Chalmers M. Roberts Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/08/1977
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Biographical Note
Chalmers M. Roberts (1910-2005) was a journalist for the *Washington Post* from 1949 to 1971. This interview covers John F. Kennedy's statements to the media and the Kennedy administration's approach to international relations, especially concerning military involvement in Vietnam, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Bay of Pigs, among other topics.

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Chalmers M. Roberts– JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

CHALMERS M. ROBERTS

November 8, 1977
Washington, D.C.

By Sheldon Stern and Bill Hartigan

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ROBERTS: When he was running in '60 and I think, like most people, I didn't take this very seriously--as you read that book* of mine when he said he was going to run against Cabot Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] I thought that was the biggest joke I'd ever heard. But by the time he was running for president I was taking him seriously. I was out on a campaign trip with him and we were flying in a little plane, I think we were going to Indiana and Michigan. My recollection is that only Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee], who was then working for Newsweek, and I were on this plane. It wasn't the Caroline. He knew Ben then--of course, he got to know him much better, but he knew Ben then far better than he did me. We were discussing his opponents at that point. Exactly when this was I don't know, but it could be figured out from the schedule. The thing that had shocked me was that we sat around talking about Symington [Stuart Symington], Stu Symington, who everybody in Washington knew was not the brightest guy in town. And he consistently called him "Stubum" and it was a gratuitous insult. I guess he figured that Bradlee would never print this, which he didn't, and that I wouldn't either which I didn't, which I probably should have. He had this effect on people. He really was great at conning the press. That's the point I've tried to make in that book. He had this Irish charm to a fare-thee-well. I just thought that was. . . . I always held that against him. It was one of those--it was small. It was one of the things that made me think that this guy is four or eight years too young. He really ought to have, I thought, a little more maturity before he runs for this job. But that's the only crack I ever heard him make like that.

STERN: Do you remember your earliest contacts with him? When he was congressman, senator?

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*First Rough Draft by Chalmers M. Roberts

ROBERTS: Well, the first one I remember was the one I wrote about in the book. My wife and I were at a dinner party when he was on the House District committee [House District of Columbia Committee]. Down here at the edge of Georgetown were these people who were trying to get him to support some move in the House. It may have been home rule for the District of Columbia. And Jack was a lazy congressman. He was viewed as a lazy congressman. He came to this dinner and I suppose there were ten people there or something. He was sitting on a couch on his spine like this, and he was a very skinny guy in those days. When you see him as president--I don't know how much the medication resulted in that puffiness that he sometimes had that was apparent when he was president. But anyway, at that time he was a skinny guy, and I was looking at some picture in here of him, something I saved. How young he looked in 1960 when you look back at the pictures of him now. This was the year--I suppose it was before the primary when he ran against Cabot Lodge, whatever year that was. It was the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] year wasn't it?

HARTIGAN: He beat Lodge the year Eisenhower won the presidency.

STERN: Was elected president, right, '52.

ROBERTS: Kennedy was how old then?

STERN: Thirty-five.

ROBERTS: He was just five years over the constitutional age (to be a senator), and he was a skinny kid, and anyway that was the first I had seen him around the Hill, I guess, but I wasn't paying any attention to him. Like a lot of people I had a negative feeling about Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy] because of his isolationism during the war, as ambassador. I never had anything to do with his father. That day he was sitting there on his spine saying he thought. . . . I asked him I guess, "What are you going to do, Jack?" He had been in the House three terms or whatever it was, and he was obviously fed up with it as he started complaining, "You can't get anywhere. You have to be here twenty years." That was in the days when seniority was very formalized.

STERN: Was he specific at all about why he was having trouble in the House?

ROBERTS: No, I don't remember it. It was just that he was impatient. It took forever to have any influence in the House. That was the burden of it. You had to do your twenty years at least.

STERN: He was having trouble with McCormack [John W. McCormack] and some others.

ROBERTS: Well, there was that too. I don't know that I was conscious then of the interplay with McCormack. I said, "What are you

going to do?" He said, "I think I'll either quit or run against Cabot Lodge." It was sort of like that. I don't think I laughed in his face out loud, but I certainly did inside. Then the conversation turned to something else and that was the end of that. I remember that and, of course, I was a little surprised that he beat Lodge especially in a big Republican year like that was. Then I saw him around the Senate when he was running for president. I remember once he came out off the Senate floor. I called him off to ask him something or other, and he got talking about--by this point it was in the papers that he wanted to run for president or that his father wanted him to run or something. And he said to me, "Do you think a Catholic could ever be elected president?" And I said, "Well, the track record wasn't very favorable." We talked about Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith] or something. I don't remember the conversation. I remember his asking me that. That was fairly early on. It must have been the year before he announced, I guess. I would see him occasionally like that. I was not working regularly on the Hill. I was covering foreign affairs. He was on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee finally.

STERN: From '58 on.

ROBERTS: But he was so far down the totem pole that he seldom got a chance to ask a question in a hearing because he was the last guy down there. I had very little contact with him until his campaign started, and then I used to go out and do some campaign trips.

STERN: Did you have any contact with him at the time of his Algerian speech, which was probably his first major foreign policy statement?

ROBERTS: No, I didn't. I had nothing to do with that. I might have written a piece or two about the effect of or the fallout or Acheson [Dean G. Acheson] screaming at him about it. But basically, I had nothing to do with that. I know nothing about it except what has been written about it. I was looking through some memos--there are a lot of memos of mine and of other people to me, that I've saved. They are not in any great order, unhappily. This is a memo from Carroll Kilpatrick who was covering the White House. We had two people covering the White House after he became president. This memo concerns a long lunch that Carroll had with Ted Clifton [Chester V. Clifton] and they wandered over a lot of subjects, as you do. This is a curious thing that Clifton said. I'm sure you've got endless stuff from Ted in the files, haven't you?

STERN: No, as a matter of fact he's been reluctant.

ROBERTS: Really? He wrote a book about Kennedy, didn't he? I never did read it; was it any good? Do you know generally? Was it very restrained?

STERN: Well, we've been trying to get him to do an oral history interview to give us more detail, and he's been resisting.

ROBERTS: I wonder why that would be. This is a very odd thing. I hadn't read this memo for a long time. This was October 26, 1961. A couple of interesting points. It starts out this way, "I asked him at one point if after all these months he still had faith in Kennedy as someone who could avoid both surrender and a nuclear war? He said that he did more than ever but that it was a tight rope to walk. The president had gone through his moment of testing . . ." I guess he was talking about, let's see, October of '61 . . .

STERN: The Bay of Pigs.

ROBERTS: The Bay of Pigs, I guess. It was not yet Berlin. ". . . and now he sees his way clearly. For days the president brought in every scientist and military expert he could find to determine what a nuclear war would mean at the maximum and minimum. Finally the president made up his mind that he would go to nuclear war if necessary." So apparently a decision in the abstract. "'This was the decision that Bradley [Omar N. Bradley], Eisenhower, and Truman [Harry S. Truman] never made. Kennedy had made it, and that means the crucial decision is made and he can maneuver and face all the peripheral and collateral questions that come up. Having made the decision that he would go the ultimate if necessary, he is much more a free agent and a great burden is lifted from his mind. The president called the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] in and, as a matter of fact, when he told them his decision it chilled them to the marrow,' Ted said. He asked them each what they would do in the thirty or forty-five minutes after they had an order to move. Though they are men who don't frighten, they shook under the impact of what was being said. I asked when the decision was taken and remember having in mind August 13."

STERN: August 13 was the Berlin Wall.

ROBERTS: That was it. "Ted declined to answer." Then there was some discussion about the fact that they weren't prepared for the Wall.

STERN: That's very interesting.

ROBERTS: I never heard that story anywhere else. Carroll is a very good note taker. He's retired, too. I don't suppose he knows anything more about it than this, but you might ask him. There were things like this.

STERN: The thing that strikes me about the memo is that it would seem that despite the stylistic changes between the Eisenhower and the Kennedy administrations, that in terms of the whole notion, for example, of massive retaliation which was Dulles's [John Foster Dulles] notion,

that Kennedy was at this point at least moving in a direction very similar. Well, of course, he would change. He had changed in '62.

ROBERTS: Kennedy changed a great deal. In many ways Carter [James E. Carter] reminds me of him. You come into this office wide-eyed and you've made a lot of campaign statements and promises and you think you see what you want to do in an area like foreign policy or domestic policy. You get swept up in your own rhetoric during the campaign and then, wham, you get hit in the face by a lot of hard facts. It's like Carter with the human rights thing. It's a great idea and then you find that if you're going to play that game that way, you're not going to do any business with the Russians. You've got to learn to trim or you're in a very different kind of situation. Kennedy found a lot of the, I think, same kind of thing.

STERN: I was struck in the chapter in your book by your sense that he had moved dramatically from the Cuban missile crisis to the American University speech.

ROBERTS: There are some other things in here that go to that. Here is another thing that he said to Clifton. Clifton, he quoted, "The president told me one day he wanted me to see what could be done about explaining the facts of life to U.S. News and World Report. The next Monday he telephoned me and asked me what I had done all week. I didn't know what he meant. He said I had done nothing on that. I said I would keep trying. The next week he told me I certainly made no progress." He had tremendous recollection about that kind of thing. Carroll says, "I noted to Ted that the president had David Lawrence to lunch. He was then running the magazine. And Ted said yes, and also for a private meeting." He did try to. . . . I remember one guy he really changed was old Sokolsky [George E. Sokolsky]. It's an interesting journalistic case history that nobody ever wrote anything about. Sokolsky was running in the Post [Washington Post] at that point, because we had taken him over when the Post bought the Times Herald [Washington (D.C.) Times Herald] and they wanted some conservative columnist to balance out the liberal. They were running George Sokolsky who was unreconstructed. He would have been a Goldwaterite if Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] had been around in those days. He used to write these very, very anti-Kennedy columns and then suddenly began to see virtues in Kennedy that had never been apparent before. Kennedy had really worked him over. He had him at the White House, so I was told. I don't know how much he managed to change David Lawrence. There is one other thing in here. Did you ask me about profanity or anything in here? There's a lot of that in Bradlee's book.

STERN: Just let me put in context that paragraph in the letter. The book by the Blairs [Joan and Clay Blair, Jr.], The Search for JFK, has gotten a tremendous amount of publicity.

ROBERTS: I never read it.

STERN: In many ways it's not worth reading. The problem, of course, is that they have taken a very sensational tack in trying essentially, they say, to destroy the mythology of JFK.

ROBERTS: This is Clay Blair.

STERN: Clay and his wife, right. They spent months at the JFK Library and in some ways, I think, did some things that were questionable about the way they used sources. But the point of that paragraph in the letter was to try and find out in terms of their intimate contacts what the real guy was like. In other words, to get away both from the myth-makers and from the muckrackers.

ROBERTS: Well, here is a little small item in this Clifton thing. I'll read you the whole paragraph to see what the context is: "Ted said he (Kennedy) was still bothered by White House staff work, by the follow-through on part of the staff. He said he never felt he could be away on Saturday or Sunday. He expressed skepticism . . ." This, remember, is October '61. ". . . skepticism that Bundy [McGeorge Bundy], Rostow [Walt W. Rostow], Bromley Smith, and Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor], and Clifton himself really had their shops in order and functioning the way they should. But the president is getting information he needs much faster and more orderly now. He is his own secretary of state and is getting 'magnificent' support from Rusk [Dean Rusk]. The State Department is doing a much better job. Bowles [Chester Bowles] isn't doing a thing, but he is reassured once a week that he is loved." He had an intellectual thing about Bowles as well. "Ball [George W. Ball], McGhee [George C. McGhee], Rusk are carrying the ball well but it's too big a job for the small group of able people available. 'Get that poor son-of-a bitch on the phone again,' the president will say, meaning get Rusk." That was the kind of thing that Clifton was hearing.

Here is a Kennedy humor item. "A White House staffer asked Ted the other day to get the president to autograph a book for his son, who was to celebrate his bar mitzvah. When Ted got the book to the president, Ted said the boy was going to celebrate Rosh Hashana and wanted the president's autograph. Deadpan, the president said, 'You mean bar mitzvah. I remember it as the greatest day of my life,' and signed it anyway. Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] who was in the room at the time, also completely deadpan, chimed in to say it was the greatest memory of his life. Salinger [Pierre E. Salinger] was there and took about ten double takes before he oould regain his oomposure." I asked Ted if I could use this story and he said absolutely not. That's the thing that drives you up the wall. It's ridiculous; it made Kennedy look very good, that sort of small deal.

STERN: Well, I think the thing about the nuclear decision is far more interesting.

ROBERTS: That's just a clue, that's just a clue. Here's some stuff about. . . . You mentioned the great Vietnam question: What would

he really have done? This is some stuff about Laos which is sort of the predecessor of this thing. I've got four items here. This is in April: April 3, April 6, April 7, and May 8, '61. In other words, around the Bay of Pigs, pre and post. This is a lunch I had with a guy in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] on the third of April, Bob Amory [Robert Amory, Jr.], who, I think, has given you a lot of stuff. I just made this memo to myself. He talked a little bit about Cuba, and I was fishing about Cuba at the time, obviously when I look back at it. Exactly how much Amory knew about the Bay of Pigs thing, I'm not sure that I recall. I think he's told me subsequently but you know that.

STERN: This is the eighth, you say?

ROBERTS: The third of April.

STERN: The third of April.

ROBERTS: "He thinks time"--this is Cuba--"he thinks time runs in favor of Castro [Fidel Castro] therefore the pressure for some invasion this spring by somebody outside. Most cagey on this, however. Acknowledged that he'd heard talk"--which I had mentioned to him, obviously--"of a Betancourt [Romulo Betancourt] strike." This was the Venezuela angle at the Dominican Republic along with an invasion of Cuba to give the whole thing a good flavor of antidictatorships of both left and right. I remember there was some of that going around at the time. Laos--most of the lunch was consumed talking about the mess there. "He thinks the situation is bad, and he talked about what the Russian position is." He dated the flap and there was all this Kong Le stuff and there was some stuff about Ho Chi Minh trying to be an honest broker between Moscow and Peking, which is probably true, et cetera. What was the day that Kennedy had the press conference on Laos where he had the map of Laos? It was about this time.

STERN: It was March 23, 1961.

ROBERTS: I think this may have been afterwards, because Amory said when Kennedy was considering what to say at his press conference, he rejected as much too hard the first draft by Chip Bohlen [Charles E. Bohlen] and had Bundy do a redraft. Apparently that too was too hard, and it came out pure Kennedy. The trouble with memos like this is that you've got to go back and read the clips and get the whole context to see the whole thing. Dick Bissell [Richard Bissell] had just been sent out to Laos. At any rate, Laos was in the wind at that point. Now here is the memo of April 6: "Notes on President Kennedy's off-the-record talk yesterday afternoon to radio-TV briefing sessions at State." I think there were transcripts of all these things that he did, weren't there?

HARTIGAN: Yes, there are.

ROBERTS: I found them some of the most interesting and revealing things that I ever heard about Kennedy. He would have these people come in from all over the United States, most of whom are very green as far as Washington was concerned, but they were all eager. He loved to talk to these people, apparently. He would go on and on, and he'd take questions, and they'd ask him dumb questions or good questions, and he was very good at it. I had a feeling that since they tended to be totally off the record, not even background--although a certain amount of it always oozed into the papers some way or other--he was more at ease than in his public press conferences, because he knew that the verbatim was not going all over the world when he was talking about foreign affairs. And in this one he was talking about--somebody would say, "What's the situation in Laos?" and he said: "Intervention has many hazards but a collapse is more hazardous. The alternates are somber," and so on. He was in this mood. Then to Cuba, "Why don't we blockade Cuba as some senator suggests and make use of the Monroe Doctrine?" This was when the Republicans were beginning to attack. Keating [Kenneth B. Keating] was, I guess, already in action then. He says, "Suppose we did blockade, and we may come to that, and Russia countered with a blockade on Berlin?" So he gave them a little lecture on that. These two things were both in the air at that point. Here on the seventh, the day I went to see him, and I'll get you a copy of this eventually.

STERN: This is your talk you mentioned in the book? The forty-five minute talk. Were you alone with him at this point?

ROBERTS: Yeah. It starts out this way, "I spent forty-five minutes this afternoon with President Kennedy in his office. We talked on a background basis except . . ." (This was the only time I ever talked to him alone when he was president.) ". . . except for what he had to say about Cuba which he wanted strictly off the record. He sat in the rocker smoking one of his thin cigars, talked informally, often in uncompleted sentences. He was totally relaxed and unhurried even when both Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] and Ken O'Donnell appeared to press for waiting appointments. He finished what he had to say, including making a phone call (see below), before I bowed out, feeling almost that I overstayed though he showed no such feelings. He put the visitor totally at ease in a minute or so." That's very true. I remember that. This was the way I reconstructed it when I got back to the office. The first thing is about Cuba; the second thing is about Laos. Then it was about nuclear testing, Atlantic alliance, NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], foreign aid, Kennedy's problems at home, and a few miscellaneous things. I've organized it more than the conversation was organized.

This is what he said about Cuba. "He talked reluctantly at first, insisting that it all had to be off the record, but warmed up and referred to Cuba. He said that today's New York Times story (implying five or six thousand Cubans under arms in the U.S)"--this was one of Tad Szulc's stories, I think--"was incorrect. That there was no such number." And I wrote, "Perhaps hundreds, I gather."

STERN: He didn't give you that figure? That was your surmise?

ROBERTS: It was my surmise that somebody was there; he wasn't denying. . . . Then he picked up the telephone, and I guess he had to go back to the desk. Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] had a phone underneath that table in front of the fireplace but I don't remember that Kennedy did. Anyway, "He picked up the phone and asked for Dick Bissell, at the CIA, to check his impression, and he said he had been right. He talked with Bissell as to whether Bundy or Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] should talk to Reston [James B. Reston] or someone else on the Times about the story. I told him the U.S. press is getting no guidance on the facts, that the impression, therefore, is getting around that a big invasion of Cuba by thousands of planes may soon pop. He said it was impossible to give guidance since the government wants to, 'Keep out of this.'" In retrospect, this is much clearer than it was at the time. "As to the big invasion, he deflated it completely by saying he wished it would happen but does not believe it will." He was lying to me there. "He said there were guerrillas fighting within Cuba. Air drops from various unnamed spots in the U.S., that it was 'unfortunate' that the Guatemala base story had been printed. When I said there was an impression of, say, five thousand at that base, he said, 'Oh no, not more than six hundred.' Kennedy said two or three times, very flatly, there would be no U.S. troops sent to Cuba. He said Cubans are going back and forth all the time, and he would expect more of that and more guerrilla fighting but no U.S. participation. He made it clear he had 'stopped' a proposal for what I took to be a big CIA operation. (He also made it clear the CIA is deeply involved in what has been going on so far.)"

"He also said there was a plan under Ike last year for an invasion which did involve U.S. forces but again he would have none of that. He knew that Dr. Miró Cardona [Dr. José Miró Cardona] was shortly to have a press conference, and he discussed with Bissell some statement which appeared to be in preparation for Miró Cardona. He called him a 'good man.' He said he felt time was running in Castro's favor in a military sense," which was the same thing that Amory had been telling me, which was that he (Kennedy) was getting from the CIA, I presume. "He was getting more reports that Castro Cuban airmen are being trained in Czechoslovakia. He asked if I did not think that the Cuba pamphlet,"--that's the one that Schlesinger had done--"was a good one. He obviously was pleased with it." It's the one the State Department put out. I think Schlesinger or Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] or both of them worked on it. "As to the Soviet interest in Cuba he said he did not think that Soviet-American relations had hardened to the point where they wanted to press their position in Cuba." That's the sense of what he said about that.

STERN: Did he give you any sense at all of training, Americans, especially training of Cubans?

ROBERTS: Apparently not. "I asked him about the idea of mounting an operation against Cuba from Venezuela"--which is the same thing that I talked to Amory about--"he said he did not think it possible

because Betancourt is too insecure at home. He stressed a large number of Castro defectors implying there are plenty of Cubans to do the job." That's what he had been sold on. That was the idea. "I referred to his statement at the recent off-the-record press conference opposing a blockade of Cuba. He said again it would be foolish. That Castro would just love to have his food supplies from outside cut off. It would be a great drama for him and he could hold out a long time, perhaps indefinitely. The whole thing would be counter-productive. Then he talked about Bolivia for some reason. That was the end of the conversation about Cuba." As I said in the book, we didn't follow that up adequately. The Times was just killing the Post on this story. It was a very bad operation.

STERN: And given the date, of course, it's very clear that things were moving rapidly.

ROBERTS: I did go back later on and put this in context. But I was amazed at his picking up the phone and calling Bissell, whom I knew. My hearing this half of this conversation, he was a very disarming guy in that way when he would do that sort of thing. I'm sure you have a lot of other reports like that. Then he talked about Laos. "He said he felt that both my piece"--it was something that I had written on March 28; I have no recollection of at this point--"and Estabrook's [Robert Estabrook] editorial of yesterday were too hard on the administration, not accurate and not inaccurate, but too hard. He volunteered effusive praise for Warren Unna's [Warren W. Unna], three pieces" (Warren Unna was a Post reporter who was then in Laos, who had just written three pieces from Vientiane) "as showing the kind of situation with which he has had to deal. His argument was that the situation is so bad that to get a coalition government is not a bad outcome. After all, he said, there were Pathet Lao in the government before. They ought to point that out. He confirmed my statement that the problem with the British before Key West, and which produced the Key West meeting, was that they were thinking of an American action on the Dulles-Radford [Arthur W. Radford] lines, i.e. massive. He confirmed by indirection my statement that it appeared that his own intention was if force were necessary, to put in enough to hold a line, not to attempt to fight a war up to the Red Chinese border. He said that if we put in one man, the Chinese communists and Vietminh can put in five. If we put in five thousand, they can put in twenty-five thousand and so on. But he said and reiterated that he would go in if it were necessary, but that it is not as of now."

"Then"--This I found interesting. Here he took a fatalistic view of the political consequences, saying "he was certain the country would follow the president if he ordered a force sent in. He said he was not bothered by the Ev [Everett M. Dirksen] and Charlie [Charles A. Halleck] complaints." (You know the Ev and Charlie stuff.) "But the way he said it a couple of times made me feel that indeed he was. He spoke of the old charge of a 'Democratic war.' He said that if he had to go in and if it meant he would be around only one term, nevertheless he would do it. All this was said in a highly convincing manner. He mentioned Acheson's drawing a line around Japan but omitting Korea was probably a mistake, saying that a stand had to be made in Laos, that he

was plainly worried that the Ev and Charlie line will have some political effect at home if there is a coalition regime with Communists in it. He was most complimentary of Herblock's [Herbert L. Block] cartoon of Ev and Charlie today. He called unfortunate Harriman's [W. Averell Harriman] public remark about Souvanna Phouma probably having to be in a coalition cabinet." He sent Harriman out there to put it together. And then this stuff about nuclear testing.

STERN: As I understand this, I think the really important thing about these two recollections coming together on the same day is that he is clearly thinking about the political consequences of intervention in Laos, including possibly American troops, leaning in that direction as you perceived it. But as I understand the conclusion you reached in your book, the failure in the Bay of Pigs pushed him in the other direction.

ROBERTS: Well, I'm coming to that.

STERN: That's the really critical point.

ROBERTS: I know it is. It isn't possible to prove it, obviously. Now this is a memo to me by Jim Clayton [James E. Clayton] who is now an editorial writer at the Post. At that time he was covering the Justice Department, and he was covering Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]. He got to know Bobby quite well. This was May 8. This was when Kennedy--after the Bay of Pigs and Bobby had been named to head the committee to unscramble the debacle. That's what they were talking about. "What makes the problem of this committee particularly difficult," this is Bobby Kennedy, "is that everyone who is fully briefed on the plans, not just the idea but the full plan, of the Cuban thing approved it with one exception. That exception was Schlesinger, who knew all about it and was opposed to it. Walt Rostow did not know all about it and cannot be included in the lists of those who backed it. Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] wrote his memo before he was fully briefed. He changed his position somewhat after he learned the details. Among those who knew the plans were Rusk, McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], the president, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Berle [Adolph Berle], Bundy and others. They all approved."

STERN: Apparently Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] did not approve, although he was not fully informed.

ROBERTS: He got conned through much of it. They were interviewing everybody. There were no CIA-supported camps in Florida. The ones in Guatemala and in Nicaragua were CIA-supported. The only camps in Florida were those put up by the guys we indicted for violating the neutrality law. We didn't want them there at camps. This is a curious thing. "The operation was not as bad as has been painted. Everyone who was in on it knew there was a chance for defeat, but there was a plan to avoid a disaster." It doesn't make sense, does it? It must mean there was no plan to avoid disaster.

"The men who went in were supposed to go into the woods as guerrillas so that the possibility of disaster would be avoided." I guess that was the plan. "But after the invaders ran out of ammo, Castro's men chased them through the swamps with machine guns from the helicopters. Eight days afterwards the navy picked up a guy who had been hiding and drinking salt water. His first words were, 'Did we win?'"

This is the interesting thing. He put a note on the end of this. "There were two other things Bobby said on Sunday which I should have mentioned. One was that if it hadn't been for Cuba we would probably be up to our ears in the 'jungles of Laos.' He wouldn't expand." That's a pretty good piece of testimony. If anybody knew, it was Bobby. I don't think anybody else could honestly testify to what Jack Kennedy might have done except his brother. Certainly Rusk and McNamara couldn't, or Schlesinger.

STERN: Do you think in essense he's referring here to the political consequences of the Bay of Pigs and thus making it very. . . .

ROBERTS: That's right. He's saying that the fallout was so terrible and Kennedy himself having said, look at the terrible options in Cuba--we put in five, they put in fifty kind of thing, still he would have done something. Because he was hipped on this idea of wars of liberation, and so on; they would have gone in. Here he is saying he didn't go into Laos because of the fallout from Cuba. Now this is immediately after Cuba.

STERN: The date of this is May 8, '61.

ROBERTS: This was said on the Sunday before May 8, '61. This is another Kennedy off-the-record thing at the State Department, on August 30, '61.

STERN: That's after the Berlin Wall.

ROBERTS: Here he's being philosophical. Kennedy said, "The world today is living through two revolutions. The end of the colonial empires, leading to the creation of many small nations and the change in weapons and the nature of war. The latter has brought us to the brink many times in the last few years. The weapons are going to get far worse due to the proliferation. In ten or fifteen years many nations will have nuclear weapons." Well he got hipped on that. He talked out loud about it, of course. "As the warheads get smaller and the missiles cheaper, the world becomes more dangerous and hazardous. This latter fact should be coupled with Khrushchev's [Nikita S. Khrushchev] January 6 description of the three kinds of war: nuclear, conventional, wars of liberation." He had gotten into this. I've forgotten. I think Rostow claimed that he had gotten Kennedy to read that Khrushchev speech, if I remember correctly. Either before he was sworn in or very early on, because the speech was made on January 6.

STERN: Do you think it might have had an impact on the inaugural address?

ROBERTS: Well I think it did. I think it had an impact that business of. . . . You would have to track down--and I never did and I really often wondered exactly when he read that.

STERN: The flavor of it is in the inaugural.

ROBERTS: The flavor is in the inaugural. I think that that speech got a fair amount of publicity when he made it January 6. You could look at the front page of the Post and the Times the next day and see what they did with it. Kennedy was in Florida, I guess, at that point, reading a million things. I would think that Rostow--was Rostow in Moscow then? Or was he back? I don't know exactly. It would be interesting to know just when he read that. I think that speech colored, was a backdrop to his posture, general posture and specifically to Vietnam, Laos and Vietnam.

STERN: And of course the meeting in Vienna only pressured him further.

ROBERTS: Yes, that's right. When was that? In the fall?

STERN: June, '61.

ROBERTS: Yeah, because he says, "At the Vienna meeting he said he did not feel it would be easy to reach an understanding with the Russians. Kennedy said Khrushchev made the point again and again about wars of liberation."

BEGIN TAPE TWO

ROBERTS: . . . public opinion answered by Kennedy. "'In a nuclear exchange there would be no victor. I hope the United States continues to progress here in order to get an example of a free society. We should have restrictions on wages and prices, to be competitive in the world market.'" He wandered off into a lot of other things. "What can you tell us about the McCloy- [John J. McCloy] Khrushchev talks? The words were different but the tune was about the same." I think that was the one that I remember, talking to Jack McCloy about where Khrushchev trotted out his fifty-kiloton bomb. It scared the hell out of him. This is another thing having to do with. . . . Now that's the end of the Bay of Pigs stuff that I can lay a hand on instantly. It doesn't answer your question very much. Maybe it helps a little bit.

STERN: I think there's also very possibly a connection here between the development of policy in Vietnam, which doesn't really begin to take shape until '62, in terms of what was happening in Laos, whether or not the president regarded "the solution" in Laos to be adequate; and then, of course, with the Cuban missile crisis essentially reversing the

political problem that the Bay of Pigs created. I think it's one of the most tantalizing questions as to. . . . And you do, of course, refer to this in the chapter on JFK. What would have happened?

ROBERTS: Well, I can theorize like everybody else can, but I can't prove a damn thing.

STERN: I was particularly impressed by that statement that you had from Lester Pearson [Lester B. Pearson] and Kennedy's response, which I think was very revealing, saying, "Sure everybody knows it's best to get out, but the question is how the hell do you do it." There has bean, of course, a lot of writing on this, particularly in the last year or two, and it divides right down the middle with people arguing that Kennedy would have removed all American troops by '65.

ROBERTS: Well, I never understood that piece of Kenneth's [Kenneth O'Donnell]--was it in Life*--saying that Kennedy told me he had to get reelected and then he'd get out of Vietnam. Do you remember that?

STERN: Yes, and there's also the statement by McNamara when he returned in '63.

ROBERTS: And Mansfield [Michael J. Mansfield] too claimed the same thing. Kenny's piece came out in August of 1970. Mansfield confirmed it. I don't think anything made Kennedy look as bad as Kenny's piece, which I'm sure he didn't mean to have that effect when he wrote it. Did you talk to him about that? Do you remember the genesis of that piece [to Hartigan]?

HARTIGAN: I think that Kenny was stating it as it really was, whether it was good or bad. There is no question in my mind that what he said was correct because I think that that was precisely what was on his mind. I think what they failed to look at was the fact that nobody better than Kennedy knew that the whole thing was a losing battle anyway. In the final analysis we did exactly what Kenny said he intended to do as soon as he got reelected. The fact is that he at a very early stage knew exactly that the whole thing was a lost cause.

ROBERTS: He knew that it was a lost cause but he was trapped in this Khrushchev dogma bit and the Chinese thing. I don't think he understood. . . . The government as a whole was very poor on understanding the Russian-Chinese break and the effect of this. People like Dean Acheson kept telling Kennedy that Ho Chi Minh was just a Moscow puppet. It's all in Acheson's book. Very revealing. Kennedy was being pushed by the Republicans on this, too. I was talking about the Ev and Charlie show. He's a political animal and he could feel those political barbs. I've no doubt that Kenny was telling the absolute truth. That's exactly the kind of

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*Editor's note: "Belated Light on Vietnam" appeared in Nation, August 17, 1970.

thing he would say to Kenny and even to Mansfield, and he knew neither one of them would tell on him. But by the time Kenny wrote that piece, the situation had reached the point where it made Kennedy look terrible. That he was going to sacrifice all these lives till he got reelected.

HARTIGAN: Except for one thing. I think if you read some of the statements O'Donnell has made with reference to Vietnam, that there was a very serious question in his mind as to whether he'd ever reach that point that we did reach in loss of life because his position has always been at least from the very few times that I was involved, was the fact that he knew right at the very beginning exactly how far he was going to go and it was never going to go as far as it did because he was going to put a stop to it anyway. This is the part that always seems to be left out of Kenny's statements, but he has made the total analyses in previous speeches and previous articles, but that part always seems to be left out. He more than once, the president, was adamant against anybody going over there. I think if you check, you find out that very few, if any, actual troops were in Vietnam at the time of Kennedy.

ROBERTS: There was a figure. I've forgotten what the figure was--four thousand, sixteen thousand.

STERN: Most of them were called advisors.

ROBERTS: That was a fake.

HARTIGAN: He was disappointed with the results of the small number that were there. It told him a big story; it wasn't working. At that point you get the tiger by the tail, but he wasn't such a wild tiger He could be very easily let go and that was exactly what was going to happen. He made it very clear.

ROBERTS: It was easy to let go, except the atmosphere of the times was that it was cowardly to let go.

STERN: Well one can imagine, for example, what if Kennedy had begun to make it clear that he was going to pull out and Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] had opposed him in '64? One can just imagine what Goldwater would have done with that; it would have created real political problems.

ROBERTS: He had expected to run aginst Goldwater.

STERN: By the end he did.

HARTIGAN: You've traveled with him. I think there is a political threat here that has to be probably brought out that answers a lot of questions. He was as a young politician, he was very politically

astute. Sometimes he tripped over in international issues. At least it was my impression that the election, as Kenny mentioned it, was a big factor in him keeping this thing as much under control as he could possibly do without ending up. . . .

ROBERTS: Well, he was terribly sensitive about having won very narrowly. That was also something that came out in that conversation I had with him.

STERN: Oh yes, without any doubt he had to be.

ROBERTS: I think that is the basis of the conversations that Kenny was reporting. He didn't have the political strength to do it at that point. That's the way he was looking at it at the time. Anyway I don't think it was totally a matter of politics. I think there was a matter of conviction involved in this.

STERN: Agreed, and I think another critical factor which I think expands on your point, Bill, is that Kennedy had, which apparently Johnson did not have, an extraordinary distrust of optimistic reports coming from the military. He was very skeptical of these claims of things going so well. Interestingly enough, he had a discussion in the White House in the summer of 1962--I believe it was '62--with Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur warned him about a war in Asia, a land war in Asia.

ROBERTS: He mentioned that.

STERN: It would be the greatest mistake an American president could make. That had a real impact on him.

ROBERTS: When was that?

STERN: I'm virtually certain it was August of '62. It could have been '63 but I think it was '62.

HARTIGAN: August of '62 would have been right after he came back from Vienna, wouldn't it? I don't know, I'm not quite sure myself.

STERN: The point is the meeting took place, and he was impressed by the fact that somebody with that kind of Asian experience and who was known as essentially, from the Korean experience, as very much an Asian interventionist, would be very skeptical about a land war in Asia. I think he took that very seriously. Of course, MacArthur was dead by the time Johnson really got going. He died in the summer of '64.

ROBERTS: I think I mentioned in the book the Chester Bowles thing in relation to the Cuban missile crisis. Do you remember that? This is a very odd thing to me. Bowles told me this story in December '62.

"On Friday, October 12, as he was preparing to leave for Africa, Tom Hughes [Thomas L. Hughes] who was then number two in State Department intelligence"--he is now head of the Carnegie Foundation [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace]--"told him that we had picked up pictures"--he shouldn't have told him--"told him we had picked up pictures of Soviet bombers en route to Cuba and some pictures of scratches on the earth indicating possible work on missile sites."

STERN: This is the twelfth? That's very interesting because the U-2 photo did not take place until the fourteenth. In other words, the final evidence didn't come until the fourteenth.

ROBERTS: That's right. "Bowles said he had commented that it had begun to look as though the Soviets really were about to do the incredible, put missiles into Cuba." Now this is the way he was remembering it by December when it's all over. "'How otherwise,' said Hughes, 'would they be putting in so much big antiaircraft stuff?'" Is that right? There was antiaircraft around wasn't there?

STERN: Yeah, I think McCone [John A. McCone]had the same suspicion. Why would they be putting in antiaircraft if they're not trying to protect something?

ROBERTS: At least this is Bowles's ex post facto recollection of what he has said. "He said he has told him all this with a wry smile saying he didn't want Bowles going off to Africa thinking everything was fine." They were very close friends personally. "Next day, Saturday, October 13 . . ." This is the day before the pictures came in, wasn't it?

STERN: Right.

ROBERTS: ". . . Bowles had lunch at the Soviet embassy with Dobrynin [Anatoly F. Dobrynin]. He told me that he told Dobrynin that we Americans think you are putting offensive weapons--missiles and bombers--into Cuba."

STERN: He said that to Dobrynin?

ROBERTS: He says he said that to Dobrynin.

STERN: That's incredible.

ROBERTS: Isn't that incredible?

STERN: I'm skeptical but, of course, he might have.

ROBERTS: "'That is very dangerous. Haven't you read the president's speech on this? The speech of September 4.'"

STERN: September 5.

ROBERTS: "Dobrynin, says Bowles, assured him, 'There is nothing to it, only defensive weapons.'" Now this is what I wrote down the day he told me this story. "All this Bowles told me with a straight face, apparently totally unaware of what he had been doing, doing without any clearance with higher authority. It was the next day, Sunday, October 14 that the clincher pictures were taken, shown to McNamara on Monday and to JFK on Tuesday. Gromyko [Andrei A. Gromyko] saw JFK at the White House on Thursday and must have been told by Dobrynin in advance what Bowles had said." That's my surmise.

STERN: That raises a number of very interesting questions.

ROBERTS: Well it always raised the question to me, What the hell Bowles had done here! Because Dobrynin, the sharp guy that he is, obviously cabled Moscow instantly.

STERN: But do the Americans know?

ROBERTS: That they apparently have found out, if he told Dobrynin what he says he told him. But here he is in December telling me this in a sort of typical Bowles cloud nine.

STERN: And yet there is considerable evidence that although Gromyko clearly knew and lied to the president at the White House that Thursday, that Dobrynin did not know.

ROBERTS: I know that's the general . . .

STERN: He did not know that there were offensive missiles in Cuba. Apparently he was really shocked by it. At least he didn't know then. But if Bowles is telling him. . . .

ROBERTS: Well Bowles is telling him we know you're doing something. Then, clearly did he ask Moscow, Is there something I ought to know?

STERN: That's quite possible and, of course, he might not have been told.

ROBERTS: The general assumption was, my recollection was, that Tommy Thompson [Llewellyn E. Thompson, Jr.] always contended that they had never told Dobrynin, and they probably didn't tell him because it would have spoiled the story and there was always the risk of our reading the traffic. Something like that. But I found this incredible.

STERN: It also relates to some of the other material on your speculation concerning two things. One, the relationship between Vienna meeting and the Cuban missile crisis in that you felt that perhaps Khrushchev had been tempted by the . . .

ROBERTS: It certainly seemed that way.

STERN: . . . perception he had of Kennedy, which turned out to be an inaccurate one. Of course, more interesting, I thought was this business about the discussion with Khrushchev's son-in-law.

ROBERTS: Adzhubei [Aleksei Adzhubei].

STERN: Yes. Perhaps you could elaborate on that. That's a fascinating story.

ROBERTS: That Bowles story--Bowles is a very sick man now, I understand. I don't know whether it's possible to talk to him about it. The only answer to that riddle is Dobrynin, and he's never going to tell us.

STERN: He'll never tell, not a chance.

ROBERTS: This is Kennedy's off-the-record talk to eight hundred newspaper editors on October 16.

STERN: Now at that point he knew about the photos but it was still secret. Did he say anything about Cuba that may have led to any suspicion on the part of those who attended?

ROBERTS: Berlin--this is in the order in which he said it, I presume. As Bill says, there must be a transcript of it. "Cuba and Berlin: There may be differences"--this is indirect, paraphrase--"may be differences of judgment over the crisis ahead"--assumed crisis ahead--"but some kind of climax is obviously building up and we will have to see if we can pass through it without military action." Partly he was throwing dust in everybody's eyes that this was Berlin.

STERN: Well, on the other hand though. . . .

HARTIGAN: I think he was giving a message. I think it was a distinct message.

STERN: I think Bill's right, because clearly the National Security Council meetings that were going on at this time or just begun--this was the sixteenth? Right?--had just begun. There was a great deal of speculation as to certain moves vis-à-vis Cuba leading to Soviet counter-moves in Berlin.

ROBERTS: Well, Rusk was telling us that at the time.

STERN: So clearly he thought of the two things as connected. I think he was giving you a hint. A veiled hint, but a hint.

ROBERTS: Next is Cuba: "Not a direct collision course as Berlin where we had irreconcilable positions up to now. He really said little of Cuba."

STERN: He had to be awfully careful at that point.

ROBERTS: Then I noted that it was at this meeting that he read the famous poem of Ortega's [José Ortega y Gasset], which went right over the top of my head.

STERN: Although in retrospect, you could easily see. . . .

ROBERTS: In retrospect, he was really telling us. I don't think anybody in that group caught it. Then October 11, which was before, "This was a backbround talk of about fifteen correspondents with Rusk late yesterday on the tenth." This was looking at the Berlin thing. "Question: What relationship do you see between Berlin and Cuba? Answer: Despite the understandable anger in the U.S. over Cuba, Berlin is a major-league problem. Cuba may be very expensive for the Russians to support."

STERN: This is the eleventh? Well, of course, Rusk didn't know about the missiles on the eleventh.

ROBERTS: "Did the Soviets link the two? We have reason to know . . ." this is the eleventh; this is interesting, ". . . we have reason to know that if we try to discuss Cuba with them they will try to link Turkey, Iran, et cetera."

STERN: Which, of course, would happen during the crisis.

ROBERTS: He had some reason already to know that they had that thrown at them. "One highly"--this is Rusk--"one highly speculative possibility is that the Soviets would like to provoke us in Cuba as an umbrella for action elsewhere, a sort of new Suez and Hungary. My own guess is that the Russians are under great Cuban pressure for help. What they've put in so far has not been very important militarily. I have only talked with Gromyko on one Cuban item, the ship that was held up in Puerto Rico. He was very angry. Will Gromyko come here to see Kennedy before returning home? Not necessarily. How would you describe our Cuba policy? Is it a policy of harassment of the Castro regime? Answer: Putting U.S. divisions ashore would be the easiest thing to do and that is always available. The question is whether we can find answers short of that. It will turn on making it so expensive and so fruitless that something gives in Cuba. The Soviets have given the Cubans two hundred million in credits but so far only let them use twenty-five million worth. We are for complete isolation of Cuba in this hemisphere to make it cost more. If Khrushchev is unwilling to pay the full bill . . ." And don't forget that U.S.-Cuban trade used to total a billion dollars a year, ". . . then all sorts of opportunities may open up for changes without putting U.S. divisions ashore. That would have a very quick and violent result and wounds we would like to avoid. There would be wounds on Cubans who are anti-Castro. I obviously can't go into things we can't confess to but the opportunities for harassment are limited." He knew what the CIA was doing. "Cuba is small and it's not easy to repeat what Castro himself did. There is now harassment. Castro walks in fear,"

et cetera, et cetera. "You have to play for the breaks." He's being fairly cautious at that point. This is a memo of a talk with Roz Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] on October 26.

STERN: That's just before the crisis was resolved. Two days before.

ROBERTS: Well, the interesting thing in here. . . . There is also note of a short talk I had with Bundy saying, "We expect to get rid of the bases and do so without a trade. We're not interested in a trade. He would not be pinned on the time but said he did not think we should give readers a feeling that they can't have Saturday night parties." So he knew exactly what was going on. "Llewellyn Thompson later this evening was asked why Kennedy did not confront Gromyko with the pictures or fact of the bases. He said at that time we had not really assessed the pictures. We knew something was there. It was a question of whether it was for a surprise attack on the U.S., something to do with Cuba itself, or a step towards diplomatic blackmail." That was about true. "It is rather like. . ." This is what I like about Tommy. "It is rather like finding that your wife is unfaithful. She may know that you know but when you tell her, things are different. Then you had better be prepared, for things will begin to happen." That's a very good way of putting it. "We went very far to give Gromyko an opening which he did not take." Tommy was at State.

STERN: That was the key question that week, Why have they done it? Of course, that was the thing that they could not really know for certain, What was Khrushchev's reasoning? What did he think he was going to gain?

ROBERTS: This was interesting. "The day Mac Bundy retired from the White House, he came over to the Post for lunch. Among the other things, I was taxing him with Schlesinger having said that you couldn't believe anything in the press, that it was all like the shadows in Plato's cave. Arthur made a speech to this effect. Bundy laughed and said JFK told Schlesinger, Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and himself what he wanted to tell them. He said Sorensen was 100 percent wrong about JFK agonizing over the resumption of nuclear testing. That he, Bundy, was convinced Kennedy made the decision and called the meeting only to ratify it." That's interesting; Bundy on Kennedy. I don't know how Mac has been. Do you have a lot of stuff out of him?

STERN: Not as much as we'd like.

ROBERTS: This is the Jean Daniel thing. That's what you're talking about?

STERN: That's right. That's an absolutely fascinating thing.

ROBERTS: It was fascinating. That's the story I wrote about him. This is what happened as far as I was concerned. Do you want to go through this?

STERN: I was struck by the fact that the president used the metaphor of Hungary, the Soviet intervention in Hungary.

ROBERTS: I was too.

STERN: That was very significant.

ROBERTS: This is what happened. I sent Bundy a xerox of this Daniel piece which I got hold of on December 7, '63? Sixty-two?

STERN: It should be '62.

ROBERTS: It had to be '62. "I had sent him Jean Daniel's piece which we are printing on December 11. He had read it and checked the memcon of the JFK luncheon of January 20, 1962, with Adzhubei. He reported JFK did mention Hungary and he said no when asked if the U.S. would invade Cuba. Bundy believes that while Castro did have an anti-invasion motive in seeking missiles and he thinks he did ask for them (not otherwise as Daniel implies from the Castro interview), the Soviet motive was to create new pressures on the U.S. (i.e., Berlin problem at the time) to escape from their own frustrations. He notes that the Soviet-Chinese and the internal Soviet economic problems at that time were more severe than we then knew but now know." That's the Russian-Chinese thing you mentioned. "JFK did not say, as Castro contends, that he found Cuba intolerable but only that it was more difficult for the U.S. Kennedy then went on to say that if you, Adzhubei, want to know how important Cuba is to us, you should remember Hungary. (Meaning, says Mac, how important you found it.) Not that we did not act when the Soviets went into Hungary and therefore we expect the Soviets not to act if we go into Cuba, the version that Daniel reported from Castro." He had gone back and read the memcon of the luncheon and that's his interpretation, defensively about Kennedy. "JFK did not say that the U.S. did not intervene in Hungary as Castro claims Adzhubei's report said he said. Here he read me from the memcon and that is clearly the fact. The luncheon discussion was chiefly on Berlin," that is, the Kennedy-Adzhubei luncheon, "also on Laos and only relatively minor on Cuba in terms of the extent of the conversation. 'Marginal' on Cuba, says Bundy. On Berlin, Kennedy was pushing the thought that the problem was how to avoid extreme measures. At one point, Adzhubei asked Kennedy if the U.S. wanted Cuba to develop as Yugoslavia had developed or wanted it to drift towards a Chinese posture. There appeared to be no direct JFK response to this. Bundy said Kennedy was trying to get the Soviets to know that the U.S. was not weak but it was not going to invade Cuba. He considers this crucial to understanding Kennedy's view in the luncheon talk."

STERN: Seems to be a real contradiction there. He used Hungary as a metaphor and to say we are not going to invade Cuba; he seems to be giving contradictory signals.

ROBERTS: Well, he's trying to say it's important but don't get the idea we are going to invade Cuba. In that sense it's contradictory but it's not hard to understand how Adzhubei read it the other way.

STERN: Oh yes, sure. He can say, What does Hungary mean? It means that the Soviets intervened and the Americans didn't do anything. Therefore, he's saying if we intervene in Cuba, the Russians won't do anything.

ROBERTS: Expect you not to do anything. And he obviously went and told that to Castro. Something to do with Castro's. . . .

STERN: Do you think this could have been connected with the whole--of course we don't know--the genesis of the putting the missiles in Cuba, i.e. to protect Cuba from an American invasion?

ROBERTS: Sure. To Castro's asking for them. I think the Khrushchev book is not totally untrue in his account of that request. That's the end of that story.

STERN: Well that's one side of it, of course, we will probably never know.

ROBERTS: Never know. I think that one has to conclude that Kennedy used some sloppy language there. He was in some pretty dangerous water. Adzhubei was no fool.

STERN: Or at the very least that Adzhubei misinterpreted it.

ROBERTS: I think he had, as I remember, at that luncheon with Adzhubei, wasn't Georgi Bolshakov at that luncheon?

STERN: I don't recall.

ROBERTS: This had something to do with the air alert at the time of Cuba, the missile crisis.

STERN: If I just could add one point, obviously the whole Cuban missile crisis is a strikingly complicated business but this point about this discussion with Abzhubei raises the possibility that sometimes very important international repercussions can result from casual mistakes in language, from perhaps carelessness in the way something is said or the way something might be reinterpreted by someone else. In other words, motive. Sometimes the motive may not be as important as the misunderstanding of those motives.

ROBERTS: Oh, frequently, it's not what you say but how you say it.

HARTIGAN: Don't you think also that in some cases if a statement on a very serious situation comes out in a very simple phraseology that the experts immediately try to find out what is behind it. It can't be that simple. There's got to be more to it, and consequently when you are dealing with other languages in addition to that, or a language problem, you could have a lot of. . . .

ROBERTS: I don't know who was at that luncheon. I don't think Adzhubei spoke any English.

STERN: I don't think he did.

ROBERTS: Bolshakov spoke pretty good English, and he might have been there. Whether he was Adzhubei's interpreter or not, I don't know. The memcon of that luncheon has never been made public has it?

STERN: Not to my knowledge.

ROBERTS: Let me see if there is anything else.

STERN: By the way, you also mention in the book on page 202 that Kennedy had raised the possibility of an American nuclear first strike as an option, which corresponds to this earlier memo.

ROBERTS: Against the Russians.

STERN: That's right.

ROBERTS: That was that flap with Stewart Alsop, [Stewart J. O. Alsop] in the Saturday Evening Post piece. That's somewhere in here too. But I've forgotten the time on that.

STERN: Another sort of footnote to the Cuban missile crisis but one that I personally find very fascinating is the whole thing about what happened at the UN and the sending of McCloy to the UN to "back up Stevenson" and then, of course, the Bartlett [Charles L. Bartlett] article which, of course, caused that enormous flap and almost led to Stevenson's resignation. Did you ever get any sense as to where that originated, who leaked that stuff to Bartlett?

ROBERTS: No. Neither Charlie--he wrote that with Stew didn't he--Stew is dead and Charlie would never tell. He's such a Kennedy loyalist.

STERN: I personally don't think Kennedy gave it to him because he had nothing to gain and it caused him all sorts of trouble and he just had nothing to gain at that time.

ROBERTS: I would think that Charlie and Stew both admired Kennedy in that affair and they felt, probably both felt, that Stevenson was a softball and dangerous and had no compunctions; in fact, they delighted in printing something that made Stevenson look bad without thinking about the position it would put Kennedy in.

STERN: I think in the long run it probably did more damage to Kennedy than it did Stevenson.

ROBERTS: Yes, I think it did. Because it locked Stevenson in the job.

STERN: Exactly. It forced him to make a strong public defense of Stevenson and at the same time to have to face all the charges that he had leaked this material, which I don't think he did.

ROBERTS: In Schlesinger's book, Arthur told the story about how Kennedy heard that I was going to write about this because I called Bundy or somebody or him, I've forgotten. So Kennedy got very worried about it as soon as he realized what was happening.

STERN: Of course the Bartlett connection suggested the Bowles business the year before. That obviously put Kennedy on his guard.

ROBERTS: Well this is a lot of after-the-fact stuff about Cuba by Ball, Alex Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson], Abe Chayes [Abram J. Chayes], Bob Manning [Robert J. Manning]. One story I always like is the one Dean Acheson told. To my knowledge the only place he told it--he came to lunch at the Post one time and he was talking about Kennedy. Murrey Marder wrote it in a piece when Acheson died. It was the first time we ever used it in the Post. This is true. "Acheson was sent by Kennedy to tell de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle] what was coming, to show him the pictures. De Gaulle"--this is Marder's account of Acheson's story--"de Gaulle asked him what President Kennedy intended to do if the Soviet vessels refused to halt at the blockade line of American warships drawn around Cuba. Mr. Acheson said, without any specific instructions, he said he did not dare tell the imperious de Gaulle that the United States had not decided. As a result, Mr. Acheson said he told de Gaulle the United States would sink any ship that tried to go through, would cut off petroleum for Cuba in forty-eight hours, and would land U.S. troops in Cuba if necessary, using six divisions." Nobody but Acheson would have had the nerve to do that. [Laughter] "De Gaulle, satisfied completely, reportedly answered that was exactly what he would do too. Mr. Acheson said that diplomatically he never told President Kennedy what he told de Gaulle." That's a marvelous Acheson story.

STERN: It certainly is, and it's very typical of his advice during the crisis.

ROBERTS: This is a funny little related thing. This is a luncheon I had with Tom Brimelow [Thomas Brimelow] who was the Russian expert at the British embassy at the time. He was later the British ambassador to Moscow. I have started out with, "Facts which may not be used: British Embassy in Havana actually saw intermediate missiles being hauled past it's front door the day of Kennedy's speech, October 22."

STERN: I have never heard that.

HARTIGAN: I'm not surprised though. There were certainly an awful lot of rumors at that time, long before the U-2.

ROBERTS: That was Keating. Keating was floating them.

STERN: There were spy reports coming in, there were all sorts of things.

HARTIGAN: Anybody that in a conversation that--you could go back to Bowles--everybody had information that they could have suggested and they all could have been right.

ROBERTS: This was reported back by the British embassy in Cuba that this thing was going through the street.

STERN: Just days before the photographs finally revealed the missiles, Keating got up in the Senate and said there was six sites. He had been charging in a general way before, but now he suddenly starts saying there were six sites.

ROBERTS: Where did he get this? Did you ever find out?

STERN: That is an absolutely fascinating question. I have a strong suspicion as to where he did get them.

ROBERTS: Where?

STERN: From an operation in the Pentagon run by a man named Colonel John R. Wright, who, subsequent to the publication of Elie Abel's book on the missile crisis [The Missile Crisis], wrote to Abel and sent him what he called, "a copy of my Cuban missile crisis diary" in which he claims that on the basis of the configuration of the antiaircraft sites that he and a number of other people in his office concluded that they had to be protecting offensive sites and he projected six of them.

ROBERTS: And he was right?

STERN: Well it turned out he was right. Abel gives him a footnote. He mentions him twice as having been very smart to have figured that out. I don't know whether Wright leaked this stuff. I have absolutely no evidence for that, but it seems to me that if somebody in the Pentagon concluded days before that there were six sites and then Keating gets up in the Senate and says that there were six sites, there's got to be a connection there.

ROBERTS: Well Keating is dead and he never would tell.

STERN: Somebody in that operation.

ROBERTS: The only person that I know that Ken Keating possibly could have told that to was Nancy Dickerson. Do you know her?

STERN: I've never met her, but I know who she is, of course.

ROBERTS: He was squiring her around at that time before she got married. She lives over in Merrywood [McLean, Virginia], the Kennedy house, the Auchincloss house there.

STERN: That, of course, is speculative.

HARTIGAN: And, of course, I don't think anybody for a moment thinks that Cuba at that time was infallible to being infiltrated in and out, both ways; it was like a subway station. There really weren't any big secrets in Cuba.

ROBERTS: That's true but the idea of the Russians putting their missiles in any other country at that time was toally foreign, and all the Russian experts, both Thompson and Bohlen, said they'd never do it. It was only McCone who said that.

STERN: That's right, and I think McCone's conclusion was more sort of a hunch than anything else.

HARTIGAN: I think a lot of McCone's decision was based on the irritating situation that developed in Vienna. I think both men were in a position to look for something in the spectacular. The experts' advice was: Don't confuse them with the facts, we just don't like each other.

STERN: Kennedy asked, of course, in September for an intelligence estimate, and he got what came to be called the September estimate from the intelligence establishment which said: No, they'll never do it. It's impossible. Why would they do it, it's crazy? But they did it.

ROBERTS: Here's another thing: I have a scribbled note here, talking with Mac Bundy, April 21, '61.

STERN: That's the Bay of Pigs.

ROBERTS: "Nobody thought it would turn out to be quite as rough as it did." I remember saying to him something like this, Why was it that once this began to leak about this CIA operation and the Nicaragua thing and the Cubans in Miami and everything--why didn't you stop and take another look? And he said, "After the publicity we just didn't reexamine the odds." I think that is a key to one of the reasons of the disaster. I think we had some further conversation at a later period about whether government officials who live in the world of top secret get themselves wrapped in this cocoon so much that they can't see what's public out there. This was really the supreme example of it.

This is the first strike against the Chinese thing. Do you remember that?

STERN: Yes.

ROBERTS: There are two fragments here. January 21, 1965. This was a conversation with Ray Cline [Ray S. Cline] who was then deputy director of the CIA for intelligence. Before he was in the State Department. The last thing in this says, "JFK was deeply intrigued by arguments for knocking out Chinese Communist nuke installations and . . .

BEGIN TAPE THREE

ROBERTS: . . . some involved at the time felt it would have been okayed by him, that is Kennedy, but they were doubtful of LBJ." By this time, of course, Johnson is president. "Probably could have been done by CHINAT [Chinese National] operation who then and still anxious to try rather than by overt aircraft or by agreement with Soviets. Could appear to be an industrial accident." Cline, of course, was a great Chinese Nationalist guy. He served in Taiwan. He was Chiang Ching-Kuo's tutor. His wife taught Chiang Ching-Kuo whatever English he knows. As far as I know they still are very friendly.

Second piece of evidence about this also has to do with Cline. Cline went on to become the CIA guy in Germany, and we sent a young reporter over there named Dan Morgan to be our correspondent, and I told him among other people to look up, to go find Ray. He wrote me back--this is July 10, 1967, among other things he says, "I finally had lunch with your friend Ray Cline. Attaché ? in the U.S. embassy, and he seems to be quite interesting. During our conversation he mentioned that in 1963 Harriman had gone to Moscow and offered to share with the Russians U.S. information about Chinese nuclear developments. This was before the Chinese H-bomb explosion, but I'm not sure whether it was before or after Cuba." It was after. "He mentioned that this still could be a point of interest along with ABM [antiballistic missile] for the Soviets, though he thinks their intelligence on China is now probably as good as ours. He also mentioned that our intelligence shows that the Chinese nuclear plants are modeled on the Soviet who apparently supplied them. On the Harriman offer the Russians turned us down cold apparently." And I wrote him back, "When Harriman went to Moscow, 1963, to wrap up the nuclear test ban treaty, we know from Schlesinger's book that he did discuss China with Khrushchev, but I had not heard before your letter that Harriman 'offered to share with the Russians U.S. information about Chinese nuclear development.'" I asked him to see if he could find out something more but he never did. I don't know what the story is there.

STERN: That's fascinating.

ROBERTS: I tried Harriman once or twice on that, but he just brushed me off. He would never talk about it.

STERN: I hope you will consider the possibility of donating these documents to the library.

ROBERTS: I'll talk to you about it. This has to do with the Pentagon Papers. There's a note from Roswell Gilpatric after he got to New York but this is really a much, much later business. Back to Kennedy.

This is a background dinner with Senator Kennedy in May 8, 1958. This is a memo by Bob Estabrook, who was then head of our editorial page. The interesting thing in it, he ran down the list of all his then potential opponents for the nomination for the presidency, and his estimate of Nixon that he was giving at this point to the press was, "Kennedy served with Nixon in the House and always regarded Nixon as a man of really enormous ability who was consistently underestimated. He thinks Nixon has really worked at his job and would be a formidable man to beat in 1960. He also thinks, however, that Nixon is at heart very much more conservative than the pose that he has adopted publicly for reasons of expediency." Pretty good estimate wasn't it?

STERN: A very accurate one, I think.

ROBERTS: "Lyndon Johnson. Kennedy rates him as a superbly able tactician, but a man who has no very firm principles and does not believe in anything very deeply. He compares Johnson in some ways to Nixon. He thinks Johnson will be cautious this year in trying to cut the USIA [United States Information Agency] appropriation having been burned from last year." He's not very good on Johnson though. It's interesting to look at the people he was talking about or the press was asking him about as potential candidates. This is the list: Richardson Dilworth, Averell Harriman, Bob Meyner [Robert W. Meynor], Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], Mennen Williams [G. Mennen Williams], Adlai Stevenson, Stuart Symington, Estes Kefauver [Estes C. Kefauver], Lyndon Johnson, and Kennedy himself.

STERN: What did he say about Stevenson and Humphrey?

ROBERTS: "Humphrey, a very able man but tagged with past extremism and unpopular in some sectors."

STERN: Stevenson, I assume. . . .

ROBERTS: "Stevenson, perhaps the ablest and most attractive man in the party and possibly the compromise candidate, but one who stands very little chance of election because of his past defeats. Kennedy thinks Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] would rather run against Stevenson than anyone else. Lyndon Johnson, an able man but a man who has had a heart attack and has not been able to create a national following. He is still viewed as a sectional candidate."

STERN: I think he was absolutely right.

ROBERTS: That was true at that time.

STERN: At that time, sure.

ROBERTS: "Kennedy on Kennedy himself. Jack is quite frank about his own Catholicism being a drawback along with his youth. He thinks he has as good a chance as anyone else, however, and he would not like to change places with any of them. But he believes that none of the candidates on the horizon at the moment is very promising." That was typical of the kind of disarming way he handled the press.

STERN: In light of that, you mentioned that you had a talk with him in his hotel room on the eve of, or very shortly before, the election. Let me quote one point here and perhaps you can elaborate on it. "We talked about some of the details of the campaign and some of the potential risks he had taken." And you say, "He was fatalistic about the outcome." I wonder if you might remember some of what he considered the risks.

ROBERTS: I don't seem to have a memo on that. I tried to find one when I was writing that.

STERN: It would just be interesting to see how he perceived the thing.

ROBERTS: It was in some place like Detroit or Cleveland. It must have been maybe the Saturday night before. I think he ended up in Boston, didn't he, on election eve?

STERN: Right. On election night.

ROBERTS: Anyway, he was in this hotel room and Kenny was the doorkeeper. I asked Kenny during the day--I had been out with him on that last swing. I had written some very favorable pieces about him, too. I said, "Kenny, I'm going back to Washington tonight" or tomorrow or whatever it was, "and I'd like to see him a minute." He said, "I'll see what I can do." He called me up and said, "Come up to the room." It was just before dinner. I walked into this big--it was sort of a suite--big living room and I heard Kennedy say, "Chal, come on in here." He was in the bathtub soaking his back in hot water. He was sitting in the bathtub. Kenny and I were sitting in the doorway during this conversation, so it was not a place for taking notes. He talked about the--I wish I could remember the things he said or I asked him about the things he said during the campaign, some of the contretemps with Nixon. I don't remember any more than than impression that he would have had.

STERN: That's too bad. It would have been interesting to know what he thought he might have done wrong or what he wished he had done differently.

ROBERTS: I don't think he was saying I wish I had done any of it different. If he had said that I would have remembered it.

STERN: What do you mean by saying he was fatalistic about the, about the outcome?

ROBERTS: He was taking the position, "Well, I've done my damnedest and I can't do anything more." And the pols were all saying it's just too close to call, and his own people were telling him it was damn close in this state or that state, and everybody could smell exactly what happened. He was just saying, "It's in the lap of the gods." It was just that kind of an attitude. He got up during the conversation and dried himself off and put that back thing--corset kind of thing--on he had. That's the last time I saw him before he was elected.

STERN: I was struck also that you mentioned that he had a distaste for handshaking.

ROBERTS: I don't think he liked physical contact with people.

STERN: He certainly seemed to relish it in the public sense.

ROBERTS: Well the hand--that kind of thing, yes, but that's not what I meant exactly. I think I remember seeing him one time in this kind of situation. It's very common for politicians--if there are two guys walking along, you and I would probably walk along with our hands in our pockets or something. But there is something about politics that's closer and you frequently see--Humphrey does it a lot, he'll have his arm over somebody's shoulder. I never saw Kennedy--I can't ever remember Kennedy putting his arm over anybody's shoulder. I have a recollection somewhere, someplace, seeing him during the campaign, of some politician coming up and putting his hand around Kennedy's back and Kennedy being uncomfortable with this. Now it could have been that he felt that this particular person might feel that corset under his coat or shirt or was trying to feel it. I don't know. He was sensitive. Remember there had been a lot in the campaign about the health and about his medication and so on. So that might have been it. I had the feeling that he didn't like that kind of physical togetherness. He was not the handshaker.

HARTIGAN: Do you consider the possibility that the fact he was in pain . . .

ROBERTS: That might have . . . .

HARTIGAN: . . . and it was an effort he didn't want to reveal I'm sure that to even lift his hands. You've never really seen him lifting his children up. I can recall back in the Senate campaigns where parents would want to take a picture of him holding the youngster. All he needed was one thing to go out and it was the end of his campaigning. Would you consider that possibility as. . . .

ROBERTS: That's a possibility. Do you remember when he was in the White House the photographers were always trying to get him to pick up

Caroline [Caroline B. Kennedy]. Once he did and it just raised hell with his back.

HARTIGAN: It was a big risk on his part to do that.

ROBERTS: We didn't know. He kept that pretty damn secret, about that back.

STERN: There's a very famous photo of him arriving, coming back in the helicopter--not photo, a movie clip. I think it was used in A Thousand Days. He gets off the helicopter and John-John [John F. Kennedy Jr.] comes running up to him and you can see, literally, that he wanted to pick him up but he didn't.

HARTIGAN: We went through this during the state campaigns.

ROBERTS: That far back. I was thinking that this got so much worse, didn't it, after that tree-planting business in Canada?

HARTIGAN: That was one of those things that I'm referring to, that he was always conscious of it going out, and he couldn't afford any time off the campaign.

ROBERTS: That time it went out it was just before he went to Paris to meet de Gaulle. I was one of the pool reporters on his plane going to Paris. From Boston we went to Paris that night. We didn't know that this had happened and that his back was in such trouble. [Interruption] It gets pretty far out and in fact a lot of it is stuff from the public record.

STERN: There are just maybe one or two more general questions that I wanted to ask you perhaps in sort of winding it up. One, I was very struck in your essay on JFK by your sense of his maturity, particularly as you were saying in the beginning of the talk about the growing realization of the complexities of foreign policy problems and how different he was by the time he delivered the American University speech and, of course, the test ban treaty as compared, say, to the inaugural address. Was that apparent to you at that time or was that something you pretty much picked up in retrospect?

ROBERTS: It's always an awful lot easier in retrospect, but I'd like to think it was clear as it went along. But it certainly wasn't. At least I don't think it was. The only way I could answer that question is to go back and read everything I wrote and see whether I ever wrote anything that seemed to indicate that.

STERN: There certainly was a major shift of emphasis from the Cuban missile crisis on.

ROBERTS: Here's some note I made to myself at some point. "JFK affected by (1) poverty he found during the West Virginia primary, (2) his visit as a congressman to Vietnam and his meeting with Ed Gullion [Edmund A. Gullion], (3) the Khrushchev, January 6, '61, speech on the wars of national liberation, and (4) his narrow election." I think all those things shaped his attitude as he began. Those were sort of the-baggage-he-brought-into-office kind of thing. The experience of the Bay of Pigs and the missile crisis, test ban, and meeting this incredible Khrushchev obviously tempered him tremendously. Just the same kind of thing that's happening with this guy [Jimmy Carter]. It didn't happen enough probably to Johnson. I thought in retrospect that Kennedy--I said I thought he was too young. I suppose what that means is that he was immature--after all I don't think I was unaffected by the fact that that election, the Kennedy-Nixon election, was the first election that I covered where both the candidates were younger than I was.

STERN: Nixon was almost as young as Kennedy. He was born in 1913.

ROBERTS: I know. So even though these two guys--even though one was already vice president running for president of the United States. . . . When you get to the point where the people you're writing about are younger than you are, it does something to your psyche. I wasn't as much older than they were as Walter Lippman was, but I nonetheless was affected by that in some way. That was true of a lot of people, because he was younger than a hell of a lot of people who were writing about him. Both of them were.

STERN: There's a very famous story about, I can't recall who it was, recommending somebody for a position as director of budget and saying no I really don't think he'd be good for that; he's too young. And, of course, the person being recommended was a year older than the president. [Laughter]

ROBERTS: There was a sudden . . .

STERN: . . . realization, right.

HARTIGAN: I often remember Kenny mentioning in jest, every once in a while, that Larry [Lawrence F. O'Brien] was the only one on the staff that was older than the candidate. Did you cover any of the primaries?

ROBERTS: I was out in Wisconsin and West Virginia.

STERN: You have that marvelous letter from Humphrey.

ROBERTS: Isn't that a fascinating letter?

STERN: That's a marvelous letter.

ROBERTS: I think Hubert had some points, too.

HARTIGAN: Did you anticipate the results of both those, having covered them?

ROBERTS: Well the Wisconsin one, I think we thought that it was one of those things where the delegates went by congressional district. It was obviously going to be split. Hubert was known as the third senator in the western part of the state.

HARRIGAN: And they had crossovers.

ROBERTS: They had crossover, that crazy kind of thing. The whole question was whether Kennedy, as I remember it now, was going to "win" which meant, not win one more than one half but, clobber Humphrey. And since he didn't, it was considered not a win even though it was a win. Kennedy complained about that bitterly.

HARTIGAN: I remember that. Then he went on to West Virginia.

ROBERTS: Then the question was in West Virginia. The thing about West Virginia that I think is true though--Kennedy, I guess he was lured into there by that Harris [Louis Harris] poll, apparently. I was riding around with Humphrey on this goddamn bus where they practically made us pay bus fare at every stop because he was so busted. Jim Rowe [James H. Rowe] was crying poor all the time. The thing about West Virginia, I think, that has never really been adequately run down was the Catholic vote business. The Kennedy campaign, Kennedy himself, Bobby sold West Virginia as a great victory because it proved that a Catholic candidate could win in an overwhelmingly Protestant state. It's true that in some of those hollows down there, there were all these fundamentalists churches. You couldn't escape them. But I always had the feeling, and it was very difficult to prove, that that state was less Protestant in the sense that the Kennedys were selling it than it was atheist or nonreligious. I think there are an awful lot of voters who had no religious feelings. It did demonstrate that Kennedy could get Protestant votes. There was no question about that. But I don't think it did to the degree that Kennedy made a case out of it. Of course, that was his perfectly good political right to make the case out of it.

HARTIGAN: That's interesting that you mention that as a reporter because the staff during both of these primaries felt that the Catholic issue was much more devastating in Wisconsin than it was in West Virginia. But every time you read the press, this was the Bible Belt and this was where it was going to be proven. But the experience didn't dictate that.

ROBERTS: I know we built the damn thing up.

HARTIGAN: You built it up. We went down there and found less hostility in West Virginia in the primary than we had. . . . But you folks . . .

STERN: What if LBJ had run in West Virginia?

ROBERTS: Well Byrd [Robert C. Byrd], Bob Byrd, was trying to get him to run. Here's a note from Kenny--this was after the election. I sent him a note about Ed Gullion who was trying to get into the disarmament agency.

STERN: Johnson, it seems to me, would have campaigned in a manner which would have been very attractive in West Virginia.

HARTIGAN: He believed the press, too. In other words, if Kennedy got defeated in West Virginia, Humphrey was not a threat to Johnson because Johnson could have handled Humphrey. At least he thought he did, his people. So therefore it was an ideal situation for letting Kennedy go down the tube. But the point is, everybody was believing press releases and press reports and the experience no way dictated it. Many people we've talked to from the oral histories were all quite surprised that we were getting a home run ball pitched at us here. We might as well hit it out of the ball park. I think you'd agree with that as a. . . .

ROBERTS: Sure. There was a lot of mythmaking involved in these things, in these campaigns.

STERN: I wonder if I could raise one other point which is really my final point. Do you feel differently about Kennedy now after fourteen years than you did, say, in '63 or '70? Of course the revisionists are now at work.

ROBERTS: I think the revisionists, like most revisionists, have gone far, far too far. I think that the question of Kennedy is unanswerable because he was killed so soon. What he would have been like--I suppose my feeling would be that he was growing in the job. By the time of the American University speech in terms of foreign affairs, he was really getting a handle on things. What he would have done in Vietnam, I don't know. You cannot answer that question because you cannot know what the circumstances would have been. Do you suppose if he'd run against Goldwater and beaten Goldwater as badly as Johnson beat Goldwater, he would have had the political power to get out of Vietnam by saying the whole thing's been a mistake? But I don't know whether any politician would ever at that point say that. We were in Vietnam. It's popular to say that Kennedy wasn't really in it and that Johnson landed the troops in Da Nang, the marines and everything, but Kennedy might have landed the troops in Da Nang. The thing was sort of like this: it wasn't in jumps; it just sort of crawled along and while people were paying attention to other things the goddamn war kept saying more, more, more, more and a little more and a little more and a lot of the military kept feeding this stuff.

I always thought that all the presidents from Truman on out with the single exception of Eisenhower were really terrible victims of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to different degrees. They all were terribly afraid of the Joint Chiefs. They were afraid that these guys knew something about this mysterious thing called military that they didn't know, and that somehow or other if they

opposed you, a civilian president, with their military knowledge and prestige you were really in for trouble. Well that's demonstrated in Kennedy's case by all the work he did to get them behind the test ban treaty. In Johnson's case, too. Eisenhower was the only guy who had been a member of the Joint Chiefs, and he knew they were just as human as everybody else and they made a lot of bum errors, and he was the only guy who could face up to them. It's a hell of a thing about the American system but that's true. It's just as true today except that the military has been discredited so much because of Vietnam. I think Kennedy to that degree was the prisoner of the Joint Chiefs. So I don't think that it's so easy to accept Kenny's belief that--because Kennedy said after we get reelected we can get out. That was his political judgment of it.

HARTIGAN: I think your point that you made that not knowing what the facts would have been at that time period you could question the story, but I think based on what it was then it's a different situation. And, of course, we're running into the same thing now because the current president, Carter, is doing everything to get support for the Panama Canal from the military. So even as badly as they've been hurt reputationwise, their own military still worries about them.

ROBERTS: This is a little fragment of the Alsop-Bartlett piece about Stevenson, the Stevenson part of it. This is a memo of a conversation with Bromley Smith. "He told me," this is April '66, he told me this much later.

STERN: It's after Stevenson's death too.

ROBERTS: Yeah. "When Alsop and Bartlett's Saturday Evening Post article appeared, Kennedy called Smith at a dinner party to ask him just what Stevenson had said during the Ex-Com [Executive Committee] meetings. Smith, who was the notetaker for those sessions, said he couldn't say offhand. So, at Kennedy's request he went back to the White House to go through the files. The file is now in the JFK Library papers, he says. Adlai was so upset he got Clayton Fritchey to tell Smith that Adlai had permission from Kennedy to look at the notes. Smith asked McGeorge Bundy what to do. Bundy ran upstairs and argued Kennedy out of it on the grounds that the notes were for presidential use only. So Adlai insisted on putting into the file with the note a memorandum on his own recollection. This he based, Smith said, on a memo he had of items he had intended to raise at the White House meeting, Ex-Com, on the Cuban missile crisis, but Smith, who read it against his notes, says that Adlai hadn't raised all those points, only some of them, even though, by looking back at his memo, he may have thought he had done so." It shows you how intricate and how dangerous the human memory is.

STERN: That would suggest again, though, that if Kennedy called Smith to ask what did Stevenson say that he would not have leaked the materials because he didn't know.

ROBERTS: That conversation he knew was safe because Smith would never tell anybody anything. This is all a lot of the campaign staff.

HARTIGAN: Are you through with your questions?

STERN: I think so.

HARTIGAN: How about one last one that probably is not as historically important as others but it's one that seems to be of interest to students. Where were you when Kennedy was assassinated?

ROBERTS: If you look at the Washington Post for the next morning you'll see a front page story I wrote. I was having lunch with somebody from the White House. The boss was out of town, everything was relaxed, damned if I remember who it was. Somebody was in town who hadn't gone off so I thought I might use this as a useful time to have lunch and learn something. We had lunch. I walked back to the office. I had just gotten in--we were then in the L street building--gotten into the office and I walked back towards the room where the teletype machines were and somebody, one of the copy boys--the bells had just rung. I don't think I heard them ring--I think they had just rung--and the copy boys ran out saying, "Kennedy's been shot" or something like that. I instantly ran in. It was just starting on Smitty's [Merriman Smith] story on the UP [United Press International] ticker, I guess. Russ Wiggins [James Russell Wiggins] the editor came in just about that time from wherever he had been for lunch. What time was it, one? That was Dallas time.

STERN: Well 12:30 Dallas time was when it happened, so it was 1:30 here.

ROBERTS: So the first bulletin was pretty damn close to that. So I must have gone to a 12:00 o'clock lunch. Wiggins started the works rolling. I started running around like mad. I couldn't believe it. How long was it before they said he was dead?

STERN: Half an hour.

ROBERTS: It was a beautiful, lovely autumn day in Washington. I wrote some of that in the story.

HARTIGAN: Well thank you very much, Mr. Roberts.

STERN: Thank you.