

**Walter Lippmann Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Walter Lippmann  
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**Biographical Note**

Lippmann, journalist, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Newsweek*, discusses his work covering John F. Kennedy's Administration and his opinions on presidential appointments, among other issues.

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## Walter Lippmann – JFK #1

### Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Lippmann's initial reservations about John F. Kennedy (JFK) as a presidential candidate
3	Appointing the position of Secretary of State
4	Lippmann's opinion of Dean Rusk as a candidate for Secretary of State
6	The Cambridge brain-trust
8	Relations with France and Charles de Gaulle
9	Advice about Nikita Khrushchev
10	Lippmann's thoughts on JFK's weaknesses
11	State dinner for President Ibrahim Abboud of the Sudan
12	Stag lunch for President Léopold Sédardar Senghor of Senegal
14	Correspondence between JFK and Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis
17	The soured relationship between Lippmann and JFK

Oral History Interview

with

WALTER LIPPMANN

1964

By Elizabeth Farmer

For the John F. Kennedy Library

FARMER: Why don't you start with the beginning of your acquaintance with Congressman Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], though I recall your saying that it was rather superficial.

LIPPMANN: Yes, well, as a matter of fact I had known his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] in the 1930's, especially when he was in Washington under the New Deal as Chairman of the Securities Commission [United States Securities and Exchange Commission]. But I don't remember meeting John F. Kennedy, who must have been quite a young boy at that time. And then I saw Joseph P. Kennedy a number of times when he was Ambassador in England. The record of those conversations is in my own private papers at Yale University Library, so I won't try to repeat anything of that here.

So far as I know, the first time I met Congressman Kennedy was during the 1950's when he was living in the N Street house in Georgetown. And I have a recollection, the first vivid recollection I have of him, of going to dinner with him and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis] there. It must have been a dinner of perhaps ten or twelve or fifteen people. I remember talking with Mrs. Kennedy about newspaper work which she had been doing with the Inquiring Photographer. Otherwise, I don't remember anything about the conversation that evening.

I remember that at the time, and in fact until he became a very active candidate for President in 1960, including the 1956 period when he was running for Vice President, I had great reservations about him, both because of my knowledge of his father and because of his

[-1-]

own record in the McCarthy affair. And I couldn't possibly describe myself as an early or enthusiastic Kennedy man. After the West Virginia primary in 1960 and after I had written an article proposing that Kennedy run for Vice President with Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], an article which I was told annoyed him extremely, I decided that Stevenson couldn't be nominated and probably shouldn't be, and that Kennedy was a man who would provide the real alternative to a continuation of the Eisenhower-Nixon regime [Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard M. Nixon]. So I came out for him about that time, the record would show it, sometime about May maybe, in favor of his nomination.

FARMER: As far as I can make out in your diary, you didn't see him during all that time.

LIPPMANN: Didn't see him at all. I had one or two letters from him, and we almost had a luncheon together, or a meal anyway, at the Harvard [Harvard University] commencement of that year. He was an Overseer and I was an ex-Overseer, but then the arrangements went wrong. Anyway, we didn't meet, but we talked about meeting. Let's see, that brings us to June.

By the time of the Democratic Convention [Democratic National Convention] I was strongly for his nomination, and I thought myself, and said so, that Stevenson should have nominated him. That would have healed the breach between the two men and probably would have meant that Stevenson would be Secretary of State.

Then after that, I was unqualifiedly and enthusiastically for Kennedy as against Nixon, I remember that during that summer, I think it must have been in July, I did the first of my television broadcasts which was very favorable to Kennedy and which they seemed to like very much. They

[-2-]

used copies of it in the campaign. But I didn't see Kennedy.

FARMER: Did you get any direct messages from him about any of this?

LIPPMANN: Yes, I got messages during the campaign. I never spoke to him personally during the campaign. I remember getting a long telephone call from Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.], who was running the Illinois campaign, about some article I had written which he wanted to reprint and wanted me to get the copyright away from the *Herald Tribune* [*New York Herald Tribune*]. I said forget it, we won't sue you—use it.

FARMER: You recall that just before the election you wrote an article which was the strongest one of all, which was used very widely. You said that he was a "natural leader of men" in that article.

LIPPMANN: I remember it. Well, then, that leads up to the fact that my first real meeting with him was when he was President-elect. What have you got on that?

FARMER: That's the first reference in your diary. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December you had a telephone call from Senator Kennedy to make an appointment for the next Tuesday and he came here on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December. It says: "Senator Kennedy came for a visit at 4 o'clock to talk over Cabinet and other appointments." That was the time he came to tea.

LIPPMANN: Well now, we talked, I'll try to remember what we talked about. We talked about Secretary of State, of course. That was the thing most on his mind so far as I was concerned. I had the distinct impression that he was inclined to appoint Senator Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] as Secretary of State. By a curious coincidence, just as he was

[ -3 - ]

talking about it, my wife came in and said he was wanted on the telephone and I'm almost certain it was his brother Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy], because when he came back he said, "I don't think I can take Fulbright because of his position with the Negroes and civil rights in the South." Then we got onto the subject of Stevenson, and we didn't disagree, because although I'm a friend and admirer of Stevenson, I didn't want him as Secretary of State under those conditions. I think we talked about—I think I even suggested, but I don't mean I was the originator of the idea—that Stevenson's talents would be best used at the United Nations.

Later on—this was after the meeting but I might as well throw it in here—on the day when the President-elect had called Stevenson to his house in Georgetown to tell him he was not going to be Secretary of State but that he wanted him at the United Nations, Stevenson spent the whole morning in this room with me here. I kept trying to persuade him that it was a good thing and that he must really accept it, and he said he didn't want to be anything but Secretary of State.

Well, then, to return to my conversation with the President-elect, he said what did I think of Rusk [Dean Rusk]? He said, "I've never met Rusk. Do you know Rusk?" And I said, well, yes, I knew him. He was Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East during the Truman Administration [Harry S. Truman] for a while under Dean Acheson [Dean G. Acheson]. I said I saw a great deal of him as we were having Far Eastern affairs, and I used to go in there at least every two or three weeks and have a talk with him and find out what was going on. And I said then that he was a very conventional mind, that he would never depart from what was considered the official line and he really had no original thoughts on anything. He was a profound conformist and not bold at all, and I said I don't think you would get from him the kind of original advice which a President needs. And he said, well, a lot of other people think very highly of him, he was recommended to me very strongly by Acheson and another person—I can't remember who, but somebody else of that stature was recommending him. He said, "What could I do if I can't take Stevenson and I can't take



Fulbright, and you think I shouldn't take Rusk," and I said, "Why don't you take Bundy [McGeorge Bundy]?" He said, "That's an idea," or something to that effect, "I hadn't thought of that." And he said, "He's very young, isn't he?" And I said, "Well, you are a young President." And I said as a matter of fact he is technically every bit as competent as Rusk and he belongs to a new generation. Rusk really is not an old man but he belongs to an old generation. Well, nothing conclusive came out of it, of course, and in fact Rusk was appointed later. So that was that.

FARMER: Did he seem tempted by the Bundy idea or not?

LIPPMANN: He was, if that's the right word for it, intrigued by it. It was a strange and original idea. I think he gave it some thought. And he did speak about how he admired Bundy and knew what an able man he was and that he intended to have him with him. So, I don't mean that I had anything to do with that. Bundy was not an outsider.

[-4-]

FARMER: But the idea of his having so high a position seemed strange to him?

LIPPMANN: It seemed strange to him. Well, then he said, well, I've got other appointments in foreign affairs to make and then he mentioned the representation at NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], and I did recommend Finletter [Thomas K. Finletter] who I said was a personal friend of mine. And he said, but I can't take him. You know he has cataracts and he's going to have an operation. Nobody else—and we're very close to the family—knew that Tom Finletter had cataracts and was about to have a cataract operation. He kept it a dead secret with his family, but not from John F. Kennedy. That showed that John Kennedy was mightily well informed. Anyway, I was very impressed by that. I checked it after he went and found it was true, but it was news to me.

He certainly didn't consult me about Agriculture or...

FARMER: Or Postmaster General? Or did he?

LIPPMANN: There was some bantering reference we exchanged about his brother, and, of course, aside from the fact that he was his brother, as his campaign manager he had earned a post in the cabinet, and the choices were really Postmaster General and Attorney General. And I think he made some bantering allusion to the fact that he brother hadn't really had any law practice. Now that's all there was to that. I think that about covers it.

FARMER: All right. You also talked with McGeorge Bundy. You have a reference in your diary to fact that on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December—two days after you spoke with the President—that you had a phone call from McGeorge Bundy from Cambridge "about Secretary of State."

LIPPMANN: Oh, yes. Oh, I remember that now and I'm glad you reminded me. Yes, he did, and I forget whom he was for. I think it was McCloy [John Jay McCloy]. And I remember saying to him, "Oh, for heaven's sake not that again!" He's appointed to every job that's open in the United States government by everybody.

And then I said, now I think you ought to be it, McGeorge, and he said, oh, that's all nonsense, or something like that.

FARMER: Then Bundy was being consulted and he

[-5-]

in turn was consulting with you?

LIPPMANN: Oh, he was very much in on it, and, of course, at that time Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] was up with them and who else were there—Abe Chayes [Abram Chayes], I think.

FARMER: He was part of the Cambridge brain-trust.

LIPPMANN: Cambridge brain-trust, who I had known very well and who had done a great deal in convincing me that Kennedy was a good man to have. I mean, their support was very impressive to me.

FARMER: The next reference in your diary to the President is that on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January you talked on the telephone with Ted Sorenson [Theodore C. Sorensen] about the Inaugural Address and then that five days later Sorensen came to lunch with you—here in the house if I recall.

LIPPMANN: That's right.

FARMER: Bringing the draft of the address which you worked on. You did some editing on it.

LIPPMANN: The most important thing I did to that was to get him to take out the references to Russia as the enemy and to refer to them as the adversary. That's the only constructive contribution that I made. I remember I made a few rhetorical suggestions, as an editor would, but that was a substitute.

FARMER: Was it at that point pretty much in the shape that it was delivered?

LIPPMANN: Very much. All of the famous Sorensen chiliastic turns of speech were there.

FARMER: The next thing you have in your diary is that you went in January, just a few days later, to

[-6-]

Florence Mahoney's house and that the President-elect came in and that you had a talk with him after the ladies left.

LIPPMANN: That's right. I remember that. There were four or five other men. It was rather friendly, but I don't remember anything in particular.

FARMER: The next time you saw him was on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January when you went to the Bradlees [Benjamin C. Bradlee and Antoinette Pinchot Bradlee] for dinner for the President and Mrs. Kennedy.

LIPPMANN: That is right. I remember that. Ben Bradlee's father and mother were there, and I think Mrs. Bradlee's sister, Mary Meyer [Mary Pinchot Meyer], and not many others.

FARMER: Did you have a talk with the President?

LIPPMANN: Yes, we sat around after dinner, and the ladies left, and we talked just general Washington chit-chat. There were no substantial things as I remember.

FARMER: Now the next time that you saw the President alone (or almost alone) was when you lunched at the White House with the President and Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] in March.

LIPPMANN: Oh, March, was it?

FARMER: Yes. After lunch you went up to look at the new decorations on the second floor and met Dr. Travell [Janet G. Travell]. This seems to indicate that you and Arthur and the President were alone.

LIPPMANN: That's correct. I remember that now. We lunched downstairs in the small oval red dining room. I was also there later for another lunch before he went off with Mac Bundy—a few days before he left.

FARMER: You have two lunches with the President that spring. March 20, when you went with Arthur, and then

[-7-]

in May when you lunched with the President and McGeorge Bundy.

LIPPMANN: There was no one else there I think at either.  
Well, I think the burden of what I had to say about de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle] was that he was a very sensitive man who had never really completely forgiving or forgotten the fact that he was not treated as really the leader of France in the period when he was defending France, during the war. It wasn't that he felt personally affronted by the attitude of President Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt], and in a lesser degree, Churchill [Winston Churchill], but that he felt France was affronted. And he identified himself with France, and President Roosevelt used to think that that was funny, but he didn't think that it was funny. And that was where the trouble came. And that we had to recognize the fact that the old relationships with France, in which we were the protectors of France, and the kindly and rich uncle, were over. And that was the basis on which we had to get on with de Gaulle.

FARMER: How did he respond to that?

LIPPMANN: The President was a man who understood everything very quickly. He would get a point like that without any difficulty. But he was never a man to commit himself. He never said, I agree. He always maintained an escape hatch. I found that in all my dealings, conversations, with him. He always had an escape hatch. You see, he never could say yes, he agreed on it. He was going to listen to somebody else first. He was a great listener and a most intelligent listener.

On Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev], I remember saying to him, this man

[-8-]

moves very slowly. He cannot be hurried, and you've just got to make up your mind that it's going to be a terribly long affair or it won't work. And I still think in the event that has proved to be correct, because I think the President conferred with Khrushchev only about three hours in Vienna, and that is nothing for Khrushchev. Three hours for Khrushchev—he hasn't started. Well, anyway, the President I remember was most concerned at that time by a speech which Khrushchev had made to a Communist congress (I think in January of the same year) in which he declared that we wanted coexistence and peace and everything else, but he was in favor of wars of liberation. This was the sticking point, and he asked me whether I thought that was what Khrushchev really was—and I said, yes, I think it is—he's a revolutionist. You can't get over that. In fact, the President said, he's not a revolutionist. He's never going to carry a revolution to the point where he thinks it is going to produce a war with us. Then I remember he asked me whether I thought that Khrushchev thought we were a serious power—that if we said something, he'd believe us. And I said, he has a very healthy respect for American military power. I don't think there is any doubt of that. And we don't have to drop a bomb in order to prove that under certain circumstances we would drop one. That about all I remember of that.

FARMER: Probably most of this was probably in the second conversation.

LIPPMANN: The second conversation. The trip was much more imminent. I think in the first conversation we talked quite a lot about domestic affairs and particularly

[ -9- ]

about the problem of speeding up the economy and making it work, and the difficulty of explaining modern economies to the Congress and to the people.

FARMER: Did you talk to the President after the Bay of Pigs? You remember that you wrote very sharply about it.

LIPPMANN: I'm trying to think. I may as well say here, for the sake of the historical record, that I only saw him once alone in his office. I talked with him several times at various occasions. But after that luncheon before he went abroad, I did my second broadcast, and in that broadcast, I was asked what was his weakness. I said he was not a good teacher. He had no instinct to teach what he is trying to do and doesn't explain himself, and therefore he is failing to communicate adequately with the people. And he didn't protest to me about that, but I know that was the end of any close personal relationship because his military aide, now General Clifton [Chester V. Clifton, Jr.], telephoned CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] and protested violently about the whole thing. They never protested me, but after that it was over.

FARMER: That brings us then into the summer of 1961, the time of your second broadcast and the time of the Berlin crisis, of course. It all comes at the same time.

LIPPMANN: Now, after the building of the wall and the Berlin crisis, does my diary show that I went to a dinner—banquet—of the Sudanese?

FARMER: Yes, it does. I'll read you exactly what you have there. The date of the Sudanese dinner is October 6. Let me read you all your references in the summer and the fall.

[ -10- ]

“On the tenth of June, McGeorge Bundy came in to talk about Germany and Berlin.” That must have been just before you went to Maine. Then you have no reference to the President until October 6 when you have two references. One is that you wrote a memorandum to Theodore Sorensen about appeasement, how to counter the charges of appeasement. And then in the evening you went to the State dinner given by President Aboud [Ibrahim Abboud] of the Sudan for President Kennedy and tells who you sat with. Then it says, “After dinner the President sent for me and after a little talk with Aboud he spent the rest of the time talking with me about his conversations with Gromyko [Andrei Andreevich

Gromyko] that afternoon. Before dinner I had a talk with Rusk about those conversations.” Now that’s the 6<sup>th</sup> of October, 1961.

LIPPMANN: Well, after dinner that evening when the President called me up to the head of the table where he was to have coffee and so on, he was very concerned by an article I had written after the Berlin Wall in which I had argued that we were taken off base...we were preparing for the wrong crisis...we had expected another blockade and instead we got the opposite of the blockade. And he didn’t like that, I know, but he wasn’t angry but he just didn’t like to have it shown that we had missed the point. And he argued a good deal about that, and why we hadn’t, and so on. I don’t remember the whole argument. He didn’t convince me anyway that we had really anticipated what the Russians really did.

Then, let me see—he talked about Gromyko. That was the afternoon he had seen Gromyko. But it was only about how he got nowhere with Gromyko about Berlin and Germany.

[-11-]

That he’d run into a dead end in trying to get Gromyko to agree to the kind of thing that the Soviet Union has now agreed to in its treaty that was signed the other day with Ulbricht [Walter Ulbricht]. And I remember saying that Gromyko is the most wooden man that you’ll ever have to deal with. He said, I don’t like him.

FARMER: You also had a talk with Rusk about the Gromyko conversations.

LIPPMANN: Well, Rusk was at the dinner. It must have been before dinner that I talked with him. We stood up talking there and drinking cocktails. But I think he was also saying he couldn’t get anywhere.

FARMER: Then, the next time you saw the President was the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November, which was a little bit later, but this is still 1961, when you went to a stag lunch for the President of Senegal [Léopold Sédardar Senghor] and some of the people there, to help you remember it, were Chester Bowles [Chester B. Bowles], Dr. Bond from Atlanta [Horace Julian Bond], John Sengstacke [John H. Sengstacke], the publisher of the Chicago Defender. It must have been mainly, it sounds as if it were mainly civil rights and Negro people.

LIPPMANN: Yes, it was. I remember that.

FARMER: I don’t know whether you talked with the President that lunch or not? You don’t refer to it.

LIPPMANN: I did chat with him before lunch, or after lunch while were having coffee, but it was nothing of consequence that I remember.

FARMER: Then, the next reference, which is indirect, is that you had apparently quite a long talk with Nehru [Jawaharlal Nehru] on November 8, 1961 about his talks with the President at a lunch for John Sherman Cooper [John S. Cooper]. Now, I don't

[-12-]

know whether you gleaned anything that you would want to—that would be relevant to this in those talks with Nehru.

LIPPMANN: Well, I remember the luncheon very well and I remember sitting with Nehru after lunch, but I can't remember anything we talked about.

FARMER: You don't remember Nehru's impression of the President or anything of that nature.

LIPPMANN: It was very favorable. I mean, they had a good talk and the atmosphere was friendly and he felt that the old Dulles [John Foster Dulles] attitude, that he was immoral because he was neutral, that had all been abandoned. No, they had quite a good—and the President liked interesting people and Nehru was an interesting man so I think they conversed easily.

FARMER: On the 13<sup>th</sup> of November you went to the White House to the Munoz-Martin [Luis Muñoz Marin] dinner at which Pablo Cassals [Pablo Casals] played, and you sat at Mrs. Kennedy's table. Again, I don't know whether you spoke with the President.

LIPPMANN: I don't think I talked with the President at all that evening, but it was a brilliant evening.

FARMER: Now, we go on to 1962. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of March you had a call from Ted Sorensen here at the house to show you the President's address on the resumption of nuclear testing. That was obviously done at the request of the President so that you would have advance notice of it.

LIPPMANN: But I had nothing to do with the speech. I made no contribution.

FARMER: In June you had a message from Walter Heller [Walter Wolfgang Heller] saying that the President had read your article on the stock market slump and had agreed with it.

[-13-]

LIPPMANN: Oh, yes, that was after his encounter with Mr. Blough, wasn't it?

FARMER: Yes, it was, Now, your next serious talk with the President, and the one that you referred to back away, when you said you had not spoken with him after your second broadcast except for once—this is the time. You went to the White House on November 8, 1962 for a talk with the President. Your diary reads, “I saw Arthur Schlesinger on the way in, and McGeorge Bundy, and ran into a group of labor leaders who were just leaving the President’s office. After the talk with the President, which lasted about an hour, I was home for dinner in the evening.” That, of course, was after second Cuba.

LIPPMANN: That was after that crisis was over?

FARMER: After the Cuban Crisis with the missiles. And here is what you wrote after that, after seeing the President. “Cuba and After” was the article you wrote, you talked with the President about an hour, so you must really have said something. To remind you a little bit, you had very much on your mind the Paris speech to the *Herald Tribune*.

LIPPMANN: That was much on my mind. I had written the speech by that time. Yes, I’m sure I’d written it, and had shown it to Bundy, who said, “I wish I were free to say what you are going to say.”

Well, I don’t know whether the President knew about the speech. But now I do remember some of what happened there. He showed me the last exchange of letters between himself and Khrushchev, which were not very entertaining reading. They were, both of them, very stilted and

[-14-]

officialese. And I don’t think either of them was really writing personally to the other. They were sending each other notes drafted in bureaucratic jargon.

FARMER: What was the President object in showing you that correspondence?

LIPPMANN: If I could remember what the letters were about. They were the aftermath of the Cuban, Cuba Two.

FARMER: It was those letters which really settled Cuba Two.

LIPPMANN: Yes, it was about supervision of the missile sites and the UN [United Nations] and it was before Mikoyan [Anatas I. Mikoyan] had come and tried to persuade Castro [Fidel Castro] to go along with it. And I think it was an attempt—it showed that Khrushchev was willing to agree to what they had agreed on, namely, there would be UN inspection. Anyone who really wants to know the record can find it in the President’s own papers.



FARMER: Of course. I just wondered what your impression was of what he was trying to achieve by having you see them because he didn't show them to very many people.

LIPPMANN: No.

FARMER: Did he simply want you to understand?

LIPPMANN: He wanted me to understand where we were, and that we really were aiming at an agreement, that we had an agreement. I think that's right.

FARMER: Well, this article which you wrote afterward is connected with it. I don't say that it refers to it specifically, but I think that the article is based in part on the understanding that you got from reading those letters.

[-15-]

Did you talk to him at all about your coming trip to Europe?

LIPPMANN: Yes. We talked quite a lot, I think, about whether you could have an independent nuclear striking force, such as the French wanted, or whether air power was indivisible. And he explained our then official view, this was before the days of MLF [Multilateral Force], the so-called McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] doctrine of being able to use limited pressures.

FARMER: Which you laid out in your speech?

LIPPMANN: Yes. My speech was as conscious an attempt as I've ever made in anything to explain the American official view. Although I agreed with it, I took care to see that I wasn't off base, because it was a kind of official occasion where I couldn't afford just to speak my own views.

FARMER: Now, in 1963 as far as I can make out you hardly talked to the President. You went to dinner at the French Embassy for the unveiling of the Mona Lisa (this was just after you came back from Europe), and you talked with the President a few minutes after the dinner, but it doesn't seem to have amounted to a lot. And then you saw him at a lunch at the Moroccan Embassy in March in honor of the President. But those are your last references in your diary, so that as far as I can make out in 1963 you did not have any prearranged private talk with the President.

LIPPMANN: No. I ran into him for friendly little greetings and that sort of thing.

FARMER: But no serious conversations?

LIPPMANN: No serious conversations.

[-16-]

Mrs. Kennedy I remember seeing several times at various things, and she was always very friendly.

FARMER: So, I think we've really gone over all your meetings.

LIPPMANN: I think that covers it.

FARMER: Well, now I wonder if there is anything else we should go into. I think you've said what you want to say about the summer of 1961. It seemed to me that two things happened at that time in your relations with the President. One was Berlin. You don't really like the way that the Berlin Crisis was handled—civil defense and the enlarging of the military forces and the way the Berlin Wall was handled. Plus the fact that you had the television broadcast in which you made the critical remark about the President which annoyed him. So that it seems that because of a matter of substance, i.e., Berlin, and then this rather more personal thing, there was some slight cooling of personal affection between you and him.

LIPPMANN: I think that's quite fair.

FARMER: Both things probably contributed to it, I would think.

LIPPMANN: I was really fairly critical of him. I felt that he was not doing what he had to do, which was to explain what the difference was between himself and Eisenhower in this central problem of economic doctrine. And, he did make one bold attempt later...

FARMER: At Yale [Yale University]?

LIPPMANN: ...at Yale...when he did go all out rather rashly and overstated his case. But the business of patiently explaining the thing is what the country

[-17-]

needed and would take only from him...it was very novel. Now we take it for granted. They all voted for the tax cut even though we had a deficit. That was unheard of in Kennedy's day. Kennedy deserves the credit in history for having started that revolution and a lot of people took it up and helped him forward, and events have helped him. But in those days I didn't think he was leading the country as it needed to be led.

FARMER: Then you were, I recall, disturbed by the way Berlin was handled.

LIPPMANN: I was disturbed by the way Berlin was handled. I thought he was—I didn't think he had really grasped the realities of the thing. And my proof of it was that the Russians did the opposite of what he expected them to do.

FARMER: Well, I think that's about all we have. That was very fast—55 minutes

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-18-]

Walter Lippmann Oral History Transcript – JFK #1  
Name List

**A**

Abboud, Ibrahim, 11  
Acheson, Dean G., 4

**B**

Bond, Horace Julian, 12  
Bowles, Chester B., 12  
Bradlee, Antoinette Pinchot, 7  
Bradlee, Benjamin C., 7  
Bundy, McGeorge, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 14

**C**

Casals, Pablo, 13  
Castro, Fidel  
Chayes, Abram, 6  
Churchill, Winston, 8  
Clifton, Chester V., Jr., 10  
Cooper, John S., 12

**D**

de Gaulle, Charles A., 8  
Dulles, John Foster

**E**

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 2, 17

**F**

Finletter, Thomas K., 5  
Fulbright, J. William, 3, 4

**G**

Gromyko, Andrei Andreevich, 11, 12

**H**

Heller, Walter Wolfgang, 13

**K**

Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeyevich, 8, 9, 14  
Kennedy, John F., 1-18

Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr., 1  
Kennedy, Robert F., 4, 5

**M**

Mahoney, Florence, 7  
McCloy, John Jay, 5  
McNamara, Robert S., 16  
Meyer, Mary Pinchot, 7  
Mikoyan, Anastas I., 15  
Muñoz Marin, Luis, 13

**N**

Nehru, Jawaharlal, 12, 13  
Nixon, Richard M., 2

**O**

Onassis, Jacqueline B. Kennedy, 1, 7, 13, 17

**R**

Roosevelt, Franklin D., 8  
Rostow, Walt Whitman, 6  
Rusk, Dean, 4, 11, 12

**S**

Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr., 7, 14  
Senghor, Léopold Sédardar, 12  
Sengstacke, John H., 12  
Shriver, R. Sargent, Jr.  
Sorensen, Theodore C., 6, 11, 13  
Stevenson, Adlai E., 2, 4

**T**

Travell, Janet G., 7  
Truman, Harry S., 4

**U**

Ulbricht, Walter, 12