

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

Creator: Joseph W. Alsop
Interviewer: Elspeth Rostow
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Biographical Note

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

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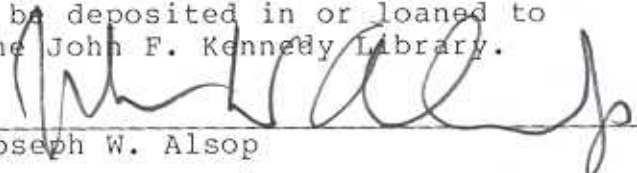
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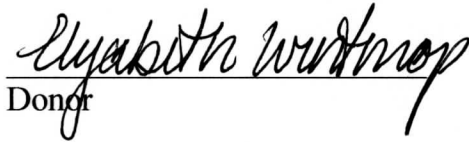
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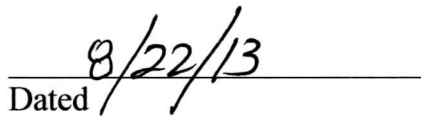
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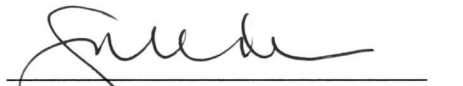
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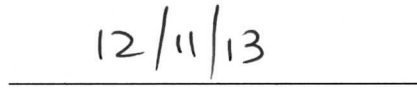
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JOSEPH W. ALSOP
JFK #1

Table of Contents

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

MEMORANDUM
KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 23 June 1964
Elspeth Rostow

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

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

Oral History Interview

With

JOSEPH W. ALSOP

June 18, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Elspeth Rostow

For the John F. Kennedy Library

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

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

[-1-]

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

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

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

[-2-]

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

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

[-3-]

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

ROSTOW: This was when he was a congressman?

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

ROSTOW: Do you remember the coffee hours on television?

[-4-]

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

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

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

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

[-5-]

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

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

[-6-]

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

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

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

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

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

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

[-7-]

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

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

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

[-8-]

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

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

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

[-9-]

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

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

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

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

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

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

[-10-]

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

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

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

[-11-]

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

ROSTOW: Well, what did you say?

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

[-12-]

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

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

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

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

ALSOP: We'd discuss practical politics.

ROSTOW: Why?

[-13-]

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

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

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

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

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

[-14-]

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

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

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

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

[-15-]

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

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

[-16-]

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

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

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

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

[-17-]

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

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

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

[-18-]

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

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

ALSOP: The attorney general is the most remarkable man

[-19-]

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

ROSTOW: But he's quite different.

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

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

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

[-20-]

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

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

[-21-]

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

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

ALSOP: Oh, on an enormous scale, yes.

ROSTOW: And he would listen....

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

[-22-]

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

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

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

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

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

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

[-23-]

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

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

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

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

[-24-]

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

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

[-25-]

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

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

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

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

[-26-]

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

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

[-27-]

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

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

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

[-28-]

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

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

[-29-]

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

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

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

[-30-]

ALSOP: It was, yes, it was.

ROSTOW: Jackie had already gone?

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

ROSTOW: Did he talk at all about the day?

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

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

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

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

[-31-]

ALSOP: Oh, he had a very strict conscience.

ROSTOW: But not the Calvinist distaste for pleasure.

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

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

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

ROSTOW: You were in Paris.

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

ROSTOW: It was painful even at a distance.

[-32-]

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

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

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

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

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

[-33-]

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

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

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

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

[-34-]

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

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

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

[-35-]

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

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

[-36-]

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

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

[-37-]

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

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

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

[-38-]

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

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

[-39-]

from the Eisenhower administration.

ALSOP: He did not think very highly of it.

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

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

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

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

[-40-]

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

[-41-]

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

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

[-42-]

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

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

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

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

[-43-]

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

ROSTOW: Have you ever discussed this with the president?

[-44-]

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

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

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

[-45-]

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

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

[-46-]

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

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

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

[-47-]

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

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

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

[-48-]

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

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

[-49-]

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

[-50-]

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

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

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

[-51-]

ROSTOW: Almost as a part of the political process.

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

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

[-52-]

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

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

ROSTOW: What's wrong with the country?

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

[-53-]

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

[-54-]

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

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

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

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

ROSTOW: This as course being....

[-55-]

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

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

[-56-]

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

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

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

[-57-]

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

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

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

[-58-]

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

Joseph W. Alsop Oral History Interview
Name List

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

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