

Sander Vanocur Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 6/9/1983
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

(1928 - 2019), Reporter, New York Times (1956 - 1957); National Broadcasting Company (NBC-TV), Washington, D.C., reporter (1957 - 1971), White House correspondent (1961 - 1963.) In this interview, Vanocur discusses the Wisconsin primary, 1960 Democratic and Republican National Conventions, television coverage, and press coverage of the White House during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations among other things.

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Sander Vanocur – JFK#3

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Third Oral History Interview

with

SANDER VANOCUR

by

Sheldon Stern

June 9, 1983
Washington, DC

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: You covered the Wisconsin primary, I gather. Do you have any specific recollections of, I know you wrote an article which I read last week in *Reporter* magazine which was kind of friendly to Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], which I think Kennedy people were not thrilled with.

VANOCUR: Well, I know he was mad about it, and then when I was reading Teddy White's [Theodore White]--I think it was *In Search of History*, he had another book before that, I can't remember--but what I said was that no one would ever know how much money the Kennedys were going to spend in his campaign, and I thought that that was a perfectly straightforward statement without any animosity or without any spin on it at all. It was a very difficult thing for anyone to see the kind of resources that the Kennedy family had in the state and watch Hubert Humphrey, who God knows was not the most organized man in the world, and I remember one night--it's described in Teddy White's first book--a scene going from the Knickerbocker Hotel to Madison on a Sunday night, and as I recall the only reporters on board the bus were Teddy and Bill Lawrence [William H. Lawrence], then of the *New York Times*, and myself. There was a cot for Hubert which he never sat on because he slept on it till the end. And that's described in Teddy's book where he strode past all the supermarkets and saying, "This is what's happening to America." And at the end of this, and it's a favorite line, and I used it indeed in a documentary I did for

Chet Huntley [Chester R. Huntley], Hubert said, "I feel like an independent running against the chain." But what struck one coming into the state--now I was based in Chicago--was the organization that the Kennedys had and, though I'd like to say that it struck me immediately I think this is more in retrospect, the kind of people they had running the campaign.

STERN: Did you see any evidence of the ambassador, the president's father, at all in Wisconsin?

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VANOCUR: No, I didn't see any, and I wouldn't have known what to look for at the time, other than money. I think the ambassador was working the eastern states, Kenny [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] in New Jersey, and Bill Green [William J. Green, Jr.] in New York, and he was working on California where he had connections. By that I mean Humphrey was going to the traditional places, like UAW [United Auto Workers]. They had mixed feelings because both Jack and Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] had stood in the way of Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] going after Walter Reuther in the racket hearings.

But I remember going into Eau Claire one night and looking for the Kennedy headquarters, and I found them in a hotel room with a guy named Chuck Spaulding [Charles Spaulding] who I later learned was a friend of Joe Kennedy's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] and Jack Kennedy's. And then there were other people, I guess. Bill Walton [William Walton] was in the state, I'd never heard of. And a guy named Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno] who I'd never heard of, and Proxmire [William Proxmire], and suddenly, though I must state again, my first presidential campaign I didn't have a clear focus then, but I thought well, this is unusual. These are sort of what I consider amateurs. But Kennedy must have seen something up there. And Humphrey had the traditional campaign. The Kennedys were being a little cute about the Catholic vote. I remember the night before the election I stopped at a table where I think it was Bobby and Ethel [Ethel S. Kennedy] and Jackie [Jacqueline B. Kennedy], maybe Lou Harris, though I can't be sure, and I said, "Well, you should do well among the Catholics." And Bobby burst out with some nonsense about my trying. So I just said he's wrong; he's just full of it. And I walked out, and I was steaming. And it was Mama Ratzsch's Restaurant, the Ratzsch's Restaurant, Mama Ratzsch's we used to call it. And Kennedy was standing there, I guess he was looking for a cab or just buttoning an overcoat, he said, "God, you're angry." I said, "I'm angry at your goddamn brother, keeping up all this crap about not looking for the Catholic vote." And he said, "Aw, take it easy. Everybody's steamed up with the campaign's [?] So we walked back to the Hotel Pfister. But they were depending on it, though. But I must say in fairness to them, you go down the roads in Wisconsin and you'd see priests and nuns waving the white handkerchiefs. That's what they're doing.

STERN: The Kennedys felt that the press overemphasized that sort of thing.

VANOCUR: Well, I'll say in fairness to them because what the Kennedys were up against was more or less than the person of Cardinal Spellman [Francis Cardinal Spellman]. The opposition of the hierarchy of the church, if not the

opposition, the uneasiness about having a Catholic president probably on the grounds we could do better with a Protestant, we can blackmail a Protestant better than we can a fellow Catholic. So in fairness they had a problem there. But there's no question they were trying to garner a great deal of support because it was one of the most Catholic states in the country. I guess it was Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and then Wisconsin was right up there. And they were looking for those votes.

Now, what I think was interesting was the way the whole family pitched in. I covered Mrs. Kennedy, Rose Kennedy, in Prairie Duchesne one day. Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] was all over the place, just like the campaigns, especially the Senate

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campaign in 1952. And I'd never quite seen anything like this before. The other thing I remember about, going to these bars in the afternoon with Kennedy and you'd see drinking early in Wisconsin. I was told it had one of the great brandy consumptions in the country, and Jackie had gone to a back room in a bar I remember once, and somebody said to tell her not to smoke--I don't know who said it to whom--I think it was Kenny O'Donnell said, "You tell her." [Laughter] And that night we got into Oshkosh, and we went into a hotel, the first night I met Kenny O'Donnell--I'd met him, but I hadn't talked to him--and Kennedy came down and we got into a long discussion with Austin Wehrwein [Austin C. Wehrwein], then with the *New York Times*--I know he's with the Minneapolis paper now--and like a lot of people from the Midwest, tried to tell Kennedy how to run his campaign, and he said, "You know, people like me and Ed Muskie [Edmund S. Muskie] are different. We're not like people out here. We have to be what we are." And after he left--he was good-natured and he went upstairs--I was talking with Kenny O'Donnell, and there was a next room where people were having a good time and I think they were bobbing for apples, as a matter of fact, and Kenny said, "If Hubert were here he'd be in there bobbing for apples," and that's the difference between the two.

But what I think angered Kennedy the most about that campaign was he took six out of the ten districts. I think if he had gone into [?] or up to the ninth--there was an argument that day, I can't remember what it was all about--that he could have taken seven out of the ten. And he felt that winning that much he should have had a generally acclaimed victory. But I remember I was doing a remote for NBC [National Broadcasting Company]--shows you how much has changed in twenty-odd years--just rigged up something at the *Milwaukee Journal*. And Humphrey and Kennedy were there, and one could see that he knew that he had to go into West Virginia that night, that it wasn't going to be a conclusive victory. No, I didn't know whether he thought he was going to knock Humphrey out of the race with Wisconsin. It's hard to think about today, but Wisconsin was traditionally an important state. I think that's where Wilkie [Wendell Wilkie] lost in his second attempt in 1944. And I formed the impression then that he was going to win, because he just had too much artillery against Humphrey.

STERN: You covered both conventions I gather, both the Democratic and the Republican?

VANOCUR: Yeah, yeah.

STERN: Perhaps you could talk a bit about the whole Johnson question. Of course, I'd like your inside scoop to the Republican convention when Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] and Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] clashed over the platform.

VANOCUR: Well, now I've got to go back, because I started to cover Rockefeller in November of 1959. There were three trips that he made around the country in...

STERN: He hadn't formally declared though, had he?

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VANOCUR: No, no, he had not. These were exploratory trips. And people still around who were around him. McGrory [Mary McGrory], Novak [Robert D. Novak], then with the *Wall Street Journal*, Witcover [Jules Witcover], I think with, I don't know what the paper was, wasn't the *Star* [*Washington Star*], I don't know, Germond [Jack W. Germond] was with the Gannett papers. I don't know who else was around. Hal Levine from *Newsweek*. Anyhow, we covered those three trips, and I remember Hal Levine from *Newsweek* and Bob Novak and I finished up in Florida a couple days before Christmas in 1959, and we had just about convinced ourselves that Rockefeller was going to run. So, low and behold, right before New Year's the announcement came out that he wasn't going to. Later on in the fall I went on a trip with him from White Plains airport--he was running or helping to elect an old classmate of his named Herman Schneebeli who later got to be ranking member of Ways and Means--and that night on the plane going back, I said, "Governor, I've never asked you, but I, my friends thought you were sure to run. What was it? Did Sidney Weinberg, the Republican [?] "No," he said, "you should have known, Sandy, you were there, I couldn't get any support for those people. People who should have supported me were not for me." I said, "Give me an example." He said, "Well, Meade Alcorn, the national committee chairman from...

STERN: Connecticut.

VANOCUR: ...Connecticut, should have been for me." I said, "Why?" And Rockefeller was straight-faced, said, "Why, Sandy, he was a classmate of mine." So my guess was that Rocky just didn't think he had the power, and the family probably didn't want him in the race. Had he won the nomination, and it was a big if, did Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] really want Nixon to be his successor? If he didn't, would he have done anything to stop it? Very questionable with Ike. Anyhow, so right before the Republican convention--and the Republican convention was in Chicago after the Democratic convention--Nixon had the, what was it called, the Compact of Fifth Avenue, where he agreed to certain things in the platform. People hadn't paid much attention to that rising star of Illinois politics, Chuck Percy [Charles Percy] was in charge of the platform. He made such a botch of it that in effect Mel Laird [Melvin R. Laird] wrote it. If you're ever interested in getting that story, Mel will talk. He'd be very good on it.

STERN: What was your impression of the Republican campaign, other than the conventions, the...?

VANOCUR: Let me go back to the Democratic convention. Kennedy had the votes. Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] gave me a count without going on the second ballot strength that proved to be almost on the mark. If there was any chance that they could stop Kennedy, Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] was helpless. It absolutely disappeared when Kennedy went before the Texas delegation and debated Lyndon Johnson, urged by the way, he was urged to do that by Fritz Hollings [Ernest F. Hollings] who was kind of a secret, not too secret Kennedy supporter.

STERN: And at the end of our first...

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VANOCUR: Yeah. I had to sit outside on Rossmore Drive. Kennedy had a hideaway in an apartment building that I think was owned by Jack Haley [John R. Haley, Jr.]. We stood out there, William Gargan had an apartment there. Now later we were told that he slipped out during the evening, went to have dinner with his father... Like all these stories, why didn't you tell us about Jack Kennedy with this lady or that lady. We didn't know, and when he went to the hall, Bob Healy [Robert Healy] and I jumped in the car, I think we ran into Dave Powers [David F. Powers] and we went to the coliseum. What I always remember about that night, and that was not his acceptance speech, that was just acknowledging the victory, was that he came on one side on the right flanked by Abe Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff], the first national political figure who endorsed him, then Mike DiSalle [Michael V. DiSalle] and his wife, and it was a kind of wonderful mosaic of Democratic party politics, the Jewish, the Italian, and the Irish in the middle and so forth. Then we got back that night to this place and, of course, I didn't have a camera, and I talked there about twenty minutes, didn't say a word about the vice presidency, and I asked him and I can't remember what we talked about. And I didn't have a clue it was going to be Johnson. Kennedy had been very clever. He had talked to a lot of people, like Orville Freeman, who gave his nominating speech. The two guys who thought they were in the running were Herschel Loveless, George Docking, Herschel Loveless of Nebraska, and George Docking of Kansas for the vice presidency.

STERN: Scoop Jackson [Henry M. Jackson]....

VANOCUR: Yeah, Scoop thought so, and Symington [Stuart Symington], then Docking and Herschel Loveless. I think Kennedy just spread a little manure around to make their ambitions grow to whatever height they wanted to. And if one had sat down and thought, and of course one never does sit down and think at convention, it would have been perfectly clear that it would have been Lyndon Johnson. The comings and goings of that whole period have been pretty well comical. The one I tend to believe is.... I was in an elevator after it was over with Bobby and Kenny O'Donnell, and Kenny was

saying, "Well, if that's the way he wants it, that's the way it's going to be, right there. Later, Kenny told me that Kennedy took him into the bathroom, and said, "If Lyndon goes to the Senate, he's just going to give me the job," a favorite Kennedy expression. "It's better to have it this way, and we can win the South." But I have a feeling that he offered it to him and didn't think he'd accept. That's my theory. You know, everybody has their own version, and I remember sitting on a bus in Oregon in September talking to Teddy White about the Phil Graham [Philip Graham] memo, and I said, "He certainly was in a position to know." I said, "Teddy, the people who write these things have to be at the event," and I think Phil had. You always tend to think [?] Who was Lyndon and Jack Kennedy and Bobby and Mr. Sam [Samuel T. Rayburn] and Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Alta (Lady Bird) Johnson]. I think Mrs. Johnson probably was the most important person in the room.

STERN: [?] certainly had that impression.

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VANOCUR: I think that it was her wish that he do this, and then I didn't go to the Cape for whatever they did up at the Cape and came back to Washington to start working on the Republican convention.

STERN: What's [?] about when you asked that question at the first debate, although you also asked a very tough question of Kennedy.

VANOCUR: I'm only remembered for the tough question and Herb Klein [Herbert G. Klein], I'm not unfond of Herb, but he told Paul Niven, who's now dead, that Vanocur got that question from the Kennedys, and I did not. I left the Nixon campaign the weekend before in Jackson, Mississippi and took the train, the Panama Limited, back to Chicago, and my wife and the kids met me. And I worked on those questions on the train. Later on, Newt Minow [Newton N. Minow], who was an old classmate of mine, said, "I was going to call you and urge you to ask that question." I said, "Newt, had you called me I'd never have used the question." And Nixon referred to it as a question with no substantive importance, which was to plague me for the rest of the campaign. But the Kennedy question, though I didn't mean it to be, was fairly prescient. He didn't do well with the Congress, and indeed he always used to in a sense drive me up the wall by talking at news conferences how more powerful Congress looks at that end of Pennsylvania Avenue when you're sitting in it. There's no question that the debate was the turning point. Abe Ribicoff tells the story of hearing it on radio, driving from Sacramento to San Francisco thinking Kennedy had lost.

STERN: It's a very common reaction.

VANOCUR: Yeah, and then when they got in their hotel room, and they saw it they knew that Kennedy had won. I knew that he had won when I got to someplace the next day outside of Cleveland, Painesville, I think, or Ashtabula, something

like that, and Frank Lausche was beating at Kennedy's motel door. I didn't realize Frank Lausche was going to be a great weathervane in American politics. But I tell you what struck me about it: I didn't know at the time that when Nixon walked in he banged that knee again. He was in some pain, nor did I know that Nixon was shaking his finger in Kennedy's face, which was a tactic [?] out of your speech or something. The thing that struck me, I've often said that Richard Nixon's greatest moment was not when he moved into the White House but when Pat accepted Nelson Rockefeller's apartment building in New York. There was terrible class insecurity about him, Nixon vis-à-vis people like Rockefeller and Kennedy, and I had the feeling...

STERN: Johnson had something very similar.

VANOCUR: Yeah, yeah, and I had the feeling that Kennedy exuded this effortless sense of superiority and Nixon the politics of lower- and middle-class. It was sad in a way, but it reminded me of my first experience of watching debates in the House of Commons at the end of 1950 and in '51 that the Labor members talked to the Tories and the Tories talked to each other, born out of that sense that having ruled with minor

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interruptions for four or five hundred years. And that's the same thing. Kennedy looked at the audience, and Nixon looked at Kennedy standing with that kind of half smile. I suppose now it seems kind of sad that one could think that about Nixon. Now, mind you, if you were at the debate as I was, you were the last person to be in any position to judge how it went, if you were careful, if you were listening, if you were trying to follow up, throw out your questions. I had another question I threw to Nixon which was about, he was talking about education. He had to be corrected because education is provided by most in their local taxes, it was in those days, but you were not in a position to know who won at last. I felt Nixon lingering around the studio. I saw Sy Hersh's [Seymour Hersh] book about Kissinger [Henry Kissinger] this weekend. Kissinger happened to pop into the office several times on an occasion to reassure Nixon he'd done well in a news conference right before going to [?] or something like that. But that was the turning point. The other part that I think I've had a tendency to feel was that the Midwest was going to be tough on Catholicism, and the South as well. That was my gut feeling.

STERN: Did you cover the Houston ministers?

VANOCUR: I sure did. It was a high point of the, that plus the debate. It was a great night for Kennedy. I think Bill Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] ordered several tapes of it--I guess it was on film--to be sent up to Arkansas. The Catholic issue was tough and intractable, and I think all of us underestimated the depth of it in 1960.

STERN: It was cut off--it was being covered on television--and they cut it off after half an hour, and there were some questions of continuing which were not actually televised, and [?] that Kennedy came to lose his cool.

VANOCUR: You know the famous story about that.

STERN: Which one was that?

VANOCUR: Kennedy and the brown shoes.

STERN: No, maybe I don't.

VANOCUR: He couldn't find his black shoes, and he had a blue or dark grey pinstripe suit. So he started to berate Dave Powers that he hadn't packed them. So going down the elevator, you know he was very impeccable about his dress, one could say he was vain about it, and all down the elevator he bitched to Dave. He had this terribly important debate, and when it was over, going up in the elevator, he started right up again where he left off as if nothing had happened in between, and Dave got a little exasperated and finally he said, "Look at it this way, Senator, that was a brown shoe crowd if ever I saw one." [Laughter]

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STERN: Were you surprised on election night how close it was? Did you have a sense it was going to be that close? I think for all intents and purposes the popular vote was a tie, it was a draw.

VANOCUR: Do you know I didn't have any sense of how it was going to go. I thought Kennedy would win, and I thought he would have to win before he had Mississippi, and, god, something saved me from extrapolating too much from the Connecticut results and saying that he's winning so big here it's got to be a sweep.

STERN: I think a lot of people felt that way.

VANOCUR: Yeah. So I was restrained. I must say I wasn't a kid--I was thirty-two years old--but you don't think big on the eve of an election. I worked very hard, I had the eastern section, I had governors, senators, the president, Congress. Mary had Midwest and Western and Rocky Mountain and South, and you don't think big. I thought he'd win, but I didn't think by how much. But I knew it had to be in the Northeast and the industrial, and I guess I didn't realize how poorly he would do in the West. I thought that he probably had a chance to [?] But that was a historical trend that had begun with President Eisenhower, and it still persists today.

STERN: Okay. Let's switch over then to your assignment as NBC White House correspondent in the Kennedy administration. Do you have any inauguration anecdotes, anything interesting you can recall?

VANOCUR: I remember picking up Ralph McGill, who was waiting at the Jefferson Hotel in a snowstorm and finally got to the inauguration gala, and Ralph was feeling very merry, and Laurence Olivier was delivering something written by Norman Corwin, "Ode on an election", or something, and Ralph looked up and said, "Who does he think he is, talking that way, Joe Alsop [Joseph Alsop]?" [Laughter] And I think the night of the, no, I didn't have any... I thought a couple of days later that speech could have, does have great totalitarian overtones, "...ask not what your country can do for you..." I thought about it but not much. No, I don't think I had many, running around trying to grab people. I remember that evening, he was going to all the various parties, and he and Lyndon and Lady Bird and Jackie came into what they used to call the Statler [Statler Hotel], over at 16th and K. They got a paper, kind of like a guy reading the reviews, and then he and Lyndon went upstairs to a party that Sinatra was giving. It was the damndest thing. Lady Bird and Jackie were just standing around in this room waiting for them to come down. But one doesn't remember.... I want to go back to something I was thinking. He called for Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton] to sign the papers for the cabinet officers. One thing should have given me a tip-off on Kennedy. I got up to Hyannis Port after the election. I think I slept all Wednesday and got down on Thursday. It was the Hyannis Armory. It was kind of, first thing he did was announced that the continuation [?] I just thought, oh, shit, is this what it was all about? Is this the bright new future of America? Then when he invited me over with some others, I guess the whole press, that night to see a movie, at his house, but I had to go back to Boston to put this on the air. No, I can't remember anything more about the....

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STERN: Let's move on then to covering the White House during the Kennedy years. What was it like in terms of access? Would people like Pierre Salinger, Kenny O'Donnell, even Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln], did you have trouble with them, were they easy?

VANOCUR: No. The place was a sieve. Nobody would shut up.

STERN: Really?

VANOCUR: No, it was the easiest thing to cover. Everybody would talk. God, it was an upturned cornucopia of leaks. The only trouble I had, and Halberstam [David Halberstam] has this in his book, both Jim Deacon and I complained about it, is that Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] would have a tendency to treat us like scholarship students from the wrong side of town at Harvard, and I finally said to Kennedy one day, "If he wants to he can keep on talking to these people from the *London Times* and the *Sunday Observer* and the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, there's television," and I said, "I'll need him, but we ought to get some answers to our questions." But I played mostly the political side. I stuck with the Irish Mafia. I'd given them that name, and, but they're quite close to Walter Heller, who was a great source of information. And Rostow [Walter Rostow] was, too, strangely enough. I was very fond of Walt. But my problem was that it was the age, at least for the first two years, of the fifteen minute television show, and we had a guy named

Huntley and a guy named Brinkley [David Brinkley], and I could not get my stuff on the Washington end of it. I did most of it on radio, and I think today if I were covering the television on live, one would have gotten on every night. It's very interesting. You get on every night now, the White House no matter who you are. In those days, because you didn't have the facility to go live, you had the studio, you weren't on. News was just as important. This guy was just as photogenic as Ronald Reagan, didn't happen. But it was an easy place to cover.

STERN: How about Pierre Salinger's press briefings? Were they useful?

VANOCUR: Yeah, yeah. They were. It was so small then, though.

STERN: That's important. Say something about that.

VANOCUR: It was a function of size. You stood around a desk, and depending on mood, you'd hit up on Pierre, just a good-natured way, kidding around. But it was all very easy, just easy, and you had access. You could see people walking in and out. You'd sleep in the hallway, those big leather benches. You couldn't miss anybody. You knew who was going in, who was going out.

STERN: That's incredible, and that's only twenty years ago.

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VANOCUR: Only twenty years ago, yeah. Now, one of the things that I think is different. Kennedy against, not against, there was some misgiving about the televised news conferences, had them in the State Department auditorium. Ike had had his in the Indian treaty room and Hagerty [James C. Hagerty] would have to approve those things before they would go out. I think one of the differences was there wasn't this tendency to be so confrontational in that setting over there because it was so wide, spaced out, got to be in the literal, not the figurative, sense, you had a lot of space there. Compared to the White House everyone's jumping up and down, it gets adversarial and so forth, quite a difference, quite a difference.

STERN: Were you able to perceive early on the point that Halberstam makes about the decline of *Life* magazine, *Look* magazine and the rise and force of TV...

VANOCUR: No, well, I knew that television was important, but if you sat where I sat, he still thought, and I told David this, that *Newsweek* and *Time* magazine was the most important influence on people's minds. And Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee] and it grieves me [telephone interruption].... I was out at a party one night at Foxboro where they were roasting George Keeverian. I thought I'd die laughing. So I thought that Kennedy really was happiest dealing with the print people. And that's where that real stuff would come out. Now I made almost no attempt to see him. I think the logs will show that I saw him three times. I didn't need to, and I could get so much better stuff when there's

an aide to put it all together.... When I broke the Kennedy-Khrushchev summit meeting story I never talked to Kennedy. Talked to nothing but aides, put some things together down at Palm Beach. But I don't think that, he knew the importance of television being.... The brothers were fairly self-deprecatory, had an uneasiness about how this was going to get too over-exposed, but well into the first year he was very much the captain. And then, remember something else, Kennedy is a snob. He'd like to see pals confessing. He liked to know who was sleeping with whom, and what was going on politically. And that's a very good thing to do a president as gossip, and Kennedy was, god knows, a regency fop when it came to gossip. He loved it. And there was always the idea that people like the Alsop brothers [Joseph W. and Stewart Alsop] and Roland Evans and Scotty Reston [James Reston] and the idea of, well, the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune* which used to drive him crazy. But what the hell. These were all the fellows in *Time*. And he knew that. But I had a tendency to think that it wasn't until later on that he gave in to television.

STERN: What about during the period of some time of an intense crisis, say the Bay of Pigs? Was that much more difficult to get stuff out of them?

VANOCUR: I didn't get anything out of them at all. I didn't know what was going on.

STERN: So they were successful in keeping that quiet.

VANOCUR: Very successful, and you know Kennedy's sorry that he got the *New York Times* to kill Tad Szulc's story. Now I did get mad at the news conference afterward when he refused to answer any questions, and he forbade any

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questions. I broke the "forbade." I must say looking back on it that my question seems kind of candy-assed, but at least I did break the ban on it. I was in much anger, I just was furious about the performance because the whole thing was an asshole performance from beginning to end, not just the news conference, but the whole exercise, but again proving the Achilles' heel of the Democrats, they always got to prove they're tougher on the communists than are the Republicans.

STERN: How about during the missile crisis, for example. Did you smell something that Cuba....

VANOCUR: Nothing, nothing. Others did, but I did not. I was not on that trip to Chicago. See, I then was doing the first Saturday night television show, new show, and I was not on that trip, came back and reported....

STERN: How about during the erection of the Berlin Wall in August of '61?

VANOCUR: No, my only feeling was anger at Kennedy, but I remembered Nyron Bevin who was then minister of health in the British Labor government, strong

anti-Soviet socialist. He apparently wanted to run a tank brigade. People said it was Ernie Bevin, I think it was Ny Bevin, but whatever, I thought that was the moment where Kennedy should have been very tough, but he wasn't. They did it on a Saturday. I think they used to do it [?] on the British. I thought Kennedy's action was too measured, and I say that in a measured way myself, but I thought that is one time he did not press his position. But, you see, he had to go back to Vienna. I thought the reason why Kennedy was trying for this summit meeting after meeting with de Gaulle, why he wanted to see Khrushchev was to prove to Khrushchev that he was not some cowardly young man who didn't have the guts for being in the Bay of Pigs. Well, as we all know, Khrushchev took his measure of this young man, and I think that Kennedy was still in a kind of a, what do I want to say, in a battered position in Vienna. Who knows. That's strictly subjective on my part.

STERN: How much [?] is the Morrissey [Francis Xavier Morrissey] nomination? I found some stuff suggesting that you had a hard time with that or that you gave him a hard time on it.

VANOCUR: I guess I did, having know Francis Xavier Morrissey. But I sensed that this was a favorite problem.

STERN: He's supposed to have said that this....

VANOCUR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No doubt I did.

STERN: Did he forgive you for it?

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VANOCUR: Kennedy played the game. I played the game. That's the way things are done, and I find it very amusing, and I'm accused of being so soft on the Kennedys. I played hard ball, and they played hard ball back. That's the kind of politics they came from.

STERN: Did you go on any trips with him, major trips?

VANOCUR: Yeah, I went on a trip to Europe in '61. I went on the last trip to Europe in '63. I also did the last trip before Dallas, which I wrote about in *Harper's*. My last one's in, it was in *Harper's*, I think April of 1963. [?] wanted to discover.... Kennedy thought he saw a way to win in 1964. But that was a [?] trip. *Harper's* magazine, I don't know what month that was. I think it was about April 1964. Yeah, April 1964. And, I didn't go on the Latin American trips.

STERN: Did you--you didn't go to Berlin?

VANOCUR: Yeah, that was one of the great trips of all time, starting Wiesbaden to Berlin and then Dublin.

STERN: Was, for example, all the accounts of the Berlin speech....

VANOCUR: Fantastic.

STERN: It was not exaggerated?

VANOCUR: No, no. Listen, I never had a day like that as a reporter. And then, the end of it, to come into Dublin, there was twilight, there was a shaft of light coming down beaming through.... The president, born in Brookline, Jack Kennedy, scion of great wealth. President Kennedy said, "But of the Irish and how they hemorrhage themselves to enrich the blood lines of other nations." It was quite a day.

STERN: How about the things that have come out in recent years about, for example, the assassination plot against Castro [Fidel Castro] and that sort of thing. Did people come to the White House with any sense at all?

VANOCUR: No, none at all. I'm angered by it now. I can't understand this obsession with Castro.

STERN: I had a fascinating interview with Laura Bergquist on that.

VANOCUR: You got her before she died, huh. Well, she got down there a lot.

STERN: That's right. She didn't understand it either.

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VANOCUR: I couldn't understand it. Now look, I am not saying a government doesn't sometimes have to move in a way it considers to be in international interest, but for this crowd to do what they did, it just cops an odd reason. I can't understand, there must be something that Bobby and Jack Kennedy advanced, Fidel and Che [Ernesto Rafael "Che" Guevara], it's so complicated. No, I didn't know anything about it.

STERN: What about Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy]? I know you've done an interview on RFK.

VANOCUR: I have. During that period I hardly ever saw Bobby Kennedy. I never was in Hickory Hill until 196...

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

VANOCUR: ... I just expressed my regrets, but never, had nothing to do with the Justice Department.

STERN: I was going to ask you about that.... What about Johnson when we go over the Kennedy presidency? Did you have any sense at all what Johnson's problems were in terms of the Congress? There was that incredible Democratic caucus in January of '61 where Johnson tried to preside over the caucus as vice-president, and they actually gave him a margin of twenty-six votes to do it.

VANOCUR: No, I didn't have anything to do with it. We saw him seldom around the White House. I didn't go on any trips. I was led to believe by Kenny O'Donnell that they tried very hard to make him feel part of the arrangement, and I think that to the degree that you can delegate powers, Kennedy treated him with some circumspection. I don't think he went out of his way at all to make life difficult. I think quite the opposite.

STERN: Yeah, well, he, Johnson, told that, too.

VANOCUR: Yeah, quite the opposite.

STERN: That's some great anger, but it wasn't directed at...

VANOCUR: Yeah, I think the question of Judge Hughes's appointment, Sarah Hughes's appointment, was one, but my sense, I remember once, went out to a dinner party at Sargent and Eunice Shriver's, it was terribly windy, a cold night, and Jackie was in New York that night. He came out after dinner for some, with the prince of Saudi Arabia, with Dave Powers and Lyndon and they all had a drink and, of course, [?] about Dupont Circle, get the thing lighted, and Kennedy said to Lyndon Johnson, "Well, John McCormack got awful close then." He took him out to Eunice's house, and Johnson seemed to have a good time, I remember, that night. There were a lot of reporters there. He didn't call him much because he wouldn't, he just wouldn't talk correctly to the [?] But I

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think that their relationship was as good as it could have been under the circumstances, on both sides.

STERN: Well, it's institutional. . . .

VANOCUR: Yeah, and I think that I must say, I think Lyndon Johnson's finest hour was in the transition period afterward. No one could ever take that from him.

STERN: What about his lack of effectiveness in the Senate?

VANOCUR: He wasn't in the Senate anymore. Period.

STERN: It's as simple as that?

VANOCUR: Period. That's it. No power.

STERN: But he's supposed to have said, "Power is where power goes." But he was wrong if he did say it.

VANOCUR: No power, period.

STERN: Which is why he tried to resign....

VANOCUR: Yeah, exactly.

STERN: Did you ever hear any of the rumors that he was going to be dumped from the ticket?

VANOCUR: Never.

STERN: Was that at all . . .

VANOCUR: Never, never.

STERN: . . . because RFK denied that vigorously.

VANOCUR: I think everybody would have wished Bobby Baker would have gone away. Now, mind you, I thought that Jack Kennedy would have probably tried to maneuver Bobby into the presidency in '68. Nothing I know about, just my gut feeling. But in '64 I think no intention of dumping him. I found no evidence of that at all. In fact, what the hell's he going down to Texas for to get his brains blown out, he goes down because he has to settle this fight between Lyndon and John Yarborough [Ralph Yarborough] and John Connally because he wants to win Texas. He ain't going down there if he's going to dump Lyndon Johnson from the ticket.

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STERN: Absolutely true. You don't give much credence to that Evelyn Lincoln thing...

VANOCUR: I don't give any credence to anything Evelyn Lincoln does.

STERN: . . . she claims the president told her that he wanted to dump Johnson.

VANOCUR: Jack Kennedy would not tell things like that to Evelyn Lincoln, believe me. Bobby is about as far, maybe Kennedy to Bobby, that's it. That's the extent of that myth.

STERN: What about the whole [phone ringing]... the White House. A number of people have told me, Laura Bergquist was one as a matter of fact, that it was very clear that there was the Kennedy White House, Jack in the White House, and then, of course, there was his Mafia friends, and people like Ted Sorensen who really had nothing to do with that. Is that very clear to someone covering the White House?

VANOCUR: Yeah, there were camps. And, indeed, Fred Dutton was brought in as secretary of the cabinet to try to be a liaison between the Irish pols and Ted and Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman]. National Security was a different kind of thing. It was compartmentalized like all those places are. Kennedy didn't have anybody like a Mike Dever. Kenny was the closest one to it. It was compartmentalized, because Kennedy was a compartmentalized man.

STERN: Yeah, I think that's it. You mentioned before when you were talking about his failure in '60 in the ? Congress campaign that it was in a sense an element of what was to come.

VANOCUR: Well, that wasn't his fault the wrong session, that was . . .

STERN: I realize that.

VANOCUR: . . . that was Lyndon Johnson.

STERN: . . . separate problems. But why do you think he had so much trouble with Congress? I know that wasn't specifically your beat.

VANOCUR: Well, because he was trying to finish the unfinished business of the New Deal, and you've got these powerful, well, remember Roosevelt ended the New Deal in effect in about '37, '38, after the court packing, and Harry Truman didn't have any great shakes with the Congress, and Ike only got two pieces of domestic legislation through of major importance, which was HEW [Health, Education and Welfare] and the Defense Interstate Highway Act of '54. So Kennedy was cutting a very tough time with those Southern barons like Judge Smith [?] and Otto Passman and so forth. But what I thought he was wrong about was I thought that he took the narrowness of his victory too

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literally. Once he had his hand on that Bible then I thought he was a powerful man. Then I realized Kennedy was a very conservative man.

STERN: How about McCormack [John W. McCormack]? Did you ever have any sense of his relationship? That's a very. . . .

VANOCUR: It wasn't very good because of Knocko McCormick [Edward "Knocko" McCormick] and Onions Burke [William H. Burke] and the fight and how would a guy like Jack Kennedy like a guy like John McCormack, a good Catholic who has dinner with his wife and two priests and a nun every night. [Laughter] What's Jack Kennedy going to do, go back to the Hotel Washington and have dinner with them every night, or wherever the hell they lived.

STERN: Then, of course, there's the Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] thing, the race in '62. Well, I think on the whole, McCormack. . . .

VANOCUR: McCormack was a fine man, but the Kennedy family is still paying for that in Massachusetts.

STERN: The aid to education bill, though, that was a major cup of pleasure for McCormack. There's no doubt about that. . . .

VANOCUR: Sure, he probably took great enjoyment and believed in it at the same time, which is the nicest thing that can happen to a pol.

STERN: That's right. [Laughter] What about the whole question of--I'm sure you've been asked this a billion times--the things that have now surfaced about his personal life. What did reporters know, if anything? One White House correspondent, I won't name him, but I talked to him about six months ago, said that he knew, he saw things, but he just felt that it was his personal business, and we were afraid to cut ourselves off.

VANOCUR: There were some guys who knew about a couple of secretaries who were working at the White House, and the celebrated Angie Dickinson business. Number one, I didn't know who the hell Angie Dickinson was then, and I think I saw her once in Los Angeles going to see Kennedy at a, he was working in Hawaii in 1963. [?] on a Saturday afternoon, but I didn't really who Angie Dickinson was. The [?] book, which I read, has some remarkable moments of verisimilitude in terms of dates, and some dates are wrong, but Mary Meyer, I know nothing about her, and a lot of other guys I've talked to about this at the White House, they didn't know either, and the question always remains if we had what would we have done about it.

STERN: That's absolutely right. I think it's very different today. It's really a whole different ball game.

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VANOCUR: What would you do about it? I knew he had an eye for women; I knew Jackie was gone, but I just didn't know.

STERN: What was your sense of his relationship with Jackie as the administration wore on?

VANOCUR: It got better. I thought it was really extraordinarily close after the death of Patrick Bouvier.

STERN: In August.

VANOCUR: Yeah. He called me in the office in September '63, I guess, and asked if NBC would be interested in a Jackie Kennedy tour of Washington because she was very low, and a trip to the Mediterranean hasn't helped, and maybe this would be nice, and then he said, "Mrs. Lincoln, Evelyn, get me *Variety*. What were those ratings on Sophia Loren's tour of Rome?" I said, "Sure, Mr. President, I can't commit to it, but I'm sure they'd love it." How do you respond to.... Look, they had a rich Catholic marriage, and it's been described by novelists and he had a lord-of-the-manor attitude that was [?] and so forth that you [?] I think he had a large libido, and I think Jackie knew about it and I think they had their own private language. I think this made them closer toward the end. I think he was extraordinarily proud of it.

STERN: In fact, a number of people have told me that. You weren't in Dallas, were you?

VANOCUR: No.

STERN: What about the transition you mentioned before, with Johnson.

VANOCUR: Well, I remember coming back--I was in Los Angeles--I was standing outside of Bundy's office on a rainy Saturday morning. This is how transitions take place in this town, out came the rocking chair. I waited about ten minutes, then came a saddle, [?] with two six-shooters....

STERN: Was that symbolism?

VANOCUR: You couldn't have put it in a novel; nobody would have believed it, in the rain, like in a Hemingway.

STERN: Sounds like you'd make it up, and nobody would believe it.

VANOCUR: Yeah, yeah.

STERN: How did covering the White House change with Johnson.

VANOCUR: I left almost immediately after this. I was associated, rightly or wrongly, with Kennedy's administration. I wanted to stay and cover Johnson, I thought he was rather interesting, but when Johnson started to fool around with the budget, couldn't keep it under a hundred billion dollars, couldn't obviously, and I took [?] saying, "This is full of, these [?]" and I said, "I have to go after him on it, and this would cause problems with [?]"

STERN: Could I have your assessment of some of the other White House correspondents, people like Pierpoint [Robert Pierpoint] of CBS and others. Did you feel that they.... Maybe that's an unfair thing to ask you.

VANOCUR: I think Bob was terrific. I had great regard for all the network correspondents there. They're all good, but Bob's a special favorite of mine. Never got the due he deserves. Great guy, great reporter.

STERN: I think of all these people....

VANOCUR: Wonderful man.

STERN: As you look back now, twenty years since the Kennedy administration ended, do you find that you think any differently about JFK and his presidency than you did during it and immediately after? Does the perspective of twenty years alter your perception of Kennedy, especially given what happened after, the whole long-range. . . .

VANOCUR: Oh, sure. I think that's natural. One always looks at things a little differently. But I must say I'm so suspicious of the revisionism that's coming now, because if the administration was so bad, how come so many people all over the world still have pictures of him and Bobby, in places in jungles and South America and Africa. Oh, I have a lot of things I could find fault with. I think that's just natural. The best way to think of him is a helluva politician. He was a, even more so by comparison to Richard Nixon. [?] if it ever was a Camelot. But I look back on it with some pleasure. It was a great time to cover. It was a reporter's paradise. As Ben Bradlee has often said, "Guys like me and Ben and Sidey [Hugh Sidey], so close to the Kennedys and so forth, close to Kennedy. I was so close to the administration as such that I was paid to get in there and get stuff that nobody else could get, and I did it. I don't want to turn [?] Sure, you'd do things differently. You're older then. Show me somebody who's wise when they're thirty, and I'll show somebody I don't want to sit next to at dinner. [Laughter]

STERN: On a purely speculative issue, and this, this isn't the [?] that I think anybody can really answer, but would you try to answer it. Was it your sense that had Kennedy lived, had he been reelected, that he would have followed essentially Johnson's thoughts on Vietnam? Some of his very closest people, of course, differ totally on this. Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] says he would not, Powers says he would not, O'Donnell says he wouldn't.

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VANOCUR: I don't know if he would have. If only, I don't think he would have to that extent, but I'm sort of, would put myself sort of as an agnostic. The only thing that makes me think that he might not have is you read about him in the Senate in the fifties, he was harshly critical of French policy in there. I think that's when he first met Gullion, Edmund Gullion, and critical of that policy, I think, about north Africa, so much so that he was chastised by Dean Acheson, who, though he was no longer secretary of state, I don't believe, or somebody. I think that he, having a sense of history and a sense of irony, that he would have found a way.... The thing is that Johnson used to listen to all those toy soldiers on the banks of the Charles River that never played with big guns in their lives. Kennedy knew those people. He wasn't in awe of them. And Kenny O'Donnell would have said something like Dick Daley [Richard J. Daley] wanted his lawyer [?] another mayor Daley, Robert Kennedy was against the wall because, what the hell, you spend all that money out there and need it in Chicago. I'm an agnostic with my sense that it wouldn't have been as clear-cut as maybe some think it was, but I don't think he would have gone for the buildup.

STERN: That's what you said earlier about him being a good politician, a very real sense that. . . .

VANOCUR: Go back to Lyndon Johnson's final designation.... Kennedy didn't have to [?] that war. He had no macho problems.

STERN: Anything else you'd like to add?

VANOCUR: No, but if I do, I might sit down with you at greater length sometime.

STERN: Okay. That'd be great.

VANOCUR: Okay?

STERN: Thank you very much. I'm sorry that you....

VANOCUR: No, no....

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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