

William H. Lawrence Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 04/22/1966
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Biographical Note

William H. Lawrence (1916-1972) was a journalist for the *New York Times* from 1943 to 1961 and a news commentator for American Broadcasting Company from 1961 to 1968. This interview focuses on the 1960 presidential campaign and John F. Kennedy's relationship with the press during the campaign and his presidency, among other topics.

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William H. Lawrence– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM H. LAWRENCE

April 22, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mr. Lawrence, do you recall when you first met John F. Kennedy?

LAWRENCE: I met him in the late 1950's when he was a member of the United States Senate. But I really came to know him well only in the 1960 primary campaigns.

GRELE: What was he like in those early years?

LAWRENCE: Well, he was a keen and alert member of the Senate. He had much greater depth than I knew at first and which became evident to me only as he became a serious candidate for the presidency. He was always fun to know. But, as I say, I didn't know him well until he was in the big time.

GRELE: Do you recall at what point you began to consider him worthy of larger coverage?

LAWRENCE: Well, when he decided for himself that he was going to make the serious effort for the presidency and that he would enter a number of primaries. We didn't

pay much attention in New Hampshire; but where he ran into serious competition, first in Wisconsin and then in West Virginia, I spent most of time either with Mr. Kennedy or with his opponent, Hubert Humphrey.

GRELE: How would you contrast the Humphrey and the Kennedy organizations in Wisconsin?

LAWRENCE: I suppose the best contrast, really, is West Virginia. The Kennedy organization was a goliath-- really a colossus. And Humphrey really had very little although most of the polls indicated that Humphrey would win. As far as I'm concerned, Jack Kennedy believed almost to the last minute that he would lose West Virginia, but not by much.

GRELE: Did he ever tell you this?

LAWRENCE: Yes, he told me on the Sunday before the voting that he thought maybe he would squeak to about 47 or 48 per cent of the votes. He thought he could survive a narrow defeat. Two days later when I saw him in Maryland, he said, "I was wrong about the outcome, but I was even more wrong about survival had I lost. If I had won by 53 per cent, I think they would have said I was destroyed."

GRELE: Was the Humphrey organization as disorganized as Theodore White implies in his book, The Making of the President 1960?

LAWRENCE: I think that's a fair criticism of the Humphrey organization. They didn't have very much money, and when you have a bunch of volunteers without a strong commanding general, you're apt to run off in all sorts of directions. Everybody's trying to be helpful, but there's a lot of duplication; there's a lot of wasting of time with purely personal projects that wouldn't have been important even if they'd turned out well.

GRELE: Do you recall any specifics?

LAWRENCE: Not really.

GRELE: When you say without a strong personal general, does this mean that Hubert Humphrey did not organize his staff effectively?

LAWRENCE: Well, I don't think Hubert had a chance to organize, he was so busy making speeches. And he didn't have a strong staff behind him, as Kennedy did, in the terms of [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy, [Kenneth P.] Ken O'Donnell, [Lawrence F.] Larry O'Brien--that echelon of planning.

GRELE: In the Wisconsin primary who was the general in the Kennedy organization, John Kennedy or Robert Kennedy, or one of the other men?

LAWRENCE: I don't know that I can answer that--in Wisconsin. I spent more time with the candidate and less with the organization. I would say in West Virginia that it was a kind of trio of Larry O'Brien, Kenny O'Donnell, and Bobby.

GRELE: In travelling with the candidate in Wisconsin, did you notice a difference in the reception that he received from the people in the cities and in the countryside?

LAWRENCE: Yes, I would say, quite obviously, he was much more popular in the urban centers than he was in the rural areas. This was in part the result of his own record of agricultural legislation.

GRELE: Did this come up during the primary?

LAWRENCE: Of course. Humphrey kept hammering at it.

GRELE: Was religion as great an issue in Wisconsin as has been implied?

LAWRENCE: Well, let's put it this way: the Catholic vote didn't hurt him. It was pretty predominantly pro-Kennedy.

GRELE: When you were in Wisconsin, was it your impression that the organization would direct itself in a particular manner in the Catholic areas and in a different way in the Protestant areas?

LAWRENCE: I didn't pay enough attention to know the answer to that.

GRELE: Was the religious hostility more virulent in West Virginia?

LAWRENCE: Much, much more. And I think he countered it very effectively. Everybody talks about his Houston speech to the Ministerial Council, which was later in the campaign, but he made one very effective statewide television appearance in Charleston, West Virginia, in which he met the Catholic issue head-on--and particularly in an area like West Virginia where there was always the fear the Pope would come and take over instantly--where he said he would hold up his hand and take this oath. Then he did it on TV. It was very effective television campaigning, and I think it did him a lot of good.

GRELE: Did you ever discuss with him personally his assessment of the Wisconsin primary?

LAWRENCE: No.

GRELE: But you did the West Virginia primary?

LAWRENCE: Oh yes.

GRELE: What did he feel was the reason why he would not do as well in West Virginia?

LAWRENCE: Well, he thought the Protestant vote, the anti-Catholic sentiment, the mine workers, were against him. And the United Mine Workers used to be a terrific influence in West Virginia politics. And there was a feeling--I don't know where we got it--that he would lose south of the river. It turned out he did very well south of the river, but there were some very fortuitous alliances with some of the local machines made in the last twenty-four or forty-eight hours.

GRELE: With slating candidates?

LAWRENCE: Yes.

GRELE: Who do you feel was most effective in the West Virginia primary?

LAWRENCE: Do you mean other than the candidate himself?

GRELE: Other than the candidate himself.

LAWRENCE: Well, I think the trio--Bobby, O'Brien, O'Donnell-- did a terrific job working out of the Charleston headquarters. On the stump, I thought Franklin Roosevelt was very effective.

GRELE: Was his appearance in West Virginia a vital part of the victory in West Virginia?

LAWRENCE: Well, like the Catholic vote in Wisconsin, it didn't hurt. Now, Roosevelt had also campaigned for him in Wisconsin. I don't think he did a bit of good. But I think he was useful in the coal fields.

GRELE: Were you in West Virginia when Franklin Roosevelt read Hubert Humphrey's war record?

LAWRENCE: Yes, I was.

GRELE: Were you at that news conference?

LAWRENCE: Franklin Roosevelt's?

GRELE: When he did it.

LAWRENCE: No. I was in Charleston.

GRELE: With the Candidate?

LAWRENCE: Well, actually, I was sitting trying to put together a voter survey that the New York Times people had put together, and I was trying to write it. The question of Humphrey's war record had been discussed with me beforehand.

GRELE: By Fred Forbes?

LAWRENCE: No, by people in the Kennedy organization. And it was my understanding that they had decided not to use it--that the candidate had decided not to use it. When Fred Forbes and young Roosevelt cut loose with it, because the organization knew that I had been interested in it, they immediately sent [Pierre E. G.] Salinger to tell me what Roosevelt had said, and that it was now being used. So, on the basis of the information I had, I then wrote a story for the New York Times.

GRELE: When Salinger told you this, what was his general tone? Did he think this was a mistake, or did he come to you to push it?

LAWRENCE: Well, I don't know. I was pretty busy at the time. I don't know that I really read much into Pierre's coming to see me except that since it was out, and since I knew about it, I ought to at least be cut in. And it was up to me--it was up more really to the editors of the New York Times--whether or not anything should be done with it.

GRELE: What do you think the effect of that incident was?

LAWRENCE: Well, I think the principal effect was to create some bad blood between Humphrey and Kennedy.

GRELE: Did it?

LAWRENCE: It did at the time, yes. I doubt if it changed any votes. I had a complete file of the letters back and forth to Humphrey's draft board. I had them in my room when they came to tell me what young Roosevelt said.

GRELE: You had these in the normal course of your work?

LAWRENCE: No, they were given to me.

GRELE: By whom?

LAWRENCE: People in the Kennedy organization about the time they were deciding whether or not this issue would be used. But I was not at liberty to use the documents until they told me that Roosevelt had gone ahead with it.

GRELE: Were you at that time ever approached by the candidate or any of his staff concerning any article you were writing or were about to write?

LAWRENCE: I don't know what you mean by "approached" . . .

GRELE: Well, did John Kennedy ever say to you that that was a good article because one, two, three; that was a bad article because one, two, three.

LAWRENCE: He was always discussing everybody's work with them, but I never had any "approach" that I thought was designed to influence me in any way. Having been a part-time journalist himself, Jack Kennedy had immense interest in every word that was written about him, and he was sharp in his criticism, or high in his praise, just straight out of his glands. But I was never "approached," if that word has any meaning.

GRELE: Do you recall, specifically, any of his high praise or harsh criticism?

LAWRENCE: No, not particularly.

GRELE: Do you feel that because you wrote for the New York Times, Senator Kennedy or his staff were particularly interested in what you had to say and what your opinions were?

LAWRENCE: Of course.

GRELE: Because of the nature of the institution or . . .

LAWRENCE: Because of the nature of the institution and the fact that I've also been writing politics for a long time. But more the institution than me.

GRELE: Did they ever comment to you about any of the Times editorials during this time?

LAWRENCE: Well, [laughter] I broke the news to Senator Kennedy when the Times endorsed him for election against [Richard M.] Nixon. It was the first time the Times

had endorsed a Democrat in some years. And of course, he was elated until he read the editorial, and he said, "Damn little praise in that, but I guess I'd rather have them for me than against me."

GRELE: Knowing John Kennedy's great interest in the press, did he ever discuss with you the reporter's craft, or the Washington press corps, when you were president of the National Press Club in 1959?

LAWRENCE: Well, no, not really. I got him to come along to speak to the Press Club at one of my final lunches. And he feigned mock horror to find himself in the Press Club with me. He said to the audience that his staff had mistakenly given him the impression that he was lunching with Governor [David L.] Lawrence, who had some delegates, and not President Lawrence, who had none. But this was really just the humorous opening of his speech.

I talked about the press with Kennedy. We had a very close relationship, especially in those primary days: not too many reporters around; many days and nights riding on the Caroline with maybe just a couple of other reporters along; and long bull sessions running all day and into the wee hours of the morning. It was a very intimate relationship--not just for me--for any of the people who chose to cover Kennedy and make the trips with him. He didn't hesitate to denounce people or praise them. And this went for politicians. Most of this was off the record. I didn't take any notes on it. My memory is far too hazy to be very specific.

GRELE: Do you recall any of his comments on his chief competitors for that nomination?

LAWRENCE: Yes, but in kind of a privileged area. I also remember most of the comments that his competitors had about him. And none of them were voiced in what you call "polite society terms." They didn't choose to make them public, and I don't see much value in breaking off-the-record confidences. I don't feel I've been released by his death.

GRELE: Was there anything that you recall as being interesting or significant about your questioning of John Kennedy on his refusal to attend the inter-faith ceremony in Philadelphia in 1959?

LAWRENCE: Only that it was a campaign issue by then. I thought some of the explanations I had read had not touched foursquare on all the points of controversy. I was simply trying to clear up the record.

GRELE: Were you satisfied with his answers?

LAWRENCE: The answer he gave, yes. The answer that had been given on his behalf, no.

GRELE: What were the differences? Do you recall them?

LAWRENCE: Well, I don't remember now. But I know there was a fundamental difference about whether, as a private individual, he might have gone; or where he got the idea he had to go as the Cardinal's representative, and since the Cardinal hadn't picked him, this meant that he couldn't go at all. It seemed to me that to enter the area of whether, as a Catholic president, he could participate in the main stream of the national endeavor, or whether he could only participate in the Catholic sector thereof, as far as I was concerned, his own answer, from his own lips, clarified the point. But some of the explanations that had been written about it and on his behalf seemed to be less than fully frank.

GRELE: Did you give him this opinion prior to the conference?

LAWRENCE: No. I don't discuss my questions with people in advance.

GRELE: Did you attend the 1960 Democratic Convention?

LAWRENCE: Oh yes.

GRELE: What was your assignment?

LAWRENCE: The main story, the overall lead.

GRELE: Do you recall anything interesting or significant that is not part of the public record about that Convention?

LAWRENCE: Well, by this time Lyndon Johnson was becoming rather annoyed with me because I had been writing since the West Virginia primary, with increasing frequency, that I thought Kennedy was going to be nominated. And that he was going to be nominated on the first ballot. Johnson challenged this accuracy of mine and went to my editors in New York, denounced my work; they wouldn't do anything about it. He then issued a statement, which the Times published, denouncing my work, the final paragraph of which said, in effect, that my sloppy work was the result of reportorial fatigue. This appeared about on page sixty-eight of the Times. But, infuriated me.

So on the Monday before the Convention, after Illinois had shifted to Kennedy and my old friend Governor Lawrence had told me that Pennsylvania would the next day, I then did another story for the Times saying that Kennedy would be nominated on the first ballot. And in the third paragraph on page one I said the Johnson forces were showing signs of early, but pronounced, political fatigue. The next morning Kennedy, running from one room to another, shouted at me in the corridor, "I see where you returned the arrow." There then ensued a considerable period of bad feeling between the vice presidential nominee and myself where he wouldn't speak to me, and I didn't bother to speak to him. But that was all ironed out after the election, and we get along fine now.

GRELE: Did John Kennedy ever have any other comments to you about this tiff with Johnson?

LAWRENCE: No, not really. Not really.

GRELE: In 1960 the New York Times did not publish the full text of the platform. Was there any particular reason for this?

LAWRENCE: Nobody asked me. I suppose it was just too long. They always are.

GRELE: Yes, but they always publish them. The only time that they haven't published it . . .

LAWRENCE: It could've been the lateness of the hour in Los Angeles before it was adopted. I confess that, as a political writer for the Times in 1960, writing

the leads, I was unaware until now that they did not publish the full text of the platform.

GRELE: Did you have any contacts with the New York delegation at the Convention?

LAWRENCE: No. I didn't have any contacts with any of them.

GRELE: You followed Senator Kennedy?

LAWRENCE: No. I followed the whole Convention story from a favored place--right on the front aisle, three rows back from the Speaker's platform. The whole Convention and everything that happened in Los Angeles, having to do with politics, fitted into my story somewhere. It was a summary of everything.

GRELE: During the campaign, what was your assignment?

LAWRENCE: Kennedy and Nixon.

GRELE: Did you travel with both?

LAWRENCE: Yes. Almost religiously, we changed every two weeks.

GRELE: How would you compare the two candidates in terms of campaigning?

LAWRENCE: Well, of course, Kennedy was the challenger, the aggressor--everything to win and nothing to lose, really. Nixon had to fight sort of a status quo battle. Kennedy had this friendly air about him. He genuinely liked reporters and liked to be around them. Nixon genuinely does not like reporters. He tolerates them. So you moved from one world to another when you changed candidates. The first debate, of course, was a great Kennedy victory and shook up Nixon's self-confidence to a point where he never really did recover.

GRELE: In what ways did this manifest itself?

LAWRENCE: In his uncertain handling of himself on the platform from then on. Neither of them liked press conferences as the campaign developed, and I don't blame

them. At a press conference you can get any loaded brick thrown at you from the other side. Press conferences during a campaign really are not designed to enlighten; they're just designed to see how quickly you can dodge bricks.

GRELE: Were things as idyllic as Theodore White paints them in his book concerning press relations, or press handling?

LAWRENCE: No, of course, they weren't. The Kennedy organization was sloppy and mismanaged; the speeches were late-- not as bad as [Adlai E.] Stevenson's. But you know, the Nixon people, their press relations being somewhat limited, were at least a little more precise. But the great difference with Kennedy was you could always get to Kennedy and you could never get to Nixon--both being overstatements. You couldn't always get to Kennedy, and you ^{could} once in a while get to Nixon. But nevertheless the feeling was there that if you had something on your mind, you could go ask Kennedy about it. That's far better than dealing with some press agent, anyway.

GRELE: This contrast between the sloppiness and the precision, would you say this was the result of the differences in the personalities between Pierre Salinger and [Herbert] Herb Klein?

LAWRENCE: Yes. Pierre is great on handling things, but he just isn't very efficient. Pierre was good on substance, lousy on detail. Klein was great on detail work and lousy on substance. Again, a different set of instructions from the head man.

GRELE: Did the Nixon staff make itself as available as the Kennedy staff?

LAWRENCE: No, and when they did, they were often unfriendly.

GRELE: Anyone in particular that you can think of?

LAWRENCE: Well, I was thinking particularly of [James] Jim Shepley from Time magazine. His staff spent most of its time grousing about the press, whereas the Kennedy people were playing up to our egos and getting away with it.

GRELE: What was your general impression of the campaign tack John Kennedy took: "Let's get the country moving again."?

LAWRENCE: I thought it was a good one.

GRELE: Effective?

LAWRENCE: Yes.

GRELE: Did you ever notice any difference in the crowd receptions of the two candidates?

LAWRENCE: Well, I suppose the most misleading evidence that you could get of that would be the tremendous and excited and overflow crowds that Kennedy drew clear across Ohio. And he got his ears beat in there. Nixon couldn't draw anywhere near those kind of crowds with anything like the enthusiasm that Kennedy has in Ohio, and he won. So, crowds are misleading things. We made a great mistake in '48 by downrating the crowds that [Harry S] Truman drew. And we were wrong. He won. But if you just stuck to crowd reactions, you wouldn't get very far either, because I again cite you Ohio.

GRELE: You have covered previous campaigns?

LAWRENCE: 1940 was my first campaign. I spent all of it with Wendell Willkie.

GRELE: I wish we could tape that experience. Was there anything unique about John Kennedy's campaign compared to the others?

LAWRENCE: Not really, no, except the televised debates.

GRELE: Were they the turning point of the campaign?

LAWRENCE: I think maybe they were; I think maybe they were. The first debate. Nothing after, in the others, except to sustain the first impression. Nixon was perhaps better in the second, third, and fourth debates, but by then he was so off balance that he could never recover.

GRELE: Did the Nixon people think that they would ever get the Negro vote?

LAWRENCE: I never discussed the vote. They certainly didn't do anything to get it.

GRELE: This was a prelude to my next question: What was the background of your article reporting a rift between Vice President Nixon and Mr. [Henry Cabot] Lodge over Lodge's promise of a Negro in the Cabinet?

LAWRENCE: The background of it was that Lodge had made this commitment to a New York audience--I think it was in Harlem; I'm not sure, I wasn't there--that there would be a Negro in President Nixon's Cabinet. The New York Times queried me about it, and I put the story up to Nixon, who, at some very, very late hour in the night, issued a denial that there was any such commitment. Then there were subsequent mutterings back and forth. Finally, there was a meeting in Connecticut of Nixon, Lodge, and their top staffs.

When the meeting broke up, Lodge came out first. He wouldn't pause very long for questions, but in response to one question, he said the issue had not even been discussed. Nixon came out--there were only three or four of us there--we walked back to the main hotel with him. We had a press conference on the walk--I mean, as we moved along--and he said that it had been discussed very thoroughly; that he had made his point quite clear to Mr. Lodge. And he reiterated the fact that there was no such commitment to put a Negro in the Cabinet. He didn't say there wouldn't be one. But they weren't going to choose a Negro on account of race--color. And I again wrote this in terms, still, of a kind of rift. But Lodge had obviously lied to us. I think it was the next day that Lodge denounced me. He said that the only quarrel here was that some New York Times reporter, Lawrence, was trying to create a quarrel where none existed. Well, I didn't bother to answer that.

GRELE: What was your reaction to his charges that the article was a work of the imagination and that you were working for the election of John Kennedy?

LAWRENCE: Oh, I just laughed.

GRELE: Were there ever any repercussions in the Times?

LAWRENCE: It was never even discussed.

GRELE: Do you recall any incidents or anecdotes of the campaign that are not part of the public record?

LAWRENCE: Yes, I think there are a few. He really decided quite early that neither Adlai Stevenson nor Chester Bowles would be his Secretary of State. I think it was in August or September. I had played golf with him at Hyannis Port. We had gone back to his house for a drink, and our conversation was interrupted by a telephone call from Governor [Abraham A.] Ribicoff breaking the news that Bowles was going to withdraw as a candidate for Congress. Kennedy was obviously disturbed about Bowles' withdrawing from the race for Congress saying he preferred to be part of the executive branch. He said to Ribicoff at that time, "Well, my own reaction now is that I wouldn't appoint either Bowles or Stevenson as Secretary of State." They talked some more. That was the main point of the conversation.

When he hung up, I said, "Excuse me, sir, I've got to go downtown and write my story. [Laughter] I've got a pretty good one." Well, he laughed because he knew, obviously, sitting in his home and under such circumstances, that it was highly off the record, and I was a reputable journalist who wouldn't rush into print with it. It could have been quite devastating. I think that if the Stevenson people had known that their boy was not going to be Secretary of State, they would not have worked very hard for the election of Kennedy. And similarly with the Bowles people in Connecticut.

It was a very useful piece of information to have in the back of my head because when the Cabinet making time came, Kennedy kept trading me little bits of information against this one fact. I did very well. I called up one morning in Palm Beach after the election and said, "I haven't got a story for Sunday. Election's over now and there's no harm in it; I think I'll write a piece saying, "Adlai Stevenson is not going to be Secretary of State." And the President said, "Well, that's just a speculative story. Why don't you write that Luther Hodges will be Secretary of Commerce?" I said, "Fine, I'll do that."

Still later I brought it up. I forget what we traded off then--something. Ribicoff, of course, had become a great friend of mine, and he called me up before he'd even seen Kennedy and said, "You know, everybody's writing that I want to be Attorney General. I don't." I said, "What do you want?" And he said, "I want to be Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare." I said, "Does Kennedy know that?" He said, "No. Why don't you tell him?" So I told him and found out he was receptive.

GREEN: What did he say when you told him?

LAWRENCE: He indicated some surprise and called Ribicoff back immediately. Two days later--we'd been out to see the Vice President in Texas--we were on an airplane with about eighty reporters, and I sidled up to him alone and said, "If Abe doesn't want to be Attorney General, what are you going to do about Justice?" And he said, "What about Bobby?" My first reaction was--and I said it--"Do you think you could get away with it?" His reaction was, "Why not? I don't see why I should discriminate against him because he's my brother." When the plane conversation was over, none of the other reporters were aware of what we'd been discussing. I really didn't know whether there were any rules because I hadn't said to him "on-the-record" or "off-the-record" or anything. We just talked as we often did.

The next day was a Saturday, and I wanted a story, so I called Mrs. [Evelyn] Lincoln and said, "Please tell the President that I'm a little bit in doubt about the circumstances of our conversation last night. I don't know whether it was on-the-record or off-the-record or what. But if he doesn't have any objection, I'd like to say that he's seriously considering the appointment of his brother as Attorney General. And please make it clear to him," I said to Mrs. Lincoln, "that if this is off-the-record, all right, it's off-the-record. But if not, I'd sure like to use it." She called back in about fifteen minutes and said, "The President says that you can write a dope piece if you want to. Make the point that he is not going to discriminate against his brother because he is his brother."

As you can imagine, this was kind of a sensation, because there had not been any hint of this in print before. In retrospect, I'm not sure whether the President and Bobby had talked about this before or not. I saw Bobby a few days later when he got back from Mexico, and he pretended to be ignorant of it.

There was a very, very moving thing: about a week after Kennedy was killed I was in Florida, and Bobby was up at [C. Douglas] Dillon's house. I was asked up for an evening, for dinner. Bobby, of course, was quite broken up. We all were-- but, naturally, Bobby, being closer than any of us. . . . The last thing Bobby said when I left that night was, "Bill, thanks for making me Attorney General." It was a jest, of course, but it had its own private history.

GRELE: If we can go back now to the telephone conversation about Bowles and Stevenson, did he tell you why he wouldn't consider either one of them for Secretary of State?

LAWRENCE: No, he didn't. And I must admit that since this was all in the nature of a confidential conversation that I was simply overhearing--not from any distance; I wasn't eavesdropping on the conversation, I was three feet from it--it wasn't the kind of conversation where I felt I should then become the prosecuting attorney or the diligent reporter, dig in, and say, "How come?" It was good enough for me that the candidate of the party that I thought was probably going to be elected had reached a decision about both these fellows. They both wanted it so bad they could taste it. The mere fact that he decided he didn't want them. . . . I didn't need many details.

GRELE: What were your opinions as to why he didn't want them?

LAWRENCE: Well, that would require some mind reading. I think, basically, that he shared my view. Basically Stevenson and Bowles were terribly eloquent men-- speak beautifully and at length--but they both find trouble making up their minds on real tough decisions. I certainly wouldn't know whether John F. Kennedy shared that view or not.

GRELE: When you went to visit the Vice President in Texas, what was your impression of the relations between the two men?

LAWRENCE: We had no impressions at all because we landed at the Johnson ranch just as total darkness fell, and we were taken on a quick tour of the ranch property in

total darkness, loaded back on our planes, and sent back to the air base, where we waited. We were a little surprised--all of us, I think--that when we landed at Bergstrom Air Force Base in Texas, the President-elect was not met by the Vice President, who chose instead to wait at the ranch and meet him there. I say we were surprised. But maybe Johnson thought this was a warmer welcome to greet him first on home territory. We had to change from a big airplane to much smaller planes to land on the ranch strip.

GRELE: When you were flying back, did John Kennedy discuss what relations he planned to establish with the Vice President?

LAWRENCE: No. I had a very brief conversation with him, in which I extracted the nugget of Bobby, and that's all I was interested in.

GRELE: On the Cabinet, was [J. William] Fulbright ever considered as a possibility for Secretary of State--seriously?

LAWRENCE: The President did tell me this. Fulbright was pushed very, very hard by Johnson, among others, for the post of Secretary of State. And the President told me that when he decided on [Dean] Rusk, as a matter of courtesy he had Rusk telephone Johnson in Texas. He said Johnson was so mad that it wasn't Fulbright and that it was Rusk, that he barely was polite with Rusk on the telephone. Rusk offered to come out to Texas and talk to him about the whole range of foreign problems, and Johnson said no, not to bother, he'd probably see him in Washington sometime--or words to that effect. Kennedy certainly gave me to understand that Fulbright was Johnson's number one choice. He may have been pushed by others; I don't know. But I think the basic problem with Fulbright's ever being chosen by Kennedy was the fact that he had signed the Southern Manifesto which, while not offensive to Kennedy as a domestic political device, was, nonetheless, a sort of red flag to be waved in the face of all of Africa and the Middle East.

GRELE: Did he tell you why Johnson would have preferred Fulbright?

LAWRENCE: No, we didn't go into that.

GRELE: Did he tell you his reasons for picking Rusk?

LAWRENCE: Never did, no.

GRELE: How much influence did Dean Acheson have in any of these choices?

LAWRENCE: I cannot answer that.

GRELE: Prior to your leaving the New York Times, did the President ever discuss with you, or express to you, any opinions that he might have held on the Times as an institution when he became President?

LAWRENCE: Oh, you know. The President sputtered with anger at times. One of his oldest friends was Arthur Krock, but he couldn't read Krock without his blood pressure going up. And I think his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] told me he had to quit reading David Lawrence completely. His father discontinued his subscription to the New York Times after I don't know how many years. Old Joe, before his stroke, had a temper of magnificent proportions. And I suppose I discussed the Times more with Joe than I did with Jack.

GRELE: What were his opinions of it?

LAWRENCE: Oh, they were unprintable. I think they'd burn up your tape recorder. Yet, for some reason or other, he still liked me. I always got along with the old man.

GRELE: What were the relations like between John Kennedy and his father?

LAWRENCE: An impossible question for an outsider to answer.

GRELE: Did the President ever discuss Mr. [James B.] Reston as he did Mr. Krock?

LAWRENCE: Yes, he used to get annoyed at Scotty. He got annoyed at everybody at one time or another. But the big difference between John Kennedy's relations with

the press and Johnson's now is that when Kennedy got mad at one reporter, he was mad at that reporter. But if Lyndon Johnson gets mad at Scotty Reston, he's mad at me and everybody else-- not just the people on the Times, but the whole press corps.

GRELE: Why the difference?

LAWRENCE: Different people, different chemistry.

GRELE: When you were working for the Times, did John Kennedy ever get angry with you over something you had written?

LAWRENCE: Something I'd written or some question I'd asked-- sure, momentarily. It never bothered me and it didn't bother him.

GRELE: In May of 1961 you left the Times for ABC [American Broadcasting Corporation]. This puts you in a rather unique position of having dealt with the White House press operation both as a newsman and as a radio man.

LAWRENCE: I'm going to ask you to rephrase that question.

GRELE: Television man?

LAWRENCE: No. Both as a printed newsman and a broadcast newsman. But both newsman; a newsman at all times.

GRELE: Can you contrast or compare for us any differences in treatment that you received with one media or another?

LAWRENCE: There are no real differences.

GRELE: No differences at all?

LAWRENCE: No differences. There are differences in your professional ability to perform. The time limit is much more restricted. But on any big story, no, it's precisely the same.

GRELE: Television was not treated any differently than the daily press?

LAWRENCE: No. By the time I came to television, it was a grown-up boy. Back in the twenties radio was kicked around by the Washington reporters, and in the forties and early fifties television was. But by 1961 when I went to work for ABC, television was a factor of its own, ^{one} that the politicians sought out.

GRELE: What were your opinions of the introduction of television into the press conferences?

LAWRENCE: At the time it happened, I was against it. Not because I was against television, but because I thought it would destroy the informality of the news conference and that it would produce hams who would vie for national attention with stupid questions. I think both these things happened. But I also think Kennedy made of the press conference a great national instrument for Administration policy. The press conference became a very popular public institution. I don't think it's as good as it was in the days when maybe fifty of us used to gather around [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's desk; a part of it could be on-the-record, and a part of it could be off-the-record, and some of it could be background, so we could more clearly understand. People followed up each other's questions so that if something was unclear, you cleared it up right there. Now the actors get up and read their little scripts. Some of them even feel they have to explain the problem to the President first.

GRELE: Anyone in particular?

LAWRENCE: Well, I don't think I'll go into that. That's not the purpose of this history. But you can get a bunch of speeches by the reporters and speeches back by the President.

GRELE: How would you compare John Kennedy's handling of the press with other Presidents that you have worked with?

LAWRENCE: I think there was kind of a friendly familiarity between Kennedy and the press.

GRELE: Like Truman's?

LAWRENCE: Truman didn't really have too many close friends around the White House. One of Truman's big problems was that he did wish to be helpful. And he would sometimes stumble along with an answer where he would have been better off to have stopped--simply trying to help the reporter out. Kennedy used the press very skillfully--never more skillfully than the steel price dispute.

GRELE: How did he use the press there?

LAWRENCE: By denouncing U.S. Steel. He used television, really. What those steel press agents had in mind in timing this one day before a set press conference, I'll never know because if they had held up the price increase two days, Kennedy would have had to have created a new news conference-television situation, not one just naturally set up for the way they did time it. Forty-eight hours delay might have meant a lot of money to United States Steel had their press agents been on their toes.

GRELE: How did Pierre Salinger handle the press operation in the White House?

LAWRENCE: Very good. He was good on substance, sloppy on detail.

GRELE: The same way? Nothing changed?

LAWRENCE: Yes. Nothing much.

GRELE: Did this ever come to John Kennedy's attention?

LAWRENCE: I never complained about Pierre. I liked him. I'm used to sloppy detail. But it is a fact that it was sloppy after a mechanical marvel like [James C.] Hagerty.

GRELE: Would you compare or contrast Kennedy and [Dwight D.] Eisenhower?

LAWRENCE: Well, there isn't really any contrast.

GRELE: No contrast?

LAWRENCE: No, there isn't really any comparison. Ike's performance with the press was basically wooden and distant. We were all troops to him. He was the commanding general.

GRELE: Did the fact that John Kennedy had many intimate friends among the press corps influence problems of the press like access?

LAWRENCE: Well, he was extremely easy to see. And whenever you saw him, he tried to dig up a story for you. I had a very funny experience with him in that respect.

I was doing a series of programs in 1962 on the congressional campaigns, and I thought I had a debate set up between Republican chairman, Mr. [William E.] Miller and the Democratic chairman Mr. [John M.] Bailey, and both had agreed to it. Bailey called up and dummed out on me. I really wanted this for my program.

I got so damned mad, I went over to see Kennedy and got him to appear instead, which had never happened before--a President appearing exclusively on one network in the middle of a political campaign. Then I found myself almost stuck with Kennedy and Miller, which hardly seemed an even match. All I had was Kennedy's word for it that he would do it, and I had to keep this reasonably confidential lest it be torpedoed. Pierre didn't know about it. So I had to go to Miller and take him into my confidence and tell him that I had the President: "How about getting me a big name?" And I must say for Bill Miller, he kept my secret, and he got me General Eisenhower. Back to back appearances on a Sunday afternoon television show were not to be sneered at.

GRELE: Was this the October 11, 1962, filming at the White House?

LAWRENCE: Yes.

GRELE: Was there any part of the film that was not broadcast?

LAWRENCE: I would say negative. I think we shot every word of it. I didn't know when we started whether he was agreeable to five minutes or ten minutes or what.

He and I just kept on talking. It wasn't in the nature of what you would call a critical analysis of the President and his Administration any more than was the following week when I had

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Ike. But it was something under thirty minutes, and then we had to build around it to make a thirty minute show. In a similar fashion, the Eisenhower interview was tailored along the same general lines and about the same length. Then again we took some other Eisenhower clips and built a program around it.

GRELE: Did any of the other representatives of the other networks complain about this exclusive interview?

LAWRENCE: I'm sure they did, but they didn't complain to me.

GRELE: I was just wondering if this could have been the background for the joint . . .

LAWRENCE: "Conversation with the President?"

GRELE: Yes.

LAWRENCE: I don't know. I think the "Conversation with the President" was really Kennedy's own idea. He wanted the three networks; he didn't want to do it exclusively. The idea was, get your White House correspondents and come on over.

GRELE: Did he approach you or did you approach him?

LAWRENCE: No, Pierre did. Oh, there was one other bid in that. Every year each of the networks does what you call a year-end review--you do it around Christmas time. You usually bring the foreign correspondents over, and we always ask the President to do a piece of it. The President always says no, he won't do it for one network because then he'd have to do it for all three, or something like that. So I think this particular year's request, which I made just as routinely as I made it the year before, stimulated the thinking again, and they said, "Why not do an hour's conversation and have the three network correspondents do the cross-examination--the questioning?" And that was it.

We gave him absolutely no idea of what we were going to ask. It was totally unrehearsed--totally spontaneous. I didn't know myself what question I was going to ask. Salinger and [Theodore C.] Sorensen sort of felt the need to brief the President about how this questioning might go. They sent for us. The three

network correspondents got together, and they said, "What are you going to ask him?" And we said, "Domestic affairs; foreign affairs." [Laughter] And they couldn't get anymore than that. As part of my preparation for the show, I took two days off; I sat in my apartment alone; I took one of those long yellow tablets, I wrote myself a lawyer's brief. I could have conducted the whole ninety minute interview without any help at all. But again, this was merely subjects, ideas, et cetera. I tore up the document before I went to the White House, but it was all freshly on top of my mind when the time for interviewing began.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

GRELE: In your work in the White House, who on the White House staff was especially helpful to you?

LAWRENCE: I feel that is probably not a very good question to answer for the reason that I've worked with five presidents, and various members of their staffs have been helpful, with or without the blessing of the president. Since I couldn't name these staff members in the stories that I did, I see no reason to compromise them now. Obviously, on the Kennedy staff I had many friends because I had been all through the campaign with them.

GRELE: In the joint television interview of December 1962, were there any comments between the various interviewers and John Kennedy that were not included in the interview or the book?

LAWRENCE: What book?

GRELE: Kennedy and the Press. It has a section which contains the joint interview.

LAWRENCE: Well, there was about thirty minutes of it that never saw the light of day. That was not the product of the President but the product of editing in New York to make ninety minutes into sixty. Those parts, so far as I know, have never been made public.

GRELE: Was there anything in there that you feel should be made public?

LAWRENCE: No. There wasn't a single question left on the floor that I would have substituted for something that appeared on the air. It was the best sixty minutes they could have picked.

GRELE: One of your questions concerned the President's reaction to the steel men, and he qualified his previous statement concerning the steel men and their attitudes, do you recall that?

LAWRENCE: Didn't he really modify his opinion of all businessmen only so that it applied just to steel men?

GRELE: Was this your impression of what he meant when the initial statement was made?

LAWRENCE: I wasn't there when the initial statement was made.

GRELE: In your years of association with John Kennedy, did you notice a change in him?

LAWRENCE: Oh yes, very much so. The presidency takes a heavy toll. It didn't change his sense of humor, but it certainly changed his opportunities to be humorous or to play. The fact that he hurt his back again took him off the golf courses. To me, of course, this made him much less accessible because I did play a lot of golf with him; I enjoyed playing golf with him.

GRELE: What kind of golfer was he?

LAWRENCE: He was a good golfer. I think with any kind of frequency of play he could have easily played in the low seventies consistently. He never really played eighteen holes. In the first place, he never really started his golf until about three thirty in the afternoon, and then we would play three holes, or five holes, nine holes, or twelve holes, or fifteen holes. So you don't have any eighteen hole scores that you can figure a handicap on. But I know twice in one week he threw thirty-sixes at me on single nines. He used to have a habit of doubling all bets on the ninth hole, whether he was up or down, and he used to birdie that ninth hole at Palm Beach with infuriating frequency. Once he birdied it three out of four times in a space of about ten days. I once said to his father,

"Your son, I guess, has got everything, including the presidency. If you are having any trouble picking out a Christmas present for him, why don't you dig up that god-damned ninth green and give it to him." [Laughter] Since Old Joe like to bet too, it amused him greatly.

GRELE: Did he seem to change temperamentally in the White House?

LAWRENCE: Sure, his sense of responsibility had to grow. His ability to be friendly, frank, and available diminished; it never disappeared, but it diminished. You could see it in his face. I remember once he said something during the campaign, and I had to specifically, deliberately ask him the question again when he was President. I made the television show by showing the question and the answer from candidate Kennedy and then the same question and answer from President Kennedy. You couldn't believe your eyes.

GRELE: What was the question?

LAWRENCE: I don't remember now. I think it was Quemoy and Matsu, but I'm not sure.

GRELE: What would you consider his greatest achievement?

LAWRENCE: That would be the Cuban missile crisis. He may have prevented World War III forever.

GRELE: His greatest failure?

LAWRENCE: Bay of Pigs. It's got to be. As he said, it was an unrelieved disaster.

GRELE: The October 1962 filming, did that occur during the missile crisis?

LAWRENCE: No. And if the timing had been a little bit off, I never would have got him or Eisenhower because they both dropped out of the campaign.

GRELE: A few days later?

LAWRENCE: Yes. Kennedy was on a Sunday before the first picture showed up on a Tuesday, though it had been filmed a few days earlier. Eisenhower appeared on

the Sunday before the Cuban missile speech of Monday. So, if my timing had been a little bit off on either one of them, I wouldn't have got either one of them.

GRELE: At the time, did President Eisenhower give you any indication of how he felt President Kennedy was handling himself?

LAWRENCE: Oh, he said in the interview that he was doing a miserable job.

GRELE: Any final comments?

LAWRENCE: No.

GRELE: Thank you very much.