Lord Harlech (William David Ormsby-Gore) Oral History Interview – RFK#1, 08/27/1969

Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Lord Harlech was the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the United Kingdom from 1957 to 1961, and the United Kingdom's Ambassador to the United States from 1961 to 1965. In this interview Lord Harlech discusses his earlier memories of Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] from the 1930s through the 1950s; RFK's religion; RFK's character, including some of his interests, faults, and struggles; dealings in Vietnam under John F. Kennedy's [JFK] Administration; RFK's difficult relationship with Lyndon B. Johnson; RFK's relationship with Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis after JFK's death; and life with RFK at Hickory Hill, among other issues.

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Lord Harlech (William David Ormsby-Gore) – RFK #1
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Oral History Interview

With

LORD HARLECH (WILLIAM DAVID ORMSBY-GORE)

August 27, 1969
London, England

By Larry J. Hackman

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: This is an interview for the Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] Oral History Program. Could you just begin by going back to your earliest memories of Robert Kennedy, maybe in the late thirties? Can you remember him at all in that period when you knew the family for the first time?

HARLECH: Yes, I do remember him. Of course, he was a very small boy. He was so much younger than I was that, other than as part of the furniture of the Kennedy family, I didn't have any discussions with him. Of course, we discussed his boyhood in England later on. And I don't think he had a very happy time here. He rather disliked the school he was sent to, Gibbs [Gibbs School, Preparatory School for Boys]. He thought it was rather ridiculous.

HACKMAN: For what reasons? Did he ever say?

HARLECH: Just a very small reason, that the uniform they had to wear was ridiculous. And I think he was always very sensitive about his appearance and whether people laughed at him or not. They were made to wear these red magenta hats which were made like a sort of tweed cap which was unique for any school, even in England. I think this acutely embarrassed him and I don't think he ever settled down at that school at all.

HACKMAN: Can you remember other things he said about the period in England other than school?

HARLECH: I don't really, no. I got the impression that he hadn't very much enjoyed his time in England, but this was chiefly due to the fact that he didn't like the school he went to.

HACKMAN: Could you see this coming out in later life, as you knew him over the years, in his attitude toward the British or toward any…?

HARLECH: Well, like all members of the family, he'd been brought up in an atmosphere which was, to some extent, anti-British—more so on his father's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] side than his mother's [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy]. It was curious the way Mrs. Kennedy, his mother, had come to liking the British very much. She still reminisces at great length about her period at the Court of St. James and all that went on in those days. Indeed, I think she has a view of England today which owes a good deal to what it was like in about 1938. It is now pretty out of date.

But, no, basically, this sort of Irish-Boston background was anti-British, and, as we know, Joe Kennedy was not very enamored of the British, and for all kinds of, some of them perfectly good, reasons. Each of them, in turn, I think gradually worked their way out of this basic anti-British feeling. Obviously Kathleen [Kathleen Kennedy Cavendish] did. Even Jack Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] had an element of it, but he grew older and found that on so many things his judgment was different from that of his father, so he became different in this particular field. And, of course, for him, too, his interest in English history and literature, I think, gradually made him admire the British more and more, and, therefore, a lot of that flavor went out. But with Bobby it was still there for a time. I mean, I remember about 1954–55 when I was over in America—he'd been working for Senator McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy]—he would still get terribly angry about British shipping going into China.

HACKMAN: Right, that's when he was on that investigation.

HARLECH: Yes. I used to point out that British governments don't really have much legal control over their shipping—if we're not at war with a country, if we have diplomatic relations with a country, there is actually no legal method by which you can forbid ships to trade. Indeed, looking back into American history, of course, this is one of the great rights the Americans have always claimed. I used those kinds of arguments with him and pointed out that probably most of these ships were registered in Hong Kong—perfectly true, they flew a British flag, but really very few British people had any connection with them—and that they were hard to control. But deep down Bobby felt that this was a treacherous act by the British and was in line with the history of the way the British had behaved to the Irish people and so on.

There was a strong emotional suspicion of Britain and, of course, an anti-colonial attitude which was perfectly natural in America anyway. This is so generally, but I think it is

even more strong among the Irish-Americans. Again, it was only later on in his life, when he visited many parts of the world and saw how British-administered territories on the whole seemed to be doing rather a better job than others, that this attitude changed a bit—it wouldn't make anyone pro-colonial, now, but the more vivid picture of British oppression was eliminated to a considerable degree.

HACKMAN: Can you remember other things in the mid-fifties? By this time, when Robert Kennedy's really no longer a child, he's taken on a personality. Can you remember other things in the mid-fifties about his personality or his view on issues, his other work for McCarthy, or any of the other things he's involved in?

HARLECH: I think he reacted very quickly to actual experience to people—not so well in theory as when he met people. I think it was 1955—he'd just been with Judge Douglas [William O. Douglas] to the Soviet Union, and he was, one night in Georgetown, showing us all these pictures he'd taken. And, once the Russians were no longer a theoretical group of Communists but were people he'd met and liked, this tended to blur his rather oversimplified image of the implacable Communist enemy. It was very noticeable on that occasion and throughout his life that once he had been in contact with people, he had a sympathy for them, and this tended to make him more and more appreciative of their problems, of how most people in the world were striving for the same kind of good life and that you couldn't put them in watertight compartments and particular categories. His original tendency to oversimplify was continually modified during his life, but usually only by direct experience, not by theory or people arguing with him.

HACKMAN: Now, had that change taken place in John Kennedy much earlier than this, or is he going through this in the same period with Robert Kennedy?

HARLECH: It's rather difficult for me to tell because, you see, from 1939, when I lost sight of him and we were all involved in the war, until after the war, '46–47, which I suppose was a period when a lot of these changes took place, I didn't see him. Therefore, it was only in the period after about 1947–48 that I began to understand more about his mind. By that time, he already had a very broad sympathy—although even he, discussing his early period as a congressman, said that he held views about how to run the economy and so on which were really archaic, which were simply handed down from his father and he accepted as the gospel. He always wondered that people hadn't dug out some of the perfectly idiotic things he'd said as a young congressman and thrown them in his face, particularly as regards monetary and financial affairs.

HACKMAN: Going back again to the late thirties, can you remember at all how Robert Kennedy sort of fits into the family: who he's close to or who he's not

close to or does he have a lot of trouble because he's small? People have said this. Does that strike you…?

HARLECH: It's very hard.

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HACKMAN: Too far back?

HARLECH: With people having said it and one having read about it and having, in a way, talked to him about it, I could give you that view, but it would really be secondhand. I didn't personally have enough experience of seeing him in action with the family to know whether it's true. I suspect it is true, but I don't have any firsthand experience with it.

HACKMAN: In that interview that you did with Richard Neustadt [Richard E. Neustadt], you talked about speaking with John Kennedy just after Robert Kennedy had come back from covering the Arab-Israeli conflict—I believe he made a trip out for a newspaper.

HARLECH: Yes.

HACKMAN: Can you remember talking to Robert Kennedy at that point about his experiences out there?

HARLECH: I remember a lunch when they both came and had lunch with us. And I may—I haven't read that interview in some time; I may have already talked about this. But they started talking about the Balfour Declaration and the responsibility the British had as a result of the Balfour Declaration, and they were critical of the whole story. But an amusing episode in that conversation was that just by chance my old grandmother, Lady Salisbury [Cicely Alice Gore], happened to come round for lunch that day, and we were sitting around the table, my wife and I, Jack and Bobby, and my grandmother. And they, of course, as usual, were doing a great deal of talking, and they were giving their impressions of the history of Palestine and the Arab-Israeli problems, and she suddenly began to talk about the period of the Balfour Declaration and the politics of that period. And, as she was very well informed and had been involved with everyone to do with the government all through that period—and, in fact, Arthur Balfour [Arthur James Balfour] was a cousin of my great-grandfather—they suddenly looked speechless as they heard this immensely aged lady give a much more accurate account than they had given of this particular period of history. They were, in fact, delighted at the end to hear it all. But it was an amusing confrontation because they were giving the impression that nobody else had ever heard about the problems before, and to find this old lady who knew a good deal more about it than they did just amused them.

HACKMAN: Can you ever remember discussing with Robert Kennedy Kick's

[Kathleen Kennedy Cavendish] marriage to your cousin William Cavendish [William John Robert Cavendish]?

HARLECH: Only very indirectly because I didn't really see him again until after Kick had been killed. Therefore, all the traumas of the religious problems and so on had died down and everybody was forgiven and it's best to forget. But from the way he talked, quite clearly he'd been very shaken and shocked by her agreement to give up

her faith or at least to accept that she wouldn't be married in church and the children wouldn't be Catholic. It was a strange episode, that, because, you know, I think if it hadn't been wartime and a year or two later, my cousin wouldn't have been so insistent—I mean, it was a difficult moment to get your ideas straightened out. I didn't have a chance to talk to him enough because as I'd married a Catholic and had agreed that my children should be brought up Catholics, I thought he was putting unnecessary pressure on Kick. But, as I say, being wartime, there wasn't the opportunity to really discuss it in detail and hopefully modify his views. Because I think it hurt her and hurt the family.

HACKMAN: How did Robert Kennedy wear his religion, so to speak, in comparison to the President?

HARLECH: Oh, he was much more seriously religious than the President. The President had, certainly, a great loyalty to the Catholic Church, but in a way, because of his character, he didn't seem to need a religious side to his life as much as Bobby Kennedy did. I think, you see, Bobby Kennedy so much of the time felt, in the nicest possible way, inadequate; that he was always sort of fighting with an inner feeling that he was not as good as his brothers in most things: that he wasn't as handsome, that he hadn't as much charm, wasn't as witty, all these things. And to enable him to battle on, I think he relied very much on his religion.

This wasn't the case with the President. I remember talking to the President about it—things like the insistence that members of the Church go to Mass every Sunday. He thought this was—curiously for him—he thought this was absolutely right. He felt that this retained the hold on members of the Catholic Church, which, once you let it go, then you don't know where you would finish up, and that this was a correct discipline even though an awful lot of people who went were just going through the motions. Nevertheless, this kept you in touch, and at moments when you really needed your religion, you would feel that you really belonged, and that this was a very worthwhile thing, and the Church ought to retain it.

I don't think Bobby would ever have questioned it even. It was just automatic that you did it. No, I think he was deeply religious, and, of course, the fact that Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] was perhaps even more deeply religious than he was made it, as a family, a very strong Catholic combination—which wasn't the same with John Kennedy.

HACKMAN: Would he ever open up and talk about these things, Robert Kennedy, the

fact that he doesn't think he's as talented or as handsome or that he's having to fight for all these things, or does he hold this in?

HARLECH: No, he held it in. He held it in. I mean, he would sometimes make a perhaps slightly flippant remark about "It's just as well that they don't examine your academic record too closely before appointing you to high office," or something like that, sort of self-depreciation in those sort of ways, rather offhand ways. No, I think it was, you know, this very worried, haggard look he had that—oh, there were moments when it was clearly a great temptation for him to duck out and do something which wouldn't keep him so much in the limelight. I remember after the assassination when he was trying to think what to do. The attraction of going to Oxford—which was one of the ideas he had—for a

year and just continue studying and, in a way, getting into the academic atmosphere was very, very strong. There really was no other purpose in it; it would not really have been a very rational decision, although at one moment he had almost definitely decided that was what he was going to do.

HACKMAN: Really? Did he talk with you a lot about this?

HARLECH: Yes. Would it be valuable and so on.

HACKMAN: What did you tell him? Do you remember?

HARLECH: As far as I remember, I said that I could see—it was always an attraction to somebody in public life to feel that they might go back to school. You realize you have gaps in your education; the whole idea of taking a year off to fill up those gaps can be very attractive. But I told him I didn't feel that he would enjoy it very much or that it would really satisfy him in that particular period of his life; that, in a way, the thing was to get stuck into a job which took up a lot of your time. This, probably would have better therapeutic properties than going and thinking at Oxford. But, as I say, it was a great attraction to him to get away and change the whole tenor of his life. I think this was an indication that there was never that self-assurance about his political career and his public life that his brother had.

HACKMAN: Is this the first time you saw this interest in sort of getting away and thinking? I'm thinking particularly of his attitude toward Harvard or the University of Virginia Law School. Did he ever talk about school and books and thought…?

HARLECH: He talked a lot about books, not so much about school. I think he felt, like most people do, that he hadn't made the best use of his years of education

and that the things that now interested him hadn't interested him much at the time he was at the University. And he was making himself read, poetry, biography, history, all kinds of things which, obviously, he hadn't really taken very much interest in earlier on in his life. This absolute passion for self-education, which I think most of them had, did continue right through to the end. One of the remarkable characteristics of the family is this determination to know more and more and to understand about more different fields, other parts of the world, other people's histories, other people's literature.

An example was the way he was fascinated by Vozneshensky [Andrei Vozneshensky] when he was over in New York. I remember a long session in Bobby's flat in New York with Vozneshensky and this total absorption in what Vozneshensky was saying and what it was like in Russia and what did the young there think, what did he think. He wasn't always terribly good on those occasions because, in a way, he didn't have a very subtle approach. There were certain things that Vozneshensky obviously couldn't say and didn't wish to say, certainly not to an American politician. But Bobby would ask rather obvious questions about "Are they all against the Communist regime?" "Do they all dislike Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev]?" this sort of thing, which Vozneshensky fielded very well and came at from a totally different angle, but he clearly wouldn't answer direct questions of a political nature of

that kind. But you very rapidly built up a picture of youth in Russia which was uninterested in politics and didn't really believe a word or care about what their elders were saying. But, as I say, Bobby rather wanted more direct answers, which he couldn't get. I really just say that in passing as an indication of this extraordinary range of interests.

HACKMAN: Would he ever ask you for help on how to question someone like this? Or would he just go ahead and go right on in?

HARLECH: He didn't on that occasion ask for help on it. But he often talked with me about attitude to the Soviet Union, to Russians, to individual Russians, to—was he called Georgikov?

HACKMAN: Georgi Bolshakov [Georgi N. Bolshakov].

HARLECH: Georgi Bolshakov, how to handle him and what was the right thing to say to him. At one moment he was very anxious that he should introduce me to him so that we could have discussions together, and I absolutely refused. I thought this would be a very bad idea. I thought it would make Bolshakov suspicious and less valuable than he was, feeling that he had this personal relationship with Bobby. So I wouldn't do it.

Anything he was doing, if I was around—although this is also true to some extent of his brother, and not only with me but with other people—he had a tendency to give you draft speeches, articles, things he wanted to say, and try it out on you. I think he was aware that there was a tendency within himself, and to some extent among his advisers, to be a little too strident; that is to say, to really pile it on, whether he was discussing Vietnam or racialism.

HACKMAN: This is all the way through, or is this just after the Administration, or when did it first start?

HARLECH: Well, obviously, it became more so after he was on his own because then it was more his own ideas and his own campaign, as it were, rather than assisting with his brother's policies and campaign. It was all his own, and, therefore, he had to make the judgments of how he would approach, for instance, his trip to South Africa.

He came through London…. Well, I think I'd seen him in New York first, and we'd looked at some of the things he was going to say. Then he came through London; I looked at them again and tried to help on one or two things there. I remember there was one particular sentence in which he talked about "the revolution of youth," and he inserted the words revolution and revolutionary a number of times, and I said, "I think you'd much better cut those words out because you can be quite sure that any speech you make in South Africa will be torn to pieces, little bits will be taken out of context, and these are very emotive words." To talk about a revolution taking place can be torn out of its context and be made to look as though you were recommending revolution, and therefore I suggested he alter the wording. You know, he was frightfully good about that. He never resented people—not only me but other people—hacking his speeches about.

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HACKMAN: Would he defend his other advisers? Who particularly? Most people point to Adam Walinsky in this period as the person who's pushing him in that direction. Do you get that feeling?

HARLECH: Oh, very much so. I thought much the best balanced of his advisers at that time was Tom Johnston [Thomas M.C. Johnston]—very sensible, very bright, very level-headed.

HACKMAN: Very attractive wife, incidentally.

HARLECH: Yes. Strange. French wife. Of course, I saw less and less of him. I mean, I used to see a lot of him when I did go over, but by this time I'd left the United States. I used to go back three or four times a year, but our movements didn't always fit exactly so we didn't always have a lot of time together. But this was the impression I got, that the drafts produced by Walinsky were, as I say, too strident in my view. All the stops were out all the time. There was no light and shade. There was a danger of the speeches sounding like ranting instead of closely-reasoned argument. Although they might go down well in a mass audience, when they were read they could give the impression of somebody who is, perhaps, being rather too superficial and not realizing the incredible complications of almost every issue that arises in the world. Trying to oversimplify them all the time could lead you to look like a demagogue and not be taken seriously by that element in public opinion which is all-important, the people who are going

to write the leading articles, who are going to write pieces about you and your prospects. And, although they don't amount to much in numbers—they're only a half a percent of the population—it's on their assessment of you that your image will gradually be built up. There was, therefore, a danger all the time that he might be typed as too much of a demagogue, and I thought, on the whole, Walinsky was the danger here and that if only he'd listen more to some of the other advice—and particularly Tom Johnston—this wouldn't have been so much of a danger.

HACKMAN: What about Vietnam? Maybe you could pick this up during the Administration if there's anything at all you can recall of conversation with Robert Kennedy on Vietnam during the Administration and then follow it up over the next few years. Can you recall him having any doubts at all during '61, '62 or up to the time of the coup in '63?

HARLECH: Oh, yes. One of the good things about both the brothers was that they questioned everything. It's very easy in life to want something to turn out a particular way and then disregard those aspects of the situation which might lead you to think that it's not going to turn out that way. They were very brave always at facing all the possibilities. And they were very doubtful all along about successive Vietnamese governments from the time of Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] and then directly after Diem the chaotic succession of governments, all of which were pretty weak and feeble in one way or another, all corrupt. They were quite prepared to face up to the fact that these people were not measuring up to what the United States had hoped for and that, therefore, this was a

pretty rickety structure. I think that's why all through that Administration they were, in fact, very cautious.

As you remember, the Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] mission, which was what, late '61, with Maxwell Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor], had in some respects—although I didn't see the document, I heard it endlessly discussed—had recommended a pretty heavy commitment then. Of course, Maxwell Taylor was more cautious than Walt Rostow. But the President was even more cautious than either of them. There was an extreme reluctance to get very heavily committed. I think they took their eye rather off this particular ball during the summer of, I suppose it was—well, obviously, '62, the Cuban missile crisis—and then through the following year when they got involved particularly in Soviet-American relations, on disarmament and the test ban and so on. It's often been said, and I think it's true, that the President, and Bobby, too, hadn't really focused their minds on where they were going in Vietnam. They were still just hoping that with the 15,000 advisers, or whatever had been agreed up to then, somehow or other it would muddle through and that the Vietnam Administration in one way and another would be able to handle the situation and there wouldn't have to be a further American commitment.

Of course, the whole thing was really just about falling apart when the President was assassinated. I mean, Diem had gone and there were still faint hopes, no doubt encouraged by reports from Vietnam, that once you got rid of the corruption of Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu] and

everyone connected with him that the situation would from then on improve. It was really too early by November to see clearly that it was not improving—although if anything, the situation was in fact steadily deteriorating. My strong impression was that they still thought that Vietnam was something of a peripheral problem that could be handled over the years more or less as Laos had been handled. That's to say it would be a permanent irritant, that there would always be this threat of possibly having to make a further American commitment; hopefully, you wouldn't have to do so; with a bit of luck, you wouldn't have to do so. They weren't really brought up firmly against the fact that, unless the Americans did more, then the situation in South Vietnam was going to collapse. That hadn't really arisen by the end of that Administration.

HACKMAN: Do you recall what direction, if any, that Robert Kennedy was urging on the President in regard to Vietnam? Does he have a frame of reference towards Southeast Asia that's clearly established—what we can do, how much we can do, particularly the counterinsurgency thing that so many people say he talked so much about during that period?

HARLECH: Yes. You talk about a frame of reference. I think his instinct was that too obvious outside help was likely to be ineffective or, indeed, have very great dangers. People have such complex characters. In a way, his suspicion about British rule in those parts of the world did have the natural corollary that it wouldn't be very much good to substitute someone else's rule for American rule or for a heavy American commitment, that on the whole you'd reached a period in history where any kind of visible Western domination in the area would create conditions which would be nationalistic and anti-West. I think he applied this attitude of mind perfectly well to the position of the United States in that part of the world. But, of course, you then got into a conflict of view. If you had

backed a particular government which you felt was holding the dike against communism, to what extent could you apply that general principle of non-interference if this might result in the collapse of the government you were supporting?

Obviously this is one of the tragedies about the Vietnam situation. It is why I think the anti-American atmosphere now is so very unfair. At each stage there was an extreme reluctance on the part of the United States to get any further involved. Nevertheless, again and again they were presented with a situation in which their best experts said, "Unless you do more, this thing is going to fold up on you, and then what are the consequences." It was always at this very late stage, and you then had to perhaps overreact, to do more than you would have had to do in the beginning.

I think, in talking later on with Bobby about it—but not at the last period when he came out openly for withdrawal—at the period before that, his real feeling was that a good look at the situation in late '63, early '64 would have given you two clear alternatives: either to make, quickly, a major effort and recognize that this would be a big American commitment, but make it, with the possibility of achieving quick results, and if you didn't

achieve them, then cut your losses; or else decide at that stage that you were not prepared to give any more help. But one of these two alternative solutions should have been arrived at. Of course, no such sort of general strategic appreciation of the situation was ever made.

The decisions were endlessly ad hoc decisions taken month by month by President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], who disliked the whole idea but was pushed bit by bit into getting further and further involved. But I don't remember any moment when the Administration said, "Well, now let's take a long-term look at this. What are the results of the two alternative policies likely to be, and which are we going to choose?" It was, "Well, we'll do a bit more propping up. There's a new general who has become Prime Minister; let's give him a chance. Let's try a little bombing. That's not very successful. Let's try a bit more bombing. We'll allow the troops that are there to actively participate. Now there aren't enough troops. Let's put a few more in."

It's awfully difficult to know how much of what Bobby had thought was, in a way, a reaction to what one was saying one's self and how much was really his own firmly held convictions. But, knowing his character and the family characteristics, I'm sure that if they—either of them—had been forced to focus on the issue, as indeed the American Administration was forced to do in '64, that then they would have made a much more clear-cut decision either to go in great strength and try and produce some quick results or else to decide quite clearly that a major military commitment by the United States was the wrong policy, in which case you would have to accept the political consequences.

HACKMAN: Was it difficult in a conversation with Robert Kennedy to get him to spell out clearly what he was thinking? Would he always ask so many questions and never…?

HARLECH: Yes. Of course, he wasn't very articulate in the way of putting over an elaborate argument at some length. He didn't like embarking on a long

assessment of the situation. But this was also to some extent true of his brother, although he had a better command of language and could formulate a whole policy pretty clearly. But both of them really liked to make other people talk and then pick up the elements that they supported and say, "That's right. That's what we should do;" also act as devil's advocate and say, "But if you do that, what will happen on this other front? What will the repercussions be?" And they were both extremely good at that, very often putting questions which were extremely awkward from their own standpoint. Although they wished a certain result, they would ask the question which might well mitigate against getting that result and then allow the conversation to take its course. Curiously enough, by these questions and their comments about which they thought was the right line and which was the wrong line and why they thought it was the wrong line, they gave by the end of the discussion a very clear picture of their views. But what you were asking just now, did Bobby spell out in a conversation exactly where he stood on the particular situation, I don't think he did. That wasn't the way his mind worked.

HACKMAN: You said as time passed you felt some of his statements—I assume including Vietnam—became a bit too strident. Can you remember conversations that you had with him when he asked for your suggestions or you tried to tone some things down, particularly important speeches?

HARLECH: Yes. I remember looking at a speech of his in his apartment in New York. I suppose it would be February ’68.

HACKMAN: Just before the campaign.

HARLECH: Just before the campaign. A major speech on…

HACKMAN: Yes, he gave a major speech in Chicago on Vietnam February eighth, I believe, in ’68.

HARLECH: Yes, that’s it.

HACKMAN: February eighth.

HARLECH: Yes. I could tell you exactly. [Interruption]

HACKMAN: All right.

HARLECH: Yes. I went to New York on the first, had dinner with Bobby on the fifth. Oh yes, then we went to the first night at *Doctor Faustus* with the Burtons [Richard Burton] on the sixth. Yes, I saw quite a lot of him in New York. It must have been then. He made the speech on the eighth, was it?

HACKMAN: Yes, I believe so.

HARLECH: Yes, well, that’s it. That’s it. Now, what were the elements of the speech? There was a whole long passage about casualties, Viet Cong recruiting, Viet Cong numbers.

HACKMAN: Right.

HARLECH: And my impression was that this went on much too long; that is to say, the point was repeated again and again and again: how everybody had been misled; there always was the prophecy that the figures would go down and that the rate of casualties were so many and the recruiting was so many and, therefore, there must be fewer Viet Cong in the field; whereas, in fact, each time you got an assessment of the Viet Cong in the field, the numbers had gone up in spite of the rate of casualties and so forth. Well, now that was a very valid point, but it was repeated again and again in more and

more vivid prose. I remember saying that, "You've made a very good point. Let it stand. If you repeat it again and again and you finish up by making it in rather strident, oversimplified terms at the end, this will not make the best possible impression." He accepted that, and did a certain amount of rewriting. That was the kind of situation that arose.

But by 1960, I saw him so intermittently, compared to the days gone by when we were all in Washington together, that it was becoming very difficult for me to get back on the wave length and to find out just what were the pressures that required him to say certain things. I was, therefore, very reticent about giving advice at that stage because I didn't know so well what the atmosphere in the United States was, I didn't know what his advisers were saying, I didn't know what his standing with various groups around the country was and what audiences he needed to appeal to and so on. It was very difficult, therefore, to come in from an almost totally different atmosphere in Britain and then be able to give good advice as to whether it was wise to do this or that.

As I say, it was a very endearing quality of all of them that whoever they met, they always asked their advice. For instance, the President would ask advice from people who really, obviously, were not going to give any advice of any great worth. But it was rather an exciting way of conducting conversations. They'd sort of say, "Well, I was thinking of doing this. Do you think that's a good idea?" Everybody rather liked being asked by the President of the United States whether they thought some idea was a good one.

HACKMAN: Can you recall any other conversation in that February fifth dinner with him—possibility of running for the presidency or his thoughts on….

HARLECH: Oh, well, we always had that conversation. He used to explain to me exactly the pressures that were on him—which are, I think, well-known—that if he ran, everyone would say that it was just typical of his personal antagonism to President Johnson and that they wouldn't believe that he sincerely held views opposed to the President, that it would all be a personal vendetta, and he would be accused of destroying the Democratic party because of his personal dislike of President Johnson. Of course, those particular arguments were the ones that held him back until after McCarthy. A criticism of this, of course, had been made, was made at the time and has been made ever since, that this was opportunism, that you first of all let somebody else get into the battle, and then when

you see that this opens an opportunity for you, you go in. But the only reason that he hadn't already come out clearly against President Johnson was because he knew that this would be the reaction of a large section of the Democratic Party and this would be bad for the Party and bad for him and bad for the country. It was perfectly true and valid that once McCarthy had challenged the President and it became clear throughout the country that there was a large section of the Democratic Party that wished to have an alternative to President Johnson, at that moment all the pressures which had been on him for moths on the other side, gained the upper hand. You know the arguments, I mean: "If you're an honest, brave, courageous

politician as we all think you are, it's inconceivable that you don't come out and say you are opposed to Johnson, policies."

In fact, now you remind me of it, of course, that very week I had dinner with him in a restaurant with Harry Belafonte [Harold George Belafonte]. Bobby had been on *The Tonight Show* because Harry Belafonte had taken over from Johnny Carson [John William Carson] for a week, and one of his guests had been Bobby. We had dinner together. And the Smothers Brothers were there, too, and I forget which of them—would it be Tommy Smothers [Thomas Bolyn Smothers], the fair-haired one—got rather drunk and attacked Bobby violently because on the program when he was asked about Vietnam and Johnson's policies; Bobby had not come out much more directly against the President. He was just like any other politician, that they always hedged, they never gave a direct answer and, for God's sake, why didn't he speak up, and so on. Obviously, Tommy Smothers and his views are not all-important, but you could see that it hurt Bobby. This was his most vulnerable point, of being accused of being a weasel, of being cowardly, that kind of thing he hated. The kind of argument he had to use about the general political atmosphere and the problems of being a prominent politician didn't come very readily to him. Of course he understood them, but he really felt like Tommy Smothers, and it was rather an uncomfortable evening.

They all got rather drunk and everybody was letting their hair down and shouting at each other. But there was this tremendous pressure, and the only thing that was holding him back from throwing his hat in the ring were the more cautious arguments that this would do him immense damage, the Party damage, and the country damage, and that, therefore, he oughtn't do it. This line of reasoning had the upper hand at that date, but after the McCarthy episode, of course, that particular argument fell to the ground, and then he felt compelled to run.

HACKMAN: Can you remember discussing with him his relationship with President Johnson, maybe going back to the Administration, if you can remember anything at that point, but then particularly after?

HARLECH: You see, I think one of the difficulties was—you know the story about the 1960 Convention. Well, you know it better than I do because I wasn't there. But Bobby never admired or liked President Johnson and, unlike his brother, he couldn't forgive the sort of snide remarks that Senator Johnson had made about Jack during the campaign, I mean sort of treating him as though he was a little boy and being rather nasty generally. He, unlike Jack, couldn't forget about those things. He couldn't put them out of his mind, so that he had this personal dislike and was obviously upset at the whole idea of Johnson being the Vice President.

Then, of course, it is perfectly true that as Vice President, he didn't cut much of a figure. He was obviously over-awed by Jack Kennedy; there was some curious way in which he felt terribly inadequate in his presence; and, therefore, he showed up as an incredibly second-rate man and even lost all that tremendous drive and energy which we know he possessed both before and after. But this was completely hidden during that period as Vice

President. And what Bobby saw of him, at Cabinet meetings and meetings of the Security Council and so on, made him appear to be a complete cipher; he never seemed to have anything to say; he always waited for everybody else to talk and then usually acquiesced; he seemed to have no particular point of view; on one or two issues, on the whole, he was too cautious, whether it was on civil rights or the whole of that discussion about the economic situation and the tax bill which then as President Johnson put through. But the theory behind it, of course, was, I think, alien to President Johnson. He was a much more conservative type of economic thinker, at least at that stage. With advice later on he may have changed, but at that stage he was very cautious. He didn't really very much like any part of that tax reform bill, although he actually got it through. But before he became President, he was against it.

I don't think there were any issues on which Bobby ever heard Johnson as Vice President express an opinion which he felt was of any value. Bobby, therefore, thought he was a terribly second-rate man. And then added to this was a personal antipathy which had existed before and was, of course, made infinitely worse by seeing this man usurp the place that he thought was his brother's, that this second-rate, gross, tactless figure should be occupying his brother's place in the White House. However irrational, it was a natural human sentiment. It would have been tough even if he had previously liked the man—and he previously disliked him and had no opinion of his judgment. This all added up to really a very, very bitter feeling about him.

HACKMAN: Are there times after Johnson becomes President when he's writing a speech or when you get into the act as far as advising him on what he should say about the President?

HARLECH: He thought the President was a pathological liar, and he was convinced that on more than one occasion he had deliberately thrown a spanner in the works when there was the possibility of some progress on negotiations for peace. He completely distrusted him, completely distrusted him, both his veracity and his judgment. And I think this was a major problem for everybody, including the President, President Johnson.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any…

HARLECH: And the family atmosphere was the same, you see. That's to say Jackie's [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis] had this absolutely insane feeling about President Johnson, that he was completely two-faced. She couldn't really bear to see him or shake him by the hand. It was just agony.

HACKMAN: Did that relationship, the relationship between Robert Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy, change

after the assassination a great deal from what it had been before from what you could see?

HARLECH: Oh yes, because, although they were all part of that strange and venerable family group, they weren't particularly close in that Bobby and Jackie didn't share a great many tastes together. But, of course, after the assassination, she leant very heavily on him, and he was wonderful to her. For a period of time, their relationship became very, very much closer. He had a sense of duty towards her and intense sympathy for her, and she was immensely dependent on him. He helped to organize her life and was somebody she could open her heart to and talk to for hours about what might have been. Therefore, there was this period when they both supported each other and had a much closer relationship than they'd ever had before.

Then, of course, as their characters developed along their own individual lines, I think their differences of approach to life arose again, and they found it more and more difficult to communicate, although on many things she would always seek Bobby's advice and still admired him, was still immensely fond of him. But, as I say, they had different tastes, totally different friends. She never liked—or didn't dislike but didn't particularly like many of his friends, the kind of group he had around him at Hickory Hill. They were absolutely not her taste at all. And this kind of a situation, which had existed previous to the assassination, gradually reasserted itself, except for the fact that Bobby was the head of the family. If it was advice about the children, about her private affairs and so on, Bobby was the person she naturally turned to.

HACKMAN: Would you see much of him at Hickory Hill? What did you think of the people he had around him? You know, how would you fit in? How difficult was it to fit in?

HARLECH: Well, it wasn't so difficult as I rather enjoy sports, and it had a strong sporting flavor, you know, life at Hickory included highly competitive sports. I didn't find that abrasive, although Jackie certainly did. She was bored by football and games and tennis and everything else of that kind. And the kind of people that he had around, like Dave Hackett [David L. Hackett], she never saw any point to at all. They never discussed anything she was the least bit interested in.

But it was different in my case. It concerns a particular side of my character. I rather enjoyed endless discussions about how the Baltimore Colts were doing, going off to see football games with them all, and playing tennis, touch football, and so on. But it wasn't a very stimulating intellectual atmosphere, except that, of course, Bobby had this thing about self-education and would, therefore, always be looking for interesting people to have around. Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] would come a certain amount of time, but he wasn't part of the pattern of everyday life. I mean, this was a different group. This was Dean Markham [Dean P. Markham], Dave Hackett, Red Fay [Paul B. "Red" Fay, Jr.] and so on. As I say, I obviously had all kinds of other lives going on so it didn't in the least bit upset me going to Hickory Hill and finding all these people there because there were certain things which I had in common with them. But I don't think Jackie found anything in common with them.

HACKMAN: Did you participate in the Hickory Hill seminars that they held during the Administration?

HARLECH: Oh, very much so, very much so.

HACKMAN: Now, what kind of crowd was that? Were these people very intelligent, very interested, or were they all trying to learn or...?

HARLECH: Some of them were very intelligent indeed. I mean, Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] has, I suppose, got one of the best brains one could possibly meet. There was Chip Bohlen [Charles E. Bohlen], who is very bright and has enormous experience in Soviet affairs. There was Walt Rostow, and, whatever his judgment may be on politics, he has a very encyclopedic mind on a great many subjects. There was Elspeth Rostow [Elspeth V.C. Rostow], who in my view is at least as clever as Walt and with better judgment. There was Doug Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman], and Arthur Schlesinger, always—he sometimes gave the lecture, but he was always there, and sometimes it was in his house. Marian Schlesinger [Marian Cannon Schlesinger], very bright. No, they were a very bright group of people, and whatever the subject was, you could expect to hear extremely intelligent comments and some very penetrating questions.

HACKMAN: How would Robert Kennedy fit into this group, then? Would he…

HARLECH: Well, he would ask very terse questions. Walt Rostow's questions tended to take about a quarter of an hour. Bobby's would take about ten seconds. But, I mean, he asked.... You see, he had an extraordinarily good penetrating mind like his brother. It wasn't as intellectual, it wasn't as sophisticated, but one of his great characteristics was an extraordinary ability to grasp the main points in any argument and really dig deep and explore them. Both of them had this extraordinary ability of listening to hours of discussion and argument and being able to pinpoint the main issues. In the seminars Bobby was very good at that. He would get really to the nub of the thing and ask some very good questions. Although, as I say, he didn't dress up his questions with an elaborate analysis of how he thought himself, but he was good in that group. And it fascinated him. He loved those sessions, whether it was on science or religion or history. And whenever they tended to flag—because sometimes, you know, it was very difficult to get hold of people—and a whole month would go by and we hadn't had a seminar, he would get really agitated and ring up and say, "For God's sake, haven't you got somebody coming over from England who can give us a lecture," or, "Kick Arthur if you see him and tell him that I'm very fed up that we haven't had a seminar for so many weeks."

HACKMAN: How would Ethel Kennedy fit into all this? Would she be there? Would she ask questions?

HARLECH: She did. Sometimes she would ask embarrassing questions, but always

seemed surprised by the answers she got and sort of little gasps of, “Oh, really!” But she put perfectly sensible questions, but they were usually very unsophisticated ones which sometimes embarrassed Bobby. There was the famous occasions, you know, with Freddy Ayer [Alfred Jules Ayer], a notorious atheist, when she asked, “What about God?” and Bobby said, “Pipe down, Ethel.” But on the whole, they were very lighthearted sessions, a lot of them. We had a very funny one with a psychiatrists, who.... The purport of his lecture really was that parents were extremely bad for children and gave them neuroses and that the sooner children could be parted from their parents the better. Of course, this absolutely infuriated the entire Kennedy family who were sitting around. I remember Bobby shouting from the back, “Are you saying all my children are neurotic?” It was Dr. Kubie [Lawrence S. Kubie]. It turned out that he was pretty neurotic himself.

HACKMAN: Your hour’s up.

HARLECH: Yes, I think I must go and do some work.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Lord Harlech (William David Ormsby-Gore) Oral History Transcript – RFK #1
Name List