

**Arthur Sylvester Oral History Interview—JFK #3, 8/2/1977**  
Administrative Information

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Arthur Sylvester (1901-1979) was the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs between 1961 and 1967. This interview focuses on Sylvester's responsibilities as assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, the relationship between Sylvester and Robert McNamara, and Sylvester's assessment of John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s presidency, among other issues.

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Arthur Sylvester—JFK #3  
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Oral History Interview

with

ARTHUR SYLVESTER

August 2, 1977  
New York, New York

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: ... pre-presidential, and what you can tell me about that?

SYLVESTER: I was a correspondent for the *Newark News* and chief of the Washington bureau. As such, I occasionally saw the senator, largely with friends on the *Boston Globe*. But it was not in my general field to cover him. My first, I think, contact, was a CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc.] "Face the Nation" TV interview before the Democratic convention in 1960. I was one of a three-man panel, as was the present publisher and then editor of the *Boston Globe*. Tommy...

STERN: Winship [Thomas Winship]?

SYLVESTER: ... Winship, Tom Winship. Senator McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] had been censured by the Senate, and the Boston people and others were trying to get Senator Kennedy to comment on his views as a Catholic, I mean, his views as a senator, particularly because he was a Catholic, and he had not made any comment one way or the other. In fact as a presidential candidate, a presumptive candidate, he had evaded this apparently.

STERN: Right. It was a difficult question, given his father and the whole....

SYLVESTER: Very difficult, right. The group went at him. They went at him direct, and he took the line that, as we knew, he was in the hospital, and when he was asked how he would have voted, he couldn't say now how he would have voted. And they were

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unable to pin him down. After some discussion it came my turn, and I said, "Senator, I realize your situation at the time, but now that the Senate has acted, do you think they acted badly or well? He said, "I think they acted properly and right." And after the interview Tommy Winship jumped up, ran to me, threw his arms around me, hugging me and said, "Arthur, damn it, that's the first time anybody has been able to nail him." But with that question he dropped evasion and said he thought they acted well. It seemed to me that if we kept on the tack that we began, we would never pin him. He would have shown himself up very badly if he had tried to evade the simple question, what did he think of the Senate action.

There was always a sort of social period after that. My wife was there. From that time on he was always very friendly to me. One of the things I admired about him as a politician was you could nail him like that or ask a question like that and he was professional enough not to come back personally, or at least it was my observation that he didn't.

STERN: That seems to be.... Mr. Knebel [Fletcher Knebel] said essentially the same thing.

SYLVESTER: I think it goes to the slogan that the Kennedys presumably had that, "Don't get mad, get even." I saw him as sort of getting even with me, but he had good control of himself that way. I don't know about others. I think that was the main first contact.

Then that year the campaign moved ahead. Four years earlier I covered the Chicago convention when he just missed being the vice presidential candidate instead of Estes Kefauver [Estes C. Kefauver] or as Mr. Truman [Harry S. Truman] called him, Cowfever. Mr. Truman regularly called him Mr. Cowfever in informal conversation. I say that because I heard it and it's true. At any rate, I think Mr. Kennedy was lucky not to have been nominated vice president that year. But he projected himself onto the national scene. Then in the next four years when Senator So-and-So or Senator So-and-So was not available to speak to the Podunk Democrats in Kansas, John Kennedy always was. And the money he put in the political bank in the next four years in that fashion was the thing that really, I think, determined the outcome of the convention, which Mr. Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] -- who, if you recall, was running against, was a candidate -- seemed to have no idea of; he seemed to have the idea that the convention is controlled or won by that arm of the government in which he spent his life; House [House of Representatives] and Senate -- Congress. If he had senators and congressmen for him, they were going to win him the nomination, they couldn't.... They didn't amount to shit.

STERN: JFK also apparently felt that Johnson made a tremendous strategic mistake

in not entering a northern primary.

SYLVESTER: Yes, right.

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STERN: In other words, Johnson had to demonstrate that he could win in the North, just as Kennedy had to demonstrate that he could in, say, West Virginia.

SYLVESTER: Right, exactly. But Mr. Johnson, if you may recall, in that 1960 convention

and primary campaign didn't do anything really, and said openly that his friends... He had friends here and here and there. And you know very well that in most of the states the senator is sent to Washington not to be in charge but to get rid of him because the local Democratic organization or state organization didn't need him, didn't want him. So get him in the Senate and get him out of the way.

Well, I covered the primary campaign from New Hampshire on, and as such saw the senator a good deal. Not to suggest I was intimate, but in that type of early campaign in the primary you are very close to the candidate whoever he is. Newsmen are, particularly since in the beginning, early March, very few newsmen even at that time were with him that early. I wanted to see a Catholic elected president. As between the Catholics and the Protestants I prefer to be a Christian. I have no religion that way. But, I'd like to see it so that it's of no particular interest whether a man is a so-called Christian or a Catholic or a Jew or whatnot, that he's qualified for the job. And the more I saw of him, the more I felt, he had two things that could win -- he had youth, which we worship and he had money, which we worship. And those two are tremendous headstarts in any campaign and could probably offset his Catholicism. The editor of our paper said, "You're crazy as hell." The editor at that time was a Catholic, and had suffered through the Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith] campaign.

STERN: It was very different then.

SYLVESTER: It was very different but the underlying... There was the liquor issue there, but there was still the Catholic issue, and it did still operate in the Middle West.

STERN: I don't think there is any question about that.

SYLVESTER: I'm just saying that the impact on Catholics in the upper-middle social strata, in places like Montclair [New Jersey] where I grew up, or outside of Boston -- Boston's not good because it's blind up there. But throughout, Catholics moved from Democrats to Republicans or came up out of the mick class to a better social status. They felt they were rejected in Al Smith. I know this from my wife's family. But at any rate....

STERN: Apparently Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] during the campaign



produced some sort of a paper which he worked out, which allegedly proved that a Catholic would actually run stronger, particularly in the northern industrial states. In other words, it would be an advantage to have a Catholic candidate. I think there was probably some truth to that.

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SYLVESTER: I think in some elements it is without question because as you know....

STERN: I must say I'm great on the timing.

SYLVESTER: At any rate, then when I watched the primary, when I watched him handle the Catholic question, first at Dartmouth College, Elie Abel and I covered that together. That was where he first met the question head on in a campaign. Of course, his appearance before the ministers in Houson was subsequent. But I'm speaking about early on. Working on that campaign I was convinced that he could win. Again, my friends at home said, "You're crazy as hell." But he won the primary. "Well, he'll get licked for President." I thought it would be close, and not second guessing after the fact but again in Oklahoma, there and other places the Catholic thing was still there.

As a matter of fact in the Mike Monroney [A.S. Mike Monroney] campaign when he was running for reelection as senator from Oklahoma, the Sunday before the election every Protestant church was filled, and each car outside had a leaflet put in it: "Do you want a Catholic to represent you in Washington?" It almost defeated him. Monroney is an Episcopalian. I covered Senator Kennedy's primary campaign in Wisconsin. I saw him out there a good deal. I found him quite approachable, interesting....

STERN: Did you ever have a chance to talk to him about issues during the campaign, how he thought he was doing?

SYLVESTER: Yes.

STERN: Apparently he sensed toward the end that Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] was coming up quickly.

SYLVESTER: I'm not aware of that.

STERN: Apparently they were kind of euphoric about, oh, the middle of October, it looked like a really substantial victory, but by the end of October his private pollsters began to say it looks grim, or very close at any rate.

SYLVESTER: You're telling me something I didn't know. I didn't see that there was that much of a change. I thought he was coming up rather than the other way around.

STERN: Apparently Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower] entry into the field for

Nixon may have helped.

SYLVESTER: Well, the general's attitude was that Kennedy was a boy and wasn't really qualified to carry on his great tradition, et cetera. Even so, Nixon had lots of things to overcome, as you know.

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STERN: Sure, sure.

SYLVESTER: I felt in the first debate -- in fact, wrote before the first debate -- that that would probably be very damaging to Mr. Nixon. Why? Because of the technique of television. Mr. Nixon. Why? Because of the technique of television. Mr. Nixon is a discursive speaker. HE had not debated for eight years; he had been out of the Senate. Mr. Kennedy had been on the Senate floor regularly. He was good in give-and-take. Quick. And gave that incisive, sharp reaction. And that's what you need on that screen. And that's what came over on the first debate.

STERN: It's very interesting that people who listened to the interview on the radio reacted very differently than people who had seen it.

SYLVESTER: Yes, I think they would.

STERN: Nixon's percentage of approval, in terms of radio audiences was much higher than the TV audiences.

SYLVESTER: That framework changes the picture entirely. Sharpens it. And the discursive speaker is at a disadvantage. Plus the fact, Mr. Nixon was scared stiff. Why do I say that? The photographers, you should always report with the help of a photographer, because he's allowed in where you as a reporter are not. They were in taking pre-pictures. A couple of them came out and said, "Art, this guy is scared stiff. He's in a blue funk."

STERN: Really? I had never heard that before.

SYLVESTER: That's what made him look so strained, it wasn't the makeup. The makeup couldn't cover up that terrible internal fear.

STERN: That's fascinating.

SYLVESTER: He didn't want to get into it to begin with. Once in it, he couldn't get out, and that ate at him. And the photographers are very sharp observers, good ones are, very sensitive. They had been following him so they could tell in a minute.

STERN: Apparently, according to Teddy White [Theodore H. White] in his book, *The Making of the President 1960*, he had been ill and he had that knee injury.

SYLVESTER: Oh, that wasn't it. It was an emotional tenseness and fear. Half an hour before they said, "God, that guy's scared stiff." And that showed up in the picture. Senator Kennedy wound up his campaign in New York. A tremendous turnout greeted him as you know.

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STERN: Yes, I remember that.

SYLVESTER: Going on the ferry from Battery Park to Staten Island, I was talking with the President. He came over to the rail where I was standing and started talking. And I talked with him in the crowds. I said, "It must make you feel good." He said, "What the hell does it mean, Arthur? What does it mean?" He said, "On the face of it, you want to say it's great; sure you want them out there. Are they going to vote for you or stab you in the back?"

STERN: That's fascinating that he said that. But do you know the story about Ohio on election night?

SYLVESTER: You tell me.

STERN: Of course he carried New York by a substantial margin. That was no problem.

SYLVESTER: They were misled completely on Ohio.

STERN: But in Ohio the crowds had been just incredible. Then, of course, he lost Ohio by.... It wasn't even close. Nixon won Ohio by a substantial margin. According to Teddy White, on election night at some point he came out and showed his hand, which was still swollen, he said, from all the handshaking in Ohio, and he said, "See they did this to me and look at that. And then they all voted for Nixon."

SYLVESTER: There is always that business of, What do crowds mean? And he was actually aware of it. Then coming back from Brooklyn on the ferry, he was

talking with a group of us. This conversation was not at the rail. But this conversation was in a group. Talking about various people he got around to Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.]. He said, "You know, the thing I admire about this guy, I don't know him very well, but he's got so many things in the fire, and he seems to be very well organized." I think Schlesinger built a relationship, had built up something that wasn't basically there. And I don't think that he had the effect or impact at all that some think he had or he thinks he had.

But at any rate, what attracted the President, according to the President in this general relaxed conversation, was that he had been impressed by Schlesinger -- all the things that he did. I would say Kennedy himself was an activist, into a lot of things and well organized. But this is what caught his eye, whether Schlesinger really knew anything or not.

The election came and.... This is a long harangue, you asked me.... The next thing I really would say is that Elie and I went out to lunch between Thanksgiving and Christmas with Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien]. They were organizing, and we were talking about it. Walking away from lunch I said to Larry, "Look, you know, I've covered quite a lot at home and abroad and

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one of the things that bothered me and impressed me was our failure, as a government, to compete in the public affairs field with other governments. Our guys go into these conferences and swear they won't tell news people anything about it. So do the other ministers. Except they have already had it set up so that their leak officer is right out there informing their people. And we get the shit beat out of us propagandawise. Call it what you want." And this had been a favorite theme of mine for a long time, before that and since. We made some headway while I was at the Pentagon. In our line anyway.

Larry said, "Gee, this is something we don't know a damn thing about. Would you talk to Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] about it?" I said, "I'll be glad to." So, I went, they set up an appointment. I went around and talked to.... Did I say Teddy? I didn't mean Teddy, I didn't mean Teddy at all. I meant Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy], RFK. I didn't mean Teddy, I meant Bobby. I talked to him and he said, "Would you be willing to talk to my brother about it?" And I said, "Of course." He said, "Are you going to cover him? Are you going down to Palm Beach during Christmas to cover down there?" I said, "I doubt it very much, and I didn't. And I didn't ever talk during that period at all to the President about it.

STERN: That's interesting, Elie Abel in his interview mentions that the president-elect asked you and Abel to come in and just sort of have a talk about problems and that Abel had to go out of town.

SYLVESTER: Neither one of us ever went. I never got.... I never heard....

STERN: Now, he said that you did. Isn't that interesting? He said that you did.

SYLVESTER: No, I never went. I heard about it. Never heard of it.

STERN: See, and I wanted to ask you what you talked about.

SYLVESTER: Sure, no, that never came off. Never came off, and I never knew there was any such invitation.

STERN: See, isn't that.... Well, that's one of the problems with oral history. See, and Abel says that you did go and talked for the two of them.

SYLVESTER: Not to rudely turn Elie down, it's just that it didn't happen.

STERN: What about the background of your appointment as assistant secretary?

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SYLVESTER: Well, I was covering the President in New York on January the fifth, I guess it was. I was staying at the Stanhope Hotel. On a Thursday at eight o'clock in the morning the phone rang. I was just getting out of bed. A woman called and said, "Mr. Sylvester?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Secretary of Defense designate McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] wants to talk to you." I'm a pretty flip person, so when McNamara came on and said, "Mr. SYLvester, this is Bob McNamara."

STERN: Did you know him at all?

SYLVESTER: No, I'd never met him.

STERN: Never met him.

SYLVESTER: Never met him, never seen him in the flesh. I wasn't even over covering Kennedy's house when McNamara went there to call on him. So I'd never seen him. I just knew him as a name. I said, "Well, Mr. Secretary, my advice to you is what the referee gives the two prize fighters just before the bout begins: Protect yourself at all times." I thought I was pretty smart. He laughed and said, "I want to see you." So I said, "I'll be back on Friday." He said, "Where are you?" "I'm in New York covering the President." "Well, he's coming down tomorrow. Will you be coming with him?" Well, I didn't know he was going down, nothing had been said to the newsmen. I said to myself, "If he knows where the president is, he's already pretty close to him." So I said, "No, but I'll be in next week and be happy to come over, and is there anything I can do for you?" He said, "No, that's too late. I don't want that." I said, "I'm sorry." "If I come up will you see me?" I said, "Of course, but that's not necessary, you're busy." He said, "No, I can work in a plane just as well as any place else. The only problem is whether I can get one." This time I shut my mouth instead of what I was going to say, "They'll give you a plane and two to fly you cover." But I didn't say it. So he said, "I'll see what I can do. When will you be through working?" I said, "I'll be through by six or seven o'clock." He said, "Will you be out at the marine terminal at La Guardia [La Guardia Airport] at seven o'clock?"

I went out there and at seven o'clock -- the air force, you know, prides itself on block time -- they'll come in right on the minute. If you're ahead of time they won't put the damn plane down. But he was there. The steps came down. It was a very large plane. The steps came down. There was a very tall man, hatless and coatless -- it was quite cold when we were down there that day. I walked out of the terminal. He came across and he said, "Mr. Sylvester?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm Bob McNamara. Come aboard, let's talk."

He began by saying, "I'm not offering you a job." I said, "You can't offer me a job. I got a better one than you can offer and furthermore you don't know anything about me." He

said, "Yes, I do. But anyway, let's sit down and talk. First, I want to talk about my ideas of an assistant secretary of public affairs; two, I want to hear your ideas; and three, I want to ask you a question." Well, before we really got into that....

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As he got into it he said, "One of the problems we're going to face is the question of imbalance of payments. So that whoever is in this job we're going to talk about, he has to be close to the secretary of the Treasury, close to the Treasury Department, et cetera." He said, "We're going to be in bad shape in this country if labor keeps on asking increases." And I thought, "Oh Christ, this is it, the president of General Motors." <sup>1</sup> Then he finished the equation, which I had not heard one of his kind do. "And if business keeps hiking prices...." To myself I think, "This man is an interesting man."

So he outlined what his views were and then he asked me what my views were. I said, "Well, I would say there are two things. First, whoever you select has got to be on a first-name, close personal relationship with you. And two, with all his access, assuming he has good judgment, he has to know all that you know. He has to have access whenever he needs it, otherwise those fellows down in the press room will know right away he doesn't know what the hell he's talking about." I said, "You can throw him in the Potomac River. Get rid of him." Okay, fine.

Now he said, "If such a job were offered to you, what would your answer be?" I said, "Well, first off, it happens", I said. "Last year at this time -- let me thank you now -- as it happens I've gotten to the point where after -- what was it? -- thirty-seven years, I'd like to do something else. Some things I wanted to do. Some writing I wanted to do. I wouldn't turn it down out of hand, but I would not do anything to jeopardize my pension because," I said, "That's the only thing I have." He had talked earlier about, how much money does a person need, or how many million dollars do you want to make? He had made enough money and, he said that his family is going to be well taken care of and he didn't need any more really . But I said, I referred to that. "You're all right financially, but my pension." He said, "Absolutely. I protected mine. And I want you to also." I said, "I'm going over to Newark." He said, "All right, you're going over to Newark. I want you to talk to them about your pension. Then on Saturday morning at eight o'clock I'm going to give you a call and I want you to answer a question." I thought, "Oh God, no." So I knew what the question was going to be.

STERN:                   Extremely methodical, isn't he?

SYLVESTER:       Well he's, yeah, he also can be very devious, too. He's a fascinating man. So I actually spent the next two nights walking the streets in New York trying to make up my mind. I was casting aside a whole lifetime. But I just wanted to see if I could ride the horse. My wife was smart and she said, "You've got to do it. You're always talking about people having to contribute when they're called upon, and you're being called upon, and you haven't any choice." Which was very heartwarming. At

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<sup>1</sup> McNamara was president of the Ford Motor Company.

eight o'clock -- and eight o'clock with Bob McNamara means not half a minute to eight or half a minute after eight, it means eight o'clock -- so at eight o'clock the phone rang. I had written out in the meantime certain things I was not going to do if he wanted [to] make me a speechwriter.

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STERN: That's interesting, because you did get into problems with that later on, in terms of the military. We'll get to that later.

SYLVESTER: The speechwriting for him. At any rate, he said, "Mr. Sylvester, I'm asking

you to join my team as assistant secretary for defense for public affairs, one of five assistants." I said, "Mr. McNamara, of course. Mr. Secretary, that's a great honor obviously. Nobody can even be asked without being moved by that. But there are certain provisos I have." "All right, what are they?" "I won't write any speeches. That's an art in itself. I don't want to.... It's a matter of catching the tone and the quality of the person speaking." "Okay, then we'll take care of that." There are a couple of others I've forgotten them, minor ones. I don't want to be tiring. "All right, Mr. Sylvester, then you'll accept." Then I said, "One other thing, Mr. Secretary. You agreed that whoever took this job would be on a first-name basis with you." He said, "Okay, Arthur, do you accept?" I said, "Yeah, Bob, I do." It began a relationship which -- to this day I see him in Washington. Fascinating man. And the whole experience, you couldn't buy it for a million dollars.

Now if you're going to rattle around under the table with the Indians, forget it. Unless you need a job. And also, if the person who hires you thinks that he's got to take care of you afterwards, forget it, because you're a step behind then. If he thinks he has to look out for you and get you a job afterwards, he'll have that in the back of his mind. My status with you on the same level is damaged. Of course I was older than lots of fellows that came along, so I didn't have that problem either. But it was tremendous.

At the end of five months we were riding up to Congress one day, and he had been.... Adam Yarmolinsky who was a buttinsky type and the smart-aleck type in this field.... He was special assistant. Public affairs is something everybody is in. They can all tell you how it should be done, without the responsibility. We weren't doing very well. Riding up I said, "Look, Bob, you've been messing with this for five months. Now you let me run it, which you said you would. You let me run it for six months. If it isn't better, a great deal better, I'll get the hell out and you get somebody else to do it." "Okay, all right."

He was always magnificent that way. The great thing for a newsman working for him was that in the news business, when you're a responsible editor, they can always tell you on Monday what should have been in Sunday's paper, that they didn't think of on Saturday or even Friday. He never did that to you, never. This is not to say that everything you did was right. He said, as his commander in World War II said, if you were 51 percent right. That was good enough. Well, it wasn't good enough for McNamara. Fifty-one percent would never be good enough, but he gave me and gave others a great grant of authority, expected us to use it. When we did use it, backed you up -- if he differed with you he kept it to himself -- provided you gave a good reason why you were doing it. In other words, explained to him.

- STERN: How long did you stay on under Johnson?
- SYLVESTER: Six years.
- STERN: Six years.
- SYLVESTER: Six years. Three under Kennedy, three under each one.
- STERN: Three under each.
- SYLVESTER: When I told Bob I wanted to leave he said, "God, I'd like to go, too, if it weren't for this war." He said, "Let's see now, you agreed to stay on for four years and you stayed for six years, fifty percent more than you agreed to. I guess I can't block you. Fifty percent more. Go ahead."
- STERN: Okay. I have a list of a number of issues.
- SYLVESTER: I won't use such long answers.
- STERN: No, that's fine. That's absolutely fascinating. Don't feel in anyway restricted. As a matter of fact, I think answers like that are very useful. A number of specific issues. There's no specific order to these.
- SYLVESTER: You can do it any way you want.
- STERN: Okay, but I'll start with Cuba, simply because I think it's one of the most important.
- SYLVESTER: The Bay of Pigs you mean?
- STERN: Started with the Bay of Pigs, and then going on, of course, to the '62 crisis. As a matter of fact, let me read something to you which I think you'd find interesting. Have you read Jack Raymond's [John W. Raymond] book on the Defense Department [*How Many More Must Die?*] Do you know the statement he makes about your job?
- SYLVESTER: I've forgotten. He gave me a copy, an inscribed copy. He's the laziest guy there is. He's as lazy as hell. He's bright, but he's lazy, he's careless.
- STERN: "The toughest most impossible job in government is that of assistant secretary of defense for public affairs. Not only must he try to satisfy a



hungry press corps which believes it should have access to all information, but also must try and pry news from reluctant busy defense managers who distrust the press and generally feel that too much vital information is already being released. It is impossible to satisfy both demands.” I think sort of as a background to the problems, particularly for example, with the Bay of Pigs, what did the White House and the secretary, how did they handle the whole issue of the press, particularly the issue of the second strike? In other words what, if you can recall, what were you...

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SYLVESTER: Well, you must remember, in handling the press, you had a president who prided himself that he knew more about handling the press than any president before him, and probably any that would come after him, in his mind.

STERN: In his mind. Right.

SYLVESTER: Because he worked for King Features [King Features Syndicate], the Hearst [William R. Hearst] people. He was still in uniform. His picture, in defiance of regulations, was used with his uniform in his column in the Hearst papers right after World War II when he came out of service.

STERN: Didn't he cover the San Francisco conference?

SYLVESTER: Yes, he covered that. But not in uniform, as I remember. That really was the first I saw John Kennedy. Because I covered that for three months. I lived out there. I wanted to ask somebody, who the hell is this kid going around here butting his, buttinsky, where did he come from? He wasn't butting in, he wasn't even a newsman. I was very impatient of people who weren't newsmen sitting in on the conference. "Well, that's John Kennedy?" Little did I know that he was going to appoint me. "That's Ambassador Kennedy's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] son." "Oh, well, what the hell is he doing here?" Well, he wrote -- and I got out all his columns and I looked up.... Have you read all those?

STERN: No.

SYLVESTER: I've read them all. That's while I was working on my own book at that time. Some of them are very good. But at any rate, that's where I first met him. He, as you know, was very close to many newsmen. Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee] and the rest. That horrible book Bradlee did. A real shitty book. Ben's a shit anyway in many ways. The president was constantly handling his own news. He and Pierre [Pierre E. G. Salinger] were very close. I don't mean it that way. An example, when the President decided to build up the paramilitary forces as opposed to our nuclear forces and our conventional nonnuclear forces, instead of calling in the AP [Associated Press] and UP [United Press International] reporters and giving the story to them -- it would have been all

over the world, which he wanted -- he called in Roscoe Drummond and gave it to a columnist. Because in Washington, the White House, they were over impressed as you probably know, with columnists. All the people who think they can read and think, read them. But the impact comes not from them -- but for the thinkers, it does. But that isn't what he was trying to reach, the thinkers. He was trying to reach the American people. So he gave the story to Roscoe and it went clunk, like that, and nobody picked it up. The *Herald Tribune* [*New York Herald Tribune, Inc.*] at least had sense enough to take it of opposite editorial and bring it on page one. And even so it didn't get an inquiry.

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The consequence was, the President told his military assistant to call me and get the story out. See, that is really what public affairs officers are supposed to do. After you crap on the floor, then he's to come to put perfume on it, make it smell good and pretend it isn't there, right? So we got the story out simply by calling in the AP and UP and giving it to them. At any rate, the President was constantly maneuvering the press that way. I can't speak to this, to how he handled it other than what I could see. All the rumors were all over the place beforehand. What I know about that is twofold: what Bob told me in the beginning, and what was going to happen...

STERN:           Apparently he approved it, but....

SYLVESTER:     They all approved it.

STERN:           They all approved it. Right.

SYLVESTER:     Sure they approved it. But the President had some doubts.

STERN:           Apparently McNamara had some doubts, too.

SYLVESTER:     They had some doubts and they weren't helped any by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Particularly the chairman, who was the navy guy....

STERN:           Burke [Arleigh C. Burke]?

SYLVESTER:     Arleigh Burke. I was not in the meeting, so I'm speaking second-hand, but Bob told me and Ros Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] told me more. You couldn't really get your hands on it. They wouldn't say yes, and they wouldn't say no. They didn't like having the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] run it from the beginning, but they didn't want to turn it down because they didn't know their feelings about Communists. They were all go-go guys that were against communism you see. They thought in that way.

The President's problem was quite clear to me at least. Here is a very young President -- and a great general [Eisenhower], who if you realize had been stuffed by the Republicans and had been put on a flat car would still be president, if they hadn't done themselves out of

that by passing the two-term amendment as soon as Mr. Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] got out of office.... We'd still have Eisenhower. You could sit him up there as an effigy, and people would still have voted for him. At any rate....

STERN: I don't think there is any question he could have won a third term in 1960.

SYLVESTER: Or a fourth or a fifth. It didn't make any difference what he did, alive or dead, and I'm not sure when he died. So the President.... Here were these plans, all ready to go.

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The Cubans and that group were at the point where they had been in training a long time, and they were ready to go. Whether you could hold them at that morale any longer was, as you know, a question. It was decided you couldn't. And I think this had all been developed under the great general, right? Now here comes a kid who isn't able to carry out what the general planned. So if he turned it down, he had that problem. If he went ahead with it.... If he didn't go ahead with it, here is the first Democratic president since the Democrats lost the presidency on "soft on communism."

STERN: He had kind of trapped himself during the debates, too, with Nixon on this issue.

SYLVESTER: That's right. Exactly. Okay. So if he's soft on communism, and doesn't move it, here you have it. You put a new Democratic president and he's soft on communism. We'll get this no good son of.... Right? So he had a terrible dilemma, I think. Then at any rate the decision was made to go ahead. I think they were like reluctant dragons from what McNamara and Ros told me. I did not sit in on any of those meetings. The thing was, as you know, a complete failure. An outrageous failure.

When McNamara was in office about four years and had gotten the reputation for being infallible -- which he did not relish, but he didn't do anything to knock it down -- the fellows used to ask him, "Now, Mr. Secretary, have you ever made a mistake?" And he'd say, "Sure, but I'm not going to tell you what it is." But he said, "We did make one mistake we ought to have been thrown out of office for, and that was the Bay of Pigs." And of course, in any other parliamentary form of government, the government would have fallen at once.

STERN: Probably would have fallen, right. Now, I'm curious, did he mean that in the sense that they shouldn't have done it at all, or that they should have followed through more completely?

SYLVESTER: He meant it in the sense that whether they should or shouldn't have done it was beside the point. They made a horrible botch of it. Either way you look at it, done or undone.

STERN: Of course this whole business about the second strike and the air

support....

SYLVESTER: All that regardless, regardless. They really showed their inexperience, ineptitude et cetera. They all did. And the day, the minute it became evident that the whole thing was a flop, he came back from the White House and called me in and said, "Now, fi there is one thing this department is going to do, it is not going to lay, to point the finger, or blame it on any other department or person in this government. We have our share. We will stand and take whatever blame we have. We will not say anything about the State [State Department] or the CIA or anybody. I want to follow this and I want anybody that

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you come in contact with that I haven't, make it very clear that you're speaking for me." That's what we did. HE would never in any interview or anything, never raise a question, never did. I think that contributed, helped to prevent a terrible interdepartmental feud. He said, "We're all to blame. We as much as anybody else. Nobody any more than the other."

STERN: Of course, the president took that position, too.

SYLVESTER: Yes. But in that sort of thing McNamara supported the President a thousand and one percent. The ins and outs of it I have forgotten. I probably knew more than I do now. But it was a nightmare, really. A damn nightmare. [Laugh]

STERN: Okay, why don't we move on then to October of '62. In some ways I suppose is the most, I don't know if exciting is quite the right word, probably the most...

SYLVESTER: The missile crisis, you mean?

STERN: ... the whole thing must have been a most extraordinary time, I would imagine, in your period as assistant secretary.

SYLVESTER: Well, I would say Congress muzzling the military, and all that crap.

STERN: We'll get to that in a little while. There's, of course, so much being written about it. It's a topic of endless discussion. Now we're getting to the point, as I mentioned while we were downstairs before, we're beginning to get the revisionists. Revisionists are essentially saying, many on the New Left that.... As a matter of fact, ironically, many of the revisionists are harking back to one of the points that McNamara made during the first meeting of the executive committee of the National Security Council. Do you remember that whole business about, "A missile is a missile? What difference does it make if it's in Russia or if it's in Cuba? It kills us anyway. Why make a big thing out of it?" Of course, then the counterargument was, well, the time to respond is cut

from -- what was it -- 18 minutes to 2 minutes, which is a serious question. But anyway, aside from that.

Some of these people are arguing essentially three things: first, that the President was sloppy; that it was possible to find out earlier. There were many reports. There were spy reports, there were eyewitness reports, there were reports about Soviet ships that were riding -- what was it? -- high in the water, which suggested a very large but light capacity. Someone should have been able to sense what all of this meant. There were reports of enormous objects, sixty-foot-long objects on trucks arriving at night. Yet, of course, the photography from the air didn't show anything. But that they should have been more cautious, and above all that the aerial surveillance should have started earlier and might have uncovered the missile

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construction earlier. Secondly; that once the photographic evidence was produced on the fourteenth of October, that the President made what could have been a disastrous mistake by going public immediately; and that what he should have done instead was to have contacted Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] privately and said, "Okay, you son of a bitch, we know what you've done, and you got forty-eight hours to undo it, or else. Then I go public." But this way he would have given him the opportunity to act and without the prospect of a public humiliation, you see. That's, I think is a very interesting argument. He did have time.

SYLVESTER: I think it's a terrible argument because it's argument in a vacuum.

STERN: Let me finish that, then we'll get to the whole thing. The other thing is the whole question of the so-called September estimate, as it was called -- why so many people within the administration simply refused to believe that the Russians would put offensive missiles in Cuba.

SYLVESTER: That is certainly true.

STERN: Yes, there's no question that it's true.

SYLVESTER: It seems to be perfectly understandable.

STERN: Well it does to me, too. As a historian I think it made sense.

SYLVESTER: Put yourself back in the time.

STERN: Right. It seemed to be a risk that they just would not take. It seemed absurd that they would do a think like that.

SYLVESTER: Absurd. Exactly. That's right.

STERN: Yet they did it. Right. And then the other thing...

SYLVESTER: Now, all you have to say to yourself is, suppose they had thought that the Russians would do it, and they hadn't done it? The end result of that today, the revisionists.... Why do they think that he would be so stupid as to do anything like that?

STERN: That's right. It could easily be the other side of the coin?

SYLVESTER: It's one of those things in which either way the revisionist is going to win. The times, the estimates, all of them. If you know now, what you knew, maybe who would have.... But, shit.

STERN: The other thing is the whole question of the leaks. In your position as assistant secretary, was there any pressure coming from the White House, from McNamara's office, to try and find out, where are there leaks coming from?

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SYLVESTER: The leaks about what?

STERN: The leaks to Keating [Kenneth B. Keating].

SYLVESTER: Oh, of course.

STERN: I'm assuming now that there were leaks to Keating, to Mundt [Karl E. Mundt] to Capehart [Homer E. Capehart], to Thurmond [Strom Thurmond].

SYLVESTER: I think it's correct to say that every one of these was run down with all the force, all the intelligence force the power the U.S. government had -- everyone of them.

STERN: They were?

SYLVESTER: Oh, Christ, they ran every.... They'd drive you nuts. Somebody would come up out of nowhere with something, and the cheeks were put on immediately. Here you have a president who was utterly sensitive to Republican charges of that sort, who reads everything, quickly reacts to things. So he was pressing all the time to find out what the truth is. They weren't sitting back there doing nothing. Yes, that they did see missiles but, when they got them right down every time, they were either cruise missiles or short-range missiles, not even intermediate or intermediate ballistic.

Actually I'm satisfied in my own mind, then and now, that every possible lead was run down if only because.... Well, for every reason. The defense people, they didn't like to

be told that there was stuff they didn't know about. The President was thin skinned as hell on this sort of thing, particularly Keating whom he'd served with, and had his own estimate of, you know. Ken is an attractive guy, but Ken Keating, he didn't hesitate to cut it a little short at times. None of them do. Hell of a nice person. Also, why did Ken Keating get such a great hearing? Because he had so many news friends who liked him, respected him, and he's a hail-fellow-well-met type, you know. Attractive sort of guy. Nancy Dickerson was running around with him. So he had the ear of the news people, too. And, how would Ken mislead us? Aside from Ken Keating, Florida and Miami was just live with this sort of report from.... People coming in, et cetera. So it was not a case of doing nothing.

STERN: So every lead was followed up?

SYLVESTER: Oh, God, yes.

STERN: And they couldn't, of course, pin down anything specific?

SYLVESTER: They could not pin down. Now, why didn't the President talk with Khrushchev? Well, Khrushchev's foreign minister and Khrushchev's ambassador in Washington, up to the day the

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President went on television, right to his face in his own office were telling him there weren't any.

STERN: Lied to him, right. Apparently there is some evidence that Dobrynin [Anatoly F. Dobrynin] did not know, although there's no question that Gromyko [Andrei A. Gromyko] knew.

SYLVESTER: Sure, Gromyko knew.

STERN: No question whatsoever.

SYLVESTER: You could very well, the way they operate, and the way you might operate yourself, you might not tell you ambassador, because you didn't want to destroy all his usefulness in Washington.

STERN: RFK thought Gromyko did not know. Robert Kennedy felt that Dobrynin did not know.

SYLVESTER: Dobrynin, not Gromyko.

STERN: Did I say Gromyko? I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Right. My error. I meant Dobrynin.

SYLVESTER: I knew what you meant, sure.

STERN: I think there's some evidence that that's true. The element of shock, and the way he responded. But of course, when Keating said on October 10.... Let me divide it into.... Essentially there were three periods, and ask you how you got your instructions from the White House or from McNamara or whatever. Essentially, up from August to September 4, I think it was, when the President made that statement that offensive missiles in Cuba would be intolerable and unacceptable, and that the United States would simply not...

[BEGIN TAPE TWO]

...to October 4 when the next set of aerial reconnaissance missions was ordered. That was the very difficult period, particularly with the charges from Capehart and Mundt and Thurmond, and especially Keating. Then, of course, from the period when the missiles were discovered to the end of the crisis. When Keating said on the tenth of October that there were six IRBM [intermediate range ballistic missiles] sites, now that was a very.... I gather from some things I've seen up at the library, that the president was furious, and, of course, confused. I mean, where the hell did he get that figure?

SYLVESTER: My own people can't get it.

STERN: That's right. Now for him to say.... If Keating had said, "They have offensive capacity" -- all right, that's one thing. But to say that there are six IRBM sites.... And, as I recall, that's damn close to what they did have.

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SYLVESTER: No, I don't think so. Weren't there four?

STERN: There were sixteen, actually sixteen, as I recall. Let me just check that.

SYLVESTER: I can't remember. I'm thinking of operational. I know there were sixteen operational, I'd say.... I wouldn't have attempted to be that accurate about that. My recollection was that there were three or four sites. They had nothing on them.

STERN: Here it is. They had twenty-four IRBMs in the second phase of the buildup on Cuba. Now, how much of that was available already...

SYLVESTER: Yeah, that's what I'm talking about, in terms of operational.

STERN: ...by the tenth is another question. But the President was really upset at that kind of specific charge. Did you have an specific contact with him?



Did he call you?

SYLVESTER: No, in that instance he was talking to McNamara. In that thing, every time the President called McNamara, obviously that would be foolish. But they were meeting, you know, constantly at the White House. Now, I'm trying to think back. However, you know the President went campaigning and it was discovered while he was on the campaign. On the way back, why, they suddenly cut off campaigning and Pierre said the President had a cold. He didn't have a cold. Now that's a lie, right? A proper one, in my book.

STERN: We'll get to that whole question in a little while. It got you into a whole lot of hot water, yeah.

SYLVESTER: The whole thing was so stupid and childish. That's my Russian mother, see. The President was campaigning and when it was really discovered that the goddamn things were all ready to be operated, that's when he came back. All right. It was not until the President came back, they met -- they being the executive committee, which became the executive committee.

STERN: Did you participate in any of these meetings?

SYLVESTER: Not in those meetings. They were always just the principals. And decided what they were going to do. McNamara then came back and called me in and told me that I was going to be the spokesman, that I would be the mouthpiece. They would speak through me.

STERN: Everything was then very carefully coordinated, right?

SYLVESTER: Oh, very.

STERN: There were very severe restrictions on what people could say in both State and Defense.

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SYLVESTER: The admiral -- what the hell was his name? -- the chief of naval operations was wild because the Navy had a junket of newsmen down in that area, the Cuban area, and I called them back. He told me what a goddamn fool I was. Of course, he was mad because he wanted the Navy to be.... If they would stay down there, they'd be leaking the stuff; the President couldn't have controlled anything. At any rate, the President was going on the air on Monday, and I think it was Saturday or Sunday Pierre, Bob.... The present editor of....

STERN: Bob Manning [Robert J. Manning]?

SYLVESTER: Bob Manning, and I, and who else? To be sure that newsmen wouldn't know, met, I guess it was Saturday morning, again in Manning's office in the State Department and we're in there and the door opened, and it was the United Press man looking in. [Laughs] That's how secretive we were.

STERN: How did he get in?

SYLVESTER: Well, he was just making a morning check on Saturday morning when nobody was in the damn building. See, that's why we went there. He was just casually.... He just stumbled....

STERN: He finds the three top press people sitting together.

SYLVESTER: Well, what the hell, you know. He was a good reporter, and he knew we weren't in there having a chewing gum party or something like that. He was sorry, and we closed the door. Then it was decided that, as in the beginning until further notice, all news if any would be coming out of the assistant secretary of defense. And even I was getting news.... When the first ship was intercepted the President called me from their meeting and dictated what this first announcement was. Other times McNamara from the meeting, or I was told to call him at the meeting. This was strictly controlled. Couldn't go past anything that was in that thing?

STERN: Did McNamara ever mention to you that famous incident that Elie Abel has in his book, the so-called flag plot, navy flag plot?

SYLVESTER: Oh sure.

STERN: He was apparently furious about that.

SYLVESTER: He and Ros Gilpatric. That ended that chief of naval operations. I knew then that he was going to be in another job. What's his name?

STERN: Was it Anderson [George W. Anderson, Jr.]?

SYLVESTER: Dave Anderson? It wasn't Dave. Anderson, yeah.

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STERN: Can't remember his first name.

SYLVESTER: It'll come to me. A big handsome guy. He was the one that was wild because I brought back, ended the news trip before the thing began. I did that one on my own. What the hell, I knew what that meant. Anderson was then appointed ambassador to Portugal. In the interim between when he resigned as chief

naval operations and landed as an ambassador, with his jesuitical Catholic mind he figured there was a period in there in which he was nothing, and therefore it was all right for him to write and knock the shit out of the President. You may not remember that.

STERN: No, I don't. I'm not aware of that. That's very interesting.

SYLVESTER: He made a speech at the National Press Club; he was the lunch club speaker. The President got wind of it and called me, and said, "For Christ's sake, Arthur, this guy is going to make a terrible speech attacking me at the press club. Stop him, will you?" I said, "I'll try to, but I can't get him." He said, "I can't get him. He's en route." He made the speech. Kennedy was wild at the guy. "Damn it, I'd fire him right now. I can't afford to fight with any more of them," he said. "I'm fighting with...." The chief of the big bomber boy...

STERN: Lemay [Curtin E. Lemay]?

SYLVESTER: Lemay. "I'm fighting with Lemay, I'm fighting with all of them. I don't want to take another fight on." And I said, "Well, he'll be on his way, Mr. President." "God damn, it can't be too soon." I said, "Maybe you made a mistake in naming him." He said, "I certainly made a mistake in naming him." But this was Anderson's.... This is sort of fellow Anderson was. He could justify to himself that there was a period in there in which he was nobody.

STERN: He was not connected, therefore he could speak freely.

SYLVESTER: Only somebody who really got crossed wires can think that. When you're going to be the President's personal representative to Portugal? This is his thinking. He was wild.

You couldn't stop him. He was on his way, couldn't catch him in between. He wouldn't have stopped anyway. I talked to him later and he said, "Well what the heck, I'm not in the government. I'm a private citizen." Well, at any rate.... So that's the way that was settled and worked out.

Then on Friday night, the *Miami Herald* -- I can't think of his name now -- called our news desk and asked whether it was true or not, did the United States know that there were operational intercontinental missiles in Cuba. Well, we had three answers there really; a, no comment, which was a confirmation.

STERN: In essence, yes, sure.

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SYLVESTER: At that time, against the background of reports every day. Yes, or no. Or come on it, we'll talk to you. I knew him well enough that at this point he

wasn't going to come in and talk, because we'd have tried to talk him out. Then you've lost control completely. Naturally I didn't go in a phone booth to decide the answer by myself. I took it up with McNamara right away. A decision was made to say no. To my knowledge that's the only lie that I participated in in the government. That's the one that always gets talked about, and that's the background of it. Now the head of our news department -- I said the answer to it was no -- he did not know it was a lie. His hands are absolutely clean. He had no idea.

STERN:            You had some other curious kinds of... For example, that operation? What was it with that very strange name -- Phibriglex or something like that? Those navy units in the Caribbean, marines? They were on some sort of training mission just when the whole Cuban thing flared up. Somebody in the press asked you about it, was this connected to the crisis? And it wasn't, really, because it had been preplanned. And you said no. Although it was very convenient to have them there. That worked out very nicely. And of course I remember that some reporter asked you, is there going to be a blockade? Excuse me an invasion. No, no, I'm sorry. He said, "Is there going to be a blockade of Cuba?" And you said no. Although at that time you had been told that it was going to be a quarantine. But strictly speaking this was true. It was not a blockade.

SYLVESTER:      I was hoping the guy wouldn't follow up.

STERN:            Well, he didn't. As a matter of fact, it took the heat off Cuba for a while. The press then turned to Berlin.

SYLVESTER:      That's right.

STERN:            On the assumption that it's not Cuba, after all.

SYLVESTER:      If he had followed up as a good reporter, he would have had me in a box. Right then I hadn't the next thought.

STERN:            A quirk of language. That's right.

SYLVESTER:      The precision of language, anyway.

STERN:            Do you have any idea, specifically.... Of course, the remark that you got into all the trouble with the press about, the government has the right to lie to save itself from nuclear war.

SYLVESTER:      You have to read the whole quotation.

STERN:            I know, I've read the whole quotation.

SYLVESTER: The government conceived of as people who choose their representatives -- if they don't like what they've done, get rid of them every four years, two years, or whatnot.

STERN: I gather you made that statement in a situation which you thought was private.

SYLVESTER: No, I was speaking to the New York chapter of Sigma Delta Chi. There was no indication it was going to be taped. What happened was, ABC [American Broadcasting Company] ran out of tape. Then they played it back over some of the used tape, so you have questions without answers, and answers without questions. When the Moss [John E. Moss] Committee [House Committee on Government Operations] asked ABC for the tape to question me on it, they said no. It was a garbled tape. "We urge you not to use it or be bound by it because it's absolutely, it's no good." The Moss Committee didn't want me to bring this up. I said, "Oh, yes, I'm going to bring this up." It's on the record, which they confirmed.

So the ANPA [American Newspaper Publishers Association] then made up their own verbatim version transcript which they used, claiming it was the original one. But at any rate.

STERN: I see.

SYLVESTER: That's where that came from. It was in that part of it which was garbled, it was the next to last question. The question came up from the United Press reporter who said, "You have been talking throughout the importance of a government information program being truthful and factual." And he said, "Now, Mr. Secretary, we understand that. But what about the little white lie. What about the little white lies such as the President used when he came back? Pierre Salinger said he had a cold, and he didn't." I said, "The assistant secretary of defense does not discuss ever anything that the President does or doesn't do. That's entirely in the hands of the press secretary. But aside from that...." And that's where I got myself in trouble. I was talking to fellow newsmen as I would talk to you here about the theories of the craft. Also, it seemed very clear to me that lots of them didn't understand, that you're not dealing with just black and white or little boy scout black and white. You are dealing with great national issues and the lives of people. And in defense of that, in self-protection, survival, I couldn't care less. If the lie was necessary it's important to do it. That's what I was getting at. Still am. At any rate...

STERN: Didn't McNamara, for example, very early in the administration he made a statement for some Senate committee in which he said that he didn't see any reason to gratuitously supply the Soviet Union with information about.... For example, if some missile doesn't work, or if we're having some problems with some, why tell them about it? Which is not saying we ought to lie but why...

SYLVESTER: We had two restrictions on information. We increased the volume in everything except two fields: intelligence and new weapons. Now, the fellows would say, "Well, look, Art, it's advertised in such-and-such a magazine," in the trade magazine. "Well it shouldn't be. I'll check and see if they got that cleared." And sometimes they didn't get it cleared. We came down on them. "But," I said, "the point is, we are not going to if we can help it hand it to them on a silver platter. It's costing them millions of dollars to get what they want. We're not going to make it easier for them." That was the basic thesis, I think. Those two areas we constantly stressed we would not give information if we could prevent it -- knowingly, anyway.

STERN: Did you have any knowledge in the early sixties when you were still in the Defense Department of some of these secret covert actions against Cuba. The Alpha 66 raids?

SYLVESTER: No, I didn't.

STERN: You didn't know anything about those things? Lansdale [Edward G. Lansdale]. What Lansdale was doing.

SYLVESTER: Lansdale I knew out in the Far East. That's where I... You mean in Cuba?

STERN: In terms of the assassination of Castro, you didn't know anything about that?

SYLVESTER: No, no I did not.

STERN: All of that has come out since.

SYLVESTER: No, I did not know about that.

STERN: It's especially striking, for example, to see that some of the Watergate people -- Sturgis [Frank Sturgis] and the Cubans -- were involved in that business in the sixties.

SYLVESTER: I can't claim any knowledge of that at all. No way. Lansdale was a pain in the ass out in the East, but I don't know anything about Cuba.

STERN: When you got into that difficulty over that Sigma Delta Chi statement, Sorensen says the President drafted some kind of statement, a kind of explanation, and you refused to sign it, saying that you had....

SYLVESTER: No, I was never asked by the President. That's not true.

STERN: Oh really, here it is right here.

SYLVESTER: No, never asked by the President.

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STERN: He says, "The President asked me to draft a letter for Sylvester which explained his choice of language and admitted it should have been more carefully phrased and considered. But Sylvester, with a show of spunk the President had to admire, refused to sign any letter what appeared to appease his accusers, and so the sound and fury continued."

SYLVESTER: I have no recollection of that whatsoever.

STERN: Really.

SYLVESTER: Ted is certainly an authority on whether he drafted such a letter.

STERN: But he may never have shown it to you.

SYLVESTER: I never saw it. He never showed it to me.

STERN: That's very interesting.

SYLVESTER: Same way with Ben Bradlee telling things the President said. I think I [inaudible] why the President would tell him that, but it never came through to me at all. The only time was when I... The one thing that I thought he should never have done -- it got the President in bad. I didn't give a damn about myself. I didn't want to do anything to damage the President whoever he might be -- you're working for him. I went to him and I said, "Look, I said this. If you want, you've got my resignation. You can get rid of me." He said, "For Christ's sake forget it. You've been in politics long enough to know what these guys are doing -- your own tribe," he said. "So go on your way and don't bother about something like that. We'll have more of that. Forget it." That was the way he was throughout with me.

STERN: Okay, why don't we turn to some of the other issues, for example, all the fuss over censoring of the speeches of the military. And the hearings and all of that. The so-called muzzling.

SYLVESTER: We can do that quickly. When I was reporting abroad -- I was not stationed in Europe but I went over for various meetings constantly -- one of the things that impressed me you had two faces to it. One, as an American, looking at your country from there with a cacophony of voices speaking in terms of, this is government policy, particularly military. In Europe, not a goddamn one of them opened their face as you know. Number two, you were constantly being asked by the people you were meeting with or interviewing or seeing, "Who the hell speaks for your government? What

does this mean?" Always, it seemed to me as a newsman, it was outrageous that our people -- not that the military don't know about foreign policy, not that they shouldn't be thinking, but it's not their business to speak. Their business is to sustain it. And the secretary of state. So when I went in, McNamara and I had a very clear understanding of that.

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STERN: McNamara made a public statement to that effect very early.

SYLVESTER: Correct. Very early on.

STERN: Said it's outside of their capacity.

SYLVESTER: That is correct. This represented the President's view. Not done by Defense by itself. It's done by the President and Rusk [Dean Rusk] knowing, too. Because McNamara and Rusk made a policy and started right out that this fighting or standoff between the two departments was going to stop and they were going to corporate and work together. All right. I had hardly been in the damn job, didn't even know where the men's room was, when a speech which was out of channel was brought to me by the navy chief of information Admiral Smith [Daniel F. Smith, Jr.]. It was a proposed speech by Arleigh Burke. You have to realize that all three of the chiefs were making speeches all over on anticommunism. General Arthur Trudeau [Arthur G. Trudeau], director of weapons research and development in the army made 66 speeches in the year '60 through '61.

STERN: As a matter of fact, I came up with a figure that out of a thousand speeches in the Defense Department, 1962, 79 percent were by military officers.

SYLVESTER: At least that. They were chargers. All of them were chargers. Burke was, Trudeau was, Anderson, they all were. And they were charging into foreign affairs. This speech by Burke covered the waterfront. It went into what we should do here, there, and the other place. It was being made at the very time that RB-47 fliers, who went down in the Bering Sea --

STERN: That was in '60.

SYLVESTER: Correct -- were being brought back with negotiations, and they hadn't been released. That is to say, agreement had been reached, but we didn't know whether the Russians would come through or not. At that very time this stupid Burke was going to make a speech attackign the Soviet Union from hell to breakfast not knowing all the facts. He covered Egypt, he covered everything.

What I should have done was to send the speech down to security review, which was my department, and have them pass it. But since it was brought to me out of channel by SMith and he wanted me to answer him the next morning, I took it home and read it. And I scrawled on various pages, "This is a speech that should be made only by the secretary of



state,” and sent it back. The more I thought about it I said, “This is not happening.” This was early on, and the assistant secretary for public affairs before had no status. They hadn’t gotten on to the fact that the new one, when he spoke on this sort of thing, he spoke for the secretary of defense and would be backed up. They hadn’t gotten on to the fact that the new one, when he spoke on this sort of thing, he spoke for the secretary of defense and would be backed up. They hadn’t caught on. They didn’t even look.

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So I figured they’d take it to the White House. And they did. But I was there first. And I saw Burke that day -- somebody was sworn in, right? He said, “You old son-of-a-bitch, I’ll write a new speech, it’s no good. But here it is.” I said, “Thanks a lot, Admiral, that’s great.” But they then maybe leaked the thing to Jack Raymond of the *Times* [*New York Times*]. And then began the business of muzzling. We cut down very hard on the speeches. The speeches that went to the State Department were not handled very skillfully. They would sort of stomp on that one. All of communism’s enemies, Strom Thurmond, they got to work on it. And that cabal of senators on their Armed Services Committee -- free rides from the Air Force -- they all went to work. Plus their belief that we were being soft on communism.

STERN: They, of course, called you before the committee, didn’t they, and you had a rough time with them?

SYLVESTER: Not as bad as they wanted. Because I had.... Yes.

STERN: Was this the one -- I can’t remember if it was this or TFX [Tactical Fighter Experimental] -- where Mundt said to you, “Didn’t you say that the government doesn’t have to tell the truth?” You responded very angrily to that, told them that was out of context, and he then sort of apologized.

SYLVESTER: Yeah, that was the TFX.

STERN: That was the TFX, that’s what I thought.

SYLVESTER: So that’s how that began. The first White House reception we were invited to, that is the Department of Defense people, the President came over to me and said, “Arthur, the greatest thing that’s happened in the first three months in my administration was your stopping the Burke speech.” He said, “But did he really intend to make that speech?” I said, “There it was, Mr. President. Yes, he intended all right. They’ve been doing that.” He said, “God, I didn’t realize, it’s hard for me to....” From then on we... It took some time to turn it around, but it was turned around.

STERN: Did you have any contact with that whole flap over -- what was his name -- General Walker [Edwin A. Walker]?

SYLVESTER: Oh, did I ever!

STERN: Could you tell me a little about that?

SYLVESTER: The *New York Times* from overseas had reported Walker's....

STERN: The orientation business in Germany.

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SYLVESTER: True blue, or whatever it was. And he attacked Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt], et cetera, et cetera. The President saw it on a Thursday or Friday -- Thursday, I guess -- and the President called McNamara over there and said, "I want you to get.... -- Did he really say this? -- I want to get to the bottom of it. I want it in twenty four hours." Well, McNamara wired, cabled over, sent by wherever channels -- I don't know, I've forgotten -- and no response came. This was Saturday now, and the President was really on McNamara's back for his failure to produce. That didn't sit well, either.

STERN: You mean he cabled Walker, and Walker didn't respond?

SYLVESTER: He either cabled him direct -- as I've forgotten I'd have to go back. I saw the cable. He showed it to me, because we discussed the failure of the response from Europe, from Walker. The President was gnawing on McNamara, what was the answer? Because the President was very sensitive to this sort of thing. So Bob called me up, it was a Saturday and he said, "Arthur, I want you to get on the phone. Get Walker. I don't care how you get him, you get him. I want your answer tomorrow." So I had the *New York Times* clipping, I got Walker. I went down sentence by sentence. I was an incredible performance that he put on. Weasling; "Maybe I did say it, maybe I didn't."

STERN: He wouldn't give you a straight answer?

SYLVESTER: Well, finally he did. It was a terrible answer. I finally said to him, "Look, General" -- I went back and said to him -- "This is what I'm going to have to report. I want you to be sure, now, that this is what you want to say." "Well, why?" "Well" I said, "because it sounds terrible. I'll just tell you that. It's part of my job to protect.... I shall report as you give it. Let's go through it." And of course it murdered him. That was the end of him. I mean, of the beginning of the end. Of course he had it in for me, and I had warned him beforehand. I didn't cut any corners. I gave my report on him. "This is what the man said," and that's all I had to do.

STERN: Well, of course, he was to haunt the President again in Mississippi.

SYLVESTER: Oh sure, he wound up being as whacky as he was. Another evidence of

how so many careers have been hurt by nothing to do with the basic thrust of their competence. A competent officer is a military weapon. But he gets into something in which he doesn't know his ass from his elbow about and he craps all over himself and ruins himself on a completely extraneous matter. It has nothing to do with his military competence.

STERN: In the hearing, Senator Thurmond made a remark at some point that you were the one responsible for this tremendous increase in review of military speeches.

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SYLVESTER: I was. That's right.

STERN: But yet obviously, Secretary McNamara and the President were very much interested at this end. There was no question that they wanted strict control.

SYLVESTER: Absolutely, absolutely. None whatever.

STERN: Okay, what about the TFX. Apparently you had a hell of a time before the Congress on that, McClellan [John L. McClellan] Committee [Senate Committee on Government Operations].

SYLVESTER: Yes. It's very simple actually. One guy who understood it was Gene Zuckert [Eugene M. Zuckert], the secretary of the Air Force, what I was doing, what I did.

What you were in the midst of here was a great economic conflict between two parts of the country. Between the West and the Southwest or South.... Yes, Southeast and Southwest. The company which has a net to catch all Air Force officers when they're out, or fall out, and give them a job, Boeing [Boeing Company]. Incestuous relationship with the Air Force. Loosing a big contract, the TFX to General Dynamics [General Dynamics Corporation]. I suspect that Ros Gilpatric was in there some place as an international lawyer.

At any rate, once the decision was made by the Senate committee to get into this conflict between regions and so on, the Defense Department had two options, as I see it -- I saw it then -- at this point I would not ask for them ideally. One option was to tell our story first, and then let them chew on it. Or, the option which was taken, was to let them go and answer them. I was not asked and clued in at that time. I was brought in afterwards, as usual.

At any rate, at that point the people dealing with Congress, the general counsel and all that crap, all those guys, they had it that way, and McNamara. But without looking at this other fellow, McClellan was, and his staff who were out to get us, because they were in the Boeing camp.

STERN: First, because they wanted to discover some sort of, they were implying that there was corruption.

SYLVESTER: That's right. They were looking for corruption. That's right.

STERN: In terms of Texas especially with Secretary Korth [Fred Korth] and Connally [John B. Connally] and Johnson and the whole bunch.

SYLVESTER: That's right. All of that.

STERN: Then, of course, there's the whole issue of civilian and military control over decision making.

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SYLVESTER: It was a chance to get back at McNamara. At this point McNamara had so dominated the Congress that they were restive, you know. They couldn't beat him on his own terms so they had to look at some other way.

STERN: It was a striking confrontation, because you had all the civilian people in Defense on one side and all the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] people on the other.

SYLVESTER: Right. Right. That's right. So these were the options. They chose that option without really realizing what sort of a guy.... All the implications of how much McClellan.... They thought it was going to be handled as a judicial bullshit. It was handled as a striking force. McClellan in the middle of the hearings, would go out and brief the news guys. He knew what every edition time was -- what the AP edition -- literally.

STERN: Really?

SYLVESTER: Oh sure. They would always make that paper with a headline. He always gave them a headline. It wasn't anything to do with whether it was fair or not, but it was a story. And this thing began to beat on the Defense Department. It got them very unhappy. I understand, McNamara particularly.

So he intervened and asked to be put on. Well, this meant that he had not been preparing as he does. So he had to go to work and prepare himself, hours of preparation. And when he could get on, I think the request was on, say, Monday, to get on Friday. We had to fill in that time. There was one day in there, one day more that we needed to block out any stuff. That is, to give ourselves another day and try not to let them get us in any more trouble. Well, I had no idea that it would work the way it did. But anyway, I was asked at my daily briefing -- let us say, the regular twelve o'clock news briefing, which I did everyday -- I was asked at think on -- yeah, I was asked, that's it -- asked on Tuesday something about the, "Do you have any opinion on the senatorial procedure?" I said, "They'll never get a judicial rendering by this committee or any other Senate Committee." Which you won't. It's not a judicial process. It's a political process. That's all I said. And those god damn fools, meaning

Senator McClellan was stupid enough. Of course, the news guys went right to him and said, "Look at what Sylvester said." These damn fools were stupid enough to put me on for the next day, Thursday, which was the one day we needed and we hadn't any reason to hope that we could preempt that day for ourselves. So they called me up there at ten o'clock. And what the hell are they going to ask me, right? Did I say it? Well, of course I said it. Well, I danced around really. I said, "A judicial rendering in which they all have an interest in one form or another," which most of them did except what's-his-name from Maine. So they called makeup there at ten o'clock, and I had made up my mind that I was going to be as evasive as possible so at least get to twelve o'clock and ruin their day for them. And about ten after twelve, what's-his-name from Washington, the senator from Boeing...

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STERN: Jackson [Henry M. Jackson].

SYLVESTER: ... Jackson, Scoop Jackson. At ten after twelve, quarter after twelve, and I had seen McClellan leave the bench, go out and tell the news guys his side of my testimony. "Mr. Secretary, all you had to do was to come up here and apologize. You haven't apologized. You've added insult to injury. You've kept us up here for two hours and fifteen minutes. We haven't gotten anywhere." Gene Zuckert later on said to me, "Oh, geez, I know what you were doing. It was a great job."

However, the night before I was to go up there, I got a telephone call from the White House. The President was calling. "Arthur?" "Yes, Mr. President." "Arthur, what are you going to say to those fellows up there?" I said, "Well, I don't know Mr. President." "What are you gonna say? That's horseshit. Don't say that, say this," he said. "Now what else?" I went on. He said, "That's good, that's good, that'll be good. Now what else? Arthur, that's all right, that's good. Don't let em.... Don't let em.... Give it to those bastards. Go after them," he said.

STERN: Did you get calls from him often of that kind?

SYLVESTER: Yes, quite a number of times.

STERN: Apparently his language was very explicit.

SYLVESTER: Oh, wonderful, yes. I'll finish this and come back to that. So after the testimony, I was having lunch that day with the AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph Company, Inc.] people, the public affairs people. And a call came from my secretary that the President was trying to get me. So I go out to a public telephone to call. "Arthur, how'd it go? What did that son-of-a-bitch Jackson have to say for himself, that bastard?" He said, "He pretends to be my campaign.... Look at him. What the hell did he have to say for himself?" He heard about this thing later. Yes, I got a lot of calls from him, which of course made the job fascinating. The first time I got a call, I said to Bob, "Look, I want to talk to you about this, because it's out of channel." I mean, not many men can stand having the President call one of their assistants direct. That's a hard

thing to take. McNamara said, "Look, forget it, Arthur. If there's anything that.... First off, do whatever the President wants. Take the President's word. If there's anything you think I ought to know about, just keep me informed about it. Otherwise I've got work enough to go around." That's the mark of a big man.

I got a number of calls from him. One I got, Sunday, I guess it was '61 or '62, '61 on Sunday. Yeah, it was '61 on a Sunday, July or August. I got a call about ten o'clock. The White House was calling, the President was up in Massachusetts out on Cape COD. "Arthur, have you seen what this son-of-a-bitch Hearst has written? They pretend to be friends of mine, those so-and-so's. They're no more friends." He said, "There's a column in there...." I said to myself, "Jesus, where has he seen Hearst already?" The *Boston American*, right? Hearst had a column -- of course, Hearst was like this with the military -- attacking the President for killing the.... Not the B-1. What was it? It was a big bomber program.

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STERN: I should know that.

SYLVESTER: Oh yes, it's the same program as the B-1, but what did we call it?

STERN: It eludes me. I know what you're talking about.

SYLVESTER: For killing the nuclear airplane.

STERN: Skybolt [Skybolt Missile].

SYLVESTER: No, not, Skybolt. Skybolt was different.

STERN: Oh, I see.

SYLVESTER: Skybolt was a program of the British. This was a nuclear war plane, nuclear-powered plane. A frightfully expensive program. It had been started when we took over. These three things were killed early on. Hearst wrote an outrageous, outraged column. "It was weakening the" et cetera. "I want you to get a hold of Gene Zuckert." Why the hell he wasn't.... Here again he was delegating me to direct the secretary of the Air Force. So I said okay. He said, "I want you to have him write a letter attacking this, answering this, and have it on my desk tomorrow morning." First, I have to get the goddamn paper. I'm living out in McLean [Virginia], which is outside of Washington. Not far out. I go down and get a paper. And I have to get Zuckert. Of course, he went through the roof. "Why the hell didn't he call me?" I said, "Mr. Zuckert, Mr. Secretary, I can't tell you why he didn't call you. All I'm telling you is what the man told me. And this is what the man told me." "God damn it I can't write this letter. I've been for these things. I'm on record for these things." So I said, "Well, just let's agree now what I'm to tell the President when I haven't got your letter on his desk tomorrow morning, so you're satisfied and I'm reporting it correct." So we agreed, tell the President. I didn't send anything over.

“Arthur, where’s that letter?” “I’m sorry, Mr. President.” “Where’s Zuckert?” I said, “Well, I talked to Mr. Zuckert and he can’t write the letter.” “Can’t write the letter? What the hell do you mean, he can’t write the letter? Who the hell is he working for, the Air Force or me? Didn’t I appoint him? Does he know that?” I said, “Yes, Mr. President, I think he knows all of that.” I said, “Mr. President, I think you may be making too much out of this Hearst column. Normally if it has any impact we have inquiries right away. We haven’t heard one word from anybody. I don’t think anybody saw it, and it seems to me to answer them at that level is much too high.” “You do?” He said, “Okay, we’ll have the assistant secretary of public affairs answer it. Is that low enough for you?” He said to me. I said, “That’s pretty low. That’s pretty low.” “You write the letter and have it over here.” So I wrote a letter. And he tore it apart. Some of it he left, and the rest he wrote in himself. I sent it and they published it the next week.

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STERN: That’s great. I heard a story about a call to give you in the summer of ‘63, when his wife was about to give birth to the baby that died. Apparently he blew up because someone at Otis Air Force base had set up some sort of elaborate accommodation for Jackie Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], spent a lot of money on furniture. You don’t have any recollection of that? He was furious apparently.

SYLVESTER: No, no. Yes, I was aware, you’re right. He didn’t call me on that. I’ve forgotten who.... It didn’t come from the President directly. It came from -- what’s his name? -- the military assistant. We’d gotten word that they’d done that up there. My recollection is that I’d talked to them beforehand. I said, “Well you may be overdoing this because....” “Well, we’re pretty proud of this over here.” “I’m not trying to hurt your pride but at any rate I’m just alerting you that my feeling is he may not be keen about this a bit.” It did come through. I’ve forgotten. The President didn’t call me. I think Pierre did. He probably talked to Pierre about it. Pierre told me. I told him, well, I think they were pretty heavy on it. Or I called Pierre up warning him. I think that was it. I had heard about it. Somebody tipped me off. I got hold of Pierre and I said, “This could bite you if you’re not careful.” So it was then. That’s true. Then I think he came back and said, “For God’s sake get hold of them,” or, “Knock it off,” or what not.

STERN: It was a minor thing, but apparently the President was very angry about it.

SYLVESTER: That was the sort of stuff he was into, from big things to little things.

STERN: Yeah, right. That’s very much true.

SYLVESTER: He wanted to attack the Hearsts because they pretended to be friends of his. Are we all right?

STERN: We’re at quarter to eleven. We’re doing fine. I’m thinking about the Skybolt issue. Apparently there were some leaks from within the JCS

which alerted the British that the program was going to be canceled, and apparently the President was furious about that, too.

SYLVESTER: He was always furious about leaks, and he always had the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] in.

STERN: That led to his meeting in Nassau with Macmillan. Did you have any specific role in that?

SYLVESTER: I was, I would say, across the room from it. I was some distance from it. The secretary went there. I didn't go with him that trip, a presidential trip. What that involved

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usually was Salinger, and nobody else. I didn't go. I can't really shed more light than anybody else can, and I'm not too sure about the light. I remember it was a great "knif-knaffing" back and forth. I had to justify it, I remember, how it was handled. The question was, had the British been properly alerted beforehand, or was it dropped on them? My recollection, it... I know what line we took -- not publicly, privately -- that they had. I had gone to Europe, gone to England with the secretary at a time when I'm satisfied he did talk with whoever was in power then -- Watkinson [Harold Watkinson], whoever. It was either not a clear meeting of minds, or McNamara thought that the British got more than they said they got. There was some missed link in there, apparently. And they agreed before Parliament. That was it. The defense minister had actually committed the defensive strategy of Britain to the Skybolt on the basis of assurance that we were going to develop it, or go all the way. And I had no doubt that at that time, as it comes back to me, we were pretty well committed to developing it. And it was on the basis of that national commitment to the weapon, that therefore the British were drawn in and assured they would be cut in on it.

STERN: Apparently the original commitment was made under Eisenhower.

SYLVESTER: I think that was correct. That was correct. Then when they started looking to reduce the budget here and there and go in another direction, Skybolt on the basis of its tests, et cetera, the conclusion was reached that it wasn't worth the effort.

STERN: McNamara felt Polaris [Missile] made more sense economically.

SYLVESTER: That it was better, that's correct. Here again was a constant conflict between the services. I negotiated, believe it or not, a written agreement memorandum in which the secretary of the air force and the secretary of the army sat down and agreed to stop shooting at each other over defensive missiles. Literally, in which we worked out what they would say, and what each side would say, and



stop this other crap. That they had a sure-fire defense and a sure-fire deterrent. Literally sat down and signed this goddamn thing, the two of them.

STERN: A peace treaty. [Laughs]

SYLVESTER: Yeah, a peace treaty, for an hour, for an hour. [Laughs] Now that I think, you make that begin to come back to me. Yes, that's true. And they conclude that.... That will get you to the point, how did they handle the British at that point? I don't know. I don't know because I think you can make a case that they were badly handled. But you can also make a case that no matter how they were handled, to protect themselves at home the British were going to charge that they were badly handled.

STERN: Of course.

SYLVESTER: That was their defense. Oh, I haven't any doubt of that.

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STERN: But apparently there was a leak and Macmillan found out, or the British government found out, before....

SYLVESTER: Before Kennedy could tell them.

STERN: Could tell them properly, and that embarrassed the President.

SYLVESTER: He went up and down every wall, and through the ceiling.

STERN: Apparently this meeting with Macmillan in Nassau was arranged very quickly in order to pacify the British, and I think he made a commitment at that time to supply them with Polaris missiles as a substitute...

SYLVESTER: Yes, that was it. That is exactly right.

STERN: ... which would help Macmillan politically at home. Okay, some of the other things which are not obviously as important, but I know you had some problems with , particularly with the press. For example, on base closings. Do you have any recollection of the.... Obviously those areas of the country in which bases were going to be closed, as part of McNamara's cost cutting. I think the President said fifty would be closed right away.

SYLVESTER: Right. When Bob started to analyze the budget and ways to cut down on fat, as you called it then -- do that, and at the same time increase the

availability of funds for weapons -- it came out very clearly.... When I say he made it, and when he and the fellows he put to work on it, very clearly we were hanging onto all sorts of bases.

In the course of this discussion and analysis what really came out was that General Eisenhower's idea of the industrial-military complex was only.... I've never seen a two-legged stool. He left out the third leg. It's the industrial-military-congressional complex. That is the stool. The other two by themselves can't do anything. It's the congressional that you bring in that approves the program or votes the money and fights like tigers not to have anything cut down. If anybody had any doubts what it was, it was so clear because there was always your member of Congress who was gotten onto by his home people. At any rate, so, the lists were made out. But McNamara was also acutely aware that you certainly just couldn't just shut down bases that had become ways of life for various communities.

STERN: Wasn't there this office of economic adjustment to help?

SYLVESTER: That's correct. Brought in a couple of guys to work on with the community, if they wanted them, so that they could bring in industry, business, or find other uses so that the period of adjustment would be as easy as possible. I think they had some tough ones. I remember Glasgow, Montana, we could never foresee what the hell they would use that for. But they brought in successfully....

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STERN: Apparently it was a very successful....

[BEGIN TAPE THREE<sup>2</sup>]

STERN: I think there was also some help for, wasn't it, the Boeing Company in Kansas which had lost the TFX.

SYLVESTER: The one in Massachusetts was the Springfield arsenal. Oh, that was another one. The Navy Yard in Boston. That was one the President and Bobby had to pick. That's when Bobby was in New York. There was the Brooklyn Navy Yard. We were sitting in a meeting with him, Senator Javits [Jacob K. Javits], who talks all over the lot. You could never pin down what he was for or against. That was another one. But they went ahead with the program.

STERN: Right. There were a very large number of bases closed.

SYLVESTER: Oh, a tremendous number, yes.

STERN: A great deal of money was saved.

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<sup>2</sup> Tapes 3 and 4 were difficult to hear due, apparently, to a cutting down of power; therefore, there are many short phrases that are inaudible and are marked so in this transcript.

SYLVESTER: A great deal of money, absolutely. I don't recall any problems with the press on that. There may have been, but I don't recall any.

STERN: I would imagine that it would be mostly the Congress, rather members of Congress from affected areas.

SYLVESTER: That fell less on me than on our liaison fellows with Congress from McNamara's office. They had the trouble with that. McNamara handled it very well himself in several press conferences, too.

STERN: On the whole issue of test ban and the test ban treaty, [Nuclear Test Ban Treaty], there are accounts of McNamara's rather incredible effort to get the Joint Chiefs of Staff to agree, essentially support, the whole idea of the test ban treaty. Apparently he literally set up seminars for them in which he brought in experts to calm all their fears about falling behind the Russians, and eventually convinced them that the gains were worth the risks. Did you have anything to do with that, their effort to essentially sell the test ban treaty to the Joint Chiefs?

SYLVESTER: No. I'm aware of what you're talking about. I did not sit in on it. I'm aware of it, and was aware of it, but I did not participate in it.

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STERN: Let's see, on Berlin, particularly that bad year when Khrushchev made the threats about the separate peace treaty with East Germany.

SYLVESTER: Right, and we had the call-up.

STERN: Right, the call-ups. How was that handled?

SYLVESTER: Well, it was handled very gingerly, of course. [Laughs]

STERN: They called up, as I recall, some forty-six thousand. The draft was doubled....

SYLVESTER: Right. There was a call-up of the national guard. I remember that one particularly because when we called up, there were a lot of hardship cases. But there was one in Missouri, which as it worked.... A man and wife had a grocery store or a general store, and he was called. His wife took over the store. She ran it.

At that time, "The Longest Day," the movie was being made, on the beaches of France by -- who made it, Zanuck [Darryl F. Zanuck]? I had just taken office when they presented to me a sign-off approving what was known then as cooperation with a motion picture company. It was one of the big things that I handled, in which they were saving millions of dollars by using military equipment and everything else for no charge, for war pictures, which if they'd made them on their own as they should have, it would have cost

them money. I didn't know anything up front, I didn't know how sloppy they were running it, et cetera. I signed off on this -- I think this was in the first ten days I was in office -- without really knowing, and being assured by the people in charge and the secretary. [Inaudible] We offered things to these people. We recommended that they do it. They were in the midst of making this, and the call-up was under way. The NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] commander-in-chief and the Air Force defense staff authorized the withdrawal of two combat brigades from Berlin to take part in this [Inaudible].

STERN: Oh, my God.

SYLVESTER: At the time all I could think of was -- what's that saying about? If I had known about that now, "If I were a gorilla, I could speak." [Inaudible] For God's sake, we're taking husbands and sons, people out of their businesses, right out of them like that. What are they going to say, "For heaven's sake, why are you sending me here, when you're bringing battle brigades out of Berlin to take part in a movie down on the beaches.

At about the same time came Jack Paar and his damn show.... Well, as to the picture, my name was on the goddamn thing as approving this cooperation. The cooperation does not conceive of taking dialogue from troops.

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That triggered a subsequent complete revamping of our relationship, a complete attack on us by the moving picture industry because they suddenly demanded we start letting them call for anything any time, outlining what they wanted associated, et cetera. It was sort of a pact.

At any rate, word got to the Congress now from the senator [Henry Jackson] from Boeing, as well as to McNamara's headquarters. So I made a statement: "This is outrageous. Get right into it. The same thing with Jack Paar. [Inaudible]... such-and-such," and they quoted me, saying it's terrible. I did. They got tough with me. Bob McNamara said, "Shut them up." I did say that I had been told -- he wasn't a very good reporter -- I'd been told that there was a friendship between Norstad [Lauris Norstad] and the producer Zanuck, who produced "The Longest Day." It was a very tenuous relationship. [Inaudible] He called up and demanded I be fired. McNamara didn't fire me. He said, "You'd better write me a letter," and I never wrote the letter. He said, "You've got to write me an apology." I never did; from that day to this.

So the next time we went to Europe [Inaudible]. They put me out in the record room. Never let me in the place at all. He was outrageously rude. I knew that his days were numbered because the first time we went there he spent the whole time talking politics. McNamara couldn't have cared that much for him since the first meeting.

The first night of the dinner for McNamara which he didn't attend -- General Norstad didn't attend it, which was about as discourteous as you can get. But the main thing was, he was talking politics instead of business, and he was explaining why he tried for four or five years to get the Danes to do something they wouldn't do. Bob said there would be a new commander.... At any rate that was the story on Berlin. Jack Paar went there on his own.

[Inaudible] Congress roared, pulled the light switch, calmed them down. He didn't have him on investigation, God knows.

STERN: What exactly did Jack Paar say? I have no personal recollection...

SYLVESTER: You remember he put on his show at the crossing entrance into East Berlin -- Charlie, I think it was called.

STERN: Checkpoint Charlie.

SYLVESTER: Checkpoint Charlie -- without the approval of anybody. We had not given it. Europe gave him approval. Some guy had lost his job as head over there. They were looking for some scapegoat, and they got one, the commander over there, because he wasn't going to take the heat. [Inaudible] You know, Jack Paar was a controversial figure anyways. He was sort of light-headed, dizzy. Here was a time of crisis, he was putting on a laughing show that came on that Sunday, and that just caught everybody by his ears, too.

STERN: Why don't we turn to Vietnam for a while. Particularly to, if you had any specific relationship to.... Well first,

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of course, Johnson as vice president went in '61, and then Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] and Rostow [Walt W. Rostow] went in '61, and then of course there were further missions....

SYLVESTER: We went on Mr. McNamara's first trip in '61. He went from Paris out there. Went from NATO defense ministers' meeting out there. The general in charge at that time was General McGarr [Lionel C. McGaar], and they laid out a scenario of what had to be done in Vietnam that sent the chills through all of us. We thought the guy was crazy.

STERN: But what exactly did they say?

SYLVESTER: I'm going to get to that. In effect this is what happened in the end. We had to clean out Triangle D, had to bring in x number of thousands of men, had to do bombing.

STERN: Of the north included, I'm sure. North of the DMZ [demilitarized zone].

SYLVESTER: Not excluding it, at that point. But, basically it meant [Inaudible] the strongholds of the Vietcong. At that point we had advisors, unarmed

advisors. Frequently the North Vietnamese [Inaudible] claimed we had soldiers. They had another language, we didn't understand the customs, we didn't like the people, they were dark, different skin. Part of Vietnam came because they looked black, dark-skinned. Basically that was the heart of it.

STERN: A lot of people have made that observation.

SYLVESTER: Oh sure. Clearly. And the other was that maybe the way to stop the war is just to cover it on television, you scare the shit out of everyone, scare the shit out of all these young men. They didn't want any part of it. That corrected all the theoretical crap that we heard about it. It was an illegal war. What war is legal?

STERN: Did you have any particular, for example, problems with the press asking you questions, say, in '62, '63, "are Americans fighting? Are Americans getting killed over there?"

SYLVESTER: Only as they began to be killed, the press began to ask about it.

STERN: Did you get any specific instructions from either McNamara or the President on how to handle that?

SYLVESTER: Oh, at the beginning, yes, the President wanted to hold down on everything. He didn't want us to say anything. If I went back and looked at the transcripts of my news conferences, I think you'd see that I said, "Well, if you see it, report it." I'd get out of answering. "If you see it, you don't need me to confirm it -- report it."

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STERN: In other words, you tried to steer away from answering the question directly?

SYLVESTER: I didn't try to, I did. I made every effort to, in line with my directions but I say, what the foolish part was that the troops came in right next to the hotel where most of the newmen were and all they had to do was sit and watch it. Then they asked me, "Are there troops landing?" I said, "Did you see them? Why ask me, if you saw them?"

STERN: I think one of the most intriguing questions about Vietnam inevitably -- and in many ways it's an unanswerable question -- is, would Kennedy have followed the course that Johnson eventually followed?

SYLVESTER: I think what Johnson followed seemed what Kennedy had preset, predetermined.

STERN: I think that's a very interesting position to take. A lot of people like Roger Hilsman [Roger Hilsman, Jr.] in his book, *To Move a Nation*, and Schlesinger, they argued -- until very recently in that column in *Esquire*, the *New York Times* guy, Tom Wicker -- they all argued that Kennedy would not have done it.

SYLVESTER: Isn't it nice that they know.

STERN: That he would have cut the commitment. Indeed some of them argued that when McNamara went in in '63, depending on how you interpret the statement he made when he came back, that one interpretation was that he was saying, "By '65 we are going to get out, no matter what the results." Personally, I've read that statement. I don't interpret it that way, I don't think that's what he said.

SYLVESTER: No, he did not say it, pre-empting the President, we'd get out. I think he was leaving the way open that if the training program.... As a matter of fact, in my judgment, what caused the North Vietnamese to step up [the war] was that Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] at that point was beginning to build, was making progress, and their game was destroying and killing the teachers, everybody, all the professionals, was going on. But still the country was making a comeback, and it was not going the way they thought.

Once you did what we started to do.... Again we go back to "Lightning" Joe Collins [Joseph L. Collins]. That was where it began when Eisenhower sent Collins to Vietnam to survey the situation under Diem and Collins came back and said the country was viable answer ought to save it. It was a large Catholic colony. He being one, Diem being one, a convert. He went to school in New Jersey in -- where is it? They looked at all the possibilities and figured it out.

STERN: Your assessment would be that, if Kennedy had lived, you think he would followed a course on the whole very much close to Johnson's course?

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SYLVESTER: I can't... Well, yes, I do. Look at what he did in Cuba. All the people now saying that he should have done this and that, right? In the sense that he was going to stand up and have a showdown. That thing coming up the way it did, I doubt very much whether he would have, so-called, cut his losses, and gotten out with his tail between his legs.

STERN: Of course when you look at the Hilsman, the Wicker, the Schlesinger argument, you can easily.... And then there's the other side which says, look, look at the people who advised Johnson, whose ideas Johnson accepted, in terms of his position in Vietnam -- Rostow, McNamara, Rusk et cetera. These were all Kennedy people.

SYLVESTER: Certainly, certainly.

STERN: One can make a very persuasive argument that.... It's one of those intriguing things.

SYLVESTER: I never get into these things because there are so many interesting things to do and be involved in, all of them guessing in a vacuum what might have happened that didn't happen. I don't know, neither do they. I respect them, though. They can theorize all they want. It's only theory. I don't believe.... It may satisfy their ego, but it doesn't satisfy mine.

STERN: Well, it's an intriguing question, the great might have been. But, let's face it, there's just no answer.

SYLVESTER: There is no answer to that. In all history, you don't go back and change the thing. Remember, it moves on. You can go back and say, "This could have happened," but it didn't happen. The hard unchangeable fact of history is that it didn't happen. Regardless of what might have happened, it didn't, and there are all sorts of factors which determined that it didn't.

STERN: I think the big problem here in analyzing a question like that is, you have to have a tremendous sense for what the context was within which the President was acting.

SYLVESTER: Precisely.

STERN: The kind of people around him, the way they.... They didn't see Vietnam in '62 or '63 the way we see it now after the fact.

SYLVESTER: Of course not. A lot of important factors were not under his control or our control. It was against the bigger backdrop over here. We were fighting in Vietnam in the beginning because of Russia there and China here. I remember coming back on the plane thinking about it. I thought it was a war in the wrong place. Not the moral thing, but because -- this was directed at the Russians -- we were getting killed and they weren't. They were fighting it by proxy. The people that were getting killed were the North Vietnamese, and the more

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the better. We were losing, we were being bloodied. Not ever getting at the main dragon. If that was the purpose -- and we argued that at that time -- it was self-defeating. Not after the fact, but at the time. I had full confidence at the time.... When the thing gets a little away from you and you see what sort of lousy reporting that was done on that. Did you see Nora



Ephron's new book in which she just takes the press apart for the lousy reporting they did on Vietnam?

STERN: The early reporting especially.

SYLVESTER: Or later. Once you got in that pack, it was in the groove, and they stayed with it. But the early reporting seemed.... Vietnam had none and has no constituency in the United States whatsoever.

STERN: Unlike China, for example.

SYLVESTER: Correct. And it had no news constituency whatever. So that they were sending third-string reporters covering it in the early days. Not every man was, but basically. I spent a hundred thousand dollars of the taxpayers' money transporting newsmen from the United States to Vietnam just to go out and report whatever they saw or wanted so we would get visibility.

There was a survey made in 1961, '64, that less than one-third of the people in the United States were aware of Vietnam. This was wrong, as I saw it. We ought to get people to know about it. All it was doing, the policy that I had to content with *not* to report. At any rate, I sent a hundred newsmen -- television, radio, magazine columnists, the *New York Times*' Jack Raymond -- they let the government pay for all their way. Twelve hundred dollars, because the papers would not pay the then high transportation out and back. They would guarantee them places coming back, but all of their transportation after ten days or two weeks. [Inaudible] If they wanted to go, we'd take them, but there were no program outlines, no junkets. Get out there and go do whatever you want to. At the end of the year, that same.... We didn't make this survey. It was made by somewhere outside -- it had nothing to do with Kennedy -- it concluded that about sixty-six and two-thirds of people were aware that we were out there. So when you hear people say, "Congress should have known...." they didn't get any information at all. Newsmen didn't report it. That's why. Understandably they didn't report it. It was much too close... It had no constituency here.

Well then, after you get through the first phase, the training phase, up until they began really shooting at people, then we moved in. Then the great decision was, were they going to put the Hawk missiles in there? Once they put the Hawk missiles in it was like a Greek tragedy. Each act led into another, got bigger and bigger and unsolvable. We put the Hawk missiles in. Then we put in troops to defend the Hawk missiles, then more came in to defend the defenders of the Hawk missiles. Then the other side really got into it. WE had no anti-aircraft.

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One of the things that Vietnam taught us was the thesis that to live by missiles alone is utterly wrong. The North Vietnamese filled the air with anti-aircraft fire, conventional anti-aircraft, filled it. They didn't hit you -- you flew into their bullets. And under Thieu [Nguyen Van Thieu] highly sophisticated planes that we now have and are used in there -- one ping would put 'em down or put 'em out. The old propeller type would go through all that and

knock the hell out of them and come back. If you put down little sophisticated planes, so much miles of wire that one mile depends on another mile, couldn't take that. We had no anti-aircraft fire. Remember when Earle Wheeler [Earle G. Wheeler] said, "When I came back from Europe, we didn't have one anti-aircraft gun in the Army, not one. It was all missiles. Never need anti-aircraft." Yet what Hanoi had done extremely well -- that sort of thing, we'd never seen it before. It was like flying into a rainstorm.

STERN:           It was very effective.

SYLVESTER:    Oh, it was terribly effective. And, of course, the first part, we never made up our mind what we were going to do. McNamara and Kennedy and, I think, Johnson and the thinkers wanted to reply with each increase of power and equal increase to meet it and a little more to overcome it. So it was a constant escalation, not that we should go all out there. The military was there, and I think they were right. What goes in... [Inaudible] That's what I'd do, you know. We wanted to get the hell out. We probably should have wiped them out right at the start. But not this way. We did not believe that we could stand before the world. They out-propagandized us right and left, the North Vietnamese. Early in the war when the Vietcong were slaughtering teachers, soldiers, plantation workers, doctors, lawyers, whatever, dismembering their bodies, we had pictures of it. Bob asked me, "Why don't you get stuff to show what they're doing out there? Why don't you get it?" We got it, then they wouldn't release it. It was too horrible.

STERN:           This was under Kennedy or Johnson?

SYLVESTER:    Kennedy.

STERN:           Under Kennedy?

SYLVESTER:    Sure. Under -- what's his name -- Kennedy and McGeorge Bundy and his brother Bill [William P. Bundy]. Great public affairs people and they were that. But we didn't, they didn't place great... They had known in the pictures, pictures they had seen of the children.

STERN:           Is that right?

SYLVESTER:    They acted horrible there. It's all right. It's nothing, as long as you don't do anything. The psychology of savagery. Finally, the idea that there was going to be a democratic form of government next. I don't know how anybody who could be so stupid as to have ever thought that.

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STERN:           It's very easy in the light of hindsight to make certain observations about Vietnam.

SYLVESTER: There are several stages I went through with Vietnam. The first few years of training, tough training in every way. We were trying to turn this society

around, and make them adjust to a form of life which is not a bit compatible with them or their background. They're lovely people, I think. I was out there with McNamara eleven times. One of the charges by the news people was that, for instance, Taylor would go out. Did we think, did I think, did any of us think, that Taylor would get the right story? When majors or captains out in the field would come in and [Inaudible] the full reports, would they tell him what really went on in the field? He said, "Yeah, they do."

Taylor would say something, they would say, "No, that's not right at all, General. It's this way." Some people say Taylor's questions should have provoked them more. I disagree with that. You have your [Inaudible]. "Well, did they say this and that?" "Yes, they did." "No, they didn't say that." I'm not saying to you that there wasn't any feeling on the part of any captain [Inaudible], but they didn't show it and they didn't act it, and they didn't hesitate to contradict. He didn't go out there -- and when we'd go out there -- to be "Yessed" by these people. 'Cause these fellows were out living it. And it was clear we were losing. Not now, then.

STERN: It was clear then?

SYLVESTER: Oh, sure.

STERN: Yet, apparently McNamara kept, in terms of his public statements, issuing very, very optimistic accounts.

SYLVESTER: But you've got to measure what.... The advances we were making were tremendous. But we never.... Because the South Vietnamese were not organized the way the Communists had instilled and organized the disciplined cadre that they had. We never had that. They had a simple clear program, which we've read and known about. They followed it -- songs, athletics, setting up. It's all controlled life. God knows, it's a controlled life in North Vietnam. That I know.

STERN: There are those who have written that particularly under Johnson, that McNamara began to have great doubts? Did you perceive that -- that he began to essentially question his own judgment and become very depressed about the whole Vietnamese situation?

SYLVESTER: I could only see.... He became.... That would have happened after -- I left in '67.

STERN: He left in '68, wasn't it?

SYLVESTER: At the end of the year.

STERN: Just before Johnson left.

SYLVESTER: I left in February of '67. So it was all of '67 and '68. I mentioned earlier to you that when Bob said, "I would like to go, too, if it weren't for the war."

STERN: He felt a very special responsibility for the war.

SYLVESTER: And he couldn't run out on the President. It would never enter his mind -- I mean, that he would want to. He could have wanted to. I know that at the time that his meant to me that the prospect of going on without achieving what we wanted to achieve was very difficult. Anyway aren't you glad I could look the other way? He couldn't do that. Scotty Reston [James B. Reston] told me that he talked to him two and a half years ago and he thought that Robert McNamara was depressed and told him that he'd wanted to get out or whatnot, I don't know. Tragic. I'd seen Bob lately. The last I saw him was March or April of this year, and I found him tremendously improved in outlook. I think half of the time it's getting away from it. His secretary Ruth Child -- she had been with him for years -- told me this. She said, "you're the only one he wants.... He won't talk to anyone about the Vietnam war."

STERN: That's interesting.

SYLVESTER: We talk from time to time. I don't bring it up a great deal unless he wants to talk about it. My impression is that there were differences toward the end. I got pretty close to him, but I think probably there were differences. Then Clark Clifford [Clark M. Clifford] came in.

STERN: Was McNamara as close to Johnson as he was to Kennedy? I think he admired him immensely. No question of that.

SYLVESTER: It went two ways. No, I'm sure he wasn't. There was a great closeness there but it was a different sort. The personal thing, he was in the Hickory Hill group. He was more friendly with Bobby. Frankly, I detest Bobby. I think he was the biggest phony I ever saw, really. A real phony. I'll tell you why. A phony because he and Roy Cohn were the little tail-lights of McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy], when McCarthy's committee [Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Senate Government Operations Committee].... I covered that committee. I saw what Bobby Kennedy was, a real little cheap Catholic heel, that's what he was. If you could see right and wrong in him.... If you were ever with McCarthy and didn't know it, and tried to justify it, you were in a bad way, and he was always that way. Always that way.

STERN: You feel that McNamara's relationship with Johnson was more of a professional than a personal one, if that's the right distinction?

SYLVESTER: I don't think it is. Maybe. I'm just trying to think.... Now that you've

raised it.... I would say Mr. Johnson relied on Bob a great deal, completely relied. I sat in some of the meetings at the White House. I would say, absolutely. But I think probably it was eroded, inevitably eroded with anybody under the pressure

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that the President was under, and under the extreme -- not getting anywhere out there. An election coming -- I think all of that had to erode.

At the same time, of course, there were other people telling him other things. I know that from meeting with McNamara, I knew that. That undoubtedly didn't help. Clark Clifford, he's an operator, you know. Very attractive, effective operator. I don't think Clark.... I think he's always been able to rise over your principles, because his bank balance shows it to me. And I'd like to have a big one, I don't think there's anything wrong. Clark is a good lawyer. Lawyers never go too far against you because, although you're on the other side today, tomorrow you may be their client, so they never go that far, all right? I think it's more that.

STERN:           What about your own relationship in terms that you had a lot of, obviously, the calls from Kennedy, and you had a lot of contact with Kennedy. Did you have that kind of a relationship with Johnson?

SYLVESTER:     No, he called me in the beginning a few times, and then after that he went through channels. He called me in [Inaudible] one day, which is the usual thing the President does to speak to officers over there, and I was standing outside waiting for him to come. As he went by he beckoned and said, "I want to see you later." He walked me in and I [Inaudible]. And I waited for him and he gave me a ride back to the White House in his limousine with him.

What did he want? Well, he wanted me to help George Reedy [George E. Reedy]. "Look after old George, will you? Give him all the help you can." Completely wrong thing for him to do. It's wrong, because if I'm telling you about it, it undercuts George. And it's unfair to George for the reason that I think he was misplaced by making him press secretary at the White House. George had been the President's confidential man when he was Senate majority leader. He was like a bird dog. His function was as a very good listener, listening to news people, of whom he was a very fine one, and evaluate currents, that way. But for really being the manager for the President, he was all over the lot. He ran a damn shambles of a news operation, because he was doing it and not telling....

I remember one case where the fellows were pulling out -- not there, because at the White House [Inaudible], asking George something about the President and he said no, he wasn't here. They looked out the window, and there was the President walking out there. George didn't know anything about it. That's what I'm getting at. Which was wrong, wrong to do to George. George being a loyal, charming man nevertheless didn't know enough to say, "Mr. President, this can't go on." He took a lot of lumps, which by nature he wasn't going to stand up and [Inaudible] the place up entirely. And, as a consequence, it was bad for

both of them. So that at any rate two times like that. But it would be wrong to suggest that I had the sort of calls or relationship...

The President embarrassed me by calling a meeting of press officers. "Do it the way Arthur does it. He get smore stuff in the paper all the time than all of you put together." Without saying, "Look I have a big

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staff, I can't get stuff in the paper, I don't know how to do that," et cetera, et cetera. He was also saying, "Dig, dig, dig, dig. Get this stuff out about our administration." He wanted publicity about it. That was not the way to go in a meeting like that. Some of the guys went out and told newsmen, and he got clobbered that way. That's tno the way to do it. At any rate, I don't mean to sound as if I know all the ways to do it, or did it all. So I'm just saying. You asked me the question of the relationship. An interesting, fascinating man, I find him tremendously fascinating. I didn't have as much opportunity. I went maybe to more meetings a the White House under him, cabinet meetings to which he usually had second-level cabinet people there, second level people. But I did not attend personally. I don't remember that well.

STERN: Okay, there's just two more....

SYLVESTER: Of [Inaudible] all the glowing terms that he sent over to me, you couldn't ask for anything more personal and deeper than he sent me. What he liked was loyalty, and he had my loyalty. He watched every television show, and I was in a show with... I was on with -- I can't remember his name -- Greenfield [James L. Greenfield] succeeded Manning, and he and you know who I mean -- formerly with CBS and with ABC. He got a program now at night. Oh yes, Martin Agronsky. He was questioning us, and I had been on shows too much myself -- I had been a newsman questioning people. I wasn't going to let him tear my, pin my ears back. He was attacking us and I came back at him very hard. Afterwards he said, "God damn you, you turned on me." I said, "What the hell do you think I'm going to do?"

The President was watching, and he loved it because I was standing up for the administration, not taking anything. He thought, I think unfairly, but he thought that Greenfield was too easy and didn't really stand up enough, that sort of thing. Once you had that relationship going, which I did.... And other people told me, if I had that you couldn't do any wrong. He was with you all the way, then.

STERN: With Kennedy it was somewhat different, in terms of....

SYLVESTER: I would say he was different, but he supported you because he appreciated intellectually more what you were doing. I don't mean the President wasn't astute, but it was a more gut thing. He was more emotionally up and down and involved, Kennedy was -- we talked earlier -- didn't get mad, get even maybe, but doesn't get mad. He kept better control of himself, I would say.

STERN: There are two other issues, I don't think either one of them were nearly as

important as some of the others. I was wondering if you had any contact with the multilateral force question which the President....

SYLVESTER: Yes, multilateral force, right. We were plugging that.

STERN: Apparently President Kennedy was never really convinced about the whole thing.

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SYLVESTER: Not the multilateral force. Well, I'm not sure whether it was that, or whether.... He never really burned his bridges back on anything. He was like the fellow that was walking on ice, he never went down on one piece until he got another piece to step on. [Inaudible] He was in the Navy, he was an officer; these columns he wrote -- he had something up here, as you know.

STERN: Sure.

SYLVESTER: Don't forget, he was burned early because of military advice on the Bay of Pigs. That never left him, really, the scars and the doubts that they cast upon themselves with him. So I think he took all military advice with a question mark. He did not accept it. He might not have known what the answer was, but he had this thing of "God damn it, I'm not sure that they know either." He knew their shortcomings, he'd seen them, he'd suffered from them. He had been in the service. As commander in-chief, he'd suffered from the Bay of Pigs. I think he never got over it. Other people probably felt the same thing.

STERN: Right. What were your instructions, how did you handle the whole thing? How did he handle the whole thing?

SYLVESTER: I had a briefing from the top people, the secretary, so I knew what they were trying to do. My basic intent was to get the facts out. Set up opportunities for you to come and question us yourself. You did not ever attempt in any situation militarily to argue a case or defend it militarily; brought in an admiral or whoever was necessary, who had the expertise to answer the question to show up. I set up the situation to tell the story by people who did know; or who were convincing, anyway.

STERN: Another area, a very similar kind of area in which the President apparently first was enthusiastic and then began to withdraw was this flurry of controversy over the fallout shelters. Do you have any recollection of that?

SYLVESTER: Oh God, did I.

STERN: He was very distressed.

SYLVESTER: It was all go, go, in the beginning. Adam Yarmolinsky was put in charge of that, and he got nowhere. Adam was not a good organizer. He had good ideas, good layouts, you know, but when you get down to really pushing a program like that, you can't do it overnight. Then the pressure began to be deflated, and other problems came to the fore, and finally it drifted way down, and finally was forgotten about.

STERN: Eventually he replaced Pittman [Stewart L. Pittman] who took over, but by then it was too late.

SYLVESTER: Yes, then it was too late.

STERN: Apparently, I gather, many people around the President felt that this was just not a politically sensible position for the President to take.

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SYLVESTER: I think that's right.

STERN: Politically questionable.

STYLVESTER: It had no.... Oh, very questionable.

STERN: It raised all sorts of delicate questions.

SYLVESTER: It was a constant argument in the media of all kinds as to whether it was good or bad, and other experts said it was a waste, et cetera. Now, the military said, "Let's give it its due. We don't want them to get the idea that we can escape their great weapons." On the other hand, they didn't want to get people so scared they didn't have the weapons. It was a great mishmash.

STERN: I remember particularly there was some kind of difficulty over some kind of pamphlet that was being prepared, in which *Life* or *Look*....

SYLVESTER: Oh, yes. Oh God, yes. I had forgotten all about that. I don't know if I can recall....

STERN: In which apparently the impression given by the pamphlet was that, come the great holocaust, you just sit there in your shelter reading the newspaper and there's nothing to worry about.

SYLVESTER: I didn't have as much to do, thank God, with that as I might have because Pittman -- first Adam and then Pittman -- they had to have their own



public relations. So I said, "Boys, be my guests." All I could speak for was, I could only see a zero production out of it. They didn't want me in it, and I didn't shoot my mouth off. Thank the Lord. [Laughs] Gradually McNamara.... The whole thing just fell of its own weight.

STERN: McNamara supported it though at the beginning.

SYLVESTER: Oh, very much. He charged all over that. Well, the President was.

STERN: Apparently the doubts especially surfaced as the election was drawing near, the '64 election.

SYLVESTER: That's right. [Laughs] Oh, yeah.

STERN: It was not a politically sound position for the President to be defending and they just sort of dropped it. Just one small incident that I made a note of this morning. There was a leak at one point -- I think it was in '62 -- in which a reporter by the name of Lloyd Norman was given by some military officer in the Pentagon these little plastic darts, which were apparently in the early stages of development

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at one of these anti-personnel weapons eventually used in Vietnam which explode and send the plastic in every direction. Somehow this got back to the President. I don't remember the details, but he was at a party. The source that I read said the President said, "What are these? How the hell did a reporter get onto this thing?" He went to McNamara who was at the party, and he went and showed them to McNamara.... As I recall, you had something to do with finding out who had leaked them and putting a clamp on.

SYLVESTER: I never found out, and I never worked very hard. I always thought it was a waste of time.

STERN: Do you have any recollection of that specific incident?

SYLVESTER: I remember the thing but I can't remember any of the details of it. I probably brought in the FBI and went through the same performance. In one case we did get two officers, and they were banished to "Pleasant Isles," someplace, and came back promoted. This is the Air Force.

STERN: Did you find in most cases when leaks of this kind occurred that it was purposeful or sort of...

SYLVESTER: Oh, sure.

STERN: It was? It wasn't carelessness?

SYLVESTER: No. Originally the defense budget was budgeted by service, as you know. It was a fight over which share each one would get of the pie, the dollar. McNamara made a fundamental budgeting change which is in effect today. He broke that interservice business, fighting, up by budgeting for offensive forces, defensive forces...

STERN: Across the line.

SYLVESTER: Across the line. This came along early on, and the question had been debated before the election and afterwards of communications services. He didn't want to get into that fight. So he finessed it by pulling the string out [Inaudible] by budgeting it by function, so that in the end all the services had [Inaudible] majority. It became the law. The law before it was, it has been unified by command. He never had to really get into [Inaudible] and explain why [Inaudible] a big argument for a unified program.

[BEGIN TAPE FOUR]

SYLVESTER: It was skillfully handled by particularly the Air Force, Navy too, for their own benefit insofar as they saw their own benefit. People aren't quite as good as they thought. It often seems that from a distance. A perfect example of this is early in the Administration when the President, McNamara and Mr. Rusk, the secretary of state, agreed, a) that the budget for nuclear weapons would be increased

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about two billion dollars; that the budget for paramilitary, non-nuclear and regular would be also increased more, because of the low condition in which they were.

STERN: Of course, that was the whole Eisenhower strategy, the nuclear.... What was it called again? I can't think of the name.

SYLVESTER: "Bigger bang for a buck." [Laughs] That was Mr. Dulles' [John Foster Dulles]. That was a great loss. They exchanged notes, Mr. McNamara and Mr. Rusk, on this. He saw rather clearly from these notes that the new administration was cutting down nuclear power in favor of non-nuclear power. The story was written by.... It had a two byline... [Inaudible] Dick Fryklund [Richard Fryklund], he had written a book on the Air Force, he'd lived in the Air Force. Just the way Jack Anderson lived in the Air Force. He had been passed [Inaudible] because they had been [Inaudible] real cheap. But the clamp put on it by the Air Force that the nuclear power and the nuclear weapons were being cut back, and the theory of it was that since they were giving the money to build up and more money for non-nuclear, hence they were cutting back on nuclear. That's why he wrote the story.

STERN: Which was not accurate.

SYLVESTER: Of course it wasn't accurate. It was propaganda planted by the Air Force. This story went around the world. For the next six years every foreign defense minister's meeting that I went with McNamara, it always came up. They were never convinced that it wasn't true. A newsman would say to me, "How can the national defense be hurt by a leak on that merit?" That's their marvelous example. The President was wild, McNamara. They brought in the FBI. They never want to investigate newsmen, ever. They don't want to investigate newsmen, they don't want to investigate the Pentagon.

At any rate I did come into it. The Air Force had two brigadiers whose job it was to leak this sort of stuff and they nailed them. But the Air Force protected them. They got bowed down and, "How terrible it is," and sent them off to some nice places, and in about two years they were back with promotions. That, to my mind, was the classic one. We had some others, but that's the damaging kind. And that is truly damaging, because I saw the effects of it. There always was doubt in the NATO meetings; the defense ministers said, "If that wasn't true, how else could it come out? What about the nuclear umbrella that you were going to protect us with?" It was very damaging."

STERN: Obviously, they were very disturbed about that; didn't believe it after the meeting.

SYLVESTER: The AP and the United Press, used the story. And their people knew who put them out, and knew who the State Department man was.

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STERN: Okay, I've got only one more major issue that I wanted to ask you about and that was, on a more personal level -- your assessment of John Kennedy: personally, politically, as President, given your contacts with him, the calls, all the rest of it. Particularly I'd like to state it this way. If you could give me the assessment both in terms of how you felt then when you served him, and how you feel now in the light of what's happened over the last decade. In other words, to what degree has your perspective changed on him? If you were to say, sit down and write now, what I think of John F. Kennedy, how you would characterize him. Let me say just one more thing. I couldn't help, particularly when we were having breakfast earlier, seeing that you do have a sense of his wit. You obviously were impressed by that.

SYLVESTER: I enjoyed it.

STERN: Okay, I don't want to lead you.

SYLVESTER: No. That's all right. Go ahead.

STERN: Okay, fine. That's excellent.

SYLVESTER: When you think back to California in the '46 state primary and the United Nations meeting and he was a young reporter butting into our business, I wrote that I looked at it exactly like a newsman who doesn't want to see a non-professional enter his business and, "Get out of our way." [Inaudible] I didn't know. I didn't know about him. And only when I got out and started to write about him, and I looked up his columns, did I realize that even at that time he was effective for a young man -- granted that he had all the benefits that [Inaudible] important and valuable. But he had his own reporting talent, and it was very good. His columns -- he said clearly and simply something in each column. As a senator, I didn't pay too much attention to him. I didn't have a high regard for him, I didn't have a low regard -- I just had none. I didn't have much contact with him. I had been convicted somewhat against his family from what knowledge I had of the family and the father, and my own father's feeling that he was a "high binder" and a real highway man. But as I got to know him, I began to think he could be President, and he'd make a good president. I thought after Mr. Eisenhower left [Inaudible] a great deal intellectual kind, the kind of wit. Sure, he had inexperience but you can't overcome that by not doing anything. In effect, I was terribly anxious and desirous to see us elect a President not on the basis of religion or his color, but on his ability. Naive, I must realize it's a hard road, but we'll get there eventually. So I came at him from that point of view.

Then I listened to him, covered him, and became more impressed. Of course, on that program you could see right away that this man was.... I had seen him on the floor of the Senate. He was able to handle himself effectively. He had a style which I liked, a "style of life," et cetera.

As of today, I would say that I don't know what would have happened had he stayed on. I'm not going to.... I think we all speculate about it, but we have nothing to do about it. It is idle. I can only say in what he did with that as President in office, not going behind the scenes....

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Early on in my life I went backstage to look at a girl -- I should never have done that - I went in early. Look at the actress in here, and don't go back and look at them backstage. What they're doing here. The hell with it. They were dressing. As a president, I'd had to say what they were doing. It's a flower not so open, really, I would say. I don't know if new colors would have come into it, or whether it would have reached its full size, its full burst of color or its petals, how long it would last -- I don't know. I didn't know then. But up to the time he was assassinated I think he was strong. Problem somewhat and I don't want to give the impression that I.... I was not close in the personal sense because I was never at the White House. I was never on any [Inaudible] parties with him. I only have the feeling then and now that my relationship in a business way with him, was as close as it could be -- closer maybe than if I had known him personally in the Pentagon or his house and then the phone. It's a judgment he made on what I was doing, and not that I knew his wife or whatever, or used him, or when he got tired or bored, or whatnot.

So I think he was a beacon of what a presidency could be, as a person and a great [Inaudible]. His handling of people, playing on them like a piano or organ was extraordinary

to see. I think he was good at that. He didn't handle everybody like that. He was [Inaudible]. Very quick. A hero in a sense that he basically a very cool, rational mind going back to it. [Inaudible] I think some of this business might have hurt people, and in the middle of it when you say, "You can't get much lower than assistant secretary of defense for public affairs." Knowing that it wasn't going to [Inaudible]. I had found out when he was wrong, he wasn't going to take that too much. He was going to say, "Yeah, but okay." [Inaudible] He knew it, he admitted it, "You're right Arthur, you're the only person who can do that." [Inaudible] say the hell with that. [Inaudible] He liked that. I think he had a reasonable concern for people; that was very important to him, I think.

[Inaudible] but they were pretty darn good. I don't necessarily want to assess how honest they were or not, I would have some doubt. As compared to other people, as compared to Mr. Grant [Ulysses S. Grant] I haven't seen that yet. Although the very first appointment he made, a black man, blew up in his face because of the poor staff work. Every president early on gets hit in the face because of poor staff work. What was his name? He was appointed commissioner, U.S. commissioner. He was on a campaign swing. He was talking about he hasn't paid the goddamn income tax from the year one.

STERN: Oh, I recall that story, but I can't recall his name.

SYLVESTER: Yeah, it'll come to me. Frank... Jones, whatever. The guy's really thick. You could say, whoever, nobody could talk to him, and bing. They eventually.... I'm sure they were ruthless, ruthless in the government agencies. It's always seemed to be wrong, believe it or not, as a newsman, if you were going to take over the United States bloodlessly, two places, the federal income tax bureau and [Interruption]

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I would say yes, I would say that in view of the disclosures about this gal he had, if he did, it was an inexcusable performance, no doubt about it. I'm making no comment about his relationship with women -- that doesn't bother me -- but I think the President or anybody in office has got to realize that he's not a free agent. Certainly not to be suckered that way.

STERN: Have you changed your opinion in any way based on the business about the CIA, the attempts to kill Castro [Fidel Castro] and other similar things?

SYLVESTER: No, I think...

STERN: Alpha 66 and the whole...

SYLVESTER: I feel that we as a people inflicted terrible wounds upon ourselves, almost practiced self-immolation on the CIA and the FBI. I think our handling of it has been outrageous. I think we've damaged ourselves in a way that will make us suffer for it. Every time anything happens any place for the next number of years, the

opposition will always say it's the CIA. It didn't make any difference if it's the PQR -- it will be the CIA. It doesn't make any difference if the CIA went out of existence, it's going to be the CIA.

This in my mind is the mark of childishness in making that diagnosis. I think the British or Canadian -- even if it was the Canadian method or the British method, or the royal commissioner or government commission. They assume that they have people in their country and we have in our country that can do a job like that, and not cover up for anybody. You don't have to stand out in the middle of Broadway and take your clothes off and point to your penis and, "See how wonderful it is." It's absurd. It's worse than absurd. I think that anybody who has looked at government closely or watched it would agree [Inaudible].

If you control the FBI and the internal revenue, you could take this government right over. That's the way most governments have been taken over. They call it the interior department abroad. That's where you get the goods on them. Then you control all the income tax returns and the FBI records, that's the thing that will run the country, from the point of a dictator. From the point of view of, "I'm going to run it, my way." I don't mean it's good for the country any more but that's the way you'd do it. In all I suspect being a reporter and close on to some in Washington, many presidents and many people abused those inevitably. It's there.

The CIA came to me and wanted to put one of their men in as one of the secret newsmen they were sending to Cuba. I wouldn't have it. I said, "What are you trying to do, destroy the newspaper industry in this country?" "No, no, no, no," they can't understand your viewpoint. "I've got to make it clear to you." "Well, we understood that if we came to you, that you'd be cooperative. You can go any place you want." Here again, early on, what they were doing, it's amazing.

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STERN: A lot of the press speculation about all of this stuff being pushed back to the Kennedy administration is just sort of unrealistic.

SYLVESTER: I think yes. I'm not saying countries [Inaudible] very bad. But I'm saying, "This isn't the way to cure them."

STERN: I see your point.

SYLVESTER: This isn't the way to cure them. Not that there weren't -- there were not any. We had this suspicion about it anyway from the beginning of this thing. Any type of organization, you had a need on the part of the [Inaudible] down to the police. You can catch on right away how their minds work. The higher you get, the bigger the goal, and finally the patriotism involved is.... It's hard to figure what they're going to do. It happens to other countries in different ways. There's always been some great goal. Yes, the way we went about it, the way we did it, I think that we failed. Damaging, not achieving what we want to achieve. The other answer would be, if things were so bad you ought to chuck the whole thing, and if that doesn't work I won't have anything to do with it. I suspect the death wound has been given to the CIA. We'll have those

initials for a long time. We've already seen it in the cries from abroad, and the stories [Inaudible], "This is a plot of the CIA."

STERN: I think they were just charged the other day with having been involved on the Egyptian side on the latest flareup.

SYLVESTER: Right. On and on. In the world of [Inaudible], with the so-called friendly countries conducting espionage against each other all the time, here again you've got something very mysterious. You've got to do the same thing, but you can do it better and a little less handed and more skillful.

STERN: Do you think you can just speculate how, if President Kennedy were alive now, how he would react to all of these disclosures and what he would say?

SYLVESTER: I would guess that he would come down the same way he did when the leaks came out of the Defense Department: it's a problem or it's their problem.

STERN: I just can't imagine him taking a very defensive position.

SYLVESTER: No, I don't think so. [Tape skips] If you remember when Macmillan and Khrushchev went to Plymouth, the ships landed in Plymouth, and there was a frogman and he was killed by the Russians under their ships.

STERN: I don't recall that, no.

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SYLVESTER: It was this great incident. It was a British intelligence operation, clearly. To this day the British have never acknowledged a word on that. They have never said yes, no, by your leave, please forgive me, anything. We could have anything we want, but the rest of this story, nothing. [Inaudible] The Russians respected that, they knew that. It wasn't that they [Inaudible]. But they would be damned fools if they did. What threw them was that Eisenhower said, "Yes, it was our doing." Khrushchev looked like a fool with his own people. They expected Eisenhower to say, "No, of course not."

STERN: Do you have any other observations you'd like to make?

SYLVESTER: No, I've talked too much now. [Inaudible]

STERN: You've been tremendous. Oh, you certainly did.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

