Press Panel Interview with White House Correspondents: George Herman, Peter Lisagor and Mary McGrory – JFK#1, 08/04/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: George Herman, Peter Lisagor and Mary McGrory
Interviewer: Fred Holborn
Date of Interview: August 4, 1964
Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 104 pages

Biographical Note
Press Panel Interview with White House correspondents: George Herman (1920 - 2005) of CBS, Peter Lisagor (1915 - 1976) of *Chicago Daily News*, and Mary McGrory (1918 - 2004) of the *Washington Evening Star* conducted in 1964. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy's [JFK] relationship with the press prior to and during his presidency, among other topics.

Access
Open –Portion(s) Closed

Usage Restrictions
Copyright of these materials has passed to the United States Government upon the deaths of the interviewees. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright
The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview
These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any

concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation
Press Panel Interview with White House Correspondents: George Herman, Peter Lisagor and Mary McGrory, recorded interview by Frank Holborn, August 4, 1964 (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

Press Panel Interview with White House Correspondents: George Herman, Peter Lisagor, and Mary McGrory

Although a legal agreement was not signed during the lifetime of George Herman, Peter Lisagor, and Mary McGrory, upon their deaths, ownership of the recording and transcript of their interview for the Oral History Program passed to the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

The following terms and conditions apply:

1. The transcript is available for use by researchers.

2. The tape recording shall be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

3. Copyright to the interview transcript and tape is assigned to the United States Government.

4. Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request for a fee.

5. Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.

Press Panel Interview with White House Correspondents: George Herman, Peter Lisagor and Mary McGrory – JFK #1
Table of Contents

Press Panel Interview

with

White House Correspondents:
GEORGE HERMAN
PETER LISAGOR
MARY McGRORY

August 4, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Fred Holborn

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HOLBORN: This is a panel interview for the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library oral history series devoted to the subject of President Kennedy and the press. It's being conducted the evening of August 4, 1964, in the apartment of Mary McGrory. The participants are Mary McGrory, Peter Lisagor, George Herman. Due to the crisis that has occurred in Vietnam and the President's speech this evening, we are temporarily without Tom Wicker, but later during this tape Tom Wicker of *The New York Times* may also be heard. The interviewer is Fred Holborn. I think we can anticipate that there will be several telephonic and perhaps other interruptions during this conversation. The listener must understand that on this evening there is a presidential statement on TV as well as the announcement a few minutes ago that the civil rights workers who had been presumed killed in Mississippi were found today.

[-1-]

Well, simply by way of getting started, and if we can lift ourselves over this crisis atmosphere this evening, the easiest way, I think, to begin is simply for each of the three of you to recount the early circumstances in which you first knew Kennedy, whether as a private citizen, a congressman, a senator, a candidate, or president. Then we shall move from there a little bit

more systematically on to some of the specific topics. I think, Mary, you were by far the earliest to know Kennedy, and I think, if I recall correctly, you knew him even before he entered Congress in Boston.

MCGRORY: Yes. I met him — I'm trying to remember the year. When would he have run? He was….

HOLBORN: 1946.

MCGRORY: 1946, yes. His picture was in all the papers. He was the hero, the newest of the Kennedys which was always a glamorous clan in Massachusetts. His grandfather was John F. Fitzgerald, Honey Fitz; his father was [Joseph P., Sr.] Joe Kennedy, the great financier; his mother was Rose Kennedy, the most beautiful woman of her day in Boston. There he was, home from the Pacific after great exploits in the PT boat and obviously going somewhere politically. The first time I saw him was at the Parker House where he was making a speech. His grandfather was there. They're both very tousle-headed, the grandfather silver and Jack sandy, and they were both smiling, obviously both happy with each other. As I remember it, he made a speech about Ireland, but mostly I remember the smile and thinking how yellow he was from the malaria and how thin and how attractive.

HOLBORN: This would presumably then have been in the primary campaign.

[-2-]

MCGRORY: Yes. I knew one of his sort of handlers very well. Mostly young Irish were around him because they had great hopes of him. They were sick of the *Last Hurrah* type politician. So they'd all rallied 'round Jack. I remember all the streetcars had signs saying, "The new generation offers a leader." They were always in a rush. He was never alone. He was always in a rush. There were always several determined young men with him, and they told me they never could get a hat on him. At the last minute going out the door, he'd reach in the closet for any hat that was there. He'd put it on, and sometimes it wouldn't go down over his hair, sometimes it fell down over his ears. I remember there was a great excitement around him then because, well, he was young and good looking and a hero. He had a following.

HOLBORN: Did you come to know him personally during that campaign?

MCGRORY: No, I didn't. No, I just heard that one speech and wrote a little bit about it.

HERMAN: When did he first meet you?

MCGRORY: In the Parker House.

LISAGOR: When did he first become aware of you, my dear?

HERMAN: When did he first really meet you?
MCGRORY: Oh, oh. I don't think he ever really did. [Laughter]

LISAGOR: He never came to know the real you, did he?

MCGRORY: No. Well, I don't know, but I mean….

HOLBORN: Well, did he always identify you with Boston?

[-3-]

MCGRORY: I think so, yes.

HOLBORN: But it wasn't till you came to Washington that you…

MCGRORY: No, and when I came here — remember I came as a book reviewer — he was always saying to me, "Why don't you write about politics?" In the early days, I remember we had some rather pedestrian reporter who covered District affairs, and he was on the District Committee and bored to death with it. I remember they'd come back and tell stories about him. They didn't quite know what to make of him. They found him rather exhilarating but a little different. The District was always pushing for home rule, and they used to advance in great earnest hordes on him, and he'd just sort of sit through it. One of the reporters told me that after one of these visitations, he came to Congressman Kennedy, as he then was, and Kennedy said, "Gee, those goofs are really obnoxious." He said, "That means we're doing the best we can." That was the quote he gave him. That's about all I remember from those days.

Then when he was going to run for the Senate, I told him not to with my usual prescience. [Laughter]

HOLBORN: Solicited or unsolicited?

MCGRORY: Well, I don't know. We were talking about it in the House lobby. I was there on another matter, and he came out and told me he was going to do it, and I said, "But why? What's the choice between you and Henry Cabot Lodge?" I have no reason to think he enjoyed the discussion, and he certainly didn't take the advice. I told him I didn't see any real difference between them.

[-4-]

Am I still to…. Has anyone entered this era yet?

ALL: No, no.

HOLBORN: No, you're still all on your own.

MCGRORY: Well, I remember him during the Senate campaign. I think he certainly showed his great, sort of champion, thoroughbred quality most vividly during that campaign, which was very hard fought. He had the further complicating difficulty of McCarthy, Joseph R., that is. Kennedy had the support of Basil Brewer and conservative Republicans who were alienated because [Robert A.] Taft was not nominated in Chicago; the Republicans took [Dwight D.] Eisenhower instead. So they were supporting Kennedy out of spite. They were also very pro-McCarthy. And his own family, Jack Kennedy's own family, had certain ties with Joe. I never thought that either Jack or his brother Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] felt the sort of outrage that many other people felt at the time about McCarthy's methods and purpose, which seemed to so many other people just to destroy and stir people up and so forth. But at any rate, luckily for Kennedy, Lodge was no more eager to take on McCarty so that that issue, which was really one of the most inflammable issues of the day, was really moot. The whole thing came to a climax with a debate. I think it was in Waltham, Massachusetts.

HOLBORN: The League of Women Voters in Waltham.

MCGRORY: Yes. And he came on the stage, and he looked absolutely wonderful. He just looked like a prince of the blood, very slim, hollow-cheeked, with the thatch of hair, and a dark suit, you know, very suave and sort of…. What am I trying to say?

HOLBORN: Debonair.

[-5-]

MCGRORY: Yes. And well-groomed. I mean, I don't think he was so famous for his grooming in those days but, anyway, he looked perfectly wonderful. He had on sort of a silver tie. A sort of stir went through that audience when he came on. I remember that gesture of fingering the tie. He was always pushing it in even when it wasn't out. He just took Lodge. That's all there was to it. It was a sort of foretaste of what he did to [Richard M.] Nixon. He was totally self-possessed, had all the facts at his command, and charmed everybody.

LISAGOR: Was it an out and out debate?

MCGRORY: Well, one spoke, and then the other spoke, and then I believe they answered questions.

HERMAN: No, but did he win by personality or force of debate?

MCGRORY: Well, it was the whole aura. It was his appearance; it was his manner; and, as he said himself, "Life is unfair," it was his charm. He was just the most charming person imaginable. I mean, it really…. Lodge just wasn't in it, that's all. Here was this handsome, graceful, articulate creature, and I think everybody was

inclined to give him exactly what he wanted, which was a seat in the Senate. You know, it was as simple as that.

LISAGOR: What year was that?

MCGRORY: That was 1952.

LISAGOR: '52.

MCGRORY: Yes, and as you all know, he won that. Then I saw him again in 1958 when he was running against Vincent Celeste.

[-6-]

HOLBORN: Celeste.

HERMAN: You saw him also in 1956 in the [Adlai E.] Stevenson campaign at Notre Dame. You introduced me to him at the airport.

MCGRORY: Did I?

HERMAN: He came to make a speech for Stevenson. We were campaigning with Adlai, and you introduced me to him at the airport on a rainy day at Notre Dame.

MCGRORY: Oh, was anything said?

HERMAN: Just…. It was my first meeting with him so I, you know, remember more sort of absorbing his appearance and so forth. He seemed to me at that time a very chilly, self-possessed young man. He had sort of a cold look, you know. With those blond eyelashes he could give you a very cold look. And you introduced me to him. But he was obviously very pleased to see you and very fond of you. It was a fairly brief meeting.

MCGRORY: I saw him again during that campaign in an airport in Denver. I had been traveling with [Estes] Kefauver, which was the gayest campaign in the history of politics. [Laughter] I was with a whole crowd of people who really considered themselves of no importance and who spent all their time writing funny telegrams. And there was…. You weren't there….

LISAGOR: Blair Clark.

[-7-]

MCGRORY: Yes. And Cyrille Hillman and Peter Hackes and all sort of, at that time, very second string people. None of the great prima donnas and tenors of

the corps were with us. I had just gotten to Denver, and they sent me twelve collect telegrams, just hilarious, just all sorts about the chicken feed figures in Missoula, Montana, and that the *Time* correspondent hadn't stopped writing since I left the plane, and that in memory of me, going over Kalispell, [John] Chadwick or Clark or one of them got up and got to the microphone and said, "We are passing over Kalispell. In tribute to Mary McGrory, we will turn off the motors for three minutes."

LISAGOR: Over what?

MCGRORY: Kalispell, Montana. So I got there, and there were all these telegrams, and I came away from the phone laughing, and I saw Kennedy and he said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Well, what are you doing here?" I had all these funny hats I'd collected, and he tried them on one by one, I remember, in the middle of the airport in Denver. He said, "Who are you with?" And I told him, and he told me who he knew and who he didn't know. And he went his way and I went mine. So it was 1956.

HOLBORN: Well, now you're beginning to enter into this time zone. You might just finish here what you were about to say about 1958, the campaign of Vincent Celeste.

MCGRORY: I remember going to his apartment on Bowdoin Street. It was full of men, and I believe he had his shoes off. He had woolen socks. I was cross because it was early in the morning. He was cross because I was there, and he was going to have to do something about me, and he obviously didn't want to. He wanted to plan. He sent me to the kitchen and a nice old man made me a piece of toast and a cup of coffee.

HOLBORN: Phil Murphy, the janitor.

MCGRORY: And then we campaigned all day. I don't remember a single thing he said or did. No recollection.

HOLBORN: That was typical of that campaign. He never saw a rally. He went to an opening of a new plant in Concord, I remember.

MCGRORY: Oh, yes, you were there, you were there. Do you remember anything that was said or done? Did you think you were with a future President of the United States? I certainly didn't.

HOLBORN: Well, at what point did you first conceive of him as a strong possibility in your own mind?

MCGRORY: When he was inaugurated. [Laughter]

HOLBORN: Well, that's different.

LISAGOR: You didn't have that trouble alone, Mary. We all had that trouble, really.

MCGRORY: I really had it very badly, and he knew it.

LISAGOR: My first experience with him…

HOLBORN: Pete, right.

LISAGOR: I was just saying that I don't remember which was my first experience with Kennedy, but I had three experiences with newspaper groups: one in 1956 after he'd come back from his trip…. Well, it was the first day, maybe it was early '57, the first day that the Senate Labor Committee opened its racket hearings, Senate Labor Racket Committee. There was a luncheon for him. I remember Roscoe Drummond was there, [Charles W.] Chuck Roberts, and a fellow named Philip Deane of the

London Observer, and myself, Marguerite Higgins. He was sitting talking about who was going to be the presidential candidate in 1960 for the Democrats. I said, "Well…." We got to talking about it, and he said he didn't have any ideas, but he raised the question. And Roscoe Drummond said, "Well, you know, it could be a fellow like Jack Kennedy." And I simply said, really to be perverse, "Never. The only person that the Democrats could agree on in 1960 is the man they've agreed on twice before, and that's Adlai Stevenson." And I scarcely knew Jack Kennedy, but his jaw dropped and he got mad. He just got angry, and he said, "How can you say a thing like that? Adlai Stevenson is the most embittered human being I know. He is embittered. He's been embittered by these two defeats, and he just wouldn't be worth another run at this thing."

HERMAN: When was this, Pete?

HOLBORN: It would have been '57, I guess.

LISAGOR: '57 that's right, early '57. It occurred then to me that he was running for the presidency. We carried on this conversation for a while, and Roscoe turned to me and said, "Are you doing this because you believe it or just because you want to be perverse?" I said I really didn't know why I was doing it at the time except, you know, it was interesting to watch Kennedy's reaction to it — "No, I really believe that the Democrats are so split up, so divided, that they couldn't really agree on anybody." And this was so far in advance of the '60 campaign for anything that it was ridiculous.

But then a group of Nieman Fellows had Senator Kennedy to dinner one night. Clark Mollenhoff arranged it. He was then, as you know, the great rackets sleuth. He brought this young fellow to the dinner, and we sat there, and the thing that struck me most about Kennedy that night was the big, black, or big, long cigar he smoked. You know, it was a typical Irish politician from Boston. We thought he didn't look the part at all because he was, as Mary described him earlier, a very suave, handsome, attractive young man.

But he dwelt on the labor movement, labor leaders, in a most candid way. I never have heard a man describe labor leaders so candidly, especially one who was regarded as a friend of labor, who was thought to be the kind who would never say, in front of a group of newspapermen at least, anything unfriendly about any labor leader. Instead Kennedy said some of the most outlandish things about these labor leaders and won everybody in the room to him because of what we thought then was an absolutely uncommon candor in a politician.

But I remember one thing so vividly. As he left that dinner that night and walked out with those thin legs of his — really the legs of a kind of a well-groomed athlete, sort of walked out with that athletic stride that I always thought he had — with his pants bottom very tight around his ankles and looking for all the world like some young fellow just out of college, one person I can't remember who, turned to me and said, "Can you imagine that young fellow ever believing that he could be president of the United States?" And I felt the same way about it. I couldn't imagine this. But then my view about Kennedy changed as a result of another meeting that involved a group of newspapermen.

HOLBORN: Not too far after this.

LISAGOR: Not too far after it. I think maybe you were there.

HOLBORN: Yes, I was at this.

LISAGOR: This was a mixed group of foreign correspondents and American correspondents. The co-chairmen were [Robert H.] Bob Estabrook of *The Washington Post* and Max Freedman who then worked for the *Manchester Guardian*. We had about six foreign correspondents and six Americans. I think it was about twelve people, maybe more than that.

HOLBORN: Twelve or fourteen. A couple more than that, yes. Paul Ward and…

LISAGOR: Yes, and Kennedy sat there that night and was grilled on the most improbable subject. It was, how can a Catholic president deal with anybody in Europe, but the Catholic parties? And don't you run into that old consideration that the European newspaper people and politicians generally have? You know, it was kind of cabalistic idea of Catholics getting together and ruling all society. Kennedy gave a very lucid explanation of separation of church and state at that time. He said he saw no connection between the fact that he was a Catholic and became president and the Catholic parties of Europe. He saw no reason why he needed to be cozy with them, why he couldn't be a normal president of the United States. But he did it in such a way as to be very impressive. But I must say a couple of these men, one, Werner Imhoof, came to me later and said, "This young man, he thinks he would like to be president of the United States. Why does he think he is qualified to be president of the United States?" And I tried in my labored way to explain to Werner that presidents of the United States come from all kinds of people, and that he is just as likely a

prospect as any. But I never believed it, I remember. I really didn't believe it. But it was an interesting evening that we had, and he was most impressive. I still have a memorandum that Bob Estabrook wrote of that meeting. It was one of those memoranda in which he never believed that Jack Kennedy would ever get beyond being an attractive senator, as he was, and that he'd never be president.

HOLBORN: I do remember he was very outspoken that evening. He got started on the labor leaders again, and then he said, "You know, for the first time I really believe that there is a class struggle." I remember everybody….

[-12-]

LISAGOR: Yes, he was very impressive and persuasive on a lot of subjects, but the Catholic parties thing interested me because we were all curious then about this whole business of being a Catholic. And how could, in view of a total lack of other qualifications as it seemed to us at that time, being a Catholic on top of that, how could this man really believe that he was presidential timber? But he fully believed that it was entirely possible, and I think, Fred, that night…

MCGRORY: No guile.

LISAGOR: Yes, no guile at all, and without the artifices that you get later on in people. But he went over all of them. He went over [Stuart] Symington and [Hubert H.] Humphrey, as I recall it, and Adlai, pointing up their liabilities and their assets. And then he went over himself — and here is where he won the whole group with this totally detached, cool, candid evaluation of himself: the fact that he was a man of relative youth, Catholic, inexperienced, in the Senate, no administrative experience, all the rest of it — and came out with the conclusion, as Fred recalls, that he was at least as well qualified as any of the others, and made a good case for it.

[-13-]

MCGRORY: I had a similar conversation with him on a plane coming back from California in — [Harry S] Truman's birthday is when?

HOLBORN: In May.

MCGRORY: In the spring. And I had gone to Missouri to write a seventy-fifth birthday story on Truman.

HOLBORN: '59.

MCGRORY: In '59. He went to California where he was coolly received by [Edmund G.] Pat Brown and told by the party people that he would split the party and that they preferred Hubert Humphrey and there was all sorts of byplay and maneuvering and backstabbing and all the rest going on. He and I and [Stephen E.] Steve

Smith came back together in a plane. I remember I said to him, "Why do you want to be president?" I still didn't…. I thought it was preposterous at the time, still, having, you know, all along the route discouraged him. I thought he should wait. But anyway I asked him, and — I don't remember the details — he mentioned Symington, he mentioned Stevenson, he mentioned [Lyndon B.] Johnson….

LISAGOR: Yes, he mentioned Johnson that night. I left him out.

MCGRORY: Who else was there?

LISAGOR: Humphrey.

MCGRORY: Humphrey. And in effect he said, "Why not me?"

LISAGOR: That's right. That's exactly the attitude that night.

[-14-]

MCGRORY: That was the sum total of it. "Why not me? If they can aspire with what they don't have, why can't I?"

LISAGOR: Now there's a curious thing, Fred, about Kennedy in his relations with the press that affected me during this period. Kennedy had no idea of who I was. He'd seen me at a couple of these dinners, and I'd asked questions, but he had no inkling as to who I was, but he did know I was a Chicago newspaperman. This was important to Kennedy's thinking. I was a Chicago newspaperman because one time I went up to the Hill to see Kennedy after a committee meeting, and he said to me, "How's Sarge [R. Sargent Shriver] doing?" And so help me, at that moment I didn't know who Sarge was. [Laughter] And he said, "How is Sarge doing?" I said, "Sarge?" He said, "Yes, Sargent Shriver." And I figured there must be some sergeant in the Army somewhere that I should know and he — I played it real cool. I didn't indicate. I didn't say, "Sargent who?" I said, "Well…." I fumbled and something, and somebody came up and rescued me. But I didn't realize then what I later came to realize, and that is that Kennedy felt that in a Chicago newspaperman, me, I looked like, you know, I didn't have a totally vacuous expression when he talked to me, that therefore I might in some way be a fellow he ought to talk to. I mean, there was no other reason why he would particularly want to talk to me because I never crossed his bow in what I wrote or anything. Later on — I don't know whether everybody will agree — I always had the view of Kennedy that he measured you by the circulation of your paper or the magazine you may have worked for in large measure until he came to know you a little better or had some other yardstick by which to measure you. But I always had the feeling that he knew those circulation figures better really than I did.

[-15-]

HERMAN: In that connection I might say that for, oh, perhaps the first six months when I covered the White House with him, or even before he was in the

White House when I was covering him very closely, he never once referred to me by my name. He never once said, when he was introducing people around among the press, he never once said, "This is George Herman." He said, "And this is CBS." He never once used my name, and I wasn't sure whether he knew it or not, except I always believed that he did know it but wasn't ready to use it yet. But he always referred to me as CBS, never as a person. This made a very big impression.

LISAGOR: I always had a feeling — and this may be a little unfair — that in 1959 when Marshall Field bought the *Chicago Daily News*…. You know that Eunice Shriver and Sargent Shriver lived downstairs below the Marshall Fields on Lakeshore Drive in Chicago, or Lakeview Avenue I think it was called, and Jack Kennedy often appeared out there to visit Eunice, and Kay Field would come down. I remember one time they rehearsed him in speed reading. You know, he'd practice his speed reading there. But when Marshall Field bought the paper, then I had another identification, really, in his mind. Now this may be subjective entirely, but I believe it not to be, I believe it is the case. I was then a representative of a paper that Marshall Field owned, he had bought, you know, and he knew Marshall Field. Therefore as a representative of a paper owned by a fellow he knew, again it might be useful for both of us to know each other a little better. He used to identify [Carleton] Bill Kent not so much as the *Chicago Sun-Times* but as Marshall Field's paper in Chicago. But in these early days I felt this was a primary consideration of the Senator, and I thought also it didn't apply solely to me but to other people.

MCGRORY: Yes, I once saw him read a newspaper. It was the same trip, coming from California, and he used to devour them. He never passed a newsstand without buying everything available.

LISAGOR: That's right, yes.

HOLBORN: That's true, yes.

HERMAN: We used to hide our papers when he got onto the plane because as he walked past our seat, he'd snatch a paper out of your hand, or a magazine.

MCGRORY: And he could go through it quicker. I remember he pointed out a story. He said, "Look at that. What do you suppose he thinks he's doing?" And he went through, and he didn't miss one political story.

HERMAN: That's the other aspect of his attitude towards newspaper people. "What do you suppose he thinks he's doing?" The first times I met him, before he was president, I would ask a question, or if he was doing something for television, he had a speech and I was indicating the portions that I thought we would like to film for showing on television and I would suggest this portion, half the time, instead of just looking down at what I had marked or following my finger, he would look at me and give me a very searching look. To my way of thinking — at that time I was more or less of a stranger — it was

obvious that he was thinking, “What has he got in mind? Why is he asking me for this piece rather than another piece? What does he think he’s doing?” And I think this was very much on his mind. I want to go back a little and enter not a dissent, but a different appreciation or attitude towards Kennedy in these times and perhaps on which would reflect a majority of Washington newspapermen, those who were not as friendly with him as you. I was off on different beats most of the time, but I would come up to the Senate frequently for any major development or bill or discussion or debate or something of that sort. I must say, in spite of having been introduced to him by Mary and in spite of having watched the fascinating race for the vice

[-17-]

presidential nomination in ‘56, still, when I went up to the Senate to cover a major bill or a hearing, even those in which Jack Kennedy was involved, I never once thought of selecting him as a person to interview or as a person to record or film. I would always think of one of the big names. It never occurred to me that John Kennedy would be a good interview, that he would be an important person to interview, that he would have something interesting and constructive to say. Nor did it occur to the people who regularly covered the Hill, for example, for the wire services, the AP [Associated Press], and UP [United Press], and in his time the INS [International News Service] man. I would work with them sometimes and say, “Gee, here’s something I’d like to get on this subject or on this hearing. Who’s got something really interesting to say?” Nobody ever suggested John F. Kennedy. And in all the time I covered the Hill, not on a full-time basis, not really intensively or deeply but just as a casual newsman coming up to the Hill, I never understood what John Kennedy was, what he stood for, I never heard him make a major speech, I never saw a major article except a very rare piece, perhaps in *Foreign Affairs* or something of that sort. Gradually I heard about Kennedy from outside of Washington.

LISAGOR: I think, George, you’ve said one of the most perceptive things about Kennedy and his relation to the press as I’ve ever heard, actually. Kennedy tended to use the press, but he didn’t use them when he didn’t have to use them. He didn’t waste too much time with the press when there was no point in it. He wasn’t — unlike most politicians, he wasn’t wooing the press.

HERMAN: Never.

[-18-]

LISAGOR: They were wooing the press on the Hill during this time you’re talking about I’m sure, but what Jack Kennedy had in mind was becoming the Democratic presidential nominee, and at that time the last thing in the world that he ought to have been doing was to be conducting brilliant, vivid, quotable interviews. He was out tapping the main roots of power in this country. And he understood them, unlike most politicians did on the Hill. He was out talking in little county seats at dinners, eating that rubbery chicken and talking. And one would wonder why on God’s green earth is the man appearing in Welch, West Virginia, on this wintry night in 1958? And the simple reason of why was that nobody else would go to that dinner, as the man who arranged the dinner told me after

he won in West Virginia in 1960. A man named John Kennedy from Massachusetts, with whom the West Virginians had little in common, they got him and he raised money for them. They made about twenty-five hundred dollars that night…

HERMAN: Like Barry Goldwater did.

LISAGOR: … and they'll never forget him for having done that. Now he didn't…. You're quite right that nobody…. Because I would go up there, and the only time I remember Kennedy as a senator really was when he delivered his famous Algerian speech. I think Fred will know that, having had a hand in it. I was covering mainly foreign affairs and State Department affairs, and here is some young senator, makes a speech about Algeria, rakes the French over the coals, and absolutely horrified people like Dean Acheson and others.

HERMAN: The Establishment.

LISAGOR: The Establishment, and it was a quite, from my standpoint, quite refreshing speech. I agreed with it. I thought it was fine; I thought it was worth saying; and I wondered, "Well, what's this young fellow up to anyhow?" He didn't care about the press in those days. He cared about building the political power that he could.

[-19-]

HERMAN: The only thing that I ever heard about Kennedy, even the Rackets Committee…. And I attended a good many sessions of the Rackets Committee. I was more struck by Mrs. Kennedy than I was by Senator Kennedy. I never heard him say anything important when I was there. I never heard him do a major cross examination. The only thing I heard about John Kennedy that piqued my interest were from outside of Washington, from around the country. Then I began to wonder a little bit who is this guy and what is he doing.

LISAGOR: There was a strange mixture in Kennedy of a non-presumptuousness which led him not to intrude himself upon the Washington press as a great many other senators who don't have anything to say either, who are quite flatulent when they do have anything to say, will do. But then, at the same time, I thought he was also quite presumptuous in believing that he could be President of the United States. But he had other views, and he understood, I think, something that we didn't understand at the time, namely there was a monumental vacuum in the Republican, in the Democratic party, forgive me, and that it only remained for someone like himself to go in and fill it. Or to change the analogy a bit, it was marbles running loose, and he was going to pick them up and he did, he went to pick them up. He saw what none of the rest of us saw, and that is that it was all there to be had by somebody with the energy, the will, and the drive to go after it. It did not depend so much, I don't think upon particular political savvy or intelligence. I think it was energy, drive, the will to go in and do it, the same set of circumstances that existed in this year of 1964 that in my view led

to Barry Goldwater's nomination as the Republican candidate. I think they tore a leaf from the Kennedy technique in 1960.

HERMAN: Was he as sensitive to press criticism before he became the presidential nominee?

[-20-]

LISAGOR: Well, this Fred would be better able to dwell on than I am, but I've heard stories about how Kennedy used to read *Time* magazine, for example, and just laugh at this, that, and the other sally or thrust at Eisenhower. The Eisenhower administration this, the Eisenhower administration that, and he just enjoyed it all.

HERMAN: But was there enough written about him for him to react?

LISAGOR: No, no. As a matter of fact I don't believe that he had that.

HOLBORN: Actually the first time, I think, in his life that he encountered serious criticism across the board was, curiously, this Algerian speech. It was the first time where sort of the national press attacked him.

LISAGOR: Yes, that's exactly right.

HOLBORN: And he spent a great deal of time answering letters and writing to editors. I remember I spent a good part of one month really just sort of dealing with the various brickbats that had been thrown him. Well, out of that, too, there is one rather interesting footnote which I think we see again in this presidential period. I agree to a large degree that he watched the circulation figures and what papers, but he did always have a certain weakness for the foreign press. He was much more tolerant in seeing visiting foreign press, partially because I think he felt he could learn from them not so much that he wanted to be of help to them, but very often he felt he was getting something out of them. He was, particularly in '57 and '58, to some degree in '59, probably as accessible a senator to foreign press people as…

[-21-]

LISAGOR: But don't you agree, Fred, that he also felt that foreign press, maybe rightly, was a cut above the American press?

HOLBORN: Yes, partly because…

LISAGOR: A cut above us in intelligence, in education.

HOLBORN: And aptly because he felt the playback from abroad was somewhat important in establishing his credentials. He took very seriously, for example, what the *Economist* wrote about him. One of the first times I saw

him really sort of with sustained irritation on his part about an article was — I don't remember what it was about, I think it was on the labor bill in '58. It was a rather critical piece in the *Economist*, and he kept coming back to it and who wrote it. He wanted very much to establish the author.

LISAGOR: He was a great one for wanting to know who wrote the unsigned article. He was far more interested in the person that wrote the article almost then he was in the thing that was said. I've known some experiences with it. But I want to get back to this *Time* magazine syndrome, which I think is important because later on I think that *Time* magazine's role in the Kennedy presidency was terribly important because of circulation figures. But when he became president and would read in *Time* magazine what it was writing about him critically, you would have thought that he had first discovered that there was such a thing as the American press and that part of this press was something called *Time* magazine, the same man who used to laugh with a great deal of delight and glee when *Time* got off a nifty about the Eisenhower administration — you know, in its preoccupation with a turn of phrase or something cutely said. It always puzzled me why Kennedy came to the presidency — and I knew we're jumping ahead of ourselves a little bit here — why he came to the presidency expecting anything other than what he had become accustomed to reading in *Time* magazine ever since he started reading it.

[-22-]

HERMAN: Now you're getting on a very broad subject which I hope we'll get into later because he came with a lot of misapprehensions.

LISAGOR: All right, good, because I think this, too. But *Time* magazine I'll always remember because the times I used to hear the delight they'd get out of something *Time* had said about Eisenhower or the Eisenhower administration. And then when much the same kind of approach was made to him, he was a little, well, quite a bit disturbed about it. One of the other aspects about my own personal relationship with Kennedy, I came to know him best by being on panels, television shows. I happen, for reasons which always escape me, but I was chosen several times to appear on programs like "Face the Nation" with Kennedy. This was the only time I think he came to know who I was by name. Then he had to say, "Mr. Lisagor," or he had to identify me in some way. I appeared on several of these things with him. Here I thought he was very good. I thought he was well informed, well prepared and quite articulate. The best in Kennedy in his articulate kind of clipped way came out, I think, during these television shows and prepared him, in my view, for the debates that came later on. I think that the whole technique of — well, not technique but the self-assurance that he later showed during the debates, he got on those panel shows.

HERMAN: Let me ask you, as a comparative outsider, what did you two call him by name as a senator and what did you call him as president?

LISAGOR: Well, I always called him — not always, but from the time that he first called me Pete, I called him Jack simply because I believe in doing that to anybody, except presidents, and sometimes to presidents.

HERMAN: Well, then after he became president?

LISAGOR: No, no, no. One time in Palm Beach I had a horrible experience. It was early in his presidency, and he was going up the gangplank of his plane, and he turned around and seeing me, he said, "Hello, Pete." And I said, "Hello, Jack." And I could have reached out and grabbed that "Jack," if I could, and pulled it back and put it back into my mouth and swallowed it because not only was I ashamed for the people around me, but it was something I wouldn't have done except, you know, instinctively there, and it was dreadful. And I wondered what he thought, you know, how he must have thought, "Well, what a brazen punk this is," you know, because I really didn't know him that well. I wasn't that much of a friend, but like most reporters in town we had a lunch with him here or a dinner with him there and came to call him Jack.

MCGRORY: Yes, I always called him Jack until he became president. I saw him the morning after he was elected at Hyannis Port, and I went and said, "Good morning, Mr. President," and never slipped thereafter, held him in the greatest awe, total awe.

LISAGOR: That's true of me except for this one incident in Palm Beach.

HERMAN: He did not demur.

MCGRORY: Oh no. There was no occasion to. But I never dreamed, never.

LISAGOR: I think Kennedy, throughout this time that I knew him, had a largely ambivalent attitude toward the press. I think that he developed a great liking for many people with whom he was at ease, he could talk to, he would tell many things.

MCGRORY: Some of his best friends were reporters.

LISAGOR: Yes, but some of his best friends were told less, perhaps, as reporters than some of those who were…

HERMAN: But he sought us out.

MCGRORY: Not after the presidency.

HERMAN: He did seek us out after the presidency at many functions.

LISAGOR: Oh, yes.

HERMAN: Now we'll get into those stories, I presume, in due time. I asked about what you called him because of a very interesting, and perhaps in its way typical, thing that happened after his election but before his inauguration. This is when I was assigned to cover him full time. I was asked to take over the White House for CBS. I went down to Palm Beach. He summoned one of my bosses who was a close friend of his, and they had a talk. And the boss reported to me afterwards that Kennedy had said, "Why did you put this new fellow on to me, this new reporter on to me? Don't you realize what an enormous disadvantage he will be at because, for example, [Sander] Sandy Vanocur of NBC, who had followed me all through the campaign, when I get into the White House, if Sandy wanted to know something, he can call me up and say, 'Say, Jack, what did you mean about this bill on so and so and so and so?' Don't you realize what an enormous disadvantage your man, George Herman, will be at?" The boss came back to me and said, "What do you think about this?" And I said, "Well, in the first place, it isn't true. There isn't any reporter in the country, and I don't care who's the president, there isn't any reporter in the country who, after the minute the president gets back to the White House, can call him up and say, 'Say, Jack' to him. There isn't any newsman who can do that, especially one in a highly competitive field of three networks. And in the second place, it's my belief that John Kennedy, who is always a political animal, is doing this

for a purpose. He's saying to CBS, 'Look out, you're at a disadvantage, you're in back. If you want to catch up, you have to be extra good, you have to win extra goodie points, extra brownie points, with the White House. Your man, if he's going to catch up to his opposition, has got to be extra nice to me because all the rest are my friends.'" I said to the boss, "If you are willing for us to have a slightly skeptical attitude, we may get hurt on a scoop or product." And as it turned out, and this is typical I think of what his grasp of realities was, nobody ever got a scoop.

LISAGOR: But George, I think that…. I yield to your superior wisdom as well as your superior position here, but I do believe that Kennedy was not telling whoever this man was, Blair Clark or whoever, this because he was telling CBS to watch out, that Sandy Vanocr had an advantage. I believe that Kennedy believed…

HERMAN: This was his misapprehension.

LISAGOR: Misapprehension both about the press and the presidency.

HERMAN: I believe both.

LISAGOR: I don't think he knew how that presidency would swallow him up. And I believe he was perfectly willing at that time to say, "I am not going to be the kind of conformist president who is going to be swallowed up in that White House so that people like Sandy Vanocur and others can't call me up and 'Jack, how about this?'"

HERMAN: Well, I believe both, Pete. I believe this is what lent strength to his, not exactly threat, but to his exposition. He actually believed that the NBC man would be able to call him.

[-26-]

LISAGOR: Yes, I don't think we're differing here, but I'm introducing another element.

HERMAN: Well, I've mentioned several times that he entered the presidency with a great misapprehension about his relations with the press, and I think this is the thing that I meant to point it out with. But also he was innately a political animal on one level, and whenever he operated, he couldn't help just dropping in a little something that might, a seed that might grow a flower to his benefit later on. And so I believe that he believed this, but I also believe that part of his reason in explaining this so specifically to CBS was to remind us that we were behind NBC's man and ABC's man and that there was a method in reminding us that we were behind.

LISAGOR: Yes, Kennedy always acted to me as a young fellow who pretended he knew more about the things that engaged him that he really did. This went for the press as well as for the presidency before he got in there. The presidency was a great abstraction to him. His speech before the National Press Club was a wonderfully put together speech that had some marvelous lines in it, what seemed like some great truths. But if you broke this speech down, you would see that really, you know, it was [Theodore C.] Ted Sorensen sort of philosophizing about a concept of the presidency that he thought Eisenhower fitted into, that is, an inactive president that wasn't in the barricade. But actually when Kennedy became president, he didn't fit that prescription of the National Press Club speech very well, in my view, in a lot of cases. Just to mention one in passing, which we won't go into, the major one was the civil rights issue that later engulfed him. But he talked about the president…

HERMAN: Was he that night?

[-27-]

LISAGOR: … being out in front, on the barricades, anticipating, you know, fighting not from the rear or through a staff but right there engaged in the heart of the action. There were other aspects of this speech too. So I do believe that the presidency — and this goes not only for Kennedy, I think it goes for everybody else. There used to be a saying that the presidency wasn't a place for the on-the-job training. It was a Republican slogan…

HERMAN: Against Kennedy.

LISAGOR: … used against Kennedy. It is my contention and always has been my contention that it is only a place where on-the-job training is essential. You can't get that kind of training anywhere else.

HERMAN: There is no other place.

LISAGOR: And it would have gone for Nixon, who is supposed to have been the most experienced man to have ever run for the presidency. And my contention is he knew less really about that office than Kennedy did simply because Eisenhower saw to it that he knew a great deal less about it.

MCGRORY: And Eisenhower didn't practice the presidency to a great degree.

LISAGOR: That's right. Kennedy was correct in that assessment of Eisenhower. It is a place where you have to get on-the-job training because there's no other place you can get it. But he did still tend to talk in abstractions. And I didn't want to get away from the press on purpose here because he had many illusions about the press when he took office that amazed me, absolutely surprised me. One of the things was his thin-skinned attitude toward the press. I thought that he would recognize having been a newspaperman once himself and monumentally wrong in the first major assignment he ever got — a story I'd like to tell when we get to our personal experiences with

[-28-]

him — I would have thought that he would understand there there is such a thing as the "thumb-suckers," as the "think pieces," as the things that are "written off the west wall," to use all of these familiar expressions that President Johnson seems to have learned, and that he would understand that reporters do tend to sit around and say, "Well, this is the way things should be if they're not," in the absence of facts — those who don't have the facts. But Kennedy always seemed to develop a high degree of contempt for what has been a practice in this town, so far as I know, for years. And I might add, if I may, since we're talking about an era as much as about a man, that this went for the people around him. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., is one of the most notorious discoverers of something called the American press that I've ever seen. Here's a man that had written histories based upon the American press as source material…

HOLBORN: And had been a columnist for the *New York Post*.

LISAGOR: … and a columnist for the *New York Post*. Then suddenly he says that if he had to rewrite the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt histories, he wouldn't have relied upon the contemporary press of the times so much because he sees that the press is engaged in the business of forecasting what is going to happen rather than printing what has happened. I agree in a major way that this is a fault with the press. The daily press tends to get into the business of forecasting, and not enough to report what has happened. This is what's given rise to the news magazines who feed on the frustrations of the reading public for what has happened, told flavorfully as Mary tells, it, without getting into the business of what's going to happen tomorrow, what Johnson or Kennedy or Stevenson or Eisenhower or Truman or who have you is going to do next week, but to tell what happened today.

[-29-]

HERMAN: But you're giving the impression, I think, that all his frustrations and irritations with the press were based on these think pieces…

LISAGOR: No, no, if I did, I'm sorry. I don't want to…

HERMAN: He was excessively thin-skinned about what you might call legitimate criticism.

LISAGOR: And also about facts. You know any president…

HERMAN: Yes, that's what I mean. That's my definition of legitimate.

LISAGOR: Any president has a right to be critical of what he knows not to be the facts, but as I once said to him when he complained…. [William H.] Bill Stoneman, one of our foreign correspondents, and I went in, and he was telling about how dreadful the press was. He mentioned, if I may — I don't know about the propriety of using these names now but I think it's well known.

MCGRORY: Oh do, it'll make it so much more interesting.

LISAGOR: He had an absolute obsession about the reporting of a married couple working for the *New York Times* in Germany, as you know, Sydney Gruson and Flora Lewis. Flora Lewis wrote for the *Washington Post*, and Sydney wrote for the *New York Times*. John F. Kennedy believed that these people were up to some kind of mischief with malice in their hearts to do him in or to discredit the administration. He used to base this charge on the fact that their facts were wrong. So having put this to Bill Stoneman, the most veteran of all American correspondents in Europe, I had the temerity to say, "Mr. President, the situation as regards the negotiations on Berlin wouldn't be so fouled up by Sydney Gruson and Flora Lewis if your administration would open itself up and give the facts to the press here interested in them." Then he said what I thought was rather wise and a bit perceptive, but I was not sure

that he was correct, he says, "When the time comes, when the events ripen, when the situation grows to the point when we can conveniently and wisely release the facts, we will give you the facts. You will get the facts in good time. Just trust us, be patient with us, and we will let you have the facts." I said, "Mr. President, you know we're going to have to work a little faster than that because if we don't do better than that, the Sydney Grusons and the Flora Lewises are going to continue to report back what the German officials leak to them, what the German ambassador knows here and we don't know, but what the Foreign Office knows in Bonn." He found this, it seemed to me, hard to understand. We reached an impasse on this. We got nowhere with it. But he believed that these two reporters were actually serving the interests of the German government as opposed to the interests of their own governments. And here is another thing that struck me as though he didn't see quite clearly: that you report the best information you get from

where you are, from the sources you have. They were not serving German interests at all. They were reporting what they thought to be the most reliable information they could get.

HERMAN: In order to serve American interests.

LISAGOR: Well, I don't think that it's a reporter's job especially to think of whose interests you're serving except…

HERMAN: But you're writing for the American people, to inform them.

LISAGOR: Right, right. But I think that their concern was not whether they were serving the government of the United States or the government of Germany. I think their obligation was to something we laughingly sometimes call the objective truth, if there is such a thing. That was all. But President Kennedy seemed to have trouble understanding this because their reportage did get the government into embarrassing positions vis-a-vis the German government.

[-31-]

HERMAN: You know, it's ironic, Pete, because — to get into some of the other parts of it, too — because one of the President's favorite quotations was the one he was always taking from Thomas Jefferson, "Portray us as we are, with all our warts and wrinkles and blemishes." But if you were inclined to portray him with all his warts and wrinkles and blemishes, he would say, "What's the matter? How come you concentrated on all my warts and wrinkles and blemishes?" He was very sensitive to that.

LISAGOR: This might be a good time to inject the anecdote about his own newspaper experiences that I figured in. We went to West Virginia, where I was born and raised, incidentally, in McDowell County in the heart of the southernmost part of West Virginia, the miserable Pocahontas coal field, the most blighted and benighted area in the world. When I went back there with him — for the first time in about twenty-five years, really — we were flying down there in his plane. He had a bad throat, and he wrote me a little note saying he couldn't talk and he hoped I would understand, and I said, "Fine." I went back and just simply passed the time of day but did all the talking. Well, we spent about eight hours in West Virginia, going from Welch, West Virginia, on a tour up through that Pocahontas Valley, McDowell County, and we went through another county named Beckley — no. Well, anyhow, we went through another county, and then we got on the plane to head back to Washington. He wrote me a little note on a postcard which I wish I had saved. I could barely decipher it. But it said, "Pete, how do you see the race?"

I had talked to a fellow named Judge [Sidney L.] Sid Christie, who was a friend of my father's really — I didn't know this, but I discovered he was — who was the Democratic boss of McDowell County. He said to me, "Young man, the Senator is going to win McDowell County just easy. There's twenty-seven thousand-odd registered Democrats in the County, and I aim to vote them all whether they show up or not."[1] The real flavorful old kind of county boss. So when

[1] Mr. Lisagor explained in a conversation with a Library staff member that Christie's comment was totally in jest — that it was Christie's way of emphasizing that they would get out the vote on election day.

I went back to talk to him, I said, “Well, Jack, I think that you’re going to win West Virginia.” And he said, “What makes you say that? I said, McDowell County is supposed

[-32-]

to be the heart of a bigot county. It’s just like Mingo County and Logan County and these other counties. You’re going to win big in McDowell County because the Postmaster says you’re going to win big.” No, I didn’t mention Sid Christie, but he looked at me and he said, “Oh, you’ve been talking to Sid Christie, haven’t you?” And I said, “Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I have.” And he said, “Well, you know, he’s a kind of a, my friend, and he would sort of distort things.” I said, “No, you know, Senator, I was born and raised down here (and I told him for the first time time I was), and I think it would know if he was snowing me.” Well, anyhow that was the end of it. I said, “I think you’re going to win.”

And I went back to Washington and ran into Pat Munroe who worked for *Editor and Publisher*. He said, “Who do you think is going to win in West Virginia?” I said, “Oh, Jack Kennedy is going to win big.” But I was just talking to a colleague, and I thought ill of the question. But he called me up in a few hours, and he said, “Pete, I’ve been talking to some other guys in West Virginia, and they said that you ought to stick to State Department reporting because you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” He said, “I wonder if you’d let me quote you.” I said, “Well, if that’s what they think, you go ahead and quote me.” So my boss reads in *Editor and Publisher* that I had predicted that Jack Kennedy was going to win in West Virginia — this *Editor and Publisher* things appeared after the election, when Kennedy won — so he said, “Go get Pete’s copy and let’s make a promotion out of it.” We had *Editor and Publisher*’*s* cover every other week. So they looked at my copy and couldn’t find a line in which I had written that Jack Kennedy was going to win in West Virginia. I get an enraged telephone call, “What in God’s name is going on here?” It was Stuffy Walters. I said, “Stuffy, did you ever hear about the *Literary Digest* in 1936? I want to be in business longer than that.” Well, I managed to pass it off with a little bit of humor.

[-33-]

Well, after the Democratic Convention when Kennedy was nominated, I flew back to Hyannis Port in a plane in which the press traveled, but I happened to sit behind him. I just wanted to make some conversation. I said, “When did you first think you had it?” meaning when in the Convention did he first feel that he had it. You know, there was some doubt there for a while. And he turned around. He was sitting next to [Torbert H.] Torby Macdonald, who I think was about ready to fall asleep at that point and wasn’t paying too much attention. He said, “You know, it was in West Virginia, and you know, Pete, you told me I was going to win there.” And I said, “Yes, Jack, and let me tell you a sad story about that.” And I told him this *Editor and Publisher’*s thing. And he said, “Look, don’t feel badly about it.”

And I never knew what follows. He said, “In 1945 I went to Europe, to London, for International News Service,” which was a [W. Randolph] Hearst wire service for the Hearst papers. I think Hearst owned it, I don’t know. And he said, “I was a young reporter, and I went to London, and I nosed around, and I wrote a piece about how the Labor Party was going to win in the 1945 election and was going to turn [Winston] Churchill out. I got the most fierce rocket or, you know, response back from New York, from the Hearst people, saying, ‘Why you young

punk, you don't know what you're talking about. Of all the nonsense, that story was the most nonsensical we've ever heard.'" He went into it for quite some length. They were mad about it. And Kennedy said, "Well, I figured there was only one way out of this, and that's to work my way out of it. So every other day I would say, 'Churchill is coming up strong. The Conservatives are recovering lost ground,' and so on until about a week before election, I had it back where I could safely report that Winston Churchill was going to win that election. And of course you know what happened. The Labor government won and [Clement] Atlee became Prime Minister. So don't feel badly about what happened to you." And I never knew that story. It was a charming story about Kennedy, and after the assassination I wrote it, sometime after it, as a memoir. The *Editor and Publisher*, having figured in it somewhat, reprinted that story. But Kennedy had an understanding about the press, as this story showed, that never seemed to me to show through when he was president.

[-34-]

HERMAN: And yet, to go back where we were before, he sought us out. We all traveled with him, and when we were out of the country, when he was among strangers, if he would see us at a gathering for the most glittering personalities, diplomats and so forth…

LISAGOR: Oh yes, but…

HERMAN: … he would come to us. When we were in Paris, for example…. And this had happened previously in his trip to Ottawa. The same thing happened. But when we were in Paris, General [Charles] de Gualle gave a party for the President at the Elysee Palace. There was a pool of — oh, I've forgotten how many of the — perhaps ten correspondents from the White House press were invited to come to the Palace, and we came. Now, mind you, this was de Gaulle's party to introduce Kennedy to the glittering people of Paris, but as the ten White House correspondents strolled around among several hundred Parisiens we kept being followed by Kennedy and de Gaulle. No matter where we went in the room, Kennedy would tug poor old President de Gaulle along with us and say, "Monsieur le President, these are my friends," and so forth and kept introducing and opening conversations. When we went through the line at the beginning, there was a long line. I came after — oh, I don't know — a long, unbroken series of Parisiens had been introduced, and I came along. And at that point Kennedy did not know me very well. This was the first time I ever heard him use my name. As I came through the line, very abashedly, I wanted to get out of the line because I was a reporter, not one of the guests.

LISAGOR: I was right behind you, George, and I saw this so I can testify to it.

[-35-]

HERMAN: [Laughter] We were trying to get out of the line, as you'll recall. The President grabbed my hand, stopped the line, and after I had been introduced by the major-domo to de Gaulle and de Gaulle had presented me to Kennedy, Kennedy stopped me and turned me around again and said to de Gaulle, "Mister

President, this is one of our White House correspondents. This is George Herman of CBS news. He's a reporter in Washington and covers the White House."

LISAGOR: Let me break in here, George, because to make the story absolutely correct, he said, "This is one of the most distinguished American journalists we have, Mr. President." Go ahead now.

HERMAN: And when he said, "journalist," de Gaulle straightened up another inch, [Laughter] drew his face into the most sort of, almost nauseated look, and did everything but wipe his hand on the jacket of his uniform as though he had just shaken hands with a reptile of some kind. And Kennedy passed me along to Jackie and Jackie to Mrs. de Gaulle, Madame de Gaulle, who was having hysterics about the idea of de Gaulle having to shake hands with all these reporters at a party that he was giving to the President. But afterwards, no matter where we went, with Pete Lisagor, with May Craig, no matter whom, Kennedy would tug de Gaulle over to the journalists that he knew. And this happened at Ottawa, this happened at I don't know how many places that we've been with the President. This happened at dinners at the White House where the President was host and knew all the guests. He would still seek out, frequently, the two or three reporters in the whole company of a hundred people and come over and chat with us. I don't know whether it's that he felt more at ease with us, that he felt friendly with us, or that he just felt this attraction to us, but it was manifest so often.

HOLBORN: Did you have any similar experiences, Mary, in regards to Washington?

McGRORY: Yes, I had a similar experience in France at Versailles. There was a most glorious evening, a ballet attended by all the quality of Paris and France. There was a party between the acts in a little foyer behind the presidential boxes. I had no reason to be there, no business to be there, but a whole party of people swept in, and I just sort of tagged on to the end of it and got in there. He saw me, and he came over and laughed. I said, "Well, it makes you think, doesn't it? A little different from what we've been having." And I can't remember the name of the people that Eisenhower had, the sort of not folk singers but….

HERMAN: Well, Mantovani and Fred Waring.

MCGRORY: Yes, yes. I said, "It really makes you think about Mantovani and Fred Waring, doesn't it?" He said, "Yes, we've just got to do something different." I said, "How are you getting along with de Gaulle?" He just raised his eyebrows, sort of shrugged. He said, "Have you met him?" I said, "No." And he said, "Do you want to?" And I said, "Yes, that would be nice." So he said, he didn't even pretend to speak French, he said, "General, I'd like to have you meet a friend of mine. This is Mary McGrory from the *Washington Star*, General." I don't think I even came within his range of vision. And the President did seem very happy to see me and immediately clued into a

conversation, couldn't have been more friendly and approachable and casual and gay as he always was. I think he was — I always thought he was rather shy, really.

I remember after he and the then Vice President Nixon had both been nominated in 1960, there was a sort of trying period when they were both back in Congress. Kennedy was terribly restless and sort of ranging around the chamber and picking things up off other peoples' desks and rearranging the papers so they were neat and lining up pencils. He wanted to be out on the hustings. He knew there were no votes to be gained there talking about minimum wage or something. It was a great problem for the Capitol police

[-37-]

because all the tourists were just overthrown to have the two presidential nominees constantly passing back and forth. The guards took great interest in the whole thing. When Kenendy would go by, they'd squeal, and when Nixon would go by, it was a more conventional response. I remember one of the guards saying, "Oh yes, Kennedy is different. He doesn't jump at people the way Nixon does." And I think that Kennedy, despite his immense sel-possession and sort of poise and all, was basically a truly shy human being and deeply reserved and even quite diffident with people.

HERMAN: I've seen that shyness lead him into what was really being gauche. It was a bit of gaucherie in the White House when Andew Malraux, the French Minister of Culture at the time, and his wife came to the country. The President, as you say, spoke only high school French, and he would never use it in public to anybody who spoke French. He did use a little bit in Ottawa, but there even American high school French…

HOLBORN: Well, that's the custom really.

HERMAN: Yes, this is nothing. Even President Eisenhower struggled with this…

HOLBORN: Canadian Prime Ministers don't usually know it well, either.

HERMAN: Yes, but when the Malraux, when Minister Malraux and Madame Malraux were at the White House for dinner at the time of their visit — Madame Malraux doesn't speak any English at all — the President sat next to Madame Malraux. At the end of the dinner, since he had no interpreter right there with him, since he would not speak French and she couldn't speak English, he got up and turned his back on the wife of the guest of honor and walked away. And poor Madame Malraux — it was one of these things that you never expect to see at the White House — was sort of like the heroine of a Katherine Hepburn movie. She was walking up and down through the White House halls trying to pretend that she was having a good time but had nobody to

[-38-]

talk to because since she was the guest of honor, the wife of the guest of honor, and belonged with the President, nobody else felt, you know, like breaking protocol and going to talk to her.

And my wife said, “Well, you speak French. Go talk to her.” I said, “But, honey, I’m at the very bottom of the list. I shouldn’t do….” She said, “Nonsense. The poor woman is lonely. Nobody is speaking to her. Go talk to her.”

So I went and talked to Madame Malraux and found myself in the ridiculous position of introducing her to members of the Cabinet and to various other officials. They began to urge us into the East Room for the entertainment of the evening which was — as an aftermath of your story about Versailles — was the great American trip of Isaac Stern, Eugene List, and Leonard Rose playing a Schumann trio. I took Madame Malraux in and sat her in one of the four gray chairs among all the various gold chairs. For a long time, nobody sat down next to her so Mrs. Heman and I sat down in back of her. I, again, to fill in the awkward pause engaged her in conversation. The President came in, sat down next to Madame Malraux and, turning right around past her and ignoring her presence, turned to me and said, “Well, George, do you consider this an evening of work or do you consider this, you know, an evening off?” And I said, “Well….” I was a little embarrassed because he had so blatantly ignored Madame Malraux. I said, “Well, to come to the White House is always a great pleasure and to have a chance to listen to this kind of music and besides which (and I switched into French) to have a chance to chat with a personage like Madame Malraux is always a great honor and privilege,” thinking to draw him again into conversation with Madame Malraux and even, if necessary, to act as an interpreter. And once again, without even glancing at her, he said, “My, where did you learn to speak French?” So when he was shy, he would certainly talk to newsmen, and his shyness led him to do things which were visibly awkward like this particular incident with Madame Malraux.

MCGRORY: Also he was terribly economical of his time, I think. Either you informed him or you amused him.

HERMAN: Or he turned away.

MCGRORY: Once you ceased doing either or both, then you were really supposed to disappear. That was about the size of it. He wasn’t unkind. I don’t mean to suggest that. But he was an intensely concentrated person. I can remember meeting him on the campaign trail in Wisconsin, which was very trying for him. He was in an alien land; he didn’t think he was doing very well. He didn’t like the primaries. He had told me previously in (I think it was) about February of 1960 when he was really getting down to it in earnest and he was going to Oregon and California, I remember one night, very late, in a hotel corridor — oh, we’d had a dreadful day — and he said, “I hate this.” He said, “This is a waste of time.” He Said, “Hubert can’t win. He can’t win. I don’t mind campaigning, but I don't like this.”

Well, then in Wisconsin I remember once I went to meet him at a television station. I had been with Hubert Humphrey, as he knew. We were walking down the corridor and he took my arm simply because he was so tired. I think he really needed someone to lean on momentarily. He wanted to know what Humphrey was saying and what he was doing, what his crowds were like. And just outside that — what’s that hotel, the Pfister? In Milwaukee? I had a rundown of the counties that Humphrey thought he was going to take, so I ran those all by him, and he said where Humprehy was wrong and what he would take and what he wouldn’t take and so forth. And then, suddenly, I think I was just supposed to disappear because I had made my little report

on the Humphrey camp, and he had something else to do, and that was the end of it. His attention was simply switched off. And I think he was, he wasn't ruthless, but, as I say, he was concentrated and he was very purposeful, and either you amused or entertained him or you went away.

[-40-]

LISAGOR: I had an experience in Wisconsin that may bear a bit on attitudes toward the press again. And I agree with you, Mary. I think you're quite right about if you didn't contribute something to the afternoon or evening, why, it was "Good-bye, please," more often than not. But I was on this television show with him again, "Face the Nation." Hubert Humphrey had been making a lot of charges about how he was using the Catholic issue and how he was using his great wealth and all the other things. I was simply repeating Hubert Himphrey's charges and lobbing them up to him, and he was batting them out of the ballpark one by one. It was just…. He couldn't have paid me to have served him better really, but I thought it was useful to use the direct charges and have him answer them.

But when it was over, Mrs. Kennedy, Jacqueline, looked at me as though I had crawled out of some hole and had struck with fangs and poison at the heel of her husband, and that was all and then turned away from me. I never knew her well, but I knew her well enough, you know, to say "Jackie" and for her to say "Pete." But this was nothing. And we went into a little room to watch the playback of the tape. I figured, "Well, I'm not going to sit here and be stared at like that." [Laughter] I went over, and I said, "Jackie, is there something about what went on? You seem offended." She said, "Well, I was, because I thought that the questions you asked Jack were just absolutely horrible, but Jack says you're a nice person and I'm getting very tense" (and this I found hard to believe because she said) "I'm getting very tense because I'm getting so emotionally involved in this primary campaign." I may have been wrong, and this may be an unkind thing to say, but I never thought she really was terribly emotionally involved in any of the political campaigns of the time. She said, "So forgive me." And then she turned around and was nice as she could be. She was very pleasant after that, after I'd gone over and….

[-41-]

And he did. He had actually, I learned from one of my colleagues, said to her, "No, you've got Pete all wrong." They heard this as they were walking down the corridor to this little room. "He wasn't doing this out of hostility. It was just his job." He had apparently quite a time to…. Bill Lawrence was on that program, and she was saying how like a bear, like a cuddly bear, Bill Lawrence was. Of all the people who is most unlike a cuddly bear, Bill Lawrence is it. [Laughter] But I thought this, too — maybe this was me being vain and sensitive — I thought she was directing those remarks at me too, you know. It was after that that I went over and talked to her, and she was quite alright, but he had said that, you know, that's all right.

In other subsequent programs, in subsequent times of questioning, he always seemed to accept it as a job you had to do. I never believed he thought anybody was deliberately hostile toward him. I never heard of it. And one of his most virulent critics, whose name I will not mention because I don't think it adds anything, he seemed always to call on, to defer to, and to want to hear from, and often, I felt; disarmed this critic by doing this. In fact, he seemed to get less virulent over the months that Kennedy was president, and toward the end I thought he was rather friendly. You know, maybe this was a campaign Kennedy was conducting. But there is a

point. I don't know whether this is the proper word to use, but getting back to your point, Mary, I think that Kennedy had a certain gauche quality when it came to dealing with people. It was a quality of treating them curtly and often rudely, I think and I don't know why this was. I rather feel that this may have been really something of a family trait that involved outsiders, on occasions. I don't think it was common because of all the people in the world I think I should be the last to say there was anything unkind about the Kennedys, any one that I knew, because I personally had reason to be somewhat grateful for a kindness. But there were a lot of times when he did to other people — and I know what he did to Madame Malraux — and I used to wonder about it. And some of my reporter friends, all of our friends, used to say this about him on occasion, that he seemed terribly curt and just absolutely bad mannered about

[-42-]

his attitude toward them. But I never had this experience myself. I had the experience of, "Get lost." You know, the time that I took one of….

On another occasion I took one of our correspondents. I always used our foreign correspondents as an excuse to get in to see the President. It seemed a convenient one, and it seemed also a useful one from his standpoint. So when our correspondent from Bonn, [David M.] Dave Nichol, came, I tried to get him to see [McGeorge] Mac Bundy. But when we called, Mac Bundy's girl informed us, I thought rather archly, that Mr. Bundy did not have time for such frivolous things as seeing a *Chicago Daily News* correspondent from Germany and please don't trouble them any more about such things. He had a wife with him who also was a correspondent, Judy Barden. Together they rather wanted to see what a New Frontiersman was like. They'd read about them in Bonn, Germany, but they didn't know. I think I actually told Mac that they'd like to talk a little about Germany and sort of get the feel and smell of a New Frontiersman. Maybe that was a bad approach. But anyhow the President agreed to see Dave and myself. We went in and waited for a long time in Mrs. [Evelyn] Lincoln's office. As we walked in, there was Mac Bundy sitting there, and I said, "Mac, I'd like to have you meet Dave Nichol, our German correspondent." I was very brusque about it. And he sort of blushed, and for the first time he seemed a little flustered. I'd never seen Mac Bundy seem flustered. He said, "Well, I guess the President has a better sense of priorities than I have." I said, "No, Mac, he's probably less busy than you are, and we hope to see him."

But I must say that Mac didn't leave us, and when the door opened and the President said, "Come in," we practically stood in the door and conducted this interview with Mac with a bundle of papers looking like he had to catch the 9:15 back to the suburbs, you know, and it is now 9:14, and two or three other staff people waiting there, and the President trying to be courteous and curt at the same time because it was late in the day. Dave said to him — I remember this because it later became a kind of an historical footnote — Dave said, "Mr. President, when you come to Germany, do you plan to go to Berlin?" And the President said, "Well, a lot of people are trying to get me to go to Berlin, but I

[-43-]

don't know that I ought to go to Berlin." Berlin was tense then, and for a number of reasons. And Dave said to him, "Mr. President, if you come to Germany and do not go to Berlin, it will be the worst possible thing imaginable. It will be inexcusable." And I rather admired Dave for this quite

blunt bit of advice. And the President was quite interested. He said, "Yes, and why?" Dave explained to him briefly that Berlin was a symbol of the Western will to remain in Europe, and if the President of the United States, of the country most responsible for that position, came so close and didn't come to Berlin, it would destroy the morale of the people there, a very obvious and elementary lesson in foreign policy which the President no doubt did not need. But then he quickly said, "Well…." I could feel, Mary, that feeling that you got when you felt you were no longer being either funny or useful. I felt that feeling of "Well, look, you'd better start moving backward," with Mac Bundy and his bundle of paper. I think Ralph Dungan was at that time in the wing, and Pierre Salinger was chewing on his cigar. So we were caught in the switches there. I suspected if Dave Nichols started telling funny jokes that the President wanted to hear, we would have still been ushered out in good time. But you had the feeling that, you know, you had to go.

MCGRORY: I think there was probably a certain amount of tension or sort of envy among the reporters who knew that certain reporters got in every week.

LISAGOR: Oh, a certain amount!

MCGRORY: And my first meeting with him in the White House was, from my point of view, a total disaster. It was inadvertent. It was early on. I was engaged haplessly in a too hastily assembled biography that we wanted to get out almost immediately. You will remember that there were reams written about the whole New Frontier. I was assigned to do [P. Kennedy] Kenny O'Donnell, [Lawrence F.] Larry O'Brien, and Pierre Salinger. I always had to do it after my regular working hours for the *Star*, and I finally got an appointment with Kennedy at 6:30 one night. We had just begun; Kenny's office

being right outside the President's door, the door suddenly flung open; President Kennedy burst out, walked straight through the office, didn't see anybody in there, went and got somebody else, came back, quite characteristically picked up a paper that was on some secretary's desk, and spotted me and said, "Hello, would you like to come in?" I said, "Yes, thank you." I went in, spent the most miserable twenty minutes of my life. I was absolutely awe-struck. I couldn't think of a thing to say. He said, "How's everything going?" I was having trouble with my landlord at the time. [Laughter] Somebody was treating me mean in my personal life. I thought, "Well, I wonder if he'd really be interested. He's probably the one person in the country who could do something about these matters." I wondered if I told him that the walls in my apartment were too thin and I was going to have to move and I was having a terrible time…. And then I thought, "Good lord, I'm sitting here with the leader of the western world. [Konrad] Adenauer wants to talk to him. De Gaulle wants to talk to him. And I'm here." Couldn't think of a thing to say, started to get up at least four times, and he sort of eyed me back down to my chair. I was just absolutely quivering. Nothing would come. We talked about Caroline. He asked me what I thought of her. And I said I thought she was going great. We talked about the baby. He indicated unmistakably — I forget how — that the baby was not very good looking, which the Kennedy's do not look kindly upon. And I said, "Oh, in a year he'll be running around. He'll be putting on funny hats, and you'll be laughing at him. Really, he'll be just fine. Just give him a little time." I

never, never was so unhappy in my life. I called him Mr. President every other word so he'd be sure to understand that I was not going to presume an old acquaintance in any possible shape or way. But I had this terrible impulse to tell him my troubles, and then this awful feeling of thinking I had no right to be there.

[-45-]

LISAGOR: This business of there being great jealousy or envy among reporters, who saw the President, who didn't see him, I think — George, you check me out because you had experience at the White House under Eisenhower — but I came here in 1950, and in the fifteen odd years that I've been here, and they've been very odd I might add, years I've been in Washington, I never knew the preoccupation in the press, among newspapermen, as to who was in and who was out, who was seeing the President and who was not seeing the President.

MCGRORY: Well, remember the early days, the dinners? He went to [Benjamin C.] Ben Bradlee's house, and he went to [Rowland, Jr.] Rowley Evans' house, he went to [Joseph W.] Joe Alsop's house. Why…

LISAGOR: This was the envy and, you know, the awe of everybody in town. But even in the White House among the so-called dirty fingernail set, the working reporters whose relationship with Kennedy was basically non-social and altogether professional, it was a working relationship, people like Hugh Sidey who may have been at the house…

MCGRORY: Oh, he was in every week.

LISAGOR: Yes, but he was in there as a working reporter. Hugh and his wife had little or no social relationship with the Kennedys except rarely, you know, as people would be invited to one of the big do's. But the envy of these people was something. And I often sat down…

HERMAN: And one further note — whose camera was in the President's office.

LISAGOR: Yes, I…

[-46-]

HERMAN: Because he allowed us to put sound film cameras, walking cameras, in to take pictures of him talking to people, the President at work. And this, you know, you'd walk into the White House through the back entrance, for example, and see an NBC or CBS or an ABC truck parked there and everybody'd say, "My gosh, somebody is in with the President."

LISAGOR: Yes, there was a great concern about this and I think I know the reason why. Kennedy had that remarkable faculty of inspiring in people a desire to excel, in the first place, which is something I've always found hard to

explain. All I know is that it existed in him. We always had the feeling that he had a high standard. If he picked up something of yours and read it, you wanted it to be good because…

MCGRORY: And you knew he'd read it. That was the worst thing after he died. You thought, "Whom am I writing for anymore?"

LISAGOR: His judgement was something you respected. Now I can imagine writing something now, and if certain people in high places read it or didn't read it — if they read it and said it was no good, I'd feel proud because I'd think that it was good or if they said it was good, I'd be suspicious of it, I'd wonder where I went wrong. But there was this quality. The other thing was that there was a feeling amongst the newspaper people I knew, as well as in myself, that somehow being invited in to the President was more than just status. You know, it was more than just the status that comes from being invited in to listen to a president. It was a kind of a recognition, sort of a medal, for excellence or for influence…

MCGRORY: I was never called in. Not once. [Laughter]

[-47-]

LISAGOR: Or for leadership…

MCGRORY: Not once.

LISAGOR: For boy scout good conduct or something, you see.

MCGRORY: No, well, you've just ruined my ego. The one time I got in I practically had to shoot my way in. At the end of the first year of the New Frontier, everyone was writing first anniversary stories, everyone. There wasn't a living soul with a by-line in Washington who had not been to the Oval Room. And the editors of the *Star* decided that I should go, too, and write an anniversary story. No attention whatever was paid to my application. I think there was a reason for this. I don't think the President took women political reporters very seriously. I know he read Doris Fleeson and with great respect. But he had no reason to respect my political judgment. I've already indicated how totally wrong it was in his case. So there was, as I say, no reason to seek me out for my intellectual qualities, and there were other people more elevated than myself whom I think he regularly consulted both for philosophical and political and every other reason. Besides which in Massachusetts where he grew up in politics is a very rough game, and women do not engage in it. It's like football, not touch football but real professional football, and you don't want your sister or your wife or any of your womenfolk…

LISAGOR: Doing more than just pouring tea.

MCGRORY: That's right. Coffee parties. The way the Kennedy women spent their time in the campaigns illustrates. They never made a political speech. He never took women in politics very seriously, I don't think. And I don't think he

had particular reason to. But at any rate, I went through the usual channels to no avail. Then I called Kenny O'Donnell, the appointments secretary, who was, I think, the closest of the staff to Kennedy, and I touched Kenny on his most sensitive nerve, loyalty. I said to him, I said, "Kenny, I didn't see Roscoe

[-48-]

Drummond in West Virginia, and I didn't ride any buses with him in Wisconsin. Have you forgotten all your old friends?" Kenny said, "Mary, when do you want to come in? Do you want to come now? This afternoon? Tomorrow morning?" I said, "Tomorrow morning will be time enough." Very miffed I was, and he knew it. So the next morning at 10:30, I came in. Kenny brought me into the President's office, huge grin. The President came forward rubbing his hands and saying, "There she is. Where have you been? I was saying to Kenny just the other day, 'We never see Mary anymore.'" And I sat down, and we had coffee, and he told me, he said, "I see you're writing about [Barry] Goldwater." I said, "Yes." He said, "I didn't read it." I said, "Oh, you didn't." He said, "No." He said, "Any story that starts out that a man would rather be right than president, I never finish." I said, "Except that in his case, don't you see that it's literally true?" He said, "Oh, yes. I never thought of that."

Well, then to make amends for what he knew had been really very shabby treatment, he invited me on the spot to the congressional dinner at the White House which was just a few days hence. He had some sort of excuse that he didn't proffer with any degree of sincerity, that something had happened to the list, the invitations or something. "Why don't you come?" he said, "Why don't you come?". [PORTION REDACTED] We talked about several other things.

Then…. Oh, so then I went to the dinner the following Tuesday. And I was obviously a sort of late thought because I was sitting down so near the kitchen that I could have done the dishes without any particular trouble. But I had a perfectly marvelous time. I just loved every minute of it. He and Jackie came down, and they played "Hail to the Chief." It was just a tremendous, glorious moment. And afterwards he was standing in the hall saying good night to people. I think we had about a twenty minute conversation. He asked me who I was sitting with, what we talked about, if I had enjoyed it. And I said I had such a good time I just thought I had more fun than I was even supposed to it was so great. And we said what an excellent toast Mr. [John W.] McCormack had made and so forth. And I said, "And you know," I said, "the real surprise was that

[-49-]

[Charles A.] Charlie Halleck, of all people, is a reader. I can't imagine that. But he was yelling sweet nothings down the table to me." He said, "He reads those stories, does he? And when he reads that you've said that a man would rather be right than be president, he reads all the way through, does he?" in a reference to the previous conversation. That was, I think, in one way his most satisfying quality for newspaper people, that he didn't miss a beat, and he remembered everything.

LISAGOR: You're right, and when he talked to you, it often was a conversation to you, Mary McGrory, to you, George Herman, or to me, Pete Lisagor. It wasn't talking to some — this is at a later time, now. I said earlier that I

was the *Chicago Daily News*. Later he knew that as a provincial newspaperman, a newspaperman for the provincial press, I could do him very little good, I seldom crossed his bow, so to speak. So whenever he did talk to me, I always felt that I was being spoken to as an individual and not then again as any cipher. But I still want to repeat that I think he favored the big circulation people…

MCGRORY: Oh yes. He picked his spots — the networks, the magazines.

LISAGOR: … for time and for the amount of time he gave them and for the purposes he had in mind. You know, as I've said, the presidents always want the most favorable press they can get. They try to make cheerleaders of us, and we have to fight the temptation not to be cheerleaders. And they can win you over, if you don't watch your virtue, by inviting you into that Oval Room and giving you a eucalyptus rub or its equivalent. [Laughter] And it's awfully hard to resist this. The President, I thought, looked upon it rather wryly, but he knew that the presidency was big potatoes and no small fry like myself or like Hugh Sidey, a Nebraska boy or an Iowa boy or wherever boy, is going to say, "Oh no, you're not going to try and give me that stuff." And Kennedy was quite open about this kind of thing. I remember one of his aides saying…. I said, "Why is it that these people

can get it to see the President, but I have difficulty?" He said, "Because their circulation is one million five hundred and some thousand, and yours is five hundred thousand" or some…. I use a hypothetical figure. But they were concerned about that.

MCGRORY: He never called me about anything I wrote, which rather offended me because I understand that everyone else got called.

LISAGOR: No, I never got called by him. I read about…

HERMAN: He did not listen to the radio, and he very seldom watched CBS, so I never got callbacks on it, except sometimes somebody would write in about something they'd seen on CBS. But he almost never watched us, except on things like man shoots.

HOLBORN: Here I think we're missing Mr. Wicker as a witness. I think he probably would have a rather….

MCGRORY: Oh yes, *The New York Times*.

LISAGOR: Yes, I think Tom probably, *The New York Times* would be called. I know that *Time* magazine got its share of calls from Kennedy, and also he invited them in personally to discuss things with them.

BEGIN SIDE I TAPE II

HOLBORN: This is the second reel of the panel interview with Mary McGrory, Peter Lisagor, and George Herman. Well, let's move on to a subject which has been implicit in much of what we've been saying but can confront a little more directly, and that is the whole question of to what degree you feel that Kennedy was using television, television and radio but particularly television, against the writing press, whether he used it to his advantage, whether it created special problems for the writing press, whether he introduced a permanent phenomenon in White House press relations and the like, or any thoughts you have on this whole area. Why don't you start perhaps, George, with….

[-51-]

HERMAN: Well, of course, I'm in no position to talk about the problems it created for the writing press, but Kennedy used television to a great extent, and he used it tentatively and delicately. He always worried about the question of image. Was he on too much? Was he projecting too much image and people would weary of it? Very early on in the Kennedy administration I applied to Pierre Salinger for permission to have what we call a walking sound camera, two men, a sound man and a camera man with walking equipment that they could walk around with, in the President's office to make sound film of him at work. And it was a time of some consequence. I've forgotten exactly which crisis was on at the moment, but I remember he was in conversation with Ambassador Stevenson at the United Nations and so forth. And Pierre Salinger to my complete astonishment, after consulting with the President, came back and said, yes, this would be acceptable, with the sole condition that we allow them to review the tape for sensitive security material and to have the final say on what could or could not be used. And we agreed, and so we did get the first sound film. And subsequently it was done by all three networks, just once by each network. And then it was felt that perhaps there was enough of that kind of exposure. The whole news conference with its setup carefully designed for television, backdrops, lighting, and so forth, was carefully designed. I remember particularly vividly — perhaps I was more aware of this than what I like to call the Gutenberg boys in the writing press…

LISAGOR: The hounds of the Gutenberg…

HERMAN: Well, I started with simply Gutenberg boys a couple of years ago, and then the betterisms started to flow in — not that I'm claiming original credit for it. But in any case, when he was giving his news conference on the situation in Laos, you remember he had that enormous map mounted on panels so that he could spin it around and point to various things on it to show the

[-52-]

advancing and retreating tide. For the first time, I saw a President of the United States do something which was so professional, from a television man's point of view, and to me so obvious what he was doing. When he spoke his set piece on Laos, he didn't look at any reporter in the auditorium, he looked right over their heads into the television camera. It was so clear to me that this particular, specific message he was addressing to the people of America. He was looking into their eyes by looking at the television camera. He was not trying to give it the appearance of a news conference; he wasn't looking around the room. He looked right over all

our heads, right into the camera with the red tally lights on it, the one he knew was on. It was clear to me at that time that this was a man who was extraordinarily professional and that this was something that was carefully planned. This was to go direct to the people. He knew all the reporters would be taking it down, but he was calculating his main impact, his primary impact, direct to television.

HOLBORN: This was an evening press conference?

HERMAN: It was an evening press conference. It was a live press conference. This was calculated for direct appeal.

LISAGOR: Well, what you are saying, George, is what we all among the writing press came to realize, and that is we became spearcarriers in a great televised opera. We were props in a show, in a performance. Kennedy mastered the art of this performance early, and he used it with great effectiveness. We were simply there as props. I always felt that we should have joined Actors Equity. Those of us that had a chance to ask questions should have charged that much extra for speaking lines.

[-53-]

HERMAN: And yet he made an effort to cut that down, Pete, by striking out the old Eisenhower situation of beginning your statement by saying, "Mr. President, Peter Lisagor, George Hermna of CBS news…." to try and cut it down.

LISAGOR: That's right.

MCGRORY: This was to focus more on him.

LISAGOR: We fought that, though. No, we fought that. That was a press initiated change. Remember? We said to Pierre Salinger, who asked if there were any changes we wanted, we said yes, we wanted to try and eliminate the necessity for those people who made a career of identifying themselves on television and became public figures as a result of this — and I don't have to name the names because you know who they are — we wanted to eliminate that. Oddly enough — I must say this shows how prescient we were — it did not reduce these people's…

MCGRORY: No, the same people asked the very same questions.

LISAGOR: But there is a story, I think in line with what George says, which is from my standpoint, too, from my view of how he used television, absolutely correct. I think he always looked over our heads, as a matter of fact, once television came in.

MCGRORY: He means figuratively, George.

HERMAN: I understand.

LISAGOR: Yes, I do, because I think…

HERMAN: I'm shaking my head because I don't think this was true even figuratively. But go ahead, Pete.

[-54-]

LISAGOR: Well, I always thought we got up and flung the question across the great cavern hoping he would catch it on the fly like Willie Mays out in centerfield, and then we felt completely out of it. You know, in Eisenhower's time we were up close to him, and we could ask him a question, we could see his temper flair, we could almost feel like we were shoving the hypodermic into him, you know, and we could withdraw it, we could see the red of his eyes, the white of his eyes. But in this great big, huge auditorium you could rarely do more than — if you were a bit myopic, you know, a little nearsighted, you'd have a problem seeing the man. It was like being in a surgical seminar where the master surgeon was going to show you how to do something through television cameras. You were better off…

HERMAN: But now be fair. Was that television or was that Kennedy and Kennedy personality?

LISAGOR: Well, I am not complaining about television. This is Kenendy, of course. Television is there; it's a fact of life, I hate to say.

HERMAN: No, but the great echoing cavern. This, I think, was the way Kennedy wanted his news conferences. He wanted the gulf between himself…. He didn't want to be surrounded by newsmen.

LISAGOR: Oh, exactly. Oh, I'm sorry. If I've given the contrary impression, I don't mean to. No, the target of my criticism, if such it is — I don't mean it to be critical; I'm just stating the fact, and I'm stating how we reacted to it. Kennedy had another view that he brought to the presidency that occurred. We had a television program on which I appeared with Howard K. Smith, and when the program was off the air, Howard said, "Oh, Senator, gee, I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to ask you a question I wanted so to ask you." And Kennedy said, "What is that?" And he said, "I wanted to ask you, if you are elected, will you debate the Republican candidate in 1964." And Kennedy for some odd reason said, Well, is it

[-55-]

off the record or on the record?" Howard said, "Any which way you want it." But Kennedy didn't say then "I'd prefer it off the record" or "on the record." He didn't say anything. He said, "Well, yes. My answer to your question is yes. I think that any Democratic president who is any good after four years will have so much of the American press against him that he will have to use television to get his message across to the people. And I think an effective way to do this is through the debate." Now this said many things about Kennedy, but the important thing about

him — and I again feel that here is where he had a misconception — he felt that the press in America was basically a Republican press. This is a kind of ironic turn in our lives, isn't it, because today it is the Barry Goldwater people who are criticizing the press as being unfair and all the rest of it.

MCGRORY: Well, he thought that the hierarchy of the press was Republican…

HERMAN: The ownership.

MCGRORY: … but not the reporters, because remember he used to say about the Catholic Church that everybody from monsignori down were Democrats and the rest were Republicans and he'd just as soon have the lower echelons because there were more of them. He had that all doped out.

LISAGOR: Yes. Well, but, Mary, if he felt that the press basically in its news columns were going to give him a fair shake, I don't believe he would have said this. I believe Kennedy didn't mean this. I think he was operating under the old myth, the old myth that it's a Republican press. Everybody knows that the most Republican newspaper at least pretends to give you an objective account in its news columns. The editorials may be Republican. But I think he felt that television was an ally. It was a public….

[-56-]

HERMAN: Or at least that we were a neutral thing which he could bend to his coloration.

LISAGOR: Moreover the air belongs to the public. I think it's as simple as that. He felt that the air is a publicly controlled medium, really Now whether this is strictly true or not…

HERMAN: Well, I can tell you…

MCGRORY: He knew his own charm; he knew his own charm.

LISAGOR: Well, this, too. I grant you this, too.

MCGRORY: The most attractive man of his generation.

LISAGOR: But the point is you could not keep off that electronic device as you could keep out of a newspaper column, theoretically, the activities of the President as politician as well as president.

HERMAN: And yet, Pete, he used us very selectively. When you were talking earlier about what reporters were in to see the President, who was having a private interview with the President, that was very, very seldom a radio or

television man. That was almost always the press people. He would save radio or television. You could make the most improbable applications for an interview with the President — and I mean now a filmed and recorded interview with the President — and if there were a crisis or if there was some big thing which he needed to get across, you might get it. And the rest of the time you never got it. I would not like the impression to be gotten that he favored us because I would say on a percentage basis, or on a proportional basis, we saw him a lot less than the press reporters.

LISAGOR: Oh, I think that we tend here to confuse two things.

HERMAN: He used us very selectively for his points.

LISAGOR: I think you're talking about television reporters, such as yourself.

HERMAN: And cameras.

LISAGOR: But I'm talking about the television as a medium, George. I always visualized it in this way: Kennedy used television as a medium with himself as the performer.

HERMAN: Yes.

LISAGOR: He didn't want the reporter as a middleman. Sure, if he was going to talk to a reporter, he would much prefer to talk to a writing man than he would to a television reporter because…

HERMAN: When I say applied for an interview with him, I mean with the camera there. I don't mean my going to talk to him.

LISAGOR: Oh, I see. With him actually appearing on camera.

HERMAN: I mean with the camera there. We would make application to get an interview with the President on this issue of the day or that big issue of the day, and if it were something that he thought needed airing and if he thought you had the show and you were making a bid for a show with the audience that he needed, then he would give it to you. But our cameras saw him, outside of the weekly news conferences, our cameras saw him a lot less than the reporters' eyes saw him.

LISAGOR: Well, again I think we… I don't want to be extraneous here, but I think Kennedy understood the mystique of leadership which required him to be withdrawn quite often, and also concerned about his image, from this thing you're talking about which is too ready an appearance on television. People will say, "I heard that commercial." It's like a beer commercial or a soap commercial. He could overdo this, and he knew this better, perhaps, than anyone else.

HERMAN: The selectivity did not apply to himself alone. I remember, for example, during the steel price crisis, we had applied — we had a big Sunday show at that time. We applied in mid-week for interviews with some of the top people of the administration, not the President. We got an interview with the Secretary of Commerce, an interview with Dr. Walter Heller, the head of the Council of Economic Advisors. We had all these interviews done: one was done Friday morning; the other was done Friday evening; and we had an excellent show put together. For example, Dr Heller was talking about what the steel price meant to the economy, how steel prices fit in with the overall economy and the wage-price spiral. It was not particularly about what had been done but how it fitted in with the overall economy. The crisis was settled when? Saturday evening, let us assume, and on Sunday morning the President's office called and asked that we withhold those two interviews. We said, "For heaven's sake, the show is going in a few hours, and this would make an enormous hole in it. We can't do this." The next thing we knew there was a call from Palm Beach. I believe it was from Palm Beach. One of the President's top aides said, "I am calling for the President. He would like these two interviews dropped from the program." Now this, you know, puts you in kind of a quandary because, theoretically, you've made the interview, the interview is yours; on the other hand, in our business the story you've just gotten is never as good as the story you hope to get, you know, so you want to be on the right side of these people. Still we tried to argue and to point out that, for example, Dr. Heller's interview on what a steel price rise increase would have done was in no way damaging. Nevertheless, the crisis had been solved, the unpleasantness and the backlash was now about to come. He was acutely aware of the backlash that would now arise, and he wanted to kill the whole story, and he succeeded in getting it killed.

LISAGOR: Well, he began to placate the steel people immediately after that.

HERMAN: He withdrew, and the leadership of CBS at this time acquiesced in the hopes of getting better stories later, acquiesced, and at this direct request, forwarded through an intermediary, withdrew the interviews.

LISAGOR: But, George, I think that what we were trying to get at here is a basic revolution in how the American people receive their news and how they receive their impressions, their attitudes; in fact, how they received everything. You know, it's become an aural society — aural, a-u-r-a-l. You do it through your ears somehow and your eyes, in the case of television. This revolution has been going on quite a while. Kennedy as a president sat down one day possibly and taped it and realized that here is…. As he studied circulation figures of news magazines and newspapers, he studied listening habits and viewing habits of the American people. And, my friends, the statistics beat the writing press right down to the position we now occupy, sometimes on sufferance, it seems to me. But in any event, the statistics showed clearly where he had to concentrate his desire to inform, to propagandize, to do whatever presidents do about their constituents.

HERMAN: Fred asked if the process is irreversible. To an extent, it's irreversible…

LISAGOR: Only if everybody goes blind.

HERMAN: It's irreversible in that the American people and the American presidents will now always know this medium is there. But if another president comes along and decides that he does not have TV appeal and that this is not his dish of tea, his way of getting across, he can avoid a great deal of what Kennedy used without unpleasant criticism, not unbearable criticism.

[-60-]

LISAGOR: I don't want to get philosophical about this problem, but I think, George, you're not correct because I think that now presidents are chosen on the basis — unless they enter the White House by accident as Harry Truman did, in the first instance, and as Lyndon Johnson has now — I think presidents will be chosen in the future on the basis of how they look on the television screen. And I submit one horrible experience to you to prove what I say. I went to a governors' conference in Hershey, Pennsylvania, a couple of years back, and I thought for a moment out in the garden of this lovely place where the conference was held — buffet and dancing under the stars and so on — I looked at these people and thought suddenly, you know, I might have wandered by mistake into a movie lot where all the male leading men had gathered because there was the greatest collection of telegenic politicians I have ever seen. After talking to a few of them, you came away convinced that they were primarily elected because they were telegenic and not for very many other reasons.

HERMAN: Are you going to tell me that the politicians who traveled around in trains and made personal appearances and spoke in auditoriums were an uglier group?

LISAGOR: I don't want to be trite about it, but it's the old saying, could Abraham Lincoln be elected president of the United States today with television and warts all over his face? Or a scraggly beard? Now this is an exaggerated way to make a point, but I think it's just an overwhelming disgustingly overwhelming influence on our whole set of values and certainly in politics. Look at our present campaign. The discussion is how few states, communities, locales will have to be visited with television as the main instrument of communicating with the people. You can go to one large capital city and speak to the whole state. This is the way it's being used. Now it's not only because it's quite expensive to do it this way, it's because the American people get more of it. And I think they demand their president on

[-61-]

television. I do not believe a president can withdraw. I think that they demand to see him. Tonight there's a crisis in the land. What's happening? The President of the United States goes on television to explain to the American people about the thing in Vietnam. Mary, don't you agree that it's here to stay and that we are props and spear carriers?

MCGRORY: I'm afraid so. I regret it.

HOLBORN: There was, I think, a subsidiary consideration originally with Kennedy, and that is for him, as it worked out in the '60 campaign as he hoped it would in the '64, there was a lot of free time on television and the cost factor in 1960…

LISAGOR: Oh yes, extremely important.

HOLBORN: And he had intended in 1964 when running again to be the first president who would have freely appeared on "Meet the Press," "Face the Nation," any sort of other program that would offer him time. He was quite ready to appear because he was…

LISAGOR: That's an interesting piece of news, Fred, because, you know, I would never have thought that a president would appear on a panel show — that intimate, no holds barred kind of panel show.

HOLBORN: He kept saying, "It's for free. They're going to offer it."

LISAGOR: There's an adversary situation on these panel shows. There's a prosecutor and defender. It breaks down that way often…

[-62-]

HOLBORN: But still, he never appeared on any show in his whole career, with the possible exception of the one in 1956, that ever did him any harm.

MCGRORY: And the most effective appearance of his entire presidency I thought was the television interview in which you participated, George, at about Christmas time of 1962. It was perfectly delightful.

HERMAN: And yet my conclusion when we finished the show was that to a certain extent we had failed because the three of us, Bill Lawrence, Sandy [Vanocur] and I, met ahead of time, and we thought over "What do we want out of this program?" Our conclusion was, if it's just a three man news conference with just three reporters and the President, just a regular news conference, but only with three men, it's a waste of time, it's no good. Our intention and our whole desire was to get as deeply as we could into the man and sound out his philosophy, his feelings, his sense of history, his whole feeling of perspective. When we were all through, I didn't feel that we had gotten very much deeper into him. We never succeeded in eliciting any real feeling of his philosophy about the presidency. It came out almost entirely, once again, on the operational level, on the operation of the presidency, but a little deeper, more leisurely and more thoughtful look but only at the operational level. I've been wondering since whether it's because the format wasn't right or whether because — and

this is what I suspect myself — John F. Kennedy is not the kind of man who talks about his philosophy deeply on television in front of a hundred and sixty million people.

[-63-]

LISAGOR: Well, I think there's a little bit of truth in everything you've said in all of those points, but moreover, isn't it a fact about television you call these programs, properly, it seems to me, a show? People are performing. It's far different from sitting in the President's office and probing into his philosophy, his state of mind, his general philosophical attitudes towards the problems of the day than it is to put a camera on him and to have him exposed to the public view. It's something like doing this, you know, naked. I always feel that there's a show. I know we've all had some limited experience on television, and I have never been on it without feeling that somebody is staring at me. [Laughter]

HERMAN: I hope somebody is, Pete.

LISAGOR: We behave differently when we think people are staring at us than we do if we feel nobody — like here we're sitting and talking. Put a camera on us, and we'd all begin to lower our voice a little bit and straighten our tie and project. And I think this is what gets in the way with cameras. You begin to project, you begin to be someone else. You really begin to act.

HERMAN: He projected magnificently. No donut about that.

LISAGOR: Yes. And I think that Kennedy did a wonderful job of acting. I think the greatest performance I've ever seen in my life, including the stage, John Barrymore included, was the first debate between Nixon and Kennedy.

[-64-]

HERMAN: Before you get off the question or the conversation on the presidency, I want to tell you one or two other things about it that I saw on the inside that I don't think you saw on the outside and which I thought were interesting. I gave a great deal of time and thought before and afterwards into why this program came up. You know, basically this program got most of its impetus from the President, the concept, the idea. It was almost an invitation from the President to us. And I began to think to myself, "Why does he want to give this appearance? Why does he want to go before the American people and let them have a look at him at this particular time? What is his aim, what is his purpose in this?" And I asked one question and got one answer that confirmed a tentative conclusion I've come to, which is still obviously only tentative because I never had a chance to talk to him. My conclusion was that with the Cuban crisis over and his best image before the people, really, he wanted to cement this view of himself as a person who was able to handle peace and war who was not at all like the Kennedy that emerged during the steel price crisis, a frightening man, a man who was trying to tamper with the mechanisms. He was trying to project a smooth, quiet, rather deeper image of himself. I asked a question during the course of this. You know, I started hunting around for things to ask and one of the questions — I think I was quoting

Professor Richard Nuestadt, one of the men that I knew the President read. And this was on the tape, this was on the air, except I believe it was cut out in the actual performance. I said, "Mr. President, Professor Neustadt has written that any president who hopes to be considered great by future historians must be widely accused of subverting the Constitution in his own time, in other words trying to concentrate and centralize power, and if that's true," I said, "What have you been subverting lately?" Well, he gave me, I think, the coldest stare that I've ever had from anybody. He really sort of looked me from my head down to my feet and back up again with a look that sort of put icicles on me. And I thought to myself, you know, "What did I say? What did I do?" And then he said, "No, I don't believe that's true." And then he changed the subject completely. Afterwards it occurred to me that part of his possible intention in this program had been to get away from this whole image of a person grabbing for power, of a president who was being widely

[-65-]

accused by business of being somebody who was trying to concentrate power, federal power, and that this had had on a very sore subject, and he was trying to freeze that right off. And in any case he froze that whole subject right out of the conversation so quickly and so forbiddingly that I never came back to it.

LISAGOR: I think you used a code word, George, or phrase. "Subverting the Republic." whatever its connotation or context, I think would tend to shake President Kennedy, who had too often I think in his career been accused of a liberality perhaps that bordered in some peoples' minds on a fellow that would join in subverting something or other. I think Mary discussed his experiences with McCarthyism in the Massachusetts senatorial race in 1952, was it? I think subverting the Republic really was a kind of a…

MCGRORY: And it wasn't…

HERMAN: Unlucky phrase.

LISAGOR: … flash word, wasn't it? A reflex action word.

HERMAN: One other technical thing which may be of interest only to people who are interested in virtuosity. It was the President's insistence that we tape an hour and a half for our hour program, and every time we asked an unfriendly question — and in spite of what some newspaper critics wrote afterwards, there were a great number of unfriendly questions asked — every time we asked an unfriendly question, he gave the most magnificently dull answer that I have ever heard in my life with the certain knowledge that since we were going to have to cut out one third of the material that were taping (because it was to be an hour show, that was agreed upon, and we were taping an hour and a half), all his dull answers to these unfriendly questions were almost certain to be dropped. It was a fascinating performance of skill.

[-66-]

LISAGOR: Do you feel that it was possible for any man, including a man with the great presence of mind that I think Kennedy had, to be that calculating in a give and take situation, George? I find that crediting him, perhaps, with too much presence of mind.

HERMAN: My feeling is that if an unfriendly question were asked of Kennedy, he would have the ability to answer it back and to solve it but that by playing it down and answering it in a — perhaps there was another point. Perhaps it was his attitude of soothing, that he was trying to calm all tensions. But in any case the unfriendly questions drew the most overly soothing, in fact dull and boring, answers so that in effect they were then dropped from what is now the official text of that one hour program.

LISAGOR: You know, Fred, I think that one of the things about the press is that we're just ordinary citizens when you really boil us down to get rid of this weight, and fat, and the fingernails, and the dandruff and all the rest of it, and I think we were as smitten by the President's style and his manner, that quality of grace, really, that he had, as much as any other segment of the society, and I think this tended to reflect as much in the press. I've not made up my mind even at this late date whether President Kennedy had a fairly critical press, a fair press, a adulating press, a press that you know, idolized him too much, perhaps. I know many of my colleagues thought the world of him, wouldn't be critical of him, you know, and really lost a bit of their professional aplomb and poise in the face of Kennedy. I know a number of people who did this, and I sometimes had quarrels with myself, you know, violent quarrels. I'd say, "I think that this is a mad act," or not a mad act but a wrong act, particularly in foreign policy, and I would find myself thinking, "Well, he knows better, really, and it will work out all right." I always found myself at war with myself about Kennedy, the degree to which I would use that freedom which I had to be critical, to say things as I saw them. I don't know whether this affected other people as much as it did me. I'm sure it did because, as I saw, I know there were lots of reporters in town who prided themselves on a kind of tough-minded,

objective, critical approach to the presidency, to past presidents, that really became mesmerized by John F. Kennedy, by his style, his friendliness. Often it was a case of being flattered; vanities were involved.

HERMAN: And by having an intellectual as president.

LISAGOR: And an intellectual as president. And the ironic part of this, it seems to me, is that Kennedy, perhaps more than Eisenhower before him, felt that the press didn't do right by him, that basically, it didn't understand him, it didn't understand his motives and his purposes in life, it tended to have a narrow, constricted view of his own broader, more conceptual, grander vision, if you will, of the world and of the United States. I always felt there was a quality of whining in the President about the press. He tended to whine. I've had some of my colleagues tell me that's the wrong word, it wasn't whining. But I can't think of a better word.

HERMAN: But not just about the press.

LISAGOR: He tended to whine about picayune, petty things about the press. It was about things he read, really, and…

HERMAN: But, Pete, it went wider than that. I remember one weekend when he came up to New York to speak at housing centers and various odd other things in New York when he said, I think three times in three or four days, that the reason he's not getting this great groundswell of American public opinion support that Franklin D. Roosevelt had was because the issues were clear and simple in Roosevelt's day and today in his own day the issues were so complicated that people couldn't understand them and that that was the only reason he wasn't getting a great groundswell of support. In other words he was saying, "I'm just as great, but you don't understand me." He was complaining, in a sense, or whining, as you put it. And I agree with you. For one brief moment — and this came and went from time to time, and I think we all noticed it; some forgave it more rapidly than others, some overlooked it — but he was whining. He did the same things about misology: "You don't understand me. You're not getting me because otherwise you'd be for me."

[-68-]

LISAGOR: One of the tragic, kind of small points about Kennedy's not being with us is that I would have loved to have seen him as an observer and commentator after his eights years as president, as I'm sure he would have had an eight year term, another tem, having read him on the events of the day — Kennedy the commentator, Kennedy the observer. Wouldn't you, Mary? Wouldn't that have been a fantastically wonderful thing to have waited for?

MCGRORY: Oh, indeed, yes. That would have been very trenchant and pithy.

LISAGOR: Yes, I would wonder how he would come out. I suspect we'd have found out a lot more about his attitudes towards us at that time than we now know.

HOLBORN: I do think his attitude in the last summer and fall was a little more easy going. I think partly, by the middle of '63, he felt a little bit sort of vindicated by then. So I think he felt he had most of his foreign policy under control and more successes to show. And he was a little securer about what he had accomplished. Also, I think the European trip was important because of the way he began to show his abilities of appeal over the heads of people.

LISAGOR: The European trip was fantastic.

HOLBORN: Both the press and governments along the way.

HERMAN: Very true.

HOLBORN: Also he began to have sort of the sense that the world was moving a little bit his way, and other people were coming to power, and things weren't quite as…. The Gruson problem, for example, was a problem of [Konrad] Adenauer plus Gruson.

[-69-]

LISAGOR: Yes, that's right.

HOLBORN: And if it hadn't been Adenauer there, the stories nowadays really don't bother, I mean, after the late Adenauer, after he'd been in Germany, ceased to bother him very much.

LISAGOR: I think that's about right.

HOLBORN: The German objections to the nuclear test ban were not nearly as troublesome to him as the objections had been on the….

LISAGOR: Kennedy had a great capacity for surprise, I always felt, Fred. We went on that Western trip with him. I think this was in the spring of '63.

HOLBORN: Yes, in May.

LISAGOR: It was this so-called conservation trip, when we had great fun describing him as playing the combination role of Paul Bunyan and Smokey the Bear, you know, preaching conversation, which was a dull subject to him. You know, Gifford Pinchot left him cold; Teddy Roosevelt sort of scared him off.

HOLBORN: It was in the fall. It was after the test ban treaty.

LISAGOR: It was in the fall. That's right. The test ban treaty is the point I want to make. We had reached Montana. We had gone into Wisconsin and places in Minnesota. We had gone off from Wisconsin, it seems to me, the second or third day of the trip, second day perhaps, and for the first time he mentioned very tentatively, hesitantly, haltingly the nuclear test ban treaty because he did not know at that time — you know, there'd been a lot of criticism about it — he didn't know at that time what the response was. And I watched this, and I know, Pete, we tend to think we did things at a time when the moment was seemingly historic when it didn't happen. But I really did watch his

[-70-]

face when he first mentioned this thing, and the audience erupted. He was wholly surprised by it. He was surprised by it. I thought that Kennedy would not have been surprised if he had heard a boo or two in the audience or a hoot. But instead this audience erupted with approval. Were you along, George?

HERMAN: Yes.

LISAGOR: And then he began to use the nuclear test ban treaty at every point…

HERMAN: Expanding it and expanding it.

LISAGOR: … until by the time we reached Salt Lake City, he had grown so eloquent on the subject, and then he wove it into a — is there such a word as "wove?"

HERMAN: Yes.

LISAGOR: Wove, yes. He wove it into a speech on the right-wing and reactionaries in this Mormon Tabernacle, and that audience — this truly was a magnificent audience — it really roared with approval, it applauded and cheered. And Merriman Smith, who has, as you know, a kind of jaundiced view of these things, was sitting next to me. I was a pool man in the first row. And when it was over, he moved up front, he said, "That was a great speech, Mr. President." And I just thought Smitty did it, sort of involuntarily. And I figured, "That's an awful thing for a newspaperman to go up and say." But I felt that way. I wouldn't have gone and done it. I just, you know, wouldn't have done it, period. I didn't think it was seemly. But Smitty did it. But this came out of the President's discovery about things. It happened with the press. And I think you're quite right. I don't think he was as preoccupied with the press. I don't think he was as concerned about what he read. I don't think he'd throw these papers or magazines down and say, "What in the world would possess a fellow to do that?"

[-71-]

MCGRORY: He wouldn't have said it that way, either.

LISAGOR: No. [Laughter] "Where did he get that junk?" I think he was much, much more seasoned about it all.

MCGRORY: I remember seeing him the night he made that test ban treaty speech, which I personally, as a mere woman and a citizen, thought was a tremendous moment for the Republic. We were waiting outside and Sargent Shriver came through and said, "Come in." So we went into the office. The President had left, and he had gone into another office on the far side of the Oval Room. And he saw me pass by, and he came out. He said, "How are you?" I said, "I'm happy. I think this is a great moment. I think I'm even happier than you are." He said, "Well, I'm happy." I said, "Well, you didn't sound that way." [Interruption]

To resume on the night that he announced the signing of the test ban treaty: He obviously did not wish to discuss the nuances of foreign policy with me. He came out the door, and he was jabbing his left arm forward the way he did, and he said, "What I want to know is why didn't the *Star* consider your credentials good enough to come to Ireland with us?"

HERMAN: A very legitimate question.

MCGRORY: I said, "Oh, I think it was something about immigration quotas," or something like that and it all ended in laughter. But I did think it was interesting that he didn't want to waste any time discussing nuclear policy when he did want to address a very specific inquiry indicating he knew who was where at all times.

LISAGOR: He always liked to do that. Every time I used to see him in a group like a White House Correspondent' Dinner, he'd always say, "Where were you? We missed you," you know, if he'd just gotten back from Hyannis Port or Palm Beach. And I'm sure he didn't miss me at all, but he did know who was there and you know…

[-72-]

MCGRORY: He certainly did.

HERMAN: Well, Pete, this comes back to what you said before, the question of his charming the reporters, and I think touches upon one of the most fantastic and fascinating phenomena, this question of…. I don't even remember the phrase we used to use. Control of the press? What was the…

ALL: Managing the news.

HERMAN: Managing the news, yes. It slips your mind nowadays. There was a big hue and outcry that I think goes back to this very perceptive thing that you were talking about before, about the struggles inside the reporters to try and stay impartial and the fact that they were so extraordinarily charmed by this man. I think there was a little counterreaction on both sides. The President kept thinking to himself "Well" — in the early days at least, before he sort of matured in the days of the Cuban crisis — "I'm really one of them and I'm with them. Why are they treating me like this?" And then when he put these first little ill-advised controls on at the State Department and the Pentagon, which were not unprecedented, had been tried before and had turned out badly before, the newspapermen in their way also reacted. They say, "But we love him. How can he do this to us?" And I think there was this enormous and unprecedented backlash inside the press because they had been so charmed by him and they so strongly felt that he was theirs, that how can daddy treat us like this. It was a ridiculous emotional…

LISAGOR: Well I think that this esteem was mutual, George, at the period of time we're talking about.

[-73-]

HERMAN: But I think it, it…. I agree with you, but what I'm trying to say is that it stemmed from a dangerous excess of esteem which should not be. The newsman's job is not to be charmed, not to be inside the President's social circle, not to meet him at dinner. The newsman's job, as I see it and as I was brought up to see it, is always to be skeptical, always to look at the people in power and think to yourself. "What are

they doing wrong? Why are they doing this? In what way does the American people, do my readers, need protection from this man if, in fact, they do at all?" And I think there was a small abdication of this responsibility in the first year or two of Kennedy.

LISAGOR: Not a small one. There was a considerable…

HERMAN: There was an abdication of this. And then in an attempt to sort of redeem this abdication, the press for a brief period over-reponsded, over-asserted itself as a sort of rebellious child will. And I think that's the cause for this way off base, the excess of this managed news business. Not that I condone in any way the management that was attempted, but golly, when Eisenhower attempted management in several degrees (it was harsher than this, which I experienced), there was no such response.

LISAGOR: The managed news. The whole controversy was a bit farcical, I think, because…

HERMAN: It was childish.

MCGRORY: And it came about, don't forget, because someone attacked a member of his family where he was most sensitive and most vulnerable. Didn't he ban the *Herald Tribune* because they wrote a story that Mrs. Kenendy had gotten certain appointments for the great dinner for Ayub Khan at Mount Vernon?

LISAGOR: Something of that kind was involved. I forget what it was.

[-74-]

MCGRORY: Yes, there were some donations that were questioned here. And that's what started the whole thing. That's when he cancelled his subscription to the *Herald Tribune*.

LISAGOR: But the managed news controversy actually began out of a statement made by Arthur Slyvester, if you remember, Mary.

HERMAN: At the Pentagon, in which he said…

MCGRORY: You mean in the missile crisis, about the government should lie in certain circumstances?

LISAGOR: Yes, that's right. In which he said the government has a right to lie to save itself. But this business of managed news, you know, governments really are a compound of people, some of them mistake themselves for important people, but it really, we all manage the news. We manage the news about our private lives; we manage the news about our public lives. We try to put the best possible face on anything we do and to minimize all the bad things about us. All the administrations I've ever read about in American history, certainly all of those I've ever had any experience with as a reporter, have done this. The phrase came up, the phrase was invented and used; it became an easy phrase, it

became a shibboleth after a time. Managing the news. Why, when was not the news managed? A corporation's news is managed. Your own news is managed.

HERMAN: I would say specifically that I was called into [James C.] Jim Hagerty's office more times — and I served about the same time in the two administrations, two years of covering Ike and two years of covering Kennedy — I was called into Hagerty's office more times, not many times but more times, to check up on stories that I had written and to be warned about them than I was in Kennedy's administration. But I don't believe that that was necessarily universal.

[-75-]

LISAGOR: I don't think Kennedy did an awful lot of this. I had no experience with it, of course, but I don't think he did a lot of it. I think we tended to talk up…. We really were so proud or envious or whatever the situation may be about our relations with the President under Kennedy that we talked about everything. The telephone would buzz. "You know who called me this morning? The President." It swept through the town. I never heard that…

HERMAN: "I've got the President on the hold button."

LISAGOR: Yes. It's like one of the jokes told, you know: "The greatest measure of status in Washington today is to say, "Would you hold on a minute? I've got the White House on the hold button,'" you know, or the President. It became a kind of joke around town. But in all seriousness I think that the press did come awfully close during the Kennedy time to abdicating its basic responsibility as a detached and objective instrument of…

HOLBORN: And perhaps also in terms of how they covered Washington. They covered the White House too much.

LISAGOR: Oh, excessively. As a matter of fact, I having had a lot of experience covering the State Department, during the Kennedy time practically abandoned the State Department, even though it remained within my responsibility, and a lot of good stories, of course, were developing in the State Department. You could mine them there if you spent as much time on them as I once did. The point is you wanted to be at the White House. You felt if anything meaningful is going to develop on foreign policy, it would develop at the White House. Kennedy used to say, "Who leaked that?" You remember what a great game there was about who leaked something until the Administration people struck back at the President by saying that he was the biggest leak in town and often leaked stories. I remember one time…

[-76-]

HERMAN: But sometimes unconsciously, Pete. Sometimes he told them to people who were friends of his, forgetting that they were also either publishers or managers or owners of newspapers.

LISAGOR: Oh, yes. Well, he told [Philip L.] Phil Graham a story once, the publisher of the *Washington Post*, and several days later Carroll Kilpatrick of the *Washington Post* wrote it, and Kennedy wanted to know where Carroll Kilpatrick got the story, you know, and accused a number of people, I think, of leaking it to Carroll's boss. This happened on a number of occasions. Nothing very serious, but it did tend to happen.

HERMAN: It wasn't always held off two or three days. Sometimes the boss would slip away to a telephone.

LISAGOR: Kennedy in terms of his relations with the press was more conscious of it, knew more about it perhaps, more concerned with it, than Eisenhower had been or Truman had been, maybe not as much, really, as President Johnson is. I'm not sure. I haven't made up my mind yet. I'm willing to give Johnson a few more cracks at it. But he made us more con…. We were more self-conscious during the Kennedy period than I can remember in Washington. In fact, I was more self-conscious as a personal newspaperman than I've ever been in my life. I've never been aware; I did my job; I wore my shoes down; and I never thought too much about it. But suddenly I was worried about, "Does the President know me? Will he call me by my name? Will I get invited some time someplace? Will my boss hear that he knows me? Or will I get this, that?" I always found myself involved in this terrible business of "I'd better stay up with the Joneses because the Joneses are in there pitching like crazy," you know. [Laughter]

HERMAN: Well, and in the case of network newsmen, it was terribly important because you always felt — it wasn't even so much a question of getting a story — "Maybe the next time a certain program, a visit with Mrs. Kennedy in the White House, the next time some special program or other comes up, because he knows me, he may give it to my network," or something. So there was a competition of that sort which…

LISAGOR: Well, there was a kingly air. That's what you're saying about it. It was kind of getting royal favors.

HERMAN: Yes.

LISAGOR: It was an atmosphere of royalty bestowing upon the favored few those little goodies and bounties that you can make hay with at your home office. Let's face it, city editors and managing editors get impressed,too. I went in one day with Kenendy to have a promotional picture taken. I didn't want to do this, but my office said, "Can you do it? Will you do it?" And I thought, "If I tell them I took it to Pierre

Salinger, and you know that monkey, he says no to everything, I'd be absolved." But to my astonishment Pierre says, "Sure." And the next thing I know I'm ushered in and the President is saying to me, "Pull your belly in, stick your chest out, stick your jaw…." And two of the most horrible pictures I ever took in my life came out: one looking grin like I'm about ready to slug him, and the other with my mouth wide open. So they had to use it. They tried to have an artist close my mouth a little bit [Laughter] but not much, you know. I looked chesty, and I was all out of whack, you know. Everything wrong about me. And it served me right, you know. It served them right. But he was great for doing that, you know. Jack Kelso, John Kelso of Boston? You remember John.

ALL: Yes.

[-78-]

LISAGOR: His paper, a Gannett paper, said, "Would you get a picture?" He said he did much the same thing. Early in the presidency, John was in there taking promotion pictures, and the President was…. Now John wouldn't do him much good, you see. Here is where I contradict what I said earlier a bit. But he remembered John from the Boston days. John was a Boston reporter. In those days, John used to tell me, Kennedy as a senator and a congressman was concerned about a six-head on page 39 that referred to him, you know. Well, he'd call up and say, "John, I see you got that little item in the paper," you know. And you know, old times. But Kennedy had a kind of concern about that little promotion deal. I was always grateful for the fact that he stood still long enough in a busy afternoon to have a couple of pictures taken. I must say it was very quick. I was in and out. I didn't have a chance to purse my lips, you know, to say cheese.

HOLBORN: Well, if we could turn from the royal pinnacle to the court for a moment, another problem connected with all this was the news office, the office of the news secretary, how he worked that both during the campaign and, more importantly, as president. What estimate would you make looking back onto it now after nearly a year?

LISAGOR: Well, my own view of the press secretary is that it's almost an impossible job for anybody to do truly well because the press secretary has to serve both the president and the press. It strikes me that in a contentious situation, which always develops with a strong president, the press secretary cannot win. This does not mean to say there aren't some good ones and some bad ones. I think that Kennedy was, as we've always said, it's a bit trite now, his own best press secretary in that he had an understanding of the press, knew how to use the press, preferred to be the contact with the press in any meaningful situation — that includes television, too, and going on the air. Pierre Salinger was an amiable, I always felt, waterboy…

[-79-]

HERMAN: Sloppy with a glass.

LISAGOR: … in the basic sense; not particularly informed; if so, with no mandate to discriminately pass on that information; basically uncaring. Now maybe he had a mandate which I don't know about, namely, "Don't you do very much but be accessible. Be as uncommunicative as an amiable fellow can be." But hard information, hard news, or even the kind of guidance that people who tend to write interpretive stuff like I do, to get the guidance that is so useful to you, Pierre was from my standpoint a complete waste of time. He was curt and rude many times. I never understood it because basically he is an outgoing, gregarious, amiable, you know, fun-loving type. He really is sort of a fun boy. But in that job he could be terribly rude and terribly curt and terribly unhelpful. Now I always felt that this is the way Kennedy wanted it because if Kennedy did not want it this way, he knew how a great many people felt about Pierre's operation.

Now George is a better authority on Jim Hagerty than I am, and I'm sure he'd want to dwell on Jim Hagerty, but my own experience with Jim Hagerty is a man who was passing the stuff out without favor, without giving it to this, that or the other person because he's a friend. I think Jim tried to be scrupulously objective and fair. At least that was my limited experience with him, and I must confess it was limited because I didn't cover the White House to any intensive way. So I only mention this because I think that Eisenhower left to Hagerty, or left much to Hagerty's own judgement about affairs in news, whereas Kennedy, I do not believe, left very much at all to Pierre's judgement.

HERMAN: Well, they were different jobs. Hagerty was press advisor and public relations expert to President Eisenhower, a man who had no feel for and no interest in public relations and press relations.

[-80-]

LISAGOR: A very good point.

HERMAN: And Pierre Salinger didn't know as much about public relations as John Kennedy did and was purely press secretary. He was in no sense, I think, a public relations advisor in the sense that Hagerty was to Eisenhower.

LISAGOR: Well, George, I know you don't intend to make the mistake that is often made about the difference between press relations and public relations. I think what you're talking about basically is press relations as opposed to public relations.

HERMAN: Well, I would also argue that Jim Hagerty would be perfectly willing to say to President Eisenhower, "I don't think it would get you a good…" I don't think he used the word "image," but the only equivalent word that comes to my mind after having been so long with the Kennedy administration and others — "It will be bad for your image if you do this. Now you do it if you want to or have to, but I'm just telling you that this will damage your image and this will be good for your image. You have to make the decision, but I'm advising you that it will have this effect." I don't for one minute believe that Jim Hagerty ever intruded in any policy. I wouldn't say that. But I would say that he would feel perfectly free, in fact he would feel that what he was hired for and what the President

wanted him for was to go to the President and say, "I want you to know what this will cost you or bring you. But your decision is based on whatever factors you consider important." Whereas I'm convinced that John Kennedy had more of a feel for public relations and press relations than Pierre ever had.

LISAGOR: Oh yes, it's so clear because Pierre once complained to me somewhat pensively that the President met with more newspaper people behind his back, you know. He didn't know that X columnist of Y commentator or Z writer was in there. And they'd never get their appointments, in the early days at least, through Pierre. You never thought of going and trying to see Eisenhower or Turman through anybody but the press

[-81-]

secretary. But they were working through Kenny O'Donnell; they were working through Mrs. Lincoln, as you know.

HOLBORN: Or Mac Bundy, like one of the most laughed at episodes, the Jean Daniel incident; the day that came up, Pierre never even knew there had been such a meeting.

LISAGOR: Yes, that's right. Pierre often didn't know. I don't think Pierre knew that I was in there with Bill Stoneman, for example, for a good chunk of the President's time. I don't think Pierre really knew this because we never went through Pierre, just never did that.

HERMAN: Well, Pierre…. To broaden it a little bit, in Hagerty's day if you wanted an appointment with anybody in the White House, any of the advisors, any of the staff, if you called that man's office he'd say, his secretary would say, "I'll have your call transferred." And the next thing you know you'd be talking to Jim Hagerty's office.

LISAGOR: Well, not always, George.

HERMAN: Not always, but most of the time. And that went for some very high officers of the Eisenhower White House. If you called Salinger or if you asked Pierre, "Can I interview so and so?" his attitude was, in effect, "Why bother me? Go ask him." And this was something that was new, different and, I must say, to me at least vastly healthy about the Kennedy administration.

LISAGOR: And I agree.

HERMAN: Of course, sometimes this happens to a new administration. The new crowd comes in, and they are convinced that they know more than any reporters and that they can talk perfectly frankly to us and tell us just what they want us to hear and that we will not be able to draw any conclusions that they don't give us.

And then after they've been in office a couple of years and stories are beginning to get out, conclusions are

[-82-]

being drawn that they don't like, they begin to tighten up a trifle. And I found that in the Kennedy White House, too. But still the whole approach was different. Hagerty was absolutely the appointments secretary for the newsmen with everybody in the White House, and Salinger did not want and did not have that role, and it was in no sense funneled through him.

LISAGOR: There's a couple of major points that ought to be made about that office, Fred, since you asked about it in a broad sense under Kennedy, and it probably is true under other people. And I know that I'll be read out of the profession for saying this, but I think it's absolutely true; I would stake my reportorial reputation on it. The White House press corps is one of the more pampered press corps in the world. It's also one of the laziest. It's also one of the least digging, least curious, least inspired, and perhaps least talented of press corps around the country. And you know you tell a person back in the hinterlands this, and they'll say, "What? Obviously the White House is the <u>créme de la créme</u> of all of the press people in the world." And it isn't true. Most of the White House press sit there all through the day making no effort to see any official and talk to them on a private basis, try to gain guidance or understanding or illumination, what have you. They sit there and get it spoonfed to them or shoveled out at them, depending on what the day's flow is. They're perfectly content to get the handout, rush to the telephone with it if it requires rushing to the telephone, or using it to wipe their hands with if it does not lend itself to rushing to the telephone. Now many…

HERMAN: There's a little item of justification there…

[-83-]

LISAGOR: Now many of them will tell you that they cannot do both. You need somebody there for the routine, for the shoveling out, and these people cannot desert their posts, so to speak, and go upstairs or into the back corners of the White House and talk to somebody or go across the street to the Executive Office Building, and they take lunch when the lid is on and they have to be back when the lid is off and these other things. But I do not for one minute believe this is true perhaps of anybody except the wire services.

HERMAN: And the radio, TV networks…

LISAGOR: Yes, maybe the radio, TV boys who have to be there for the break. Now there's a handful of other reporters there from all papers represented in town, all those papers that cover the White House as a regular rule, who read books, work crossword puzzles, doze, take naps, play cards endlessly, get on the telephone for social calls, and do everything else except do a diggling job, a working job. Now under these circumstances it's almost, well, it's almost no problem because no demand on a press secretary

that he be anything but a technician. He need be no more than a fellow that can tell you that the bus leaves at X hour to go to the airport, and the plane is going to leave at such an hour, and there will be press tables and typewriters available, and the Western Union man will be there, and there'll be an ample supply of telephones. This is about all some press secretaries need to do under the circumstances of reporters making very few demands upon them for information or for interpretation.

Now there's one other point, and then I'll be quiet for a moment. That press office under Kennedy was woefully lacking, from my standpoint, on one very important feature, and that was a man who could sit down and interpret what was going on in an informed way, particularly foreign affairs. You can get your own interpretation of most domestic affairs from, oh, a congressional leader or, you know, a majority leader, a minority leader or what have you. There are enough people informed well enough about this. But in the foreign affairs it's often a case of the State Department or the

[-84-]

White House, and in Kennedy's administration the White House was often the same as the State Department, or rather the State Department and the White House were often the same. But you could not get the kind of guidance one needed from a day to day basis except through Mac Bundy, who often complained that he saw too many newspapermen as it was, he had no time for them, he was spreading himself too thin. And I agree with him on this. I agree with Mac Bundy on this. I think that he had other functions to perform. But there should have been, under Pierre Salinger, somebody quite qualified to discuss matters with newspaper people who came in and needed to discuss with them. And there never was. And one reason for it, I believe, is that Kennedy may not have wanted it that way, but Salinger wouldn't have wanted it that way either because this would mean that people would be turning more to someone else in that office than to numero uno, and that just doesn't go in this hierarchic structure that we know as government, it wouldn't work. That's all I have to say about that news operation under Kennedy.

HERMAN: What are the proprieties of discussing here the role of General [Chester V.] Clifton in the news office?

LISAGOR: Oh, I think I would discuss it because it is an important ingredient in that Kennedy operation. I think I would.

HERMAN: It certainly was an important ingredient. I would say more Kennedy stories were circulated, or attempted to be circulated, or were at least launched at the press by General Clifton, the President's Military Aide, then by all the personnel in the press office combined.

LISAGOR: I'm glad you raised that question, George, because I'm thoroughly familiar with it and most articulate about, when we give you a chance. [Laughter]

[-85-]

HERMAN: I have gotten exclusive stories of considerable weight from General Clifton. I have seen him try to sell a White House point of view that was palpably unsalable and which no one would buy. I always wondered exactly what his role was and whom it was authorized by because obviously at times he was acting as a sort of super press secretary, a salesman for the President. Now I can hardly believe that after some of these exclusives came out in the press, the President of the United States and the head of the White House office could be unaware of where they were coming from. So obviously this was something which was at least winked at by the President. Now what Pierre Salinger's reaction to it was I never — I always skirted the subject; I never talked to Pierre about General Clifton nor to General Clifton about Pierre Slainger. But I certainly got more scoops on the air, more important stories and more guidance on stories, both for CBS and for the *New Leader* magazine, from General Clifton, and in considerable depth and sometimes answers found out and brought back to me than I ever got from Pierre Slinger.

LISAGOR: I think you've stated it as well as I can, George. This is precisely what the situation was. I once heard Pierre remark about it by saying, "Oh, you got that from General Clifton. He doesn't know what he's talking about." But the truth was that the piece of information being described was perfectly accurate, General Clifton on that occasion did know what he was talking about. Now General Clifton was, in my view, under Kennedy, a typical press agent in all senses of the word. His whole modus operandi was to sell Kennedy as the best and the greatest of them all. In everything he gave you, there was never anything that would reflect even by the wildest stretch of your imagination upon the performance, the quality, the calibre, the excellence, the superiority…

HERMAN: This is what I mean when I say he sometimes tried to sell stories that were not credible.

[-86-]

LISAGOR: That's right. But he was an exquisite, from Kennedy's standpoint, an exquisite press agent in the best sense of the word.

HERMAN: He was a great enthusiast.

LISAGOR: These guys in a general's uniform — and you know how we loved them generals, better than Doctor Strangelove loved that bomb. You know, he invested what he had to say with the authority of a military aide, but a general, you know, it had a little something extra. And when he talked about foreign policy on military things, you figured you were getting it from the equivalent of the horse's mouth. I don't know about — I've never talked to Ted Clifton about domestic affairs, really, because I never knew whether he understood them or whether he was empowered to discuss them.

HERMAN: It just somehow never came up.

LISAGOR: Foreign affairs, military affairs, he was always — not always, he was often not accessible, of course — but when he was accessible….

HERMAN: And the color and detail that he could give you about a meeting and about the President's preparations for a meeting, what he did, whom he met with, what he studied.

LISAGOR: And Fred, that's the kind of role I was talking about that ought to be played by someone of the three people in that office. [Interruption]

Well, we were talking about the other people outside of the news office who were useful in talking about a variety of things. There was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who was outside of the news office. There was Fred Holborn here, who was outside the news office. There were some of the speechwriters.

[-87-]

HERMAN: Well, and people in charge of things. For example, I got an awful lot of information from Dr. Heller and people on the Council of Economic Advisors.

LISAGOR: Oh, I think that we established that earlier that under Kennedy you could do that in the White House. There were those people who saw Mac Bundy rather regularly and, of course, Larry O'Brien, and he was quite good on congressional affairs…

HERMAN: And extremely frank.

LISAGOR: And what the status of legislation was, what the attitudes of the President were. Those people who had relations with the President in the daily flow who were accessible were often very useful to the degree to which, you know, they were informed. I got an awful lot of guidance from…. I didn't go often to these people, but when Arthur Schlesinger was dealing in a somewhat major way with Latin American affairs, he was quite capable of good guidance on it.

HERMAN: You know, the most interesting period in that kind of thing was around the time of the Bay of Pigs when almost every journalist in the United States knew that something was up. CBS, for example, had correspondents in Florida who had interviewed some of these people and had been told frankly of their plans. We finally brought one of our executives down from New York to have a talk with Schlesinger and through Schlesinger some of the other people and were asked as a sort of favor to national security to sit on this stuff for a while. But I suppose this was a universal experience. It was the worst kept but best squelched secret.

[-88-]

LISAGOR: Sure. But I think there were other people in the White House who did this, Fred, as you know, and I think also that Pierre was often resentful of them. He felt that people were going around him somehow, going behind his

back, which was not any — there was no mischievous intent involved. It was just most of us trying to get someone who would be productive. You know, if you can't get at the prime source, you get at all sources that touch on the prime source, all the secondary sources. Some of these people were quite good, some of them were quite useful. A few were, as far as I was concerned, more accessible than others. I found it difficult to get a hold of people when I'd call them, some of them. Others I…. You establish a personal rapport as always in any business with various sources of news, and it works that way.

HOLBORN: How did this all strike you, Mary, as a part-time client at the White House rather than someone….

MCGRORY: Well, I thought that Pierre became a public figure, while he may not have been a total success as press secretary as we've been discussing. As a public figure, I think he scored a significant breakthrough. As, for instance, the episode of the fifty mile hike when Pierre became a…

LISAGOR: A clown.

MCGRORY: Yes, a figure of fun for all the nation.

LISAGOR: He became a kind of court jester.

MCGRORY: Yes, he did.

HERMAN: What was he distracting attention from? It escapes me at the moment, but I remember I figured out at the time he was doing all this to detract attention from something else. It escapes me at the moment what it was.

[-89-]

MCGRORY: And then, of course, he had his own sort of independent operation as, for instance, the engineering of the debate between [Alexsei] Adzhubei and the President. That was his little project. I wouldn't think it was a primary function of a press secretary to arrange something like this. So it seems that when he went out of the specific area of the rather boring business of feeding us handouts, and often petty details about life in the White House, he scored a success and witness the fact that he is now a United States Senator and we're right back — we're just doing what we always did. He did establish himself as a public personality.

LISAGOR: This is in the nature really of an assertive, gregarious press secretary. He is in the public eye, he makes the announcements, he makes the statements, they see him on television all the time. Pierre had that wonderful symbol of the cigar, he was always with one. You could identify him by a cigar. Cartoonists would draw a cigar and…

MCGRORY: And he was not a retiring personality.

LISAGOR: No, Pierre was a lively one. You know that song about the lively ones, Pierre was one of the livelier ones. And he was not a bore, as has been written about him. He was a quite exciting human being, catholic in taste and interest, a joy boy in many ways. Pierre was quite a guy. I can't think of anything better to say about Pierre or more flattering than to say he was a lively one.

MCGRORY: Yes, yes.

HERMAN: And I must say under the constant frictions comparatively rarely lost his temper. And we are sometimes a darned unpleasant group to deal with.

[-90-]

LISAGOR: That's right. I think Pierre rolled with the punches, and I think this is what Kenendy liked about Pierre. Pierre could take the guff and the daily abuse…

HERMAN: Temper is very dangerous in that office.

LISAGOR: … from the press. He was a good whipping boy, a good lightning rod, all of the, you know, usual terms that…

MCGRORY: And the transcripts of the early press conferences of the New Frontier will be read with pleasure in centuries to come, details about Caroline's hamster…

HERMAN: And the rabbit and the bugle.

MCGRORY: … and the pony and the dog. All that was pretty…. And Pierre handled it. You know, Jim Hagerty, as I get it, made trivia seem like something that should be graven on tablets of stone, but Pierre always knew it was fluff and treated it as fluff. I think that was part of his appeal for the reporters, that he didn't try to con you, he didn't try to make it seem as though it was the end of the world. I mean, Jim Hagerty was busy, I think, a great deal of time concealing the fact the President was at the golf course, and, you know, he did it in rather grandiose fashion, whereas Pierre, I think maybe had to conceal a great deal of substantive action. When he gave out trivia, there was no question about what he was doing and…

HERMAN: Yes, he'd shift his cigar over and say, "I've got a great one for you today."

[-91-]

MCGRORY: And there used to be all that sort of interplay of interior decorating and foreign policy when I would go to the briefings. You know, Caroline's

room would be in pink, and John's room was going to be in blue, and Adenauer was coming…

HERMAN: He gave most of that stuff to Pamela Turnure. He'd say, "Miss Turnure has details."

MCGRORY: Yes, but he did a great deal of it himself, too.

HERMAN: Well, after a few unpleasant experiences on some of the materials and colors and so forth…

LISAGOR: It would be an interesting exercise to have someone write a job description for a press secretary. I don't think it's ever been done, and if it were done…

MCGRORY: [Laughter] For George Reedy, in two words — to suffer. [Laughter]

HERMAN: Don't write it. If it ever gets written, it'll harden into public policy and we're dead.

LISAGOR: But what we're saying here actually is that that job really depends upon what the President wants to make it. It could be anything.

HERMAN: It is to supplement the abilities of the President.

LISAGOR: That's right. It could be a job like Hagerty did it, who was kind of a wheel in the operation. It could be like Pierre did it, which was kind of a flywheel in the operation, or a pinwheel I might say.

HOLBORN: Would you characterize it at all differently for Pierre and Andy [Andrew T. Hatcher] during the campaign period?

LISAGOR: The earlier period? Yes, I think Pierre was a but more au courant. I think he was more knowledgeable, a little more informed, used I think a little bit more, because in the hustle and the bustle of a campaign where you never had a desk and you never had the steady flow of handout material, Pierre, and Andy Hatcher, too, was often, I felt, George, more useful, more helpful…

HERMAN: More helpful to us and to the President, to Mr. Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, as he was then. I remember once during the campaign and after the nomination and before the election Senator Kennedy, then, holding a news conference, and then, once again turning to my own esoteric interests, we'd go up and say, "Well, now we'd like to re-do these questions and these answers or this part of your statement for the cameras," and Senator Kennedy looking around and saying, "Where's Pierre?" He wanted to

discuss it with him. So that I think this was much truer during the days before the presidency. Now why that should be so, I'm not prepared to say. I didn't know him well enough in the early days.

HOLBORN: Perhaps just one other small problem in connection with this. None of you were on all of the foreign trips, but each of you was on some of them. What about the problem of information and guidance during the several presidential trips?

LISAGOR: Well, in view of the fact, Fred, that most of Kennedy's trips were — well, I think most of them were; I'm not thinking too well at the moment — ceremonial in nature…

[-93-]

HERMAN: Except for the meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna.

LISAGOR: Vienna, yes, except for that, most of them were ceremonial in nature, which meant that the story was out in front of you to be seen and to be heard with your own eyes and your own ears. You didn't need a press secretary or press relations very much. Second point to be made is where you did need press relations on foreign trips where people like [Robert J.] Bob Manning went on these trips…

HOLBORN: They did have Bermuda and Nassau, too.

LISAGOR: That's right. And a fine job was done there, by the way, largely through, not especially Pierre's efforts but through the State Department's efforts. They had had experience with the international conference, and they brought out the cast of characters. For example, at Nassau we had what I regard as an absolutely fabulous briefing. Here is a diplomatic conference in which the briefing at the end of the conference — some forty-five minutes — was made by the Secretary of Defense, no less. Now I think this was a commentary both on the nature of the conference and the strength of the personality of Mr. [Robert S.] McNamara. Dean Rusk was not, for legitimate reasons, was not at Nassau, but George Ball was. And George Ball simply deferred to McNamara during that. But we got a good account of the Nassau agreement, one of the most significant of all international conferences, with a communique, for a change, that had…

HERMAN: Substance.

LISAGOR: … meat and substance to it.

HOLBORN: And ambiguity.

[-94-]

LISAGOR: Ambiguity, yes, because it was done under stress and in a short time. In Vienna the meeting with Khrushchev I thought was fairly well handled,

inasmuch as I was the pool man from Vienna to London and spent my time personally on the President's plane and had an opportunity to talk to Mac Bundy and to Ted Sorensen, Kenny O'Donnell and other people who were in Vienna, to get some reflection of the attitude after the meeting with Khrushschev. During the time I don't believe….

HERMAN: There was a joint briefing.

LISAGOR: Oh yes, those we left behind were briefed by [Charles E.] Chip Bohlen.

HERMAN: Well, there was that, but there was also — no, that was in Paris. There was a Salinger and his counterpart. I've forgotten who it is.

LISAGOR: Harloff, Carloff… The Russian.

HERMAN: A joint briefing.

LISAGOR: Is there any use? Because I have to leave early, you see.

HERMAN: It was not very substantive because public briefings of this kind seldom are.

LISAGOR: Yes, but going back to a comparative account, I think they did as well during this time as previous administrations and press people did.

HERMAN: I'd like to point out, Pete, that the job of the press secretary under these circumstances is to announce those parts which are very small and are on the record, whereas the job of the Secretary of Defense and other officials are to announce those very large parts which are not off the record but for background most of the time, which cannot be attributed to him and which, therefore, are safer but of much more value.

[-95-]

LISAGOR: Yes, that's right. You couldn't identify the people involved in these briefings, but you could go out and tell…

HERMAN: But what Salinger did was identifiable as the press secretary of the President of the United States. He did almost entirely on-the-record stuff.

LISAGOR: But Pierre did do the job of getting the right people to be available for the briefing.

HERMAN: Precisely. I think those were handled very well.

LISAGOR: That's a useful role for the press secretary to play. Hagerty did this very well, too, in his time.

MCGRORY: Excuse me, could I ask a question? In the Salinger briefing after Vienna did he give you any real inkling as to the sort of menacing attitude of Khrushchev and the sort of impasse that Kennedy and Khrushchev…

HERMAN: No.

MCGRORY: He didn't.

HERMAN: No, that was not in the official…

MCGRORY: But that was the guts of the story.

HERMAN: But all Salinger was able to do, sitting next to his Soviet counterpart, was to give official statements about the meeting. All of this kind of thing came out in unofficial, non-attributable, really leaked information, officially leaked to us but nonofficial things because…

[-96-]

MCGRORY: When were these things leaked?

HERMAN: … these could not be issued as pronouncements of an official of the President of the United States.

MCGRORY: But what briefing did you ever get in Vienna that gave you an indication of the really frightening nature of the Kennedy-Khrushchev exchange?

LISAGOR: Well, I don't think it was a frightening nature, Mary, but the solemnity of it was contained in the briefing that Chip Bohlen gave everybody in Vienna after the President left. I remember so well because I waited for the briefing to be given to me. I was on the President's plane in London, and the press plane broke down in Vienna and fell into a hole and broke a wheel or some silly thing. I waited for hours in London and didn't know what Bohlen…

MCGRORY: But you got better information.

LISAGOR: Well, we got a feel. The President left the plane and said, "You can say that the atmosphere is somber." He used the word somber.

HERMAN: But that was the best word to come out of it all, and it did not come from Bohlen.

LISAGOR: Yes, but Bohlen said, "There was no give here, there was no take there." You know, he was saying that there was nothing…

HERMAN: Wasn't it Bohlen who said…

LISAGOR: Well, there was Laos. There was a statement on Laos issued there, you know, an agreement on Laos after a fashion, a rather ambiguous, vague agreement on Laos.

[-97-]

MCGRORY: I must say that I was there, and it may have been my own lack of industry, but I didn't get the slightest impression that anything of a somber nature had occurred in Vienna.

LISAGOR: Well, I had a feeling…

HERMAN: Well, I was able to get some. In fact, the phrase I picked up — and I'm trying to remember whether it was from the Bohlen briefing — was that for awhile there the discussion was literally nose to nose.

LISAGOR: Yes, that's right. We got such things from people on the plane as, "Well, he was real tough. You give him an inch he wants a mile. Boy, we didn't realize how menacing he was and what a little S.O.S. he was," that kind of thing. So you know things went tough. The President…

HERMAN: Excuse me, what is an S.O.S.? Son of a Soviet?

LISAGOR: Yes. The President went — well, we pressed him on the plane when we'd get a chance as he passed by and say, "How'd it go?" And he said, "Well, it was rough." Then he'd make such comments as, "Well, this next stop will be easier."

HERMAN: If we have a moment for discretion, the business of talking to the President on the plane, the President's own plane, for the press pool was always one of the most fascinating dilemmas because the President would talk with astonishing frankness, and sometimes it was perfectly clear from the nature of what he said that he obviously was telling us this as friends not as reporters, which is ridiculous, you know. We are reporters, and there were frequently dilemmas — to print or not to print, to quote or not to quote, to attribute or not to attribute. We never worked out a formula. We just tried to come to some agreement, but it was…. Because

[-98-]

frequently, I must say, the President would pass by, look at a newspaper over your shoulder, you'd ask him a question, and he'd sit on the arm of the chair and give you an astonishing answer. What are you going to do with it?

HOLBORN: I guess one of the very first times was the pool when he came back from Chicago after the Bay of Pigs and told about a conversation with [Douglas

A.] MacArthur, which got around in the pool reports, and the advice he'd given him, particularly in regard to Laos and several times…. Well, Mary, you…

MCGRORY: I had such an experience going on the plane from Washington to Hyde Park at the time of Mrs. Roosevelt's funeral, which I believe was in November of 1962. You were there, George.

HERMAN: Yes.

MCGRORY: And the President came to the front of the plane, and he saw me there. He said, "Say, that was a nice story you wrote about Nixon." This was a story I had written about Nixon's so-called farewell press conference after his defeat for governorship of California. The President grinned and said, "I must remember to smile when I get defeated." Sitting across from him at one of those facing seats were the Chief Justice and Arthur Goldberg — no, Arthur Goldberg came out of the forward part of the plane. The President said, "Hello, Chief. Hello, Arthur. Is Arthur being any help to you up there, Chief?" And the Chief Justice chuckled. Then he summoned the President over, and he had what I happen to know were a bunch of selected clippings from the California primaries following on Mr. Nixon's defeat. It would have been hard to say, watching their faces, who had enjoyed the downfall more, the Chief Justice or the President of the United States. They had their heads together over the clipping and were laughing like schoolboys over the contents. This, of course, was all unusable material from a journalistic point of view, but it gave a certain amount of insight.

[-99-]

HERMAN: The dilemma of the pool correspondent — and being one of the three or sometimes four networks, a representative of one of the three or sometimes four networks, depending on whether you counted in one of the semi-independent networks and so forth, my turn on the pool flight came around every three or four times, with, in other words, remarkable frequency. The dilemma was that you were there on the President's plane solely as the representative, in my case, of all the broadcast reporters or of all non-wire service reporters, and theoretically anything I heard on the plane was the property of all the reporters. The question was whether to circulate an unpublishable FYI memo to all my colleagues or to tell them <u>vive voce</u> or what to do about these fascinating bits of information. I never did solve it. Sometimes I told some people. Sometimes I told nobody.

LISAGOR: This remains a dilemma. I think for some future generation who might be listening to this thing, we ought to explain what the pool is. Three or four reporters travel with the President, four reporters. You have to choose among the…

HERMAN: Well, the two wire services.

LISAGOR: The two wire services always traveled and the others…

MCGRORY: A subject of great anguish, I might say.

LISAGOR: One special reporter, we called him, travels.

HERMAN: And one broadcaster.

LISAGOR: And one broadcaster as a representative of their particular colleagues, and they're supposed to fill them in when they arrive.

MCGRORY: Yes, I had a fascinating experience in a pool. [Laughter] I hate to be the great lamenter in this conversation, but my rights, I thought, were abrogated in the matter of the pool report in that I was never in the entire Kennedy campaign, which I had covered

[-100-]

intermittently since 1958, I had never so much as got to ride in that lovely white convertible which always went…

HERMAN: The pool car?

MCGRORY: … after the Secret Service.

LISAGOR: No, the pool car. Bless you. We'll fix that up. [Laughter]

MCGRORY: Well, the day before election everybody was in a rather strained frame of mind, the day of the election. We got on the plane to Hyannis, and the last pool of the election was announced. I was, needless to say, not a member. It was the last straw. When we landed at the airport, Mrs. Kennedy was there and said something pleasant about something I had written, and this stirred up my emotions all over again, and I stalked over to the President. I said, "What do you have to do to become a pool reporter in this cavalcade? I have followed you for four years, and I have never so much as ridden in the pool car." The President laughed, and he said, "Mary, we'll never be parted again," and went away. That night, contrary to all expectations, the outcome was in doubt, and we went to bed not knowing who had been elected president. At 5 o'clock in the morning Pierre announced the absolutely final pool of the campaign to go to the President's house on election morning, and I was in it, and I will say that a small cheer went up.

HERMAN: A small ragged cheer?

MCGRORY: Yes.

HOLBORN: Of course, the controversy of the pool never really settled. It became a great problem again on the last day in Dallas.

[-101-]

LISAGOR: Yes, that's right. That was a terrible thing because in that case what happened was the special pool man was a Dallas reporter, and the moment that he got to the hospital, there's some contention over whether he disappeared or not. He said that he saw me at the hospital, for example. I don't remember seeing him. However, he was not available to give the other people the pool report, that is, his report of what he saw.

MCGRORY: You were in Dallas, Pete. Were you in Dallas, George?

HERMAN; No.

MCGRORY: And where were you when the President was shot?

LISAGOR: We were in the bus, in the first bus, and we went to the Trade Mart.

MCGRORY: Did you see it?

LISAGOR: No, we just saw a kind of choreography of terror on the hillside, of people falling over each other. We heard what was later identified as the shots. But then we went to the Trade Mart, and from there we went in a station wagon, five or six of us, to the hospital, got there rather early, really. I ran into Lady Bird Johnson when I ran into the hospital, and she was terribly broken up. Jack Bell was on a telephone and asked her, "How about the Vice President?" She said, "No, he's not been hurt," because there had been a report that he'd been hit. She was just completely broken up. At that moment we didn't still know, but it began to seep in on us that things were pretty bad when Senator [Ralph W.] Yarborough came out in tears. A nurse said to me they were giving whole blood of a type, which she said, we do. And I should have known then that, you know, this was really something dreadfully serious, but I suppose because we did not want to believe what really had taken place, because…. But anyhow, the press there was held at bay outside the hospital until finally they managed to set up a press room in the hospital. It was done rather quickly, done expeditiously.

HERMAN: Yes, and I think proper credit should be given to [Malcolm] Mac Kilduff.

LISAGOR: Mac Kilduff and the others, the transportation people who were involved in doing that, they brought the doctors out just immediately after the President was pronounced dead. The doctors explained as best they could in those, you know, dismal circumstances what the wound was like and everything. We were misled, but not because the doctors didn't know. It was simply a circumstance of now knowing where one bullet went because the President was on his back, and one bullet went into this back. The doctors explained it in doctors terms, and really it could have been said in those terms that we harshly used in Chicago about, you know, "His brains were blown out." That was literally the case. And I must say that the press behaved in a detached, extremely professional way during

that. Everybody was emotionally numbed by it all. And everybody went through their paces, and we all went back.

I was left behind, but I managed to make the airport airplane, and we waited there at the airport after President Johnson had been sworn in and flown back to Washington. We waited there while the morning paper boys wrote their stories. They wrote it on the bus, some wrote it in the plane, and some wrote it in the terminal. We waited two and a half hours or so before we struck back for Washington on one of the most bleak and horrible plane rides known to man. We flew back to Washington, and some of us had to write while we were going back. I wrote a couple of pieces. And then we got back to Washington. And then, of course, there was another completely different story there which we were no longer a part of. We all went to the White House out of some instinct. There was nothing more. The story was away from us. The story had long since left us. But we all went to the White House just…. I sat there for a while and wondered what was I doing there.

HERMAN: But, Pete, so did the people. The sidewalk outside the White House was crowded.

[-103-]

LISAGOR: But I had a lot of work to do, George.

HERMAN: People just stood there and stared.

LISAGOR: I had a beat to take care of and guys to tell, to work out what we were going to do and so on. But we just sat there for a while. Finally, I got up and went on my way. But I think, you know, the press under circumstances like that again is not some kind of an institutional monster or automatron or a robot. It's really a bunch of people. It's guys like you and me and Mary. And that's what we are. We operated as kind of proud of a profession in which we're trained but in situations like that really the story gets too big. You do your little piece of it and hope you've done the best job you can.

HERMAN: And you don't know.

LISAGOR: You don't know is right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-104-]