covering Johnson every minute, and he was a full-time job. Just the moment, the morning that we heard that Bobby was shot and then died. 'Sixty-eight. Then Martin Luther King. It was an unbelievable era.

DAITCH: A terrible year.

THOMAS: Terrible.

DAITCH: Again, this is speculation, but this is something that everyone wants to speculate on and people want to think about, Kennedy versus Johnson, Vietnam. You covered Kennedy, you paid attention to what he was doing, foreign policy. Was it your impression that he would have escalated in Vietnam in a similar way as Johnson did?

THOMAS: My impression is he wouldn't have because he knew how fruitless. He didn't believe in fruitless things. I don't think he believed in that. But I think that when he pulled out of the Bay of Pigs and so forth, and then he did send the military advisors into South Vietnam, but I really don't believe he would have fought the war there. I think he would have.... He had enough wise advisors around him. Walter Lippman was saying, "Don't get involved in a land war in Asia." I think good sense would have prevailed, even though he had generals around him who might have been urging it, but not that much. But Johnson was very vulnerable because he didn't understand what was going on. He kept escalating and getting into the war and listening to the wrong people.

DAITCH: Do you think that maybe part of that was because of the Bay of Pigs? I mean I think historians have gone through these various versions of what they think that Kennedy would have done and their analyses of what he did do, but....

THOMAS: My opinion is he would not have stayed in Vietnam. I mean he would have made a graceful exit because he couldn't retreat too much. He had a feeling that he knew the difference between war and peace, a sense of humanity, and I think that people would have given him the benefit of the doubt. Nobody wanted to go to war. Crazy! What is war? War is killing and being killed. That's what war is. Somehow people

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don't seem to know it around here.

DAITCH: Somebody told me that he -- and I think this is just brilliant, his understanding of history, because I'm an historian partly. But one of the things that influenced him is that he had read Barbara Tuchman's book *The Guns of August* about the way that World War I started.

THOMAS: Well, he certainly did. But also the book he always recommended all over the place was John Buchan's *Pilgrim's Way*. It was about, I never read it, but it's about a British soldier, a young man who's 21 years old dying in World War I. And that had an incredible effect on him. So many times he brought it up. *The Guns of August* was more au courant at the time, Tuchman, and he probably was affected. But this is the story that really got him.

DAITCH: Yes, this is real human life and death as opposed to....

THOMAS: Always kept recommending it to everyone.

DAITCH: That's interesting. So he would do that, recommend stuff to the press corps?

THOMAS: Well, it would come up in situations, you know. I don't know why I would always hear it.

DAITCH: That's interesting.

THOMAS: But he certainly did, he brought it up. I think he realized how horrible war was.

DAITCH: Well, and the thing about *The Guns of August* is how easy it is, with all these miscalculations.

THOMAS: That's right.

DAITCH: And that's what history teaches. He didn't want to be one of those people who was written down as someone who made this kind of miscalculation.

THOMAS: Look at the miscalculations in this war. Plan, plan, plan, but never looking ahead and never giving a damn. This planned to go to Iraq before he got into office. He's surrounded by the neo-cons who want war, and they want war without end. And it's a horrible thing to contemplate for the 21st century. They've written the *Mein Kampf* for the 21st century. The American people better wake up, or their children and grandchildren are going to be immersed in war to take over the whole Middle East and everywhere else. They have to get the country back.

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DAITCH: One of the things that I've found disturbing about all this is the flag waving: Once troops are sent, you're absolutely not allowed to say anything in dissent.

THOMAS: You're un-American, unpatriotic. They'll hang that albatross.

DAITCH: And you don't support the troops. You can support the troops by wanting them to come back and not get killed.

THOMAS: Exactly. You support them wanting to stay alive. And you also don't want them to kill other people in their own country who did nothing to you.

DAITCH: Right.

THOMAS: Unprovoked! That's not us.

DAITCH: No, it's not.

THOMAS: If that's us, then we are not different from any imperialistic....

DAITCH: And it's a terrible burden, I think, for these kids over there who are being asked to kill other people.

THOMAS: Nineteen-year-old boys who won't come home.

DAITCH: Yes, and women.

THOMAS: For what? For people who have never served at all, most of them? None. They had other priorities, according to Cheney [Richard B. Cheney]. Other priorities. So did the thousands who died in the war in Vietnam.

DAITCH: Yes, I'm sure they had other things to do. But getting back to Kennedy, the fact that he did serve and he was injured and saw people dying.

THOMAS: I think that made a difference, made an incredible difference in terms of his knowing. I wonder if that's why he stepped back in Cuba, the Cuban Missile Crisis. And so did Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev]. I loved Khrushchev for his courage of cowardice. They both stepped back, they both cared about humanity, and both knew they had the possibility to blow each other up.

DAITCH: Even against their advisors, both of them had the.... I mean those two particular individuals at that historical moment, they had advisors telling

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them, you know, stand up, don't step back.

THOMAS: But they were statesmen. They were statesmen because they had known war. We don't have that. We have a bunch of people who don't know war who are willing to send others to go die. For what!? Not when you can't state the reason you're there. Talk to ten people, you get ten different answers on why we're there because they have not told the truth of why they're there. It wasn't the weapons. It was something they thought would sell. What weapons? But even if they had them, they weren't operational, they weren't used, they were totally.... Saddam Hussein was about as controlled as you can ever control an enemy.

No, American people should stamp their feet now and say, "Why did you go to war?" That would be the question I would ask him if he ever had a news conference and ever called on me again. I would say, "Why did we go to war? Why did you go to war?" And it's him, the buck stops here. It's his war. No, it's really the *Washington Post-Wall Street Journal* war. They pushed for it everyday, every columnist except a couple on the *Post*. Every day, every day! Get Saddam! Go to war! Go to war! Go to war! Including Michael Kelley, who was killed. Every column. Every column.

DAITCH: What do you think came first there, the chicken or the egg in terms of they were sort of following along the lines that the administration wanted, or the media was pushing the administration? Or the *Post* in particular.

THOMAS: I think that the neo-Cons had a plan, and they sold it to Bush II. But I also think they had five columnists on the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* who would not rest until we went to war.

DAITCH: Hard to believe that's the same paper that cracked Watergate.

THOMAS: It's gone very conservative. They wanted this war. The *New York Times* tried to play it equal, tried to hold back the dawn. Tried to say, "Hey, wait a minute," and so forth. But inevitably they were being pushed along. you've got to be patriotic. Patriotic to go kill people in their country who did nothing to you? Under Nuremberg -- I mean this is an international wrong if they ever nailed it.

DAITCH: It's kind of scary that that's us, America. But let's get back to Kennedy. I wanted to ask you about the Cuban Missile Crisis. That must have been such a scary time.

THOMAS: It was. But nobody.... But people had some ultimate faith. It was very scary. I mean it was almost expecting Doomsday. But there was in this town.... Washington was quiet. I mean it was like being in the eye of a storm. There was no panic, nothing. Everybody knew the chips were down, though. A sense of not doom, but a

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terrible danger. Yet the reaction was not panic here. And you didn't have a government trying to imbue you with fear.

DAITCH: But they were pretty open about what was going on, right?

THOMAS: Well, not the negotiations per se.

DAITCH: No.

THOMAS: But open to the extent that, yes, Kennedy went on the air. He showed the pictures of the missiles, photos, and so forth. And why we had to get them out, because the 90 miles over there, and they could use them.

DAITCH: So people sort of knew that that was going on and knew that there was some negotiation happening with the Soviets.

THOMAS: Yes. They knew it. Those were very, very tense times, and they didn't know what the outcome would be.

DAITCH: Can you picture Kennedy, his demeanor or how he was during that time?

THOMAS: Well, he came out of the Cabinet Room at one point during these

high-powered talks and negotiations. Merriman Smith said to him, you know, "How's it been?" or "What's going on?" All Kennedy said was, "It's been a very interesting day." But he was still in command, he was in command. He wasn't falling apart.

DAITCH: Have you ever listened to any of the tapes from the...?

THOMAS: Not the Kennedy, no. I did see the movie.

DAITCH: It really is. I think the impression of him being in command is supported by the evidence on the tapes from the Library. Very impressive. And again, for such a young man to be holding the line and putting it all together and making these decisions. It supports what you're saying, your impression of him.

THOMAS: I think he definitely.... He's one of the few presidents I know who grew in office. And because he grew, he became more mature in how you handle the problems of not just war and peace but blowing up the world and having that possibility in your hands. And both he and Khrushchev knew they had that. I mean the responsibility is beyond the Pale.

DAITCH: Yes, it's hard to even imagine. I personally am really thankful that those two

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men were the ones who had the responsibility at that time.

THOMAS: Me, too, because we don't want *High Noon*. We don't need a cowboy, and we don't need somebody who would be afraid to step back and not be macho.

DAITCH: Absolutely, absolutely. He had confidence.

THOMAS: They saved lives.

DAITCH: And he had the confidence to do that which, once again, is amazing. I think, for such a young fellow. But, as you say, very sophisticated and had been around. How would you sort of...? I mean he wasn't in office that long. It was a very hectic period.

THOMAS: He had good instincts.

DAITCH: How would you evaluate his, I know every presidency is different, but how would you evaluate his presidency at least for the short time that he

was in office, compared to the other presidents that you covered?

THOMAS: Much more idealistic from the start. Definitely knew where they wanted to go. Surrounded himself with intellects; not ideologies but intellects, people who had known great literature, who understood the issues and so forth. At the same time, was not totally dominated, he was not a puppet. He would listen to some advice undoubtedly. But he also knew what he was talking about.

DAITCH: You know, I've heard -- and I don't know if this is sort of exaggerating a little bit in retrospect, particularly from people who were great friends and admirers of his -- but I've often heard people say that he was an incredibly quick study, that he could read something or hear something and absorb it.

THOMAS: Well, he had taken a fast reading course, speed reading. So that helped him. Everything that was around him he'd pick up and read.

DAITCH: But according to these people, he really absorbed. I can pick up and read something and then it's out the other side of my head maybe.

THOMAS: Jackie helped him a lot to introduce him to great poems and great....

DAITCH: Oh, really!

THOMAS: She did. She was more literate than he.

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DAITCH: Did he strike you as an intellect in his own right, as opposed to just surrounding himself with intellects?

THOMAS: Idealist. I mean he didn't just rattle on. I think an intellect with idealism. He didn't rattle off facts and figures like Clinton or Carter [James E. Carter] could at their fingertips, absorbing this like a blotter. Of course different in a different perspective. I thought he was intellectual because he had to think about things in terms of his health and everything else. Introspective in that respect. I think he understood people, much more people.... Johnson was a people person with automatic instincts. But I think intellectually that Kennedy did understand. The other two, they know, they're much more pragmatic, brilliantly pragmatic.

DAITCH: The other two? Which two?

THOMAS: Well, Carter and Clinton.

DAITCH: Yes, yes. How would you then think that, you know, having lived through

all this, how would you think that historians should look at Kennedy in terms of his presidency? First he was sort of lionized. Then, you know, he made all these mistakes. And now he's become somewhat rehabilitated.

THOMAS: Give me that sentence again.

DAITCH: Well, just how would you evaluate him...? Or what would you suggest to historians that would be the most important things to look at in terms of his presidency?

THOMAS: What he wanted to accomplish, where he thought the country should be headed. He told young people there's a universe out there, worlds of knowledge. We should never stop trying to find out what it's all about, learning. I think he set the goals: to keep the mind open and probing. That's what I find about him, that he knew that we had to.... We could not stand still. That the search for truth was unending.

DAITCH: I think that's a good place to close.

THOMAS: Okay....

[END OF INTERVIEW]