Thomas Grey "Tom" Wicker Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 01/27/1966
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Biographical Note
Wicker was a journalist, a White House correspondent, and the Washington Bureau Chief for the *New York Times* from 1960 through 1971; he was also the lead journalist for the *New York Times*' coverage of John F. Kennedy's [JFK] assassination in Dallas, Texas, in 1963. In this interview Wicker discusses early impressions of JFK, 1952–1961; Lyndon B. Johnson campaigning for JFK in the South, 1960; Richard M. Nixon and Henry Cabot Lodge's 1960 presidential campaign; JFK and Johnson in the August 1960 special session of Congress; Wicker's first interview with President JFK for the *New York Times*, 1961; building a rapport with JFK's staff; various *Times* articles, by Wicker and others, about the Kennedy Administration and White House reactions to them; Wicker's arguments with Pierre E.G. Salinger over certain articles; year-end briefings in Palm Beach; and President JFK's press conferences, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

THOMAS GREY "TOM" WICKER

January 27, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

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

WICKER: If you mean when did I first actually or formally shake his hand and be introduced in that sense, it would have been in 1961, probably along late in the year I can't remember. He had been President for some time. I had been assigned to cover the White House in about June of '61. I requested and received an interview with

Mr. Kennedy. I met him in his office at that time. My recollection is it would be late in that year. Of course, by then the way things are at the White House, with the press corps and with the presidency, I knew a great deal about the President. I had seen him frequently. I mean, seen him in the sense of in groups. He knew who I was, for instance, by face. There had been lots of exchanges, in a sense, but it just had never been a formal meeting, the clasping of hands, so to speak.

GRELE: Do you recall when the first informal exchange might have taken place? When did you first become aware of John Kennedy?

WICKER: When I first became just aware that there was such a person as John F. Kennedy would have been during his 1952 campaign for the Senate. Of course, that was well

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publicized. I was not then in Washington or anywhere near it. In fact I was in Japan during the Korean War, but I recall that I realized that there was this young politician who had upset Henry Cabot Lodge. So I can remember that far back. And it seems to me, I'm not quite clear, but I think when I was at Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina, in the late 40's, he came to the University of North Carolina to make a speech, a lecture at the Carolina Forum. I say I believe because I know I didn't go if he did. It seems to me I recall that.

GRELE: What kind of recollection do you have of him before you met him after he had become President? Did you know of him as a Senator?

WICKER: Yes, I did. I was in Washington in 1957 as a correspondent for the *Winston-Salem*

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Journal. I remember very plainly I sat in the press gallery and listened to his speech on Algeria which was quite an event of that year. I remember being impressed at the time because I was a regional correspondent for quite a small newspaper in the South with no responsibility whatever for writing about foreign affairs. Yet the night before, perhaps two days before, the speech, by special messenger -- special delivery at least -- a copy of the speech, the advance text, was delivered to my apartment. I remember thinking at the time what an effort this young Senator was going to publicize and make known this speech, if he reached all the way down to me at that time. I checked around because I was interested. I found out that what they had apparently done was to send copies to everybody in the approved list of the

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Senate press gallery, which I thought at the time was rather remarkable. That and other things payed off because that speech became a headline affair. I am told that it lingered in the memories of many leaders in the Middle East and elsewhere.

I was aware of him then. The labor hearings were still going on at that time I would go to those sometimes and literally became involved in covering a story that President Kennedy, well Senator Kennedy, was closely involved in in 1960 in the legislative fight over a minimum wage bill. Kennedy was for the minimum wage bill, in fact the main proponent of it at that time. He was ultimately defeated because the Senate and the House couldn't agree in conference on a proper bill. I covered him quite closely through that. I was

then working for *The New York Times*. The following year, in 1961, when he was President he got the bill through, and I covered it again at that time, when I was still covering the Congress.

GRELE: In your coverage of that minimum wage act, do you recall Senator Clark's [Joseph S. Clark] statement about holding conference committee meetings at that time?

WICKER: Senator Clark?

GRELE: His statement went to the effect that, "If Sonny Boy ever gets back from the cricks and hollers long enough to hold a conference meeting, we might get a minimum wage bill this year."

WICKER: Yes, that was during the campaign, yes.

GRELE: Do you think that was a fair assessment of the condition of the minimum wage bill?

WICKER: Well, it certainly didn't help Kennedy. I don't remember when Clark made that

statement, but I remember that the Republicans put out a sheet -- you know, just a propaganda sheet -- after Kennedy had been nominated, as I recall it, in which they listed a whole lot of pejorative remarks that had been made by other Democrats against Kennedy. That was one of them. They had a few choice morsels from Lyndon B. Johnson and some others, all of which, of course, had been said in the heat of politics. I don't remember who Senator Clark was supporting in 1960.

GRELE: This was in reference to the minimum wage bill.

WICKER: Yes. Well, I gather he wasn't supporting Kennedy or he wouldn't have said that, at least prior to the nomination. I do recall that, and I think it's probably true that throughout 1960 Senator Kennedy's widespread presidential campaign hampered

him as a legislator. I think that's probably true. Although I'm less sure of this, I think it probably hampered him the last two or three years he was in the Senate because as Ted Sorensen's [Theodore C. Sorensen] book [*Kennedy*] makes perfectly clear, and as we all

remember, he traveled so widely. If you're going to be the principal sponsor of a bill, you've got to be there working at it all the time. I haven't studied the '59 situation close enough to know, but I wouldn't have much doubt that his absences for campaigning did affect that.

GRELE: When you worked for the Southern newspaper were you at all aware of John Kennedy's position on the various issues connected with race relations?

WICKER: I was in 1957 because one of the things that I did extensively that year here in Washington as correspondent for the

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Winston-Salem Journal was almost daily coverage of the civil rights debate of that year which resulted in the first civil rights act of Congress, as you know. The issues then boiled down to whether or not there would be a jury trial amendment. That is, whether contempt proceedings brought under the bill would be tried before a jury or before a judge only. And, also, what was known as part three. Just in shorthand, as I recall, part three, or Title III, of that Civil Rights Bill would have given the federal government the power to bring suit on behalf of the injured parties in civil rights cases. These became the two issues. Senator Kennedy either voted his convictions or straddled the issues, as you care to say. He voted for the jury trial amendment and against Title Three. The feeling was widespread in Washington

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at the time that Kennedy had somewhat straddled the issue, and that he had also made a bid for some Southern support. You will recall that a number of the Southern delegations had voted for him in '56 for the vice presidency. It was felt at that time that he was hoping to have quite a bit of Southern support in the Convention in 1960, although he wasn't an announced candidate.

GRELE: Did any of the members of the North Carolina delegation to Congress ever discuss his votes with you?

WICKER: No, I don't think so -- not in that sense. In 1957 Kennedy was a glamorous figure in the Senate. The galleries always kind of sighed when he came into the chamber, but I don't think at that time many people seriously thought President Kennedy would be the nominee. There was a great deal

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more interest then -- in my paper I wrote a great deal more about it -- about what Senator Johnson, the majority leader, was doing. Senator Kennedy was only one of many senators who were involved here. I would say that the interest in what he did was really rather small. I don't remember ever discussing it with anybody who might have had political influence.

GRELE: Did anyone on Senator Kennedy's staff ever contact you to give you publicity for the Senator or to give you a story on him?

WICKER: Only in the Algerian instance because as a regional correspondent, which I was at the time covering for the North Carolina papers, they had no particular reason to call me. I might have…. It was a long time ago, and I might possibly have gone around to the Senator's office, for instance, on what was then quite a live issue --

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whether or not there should be more tariff or quota protection for textiles which he was also interested in as a Massachusetts Senator. I might conceivably have sought something from his office on the question then of whether or not Southern states were pirating industries from New England, which he was also interested in. But I don't recall it if I did. The practice is widespread, as you know. Senators put out press releases, and they're available to everyone. I no doubt gobbled up some of those, but I don't ever recall anything specific. I know I never interviewed the Senator himself.

GRELE: Did you cover the campaign?

WICKER: In 1960?

GRELE: Yes.

WICKER: I did, but in a peculiar sort of way. I was assigned by the *Times* -- at that time

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I had only been with the *Times* less than a year -- I was assigned to cover the vice presidential candidates, so I spent most of my time with Mr. Lodge and Mr. Johnson. I did make one trip with Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], but I didn't cover the Kennedy campaign at all. By the *Times* system that year we had a couple of people who were assigned to that, and they did it consistently all the way through.

GRELE: How did Mr. Johnson run his campaign in the South?

WICKER: In 1960?

GRELE: Yes.

WICKER: Well, in a rather traditional way I think. Johnson made at all times in that campaign -- I was with him I believe in every section -- very strong appeals

which he never muted on behalf of President Kennedy. He devoted a lot of time to attempting to combat what

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was known as the Catholic issue which, it was felt, would hurt Kennedy in the South. It did, I think, in one or two of the states. Less, perhaps, than one thought. Johnson attacked that issue very heavily. He made very effective pleas for religious tolerance in politics. He used to tell at great length, in almost every speech the story of how Joseph Kennedy, Jr., President Kennedy's older brother, had been killed in the war in an airplane incident and that his co-pilot had been a boy from Fort Worth, Texas. He was a Baptist or something -- a Protestant in any case. Johnson would tell this story with great dramatic effect and drag it out. He would say that no one had asked Joe Kennedy, Jr., what his religion was when he set out at the controls of that airplane, and no one should ask John F. Kennedy what his

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religion was when he ran for President. You will recall that throughout most of the Eisenhower Administration we had had a Republican President and a Democratic Congress. Johnson made a very strong appeal to give the Democrats a chance to show what they could do with a unified government, a Democratic President and a Democratic Congress. That appeal was directly to the election of Kennedy because it was almost a foregone conclusion then that the Congress would be Democratic. The arithmetic of the situation was such that no one really believed the Republicans could carry Congress even if Nixon were elected. Certainly they couldn't have carried the Senate that year. Johnson also did a lot of back room politics in the South in particular. By backroom politics, I mean he was widely acquainted in the South. He

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had been supported at the Convention by many of the Southern political leaders. He talked their language in that way. While many of them were disappointed that Johnson was campaigning on a liberal Democratic ticket, still he was closer to them than most politicians. You will recall the famous Johnson train trip through the South. In between stops he would gather in the local state political leaders and make very strong private pleas for funds for support of Kennedy, arguing that whether or not they liked the Kennedy ticket, it was still a Democratic ticket and the Democratic party would do more for them. I think Johnson was very effective in this way. Anybody who has ever been exposed to Mr. Johnson's persuasiveness knows how strong it is, and in circumstances of that kind, he had a good case to make because it was

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difficult in many ways to see how the South had more to expect from Nixon.

GRELE: Was it your impression that it was a conscious policy to keep John Kennedy out of the states of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana?

WICKER: No, I couldn't answer to that. I really couldn't answer that. In retrospect, thinking about the campaign as I know it now…. Perhaps I know more about it now, really, than I did then because, you know, at the time you're concerned with daily events rather than looking at the thing as a whole. In retrospect it is difficult to see how it would have been profitable for Kennedy to go in those states, but yet the whole Kennedy campaign had been pitched, if I understand it, in particular on the Catholic issue, to meeting weakness head on. They went

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to the places where the Catholic issue was supposed to be strongly against them. They discussed this issue; they answered the questions; they didn't duck it, which I think was very good politics. So, without knowing the answer, I would doubt very seriously that they deliberately decided to avoid an issue. Now they might have deliberately decided that the prospect of getting any votes in Mississippi and Alabama was so remote that it wasn't worth putting on the schedule. But I really don't know.

GRELE: What was your impression of the attitude of the Johnson staffers to the Kennedy staff?

WICKER: During the campaign?

GRELE: During the campaign.

WICKER: Well, I don't think there was too much relationship because Mr. Kennedy had his people who had been with him for quite a

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while. It was a very well knit campaign staff. It was one of the best we've ever seen in this country, I think. Mr. Johnson didn't have any such thing. He had some of the people who had worked with him in the Senate. He picked up odd help here and there. I remember Bill Whitley [William B. Whitley] of Senator Everett Jordan's [B. Everett Jordan] staff from North Carolina worked with him for a while as a speech writer. Mr. Johnson had people who had been associated with him. But campaigns don't work that way. I suppose at some point back here in Washington there must have been liaison, but Johnson was off in one part of the country and Kennedy in another. They probably talked a good deal together and coordinated what they were going to do but, as a member of the Johnson touring party most of the time, I just am not much aware

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that there was a lot of contact between the two staffs. I don't think it really was necessary except as they might be exchanging information. I would think that would have been done at a pretty high level between the candidates themselves.

GRELE: Can you recall any of the bitterness of the factional fighting in Florida?

WICKER: In Florida? You mean before the Convention?

GRELE: During the campaign.

WICKER: No, I really don't. I went to Florida with Henry Cabot Lodge, campaigning down there. I remember that he got a very enthusiastic reception in places that we stopped. I don't quite remember where we stopped now except I remember putting up in some lurid hotel in Miami Beach one night. But I remember that Cabot Lodge came out of Florida thinking that he had scored very heavily. But as for Democratic factional

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fighting, I just don't recall it. I mean I just don't recall the circumstances.

GRELE: Where else did you go with Ambassador Lodge?

WICKER: Oh, well, let's see, Chicago, Indiana, New York, Texas, California, Oregon -- all up and down the West Coast.

GRELE: Were you with him when he made his campaign pledge to put a Negro in the Cabinet?

WICKER: No, I was not. I was off with Johnson at the time. That pledge was made in New York, Spanish Harlem.

GRELE: What was the reaction to this in the Johnson campaign entourage?

WICKER: As I recall it now -- of course I remember just the general reaction at the time -- I don't know of anybody who didn't regard that as a terrible goof, which I think it was. But I don't recall anything specific with the Johnson campaign. I remember that I was on the Lodge

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campaign plane…. In fact, I saw the famous first debate between Nixon and Kennedy on television in a friend's apartment in New York City. I was there because the next morning we were leaving on the Lodge plane from New York City to go to Kansas City. On the plane the next morning I remember talking with Mr. Lodge briefly about the debate the night before. Lodge was putting a good face on it and talking about the points that his man Nixon had

scored. But I felt very strongly at the time that he did not think that his man scored very well, and in discussions with members of the Lodge staff at the time, I know that they were really dismayed by the debate. Lodge would not say that. Obviously, he couldn't to a newspaperman. But it was obvious to me that he felt that way, and his staff certainly did.

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GRELE: Which members of his staff, do you recall?

WICKER: I don't want to be specific as to who said what because it's too long ago to remember. The staff people that we saw most were Steve May [Stephen May] who is now city councilman in Rochester, New York, who was then literally a member of the staff of Senator Keating [Kenneth B. Keating], but who was travelling with Lodge. There was a fellow named Charlie McCarey [Charles McCarey] who was Lodge's speech writer. His other speech writer was a man on leave from *Time Magazine*, and I'm trying to remember his name. Maybe it will come back to me. I know him; I just can't recall the name. Then there was a Congressman from Massachusetts, still is a Congressman from Massachusetts, Bill Bates [Williams H. Bates], who traveled with Lodge. There was a Massachusetts newspaperman, whose name I can't recall -- he hasn't

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figured in politics since then -- who was officially Lodge's press secretary. Then there was a fellow named Ed Terrar [Edward F. Terrar] was was delegated to Lodge from Nixon. He literally was one of Nixon's political staff. They were the main Lodge staff members, as I recall.

GRELE: What were the relations between Lodge and Nixon?

WICKER: Lodge and Nixon?

GRELE: Yes.

WICKER: I think they became more strained as time went along particularly after that incident -- after the Negro in the Cabinet incident. Lodge and Nixon conferred mostly by telephone. They had two or three well publicized meetings during the campaign. There wasn't a great deal of need for liaison between them except, again for the exchange of political information and intelligence because Lodge made a set

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piece speech wherever he went. The Negro in the Cabinet speech was an aberration. It wasn't typical. But Lodge usually said the same thing everywhere he went. As he called it, it was "a serious talk about foreign affairs." But it wasn't much of a serious talk about foreign affairs. Lodge attemped to play all the way through the campaign quite wisely on his -- at that time --

great television familiarity with the American people. He had been in the UN, and he'd denounced the Russians and all that sort of thing. He played on this very heavily. He would tell stories about how he had stood up to the Russians and so forth. That was very popular. This was the kind of thing he was campaigning on so that he didn't really need to coordinate with Nixon on issues.

I remember, in addition to the Negro

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in the Cabinet, there was another thing that I think caused conflict between them. I know it was quite a story at the time. On the West Coast, in San Francisco, Lodge gave an interview to one of the Hearst newspaperman, the San Francisco Hearst paper, in which he said that he was in favor of extending federal aid to education to cover aid to Catholic students. This was a position that wasn't giving anything away because, as a member of the Senate from Massachusetts, years before Lodge had taken that position. Nonetheless, it was a controversial thing to say in a campaign, and my recollection is that that caused a little bit of hootin' and hollerin' between Lodge and Nixon. But Lodge had taken that position; it was on the record. The question was whether or not he should have revived it during the campaign.

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GRELE: Did Henry Cabot Lodge or any member of his staff discuss John Kennedy or their earlier campaigns against one another?

WICKER: Lodge mentioned that frequently. I recall him saying once -- but I can't remember in what context…. I remember him saying to me that he knew Jack Kennedy, as he called him, very well and had great respect for him. He had known his family. But it seems to me this was in the context of disputing him on some point. In his speeches Lodge jabbed Kennedy all the time on the youth and inexperience issue. He discovered…. I happened to be with him when he found this out -- he just picked out of the blue on ebay a very good line. It seems to me it was inIllinois: Where was it? It was at the University of Illinois. He was making a speech to a student group in the courtyard there. No, it wasn't. It was in a little town before

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we got there. But he was making a trip. He took a trip down out of Chicago. He flew downstate and then got in a motorcade and went to several different places, including the University of Illinois, and went back to Chicago that night. He just stumbled on a line in which he said, "This is no time for on-the-job training in the presidency." That got a big response -- a big laugh from the crowd and everything. Lodge used that line consistently in all his speeches after that. He would always couple it, of course, with great glowing praise for Mr. Nixon's supposed experience and background. But I never heard Lodge make any personal attack of any kind on Kennedy -- not while I was with him.

GRELE: Was there ever any discussion in the Lodge camp about the use of President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] in the campaign?

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WICKER: Not that I recall, no.

GRELE: When you traveled with the Johnson organization, what were their opinions of Henry Cabot Lodge as a vice presidential candidate?

WICKER: Well, the general opinion at that time, which I shared…. I did not think Lodge was a good candidate in the sense that I didn't think he made the most of his assets. He started out with a high degree of popularity in the campaign. He drew good crowds. They wanted to come out and see him. Lodge was considered at that time as a real asset to the Nixon ticket. You would hear lots of things. I remember in some place where we were, some enthusiastic Republican lady came up to him and said, "Mr. Lodge, I just wish that you were at the head of our ticket." So there was a great deal of enthusiasm for Lodge. But he didn't exploit this very well other than by just

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appearing and looking handsome and making a speech.

Lodge did not work very hard as a campaigner. Now perhaps he worked as hard as he thought that he was physically able. I don't intend to be critical of him in this sense because every man sets his own pace. But as compared to Nixon and Johnson and Kennedy, all of whom were furious campaigners and whose days would exhaust a reporter traveling with them, and who might begin their day's work literally before daylight and end up at midnight somewhere, Lodge just didn't campaign this way. Two or three appearances in a day were the peak for Lodge.

At the very height of the campaign in the middle of October, early October, I was with Lodge and a small group travelling with him. We went into the old Coronado

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Beach Hotel in San Diego. We stayed there for four days just sort of resting. He'd make about one appearance a day. He'd go out and speak somewhere. We drove up once to Los Angeles and filmed a TV appearance and then went right back to the Coronado Beach Hotel. Unlike Johnson, he tended to appear in big cities. This trip I was talking about when we left from New York, for instance. We flew in about two or three days -- I can't remember exactly how long -- from New York to Kansas City to San Antonia to Los Angeles, to San Francisco, to Portland, Oregon. Something like that. That was about the schedule. Whereas, a more typical day with Johnson, you would go into places like Mankato, Minneapolis, you know, way back out in the sticks; Garden City, Kansas -- places of this kind -- and have a furious day.

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I think Lodge by the middle point of the campaign was generally being a little bit derided by politicians and by sort of hard-shell political reporters who just didn't think it was much of a campaign.

GRELE: Was this just the man himself…

WICKER: It may not be true. Lodge is an experienced and successful politician on the whole, and he may have thought that this was the best way to exploit whatever his assets were. I don't think it was, but then it was his decision to make, not mine.

GRELE: May I ask if this was the man himself, or if there was some point in the campaign where he decided they were going to lose and didn't want to exert himself?

WICKER: No, I think it was more the man himself because this was from the beginning. He campaigned this way from the beginning. A little bit of a lofty attitude, a somewhat

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patrician attitude, not in any really unpleasant sense, but I think Lodge wanted to appear in the big cities. I don't think he wanted to… he was older than the other candidates. He felt that as UN Ambassador he had a great deal of prestige and dignity. He was not a barnstormer in that sense. I think this was much more nearly the nature of the man. For instance at big evening banquets…. I remember this was the case in Chicago at an enormous Republican dinner there, a fundraising dinner, which drew a terrific crowd -- Lodge didn't even show up until it was time for his speech. He didn't come and eat the meal like everybody else or sit at the head table or anything. He ate in his own room. They went through all the boring preliminaries and everything. Two hours, or maybe two and one half hours,

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after everybody had gotten there to hear Lodge, it came time for Lodge's speech at which point they produced Lodge; he made the speech for about ten minutes and left. He did shake hands with the crowd afterwards. I think it was much more nearly a personal attitude on his part.

GRELE: Do you feel that this might have left a lasting impression on these Republicans?

WICKER: Oh, yes. I would say that, going back to 1952 when Lodge played such a tremendous part in the defeat of Robert Taft for the Republican nomination

and the promotion of General Eisenhower, he left a bad taste in the mouths of many Republicans professionals. The professionals, to a great degree in '52, as everyone knows, were for Taft. By 1960, Nixon took something of a risk in putting Lodge on his ticket,

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but the great prestige Lodge had achieved with independents and others, overcame that I am sure. I think Nixon's choice was not a bad one on the basis of what he knew at that time. But then the Lodge performance in 1960 has been quite criticized. By 1964 when Lodge became sort of an unspoken candidate for the presidential nomination himself -- that is, I don't think he ever promoted himself but there was a group that was promoting him; he won the New Hampshire primaries, as you know, in a write-in campaign -- I think that 1960 performance, which is considered inept by so many politicians, and the 1952 performance, which had just made enemies, combined to be a really heavy liability for Lodge. I never thought that he would be able to get the nomination. Of course, there were other factors that were much

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more important. The Goldwater [Barry Goldwater] campaign -- Lodge never really had a chance in 1964. But if he had or if Senator Goldwater had withdrawn or something, nominating Lodge with the backlog of enmities he had made would have been very difficult, I think.

GRELE: You said you had traveled with Nixon some….

WICKER: Except if Lodge had looked like a winner. You know, you can swallow a lot if you think you've got a winner. But in a close contest I think his past activities would have turned a lot of delegates against him by 1964.

GRELE: You said you traveled at one time with Vice President Nixon.

WICKER: Yes.

GRELE: Where?

WICKER: Well, it was early in the campaign. He

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made a one day trip into the South to Atlanta and Birmingham. I made that trip. I'm trying to remember whether it was before or after his knee accident. He had gone into the South to Greensboro and hurt his knee. I think right after this Birmingham and Atlanta trip he went into the hospital to have that knee operated on or repaired in some way.

GRELE: How would you account for the great reception he received in Atlanta and Birmingham?

WICKER: Well, the South felt at that time that the civil rights issue was the main thing. The Democrats, if they had not been more forthcoming in literally providing gains for the Negro, had, I think, more astutely exploited what they had done. The Democratic Platform had taken a very strong line. In addition to which the Negro vote tended to be Democratic in 1960 because of the long record of the New Deal and Fair Deal programs.

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Economic issues had swung many Negroes to the Democratic party. I think the South, by then, was beginning to link the civil rights movement very strongly with the Democratic party. Of course that came to be even more true later on. Kennedy was taking a very strong position on this, of course.

Nixon made a rather strong appeal to the South in a certain way that day in those two speeches. He did this in both Birmingham and Atlanta where he had very good crowds in both cities. The Atlanta crowd in particular was fantastic. But his approach was to dismiss civil rights rather quickly by saying, "Now everybody knows how I stand on civil rights. I'm not going to change my views here in the South. I know what your views are." Then he would pass on very quickly. This was

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not really ducking the issue in that sense. He didn't insist on debating it in front of this southern crowd. Then he would make a very strong pitch saying that the Democrats as a national party really had neglected the South. They never campaigned in the South. They took the South for granted. It was time that the blessings of two-party politics were brought to the South and here was old Richard Nixon ready to do it. This went over very well. It seems to be in Atlanta -- I wrote an article on this and it may be in there -- he produced some statistics about how long it had been since a presidential candidate had campaigned in Georgia. It was quite, quite impressive.

Then too, I think that there has been a trend in the South, a postwar trend. As prosperity has risen there and new industries

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have come in, there has been a Republican trend in the South. I don't think there's any question about it. Rising prosperity is the main thing. And, as so often happens, the more affluent a society becomes the more conservative it becomes. At least in the southern lexicon at that time the Republican party appeared to be the more conservative of the two. This got psychologically linked in some way with the growth of the civil rights movement after the Brown decision in '54 so that, before long, everything liberal began to look like being in

favor of the Negro. Even if it were on some international trade issue somehow it got linked in people's mind.

Finally, I think one of the things that happened was that the South, not having a long Republican tradition, in fact having decisively rejected the Republican

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party for nearly a century, was not particularly surprised, or wounded or hurt or anything else at the Republican stand on civil rights. After all, that was familiar since Reconstruction. But when the Democratic party, the party of their fathers, the party of Carter Glass, the party of so many famous old Southern politicians all of a sudden adopted the platform it had in 1960, and when its candidate was openly campaigning for the Negro vote, when he was pledging very strong civil rights action like the Stroke of a Pen Statement on segregated housing and so forth, I think the South felt an active and deep sense of betrayal on the part of the Democratic party. Here was the party that the South had nurtured and stuck with through thick and thin. At that time Herman Talmadge, for instance,

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used to declaim rhetorically, "What state has never left the Democratic Party?" That was Georgia. It's true. Up to that time Georgia had never left the Democratic party. It didn't that year, as a matter of fact. I didn't until 1964. This sense of betrayal created an opportunity which Nixon attempted to exploit and, I think, did exploit. I can't recall now what states he carried in the South in 1960, but he did very well.

GRELE: I have been told that the fine response he received in Atlanta affected the Nixon strategy.

WICKER: Yes, I have been told that too. There had been a live possibility that he would select Thruston Morton [Thruston B. Morton] of Kentucky as his vice presidential nominee for the purpose of trying to win Southern support. The day that he spent in Birmingham and in Atlanta,

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I think, did influence the Nixon staff, perhaps unduly, to think that they could carry the South and sweep the South perhaps. I think that may have had effect on Nixon's later judgment, for instance, not to intervene as Kennedy did in the Martin Luther King arrest and perhaps his sharp reaction to the Lodge "Negro in the Cabinet" speech -- this sort of thing. But I think it's very difficult to trace those influences. The political staff of a candidate is not a monolithic thing that all swings one way or all the other. I would imagine probably that the impression, if any, was made on Mr. Nixon himself rather than so much on his staff. My impression is that Nixon's strategic decisions by and large were his own and that they probably were made largely on the basis of that kind of impression. Certainly he could hardly be blamed for

thinking after the really overwhelming reception he was given in Atlanta that this was where the votes were.

Those things are tricky. We reporters have learned, and most politicians have, that that's a very tricky thing. People come out to see the celebrities, you know. They come out in September with a lot of enthusiasm for one thing that they don't really do when they go in the voting booth in November. It was only four years later that possibly the biggest reception that I've ever seen any candidate given -- any political candidate given in a political context -- was when Lyndon Johnson went to Atlanta. That was a much bigger crowd only four years later.

GRELE: Theodore White in his book, *The Making of the President: 1960*, compares the Kennedy press operation to the Nixon press operation

and claims that John Kennedy was much more accessible to the press than Richard Nixon.

WICKER: That's right.

GRELE: Was this true?

WICKER: That's very true.

GRELE: Did you have problems getting to Mr. Nixon when you traveled with him?

WICKER: I can't speak from personal experience on that because that one trip that I made with Nixon is not a good example. That wasn't the kid of day when a reporter could have reasonably expected to have a private interview with Mr. Nixon. It was a full day for him and a full day for us. It was a frantic day, I remember, from the point of view of trying to meet your deadlines and that sort of thing. But I know at second-hand from many conversations with my colleagues -- there's nothing reporters talk about more

than political campaigns -- I know that this is true. Or I know, let us say, that the press believes it's true which amounts to the same thing in the long run since it's the press that's involved here.

GRELE: What was your impression of Herb Klein [Herbert Klein]?

WICKER: I liked Herb Klein and I still like Herb Klein. I thought he was an efficient

press secretary. I thought, like so many people in the Nixon campaign, that he was handicapped because of some of the attributes of his candidate. I am sure that Herb as a good press secretary and a good newspaper man, given his own head, would have made Nixon much more available and would have perhaps had him handle his personal relations with the press in a different way. But a press secretary is only as good as the candidate he's working for. It's very difficult for

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a press secretary to make good press relations where the candidate is either not willing to cooperate or does not quite see the problem or is too busy doing something else, or is personally alienated from the press. I think probably all those factors entered in with Nixon's attitude that time. But I did like Herb Klein. I thought he was a good press secretary within the limits that had to be set for him. He was always helpful to me. Since I didn't cover the Nixon campaign so much, I don't know how that worked out. But in the months immediately prior to the campaign when Nixon was increasingly an important political figure in Washington in a number of things, legislative matters for instance, I always found Herb very well informed. I found him very helpful, willing to help. And above all I found that he did not deliberately give me wrong information which is the thing one

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looks for in a press secretary. I do think that he was the most outrageous exaggerator of crowd figures I've ever seen among press secretaries. But I think that's a forgivable sin.

GRELE: Did you cover Senator Johnson when he and Senator Kennedy campaigned together -- say in New York?

WICKER: No, I don't recall seeing them campaign together.

GRELE: Did you see John Kennedy at all during the campaign?

WICKER: No, I don't think so. I don't think I could say that. My memory is not clear whether I heard him make a speech somewhere or went to a news conference here in Washington perhaps. I can't recall, but I didn't see him out in the country in the literal campaign sense, I know.

GRELE: After the Convention during the special session

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of Congress, did you see him then?

WICKER: Yes, quite a bit. As it happened that year no one anticipated that special session of Congress. Most of our reporters including practically all our

congressional reporters had scheduled their vacations for August. With the campaign coming up after that, that was the sensible time to go. So many of them went ahead and took their vacations in August. The net effect was that, as one of the rookies on the staff here at that time with the other rookie of the staff who was Peter Braestrup, who's now in our Paris Bureau, Peter and I covered that rump session of Congress, so called, almost exclusively for the *Times*. Joe Loftus [Joseph A. Loftus] did some of it too. So I was involved and I did see Kennedy quite often. I don't mean personally in that sense; he was difficult to see at that time because he was so busy. But I

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mean I saw him in action, I heard him talk, was in the gallery when he would be in the Senate, covered Pierre Salinger's news conferences -- some of them -- some of Herb Kleins's. I was very well aware of that part of the campaign in that month.

GRELE: What were your impressions of the relations between John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson at that time?

WICKER: Well, I couldn't see any personal friction. I don't know of any personal friction, but I think it must have been a difficult relationship because there was a Kennedy the official party leader as the nominee, and there was Lyndon Johnson the official Senate leader as the majority leader. Obviously it must have been difficult to sort out who was supposed to do what. I'm trying to recall now these five years later. It seems to me there was some issue where Johnson as majority leader

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moved…. We heard it reported later. It was one of those things that you couldn't pin down, but it was believed that Kennedy would have done it another way or wished it had been done another way. But Johnson had acted in his majority leader's capacity. Was that on civil rights? It may have been. It may have been.

The Republicans brought up the civil rights bill to embarrass the Democrats at that point, to provoke a filibuster and so forth. Johnson as majority leader worked out a stratagem and Joe Clark, of all people, moved to table the Republican civil rights bill. The Democrats then voted that through, and that supposed of the issue. But the Republicans then made political capital out of it. "Here they are running this platform, a great liberal civil rights platform, and tabling the civil rights bill instead of going ahead

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and passing it. They've got a majority." I believe that was the issue, as I recall it, when Kennedy was reported to believe that Johnson had been too precipitate or could have handled it better or something , but I don't want to state that as a fact. There was not any public disagreement of any kind or anything visible.

GRELE: I've been told that this time was a particularly depressing time for the Kennedy staffers and for John Kennedy. Was that your impression?

WICKER: Yes, it was. I recall writing an article at the end of this session where I said, in effect, that the Democrats have not done very well, that the Senate is not the place ot win an election campaign, although Kennedy and Johnson -- I recall putting in my article -- had obviously drawn better crowds in a sense than Nixon. This was

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one of the things that I noticed particularly at that time. The Capitol was terribly crowded in those days. The gallerys were always crowded. The place was full of tourists. It was high tourist season in August. This was a real cockpit, you see -- three of the four candidates there on the floor and so forth. There was always somebody getting up and making speeches. It was an active and interesting time in covering Congress as I recall. Kennedy clearly was ahead of Nixon at that time in a crowd appeal. He was a more glamorous and appealing figure. That was about the only advantage I saw in my articles that the Democrats had gained. I recall saying that what they needed to do was to get Kennedy out on the campaign and out of this congressional atmosphere. I used a quote at the end of my article which appeared

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in the *Times* "News of the Week in Review" section where I quoted an unnamed senator as saying, "What we need to do is to get Jack out of here and get this show on the road." That Senator was Mike Monroney [Almer Stillwell "Mike" Monroney] of Oklahoma. I'm sure it doesn't make any difference to say that now. But I think that was the sentiment of most people. That rump session was not a disaster for the Democrats because they won the election, but it certainly didn't do them any good in my opinion.

GRELE: Do you feel that it did cost them votes?

WICKER: Well, did it cost them votes? I don't know. How can you ever tell that? All I know is the Democrats were not able to come back there and put through some fancy legislation that would have gained them votes. They were not able to show themselves as great leaders who could control Congress. For instance, that was the period in which Kennedy's

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minimum wage bill failed. They just didn't do themselves any good at all. I don't suppose Nixon was done any good that I can think of. Coming that early in the campaign I doubt how much effect it had on the campaign at all. My point is negative. The Democrats certainly didn't make any gains that I know of unless it was in the sense of internal strategy and organization; maybe they gained some. But in vote-getting terms none whatever.

GRELE: Were you with any of the major candidates on election eve?

WICKER: Election eve, no. I was in New York City. Our system is we write all our election coverage out of New York. I can't remember who was with whom, but I was assigned to write a separate story in the paper rounding up all the gubernatorial elections of the country. So I was really quite out of it.

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GRELE: You began covering the White House in June of 1961.

WICKER: Yes.

GRELE: Bill Lawrence [William H. Lawrence] had covered that for the *Times*.

WICKER: Bill Lawrence had covered it for the first few months of the Kennedy Administration. Bill left the *Times* to work for ABC at the time of Kennedy's first trip to Europe. It seems to me that was in April. Then for most of May and June we didn't have an officially assigned White House correspondent. I think Joe Loftus did most of it.

GRELE: Did Ned Kenworthy [Edwin Wentworth Kenworthy] do any of it?

WICKER: Ned Kenworthy may have done it. I think we were just moving around over there. Finally, Mr. Reston [James Reston], who was our bureau chief, apparently was just making up his mind what he wanted to do about it. He finally settled on me. Perhaps I was involved in

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something else that had to be completed. I don't remember the circumstances, but it was perhaps six weeks after Lawrence left the *Times* before I literally became the White House correspondent.

GRELE: You say you met John Kennedy shortly afterwards.

WICKER: I wouldn't say shortly afterwards. It would have been more in the fall as I recall. I was attempting to find my way around to learn what I was doing as White House correspondent. It was the biggest assignment I had had. I had only been in Washington for the *Times* about a year. I felt it was quite a jump up for me, and I was a little intimidated by it. I did not make any immediate effort to become an intimate of President Kennedy or to see him in private circumstances. I just tried to do what came to hand as best I could. So it was about --

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it must have been later on in the year. I went to see him specifically for a magazine article that I was writing, I recall. I thought that it was a weighty enough topic that I was entitled to ask to interview the President.

GRELE: Do you recall what the article was about?

WICKER: Yes. I had attempted…. I don't recall the original assignment, but it was something about the Democratic party. I had a little thesis at the time that I had developed in my own mind, and I wanted to put it to Kennedy that I thought that he was attempting to restore something that I called "party government." I thought that he was making a strong effort literally to use the Democratic party as an instrument by which to make his Administration function. Therefore, I went to see him on this basis but he disabused me of that notion in

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short order. Our interview then took the course -- we would talk back and forth. He discussed what he actually thought he as president could do with the party, and what the limitations on him were in some detail.

GRELE: Can you recount for us the details of that first interview?

WICKER: Well, I can in a way. I can't really remember the substance of it very much. I wrote an article which appeared in our magazine -- and I'm trying to remember which article it was -- largely as a result of this interview plus other interviews that I had. I think it would end up as an article about Kennedy as a politician rather than a…

GRELE: The one that appeared in April of 1962, "The Total Political Animal."

WICKER: Yes, yes, that's it. A lot of that was

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based on what he told me. You will find in that article in the *New York Times Magazine*, for instance, two or three things that he said were all a president really could do for his party and with his party. One of them, for instance, was to help raise money for candidates. And one was to help choose good candidates to run. The other was to try to create the kind of record that the party could exploit. But he seemed to definitely have the feeling that the party couldn't do a hell of a lot for him.

GRELE: They couldn't?

WICKER: Not in the sense of helping him be President. Now when it comes time to get elected, that's another matter. But Kennedy expressed to me the very strong feeling that you couldn't use the party as a governing tool very much. I remember him talking

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about Judge Smith [Howard W. Smith] of Virginia who was very much in the news and is Chairman of the Rules Committee. He said something like the following: he said, "Hell, Judge Smith gets a majority in his district two or three times as big as I get in his district. How am I going to influence him?" The point being that Kennedy really had no political weapon over Judge Smith of Virginia, no way to say "I"m going to go in there and defeat you." If you don't ultimately have the power as a party leader to say "I'm going to get you defeated and out of the office" you don't ultimately have any power. Maybe Judge Smith could survive any lack of the President's willingness to build post offices in his district or something of that sort. But if that President can say, "I'm going to go in there and campaign

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against you," or "I'm going to put another man in there against you, and I'm going to lick you," then he'll listen. But, you know, this is true in so many cases, and it was particularly true in Kennedy's case because he ran behind the ticket almost everywhere.

GRELE: Did he at that time discuss with you party politicians and what role he felt they should play?

WICKER: I really don't recall. I really don't recall what was said there. I remember I had not conversed with the President in his office before, and I was a little bit intimidated by the whole thing. Also I was quite respectful. One of the purposes, you know, of a newspaperman's interview, particularly with so lofty a figure as the President whom one doesn't often have the opportunity to meet, is to size the fellow up.

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In all frankness, I went to see President Kennedy about this article because I thought his opinions would be great to have and all that, but I could have written the article without going to see him. It might have been quite a different article because, as I say, in this particular case, he did very sharply disagree with the notion that I went to him with. I stated my thesis early on. He said right away, "No, I don't think your article is there. It's not like that."

But still, the main thing is you just watch this fellow. You like to judge his reactions. You like to judge whether he's being frank with you. You like to know whether he's looking at you. In a sort of egoistic sense you like to judge whether he thinks you're a pretty good fellow, too -- intelligent, worth talking to.

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In general, the greatest thing about an interview is the chance to be in a room with the man alone and to know something about him. After that you feel so much more confident writing something about him that's in the abstract. You've seen this man; you've talked to him; you've got the feel of him; you've got a sense of him. So when Ted Sorensen tells you something, you've got some kind of background to measure what Ted Sorensen says for a change instead of just accepting it. That was the great value of it.

GRELE: How did you size up President Kennedy?

WICKER: Well, I liked him immensely. I don't know anybody who ever went in to see him that way who didn't. How frank can these things be?

GRELE: As frank as you want.

WICKER: I was terribly amused when I first walked in.

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The preliminary to this -- before this interview I had written another article about President Kennedy as a speaker.

GRELE: As a "speakah."

WICKER: That's right, using his patois. But I had done this just on the basis of listening to him, you know. It was easy enough to do. I stated the thesis that he was a pretty good speaker extemporaneously, but that he read speeches very badly. I was shown into his office. It was late in the day, as I recall it. The first thing he said to me after we shook hands, he said, "You know, you're right. I can't read a speech worth a shit." This was practically the first words he had said to me. I later recounted this story to my wife. She was shocked to her teeth. She said, "You mean the President of the United States said that?" [Laughter]

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But we went on and talked a great deal, mostly a straight interview on the subject that I had raised.

Then, towards the end of it, he switched rather abruptly. He apparently -- and I have heard this from other people -- was quite interested in newspapers. He asked me how I enjoyed covering the White House. I talked about that a little bit, how I was getting along with Pierre Salinger and we talked about that. Then he asked me, "What are the prospects for a merger in the New York newspaper field?" I didn't have the faintest notion what the prospects for a merger in New York newspaper fields were. But he seemed quite interested in

this. I suppose there was some reason for him to be, but still it wasn't the thing you would expect a President to concern himself with too much. So I

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launched into a great potpourri of rumors and stuff that I had heard. I had no idea whether it was accurate or not. But he listened with great interest. He seemed to be quite interested in what was going to happen in the New York newspaper field. I touched on the labor matter, and he talked on that some. To me he obviously displayed an interest in this subject. Whether or not it was the interest of a man who felt that he, after all, was the foremost object of most newspapermen or whether it was a genuine interest, I don't know. But it certainly was an interest.

GRELE: Prior to your first appointment with John Kennedy, how did the White House press staff treat you as a neophyte?

WICKER: Oh, I had no difficulties. You really can't be a neophyte when you represent the *New York Times*. I don't say that proudly, but the

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Times is what it is and it opens a great many doors. If I had gone in there as a neophyte, as you put it, for some smaller paper from some provincial city, why, that would have been one thing I suppose. But I never really had any problem of access or anything of the sort.

The problem I had where being a neophyte was difficult was that, not having covered the Kennedy campaign very much and not having been in the first two or three months of the Kennedy Administration, I didn't have any particular rapport with these people personally. I didn't know too much about them. I didn't know how to size up Ted Sorensen, for instance. I didn't know this and I didn't know that. I knew Pierre a little bit from just having…. You know, almost any newspaperman in Washington had come into contact with

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him by then whether or not you covered the White House. I knew Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] a little bit because Larry, as I recall, during the campaign had not been…. He didn't travel always with Kennedy. He did some, but he was in Washington quite a bit. I would go to see him when I would be in Washington, you know. He had a man on his White House staff named Henry Wilson who's from North Carolina and whom I knew. So I had a few acquaintances that way but I didn't really know the staff and have any sense of rapport. I had to go through that whole thing that reporters always do first of learning who the people are that are going to be useful to you and that you particularly rely upon in developing some useful rapport with them. That sort of thing takes quite a bit of time. It particularly does in the

White House where you can't just drop in a fellow's office and hobnob with him. You've got to make an appointment and go through the secret service and all this sort of thing. They're terribly busy, and one doesn't want to just drop in and chat in the middle of a busy day. One doesn't want to go to Ted Sorensen or McGeorge Bundy with some minor little matter of some kind. I have always felt that if I'm going to absorb a half an hour of McGeorge Bundy's time, or certainly the President himself or whoever, I ought to be doing it for some reasonably important purpose and not just to write a feature story about his swimming pool or something.

GRELE: Who on the staff was particularly helpful and useful?

WICKER: In the Kennedy days? Well, I always found Pierre helpful. A press secretary has his

limitations when it comes to really getting into the center of the matter, but Pierre was always helpful to me. Ted Sorensen. generally speaking, was helpful although Ted was closemouthed, and properly so. I would say that generally he was very helpful. Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton] who was there then was helpful. Fred Holburn [Frederick L. Holburn] who was there, Larry O'Brien in particular, Henry Wilson, Ken O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]. Ken was an engaging sort of fellow to talk to because I found that he was one of those fellows whose testimony I could rely upon in a peculiar sort of way. He never hesitated to mislead me totally if he wanted to, and he never hesitated to dissemble or to simply give me a clove of generalities or something. But Ken somehow had a manner -- and I'm not sure exactly how he did it -- of letting you know when he was doing that. SO that I never had any doubt in talking

to O'Donnell whether he was really giving me the straight inside stuff or whether, for some reason, he felt he couldn't and was just giving me a lot of jazz. That's useful. I don't exactly know how he did this. It was a matter of manner and appearance, wording and so forth. I found most of the Kennedy staff was always helpful. They were not too difficult to see except just out of the sheer pressure of time. It got more and more difficult as time went along for several reasons: one, they got busier; two, they got less fascinated with the idea of being in power and in the White House.

The first year, why, you know there was a great sense of newness and excitement about it on both sides. I think there was an atmosphere of a game about it in a sense. After that it got to be pretty

deadly and pretty serious in many ways. It was not so much fun to boast to a newspaperman or to talk to a newspaperman about something. It became a more serious business. In those earliest days there -- the first year, year and one half in the Kennedy Administration -- people by and large were quite accessible, quite willing to talk, quite rank on many occasions. It got less so as time went on. I think it's a natural process.

[END SIDE I, TAPE I]

GRELE: You say there was one time they deliberately planted a story?

WICKER: Yes, not merely one time. I remember this one particular occasion it had been disclosed by somebody in tones of horror that the United States was paying for the training of Yugoslav pilots at some air base in Texas. This was one of those things all

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the professional anti-communists seize upon. Sara McClendon was up in arms -- all that sort of thing. During this weekend at Hyannis Port, Carroll Kilpatrick of the *Washington Post* and I, as I recall it, were going to dinner with General Clifton, Chester Clifton, known as Ted, who was the military aid. Ted was a very good friend of ours and a very, very good source of information -- a very knowledgeable fellow. Before we went to dinner -- or maybe we weren't going to dinner, it seems to me we just went to his room for a drink or something -- he gave us, and we were led to understand that this was a story we should write coming from the President -- although I don't remember what the words were -- a justification for why we should be training these pilots. I've forgotten the justification now although I did write

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this, but there were about 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 points why it was a good thing for the United States, and not some evil deed to be training Yugoslav pilots. At the end General Clifton said, and I've never been sure whether it was on purpose or whether he didn't realize what he was saying or what, but anyway he said, "And that was the very reason that President Eisenhower authorized the program of training these pilots." Kilpatrick and I perked up our ears, you know, and listened to this. He went away or we went away. We promptly went out and wrote a story that said that the Yugoslav pilot training program had been authorized by the Eisenhower Administration and only carried on by the Kennedys. Well, this was front page in the *Washington Post* and the *Times* both. The leak had purportedly been to justify

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the training of the pilots on the basis of whatever the good reasons were at the time. But the way we played it, of course, because it seemed to us that it was more interesting, was that this had been done by Eisenhower and not by Kennedy originally. Clifton and I have

chuckled over it several times after it ceased to be an issue. But to this day I don't know whether that was done deliberately so we would write it that way and invoke Eisenhower's protection, or whether we just picked up something that was let to slip. Anyway, about two days later I was standing in Pierre Salinger's office talking to him about something privately. Ted Clifton stuck his head in the door, looked at me, and said to Pierre, "You mean you talk to that fellow?" Pierre said, "Well, I'll be damned if I'm ever going to let you talk

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to him again." So it was one of those things. I don't think anybody really regretted that.

I once talked to General Clifton on another matter. It had to do with Cuba. I've forgotten that. I wrote a story and he was upset about it later, no personally upset at me because I hadn't perverted anything that he had said, but I picked up something that he said later that he hadn't intended for me to write. I've forgotten how it came about, but in any case it indicated that we were monitoring Cuban military radio transmissions at that time which he regretted found its way into the paper.

GRELE: Did you find as a reporter for the *New York Times* that you were given certain prerogatives or special access that other newsmen did not get?

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WICKER: No, I don't think so. It's hard to tell because a lot of times there were obviously stories that they wanted in the *Times* more than anywhere else. I don't recall being the recipient of any great flow of leaks during the Kennedy Administration more so than anyone else. As a newspaperman, throughout my career, I have never sought to be a hotshot writer of exclusive stories that no one else ever has or is going to have. The hot tip or the inside dope stories have never been anything that I have been particularly interested in. I've always concentrated on trying to do something that the *Times* gives one the opportunity to do. I would much rather write the best, and most complete, and most understanding story of a number of stories about an event than to have the only story about something and have it half wrong or misleading or something.

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I set very little store by the exclusive myself. I was never in pursuit of this sort of thing.

I don't think the *Times* got any special privileges. I would say that television people were privileged to some extent because President Kennedy and now President Johnson both are well aware of the impact of television. I do think that the television people get something of special privileges, not in a sense of what they're told, but in a physical way in which they work. They sort of get first call on things in a sense. That may be unfair to them, and I don't blame them. They're all nice fellows. I think that politicians simply emphasize television now. Pierre would never concede it to me, but I used to think that a lot of things that he was going to release early the next day to the newspapers he would

let some of the television people have for the midnight news broadcast and the early morning news broadcast and so forth. I don't know whether he did that or not, but it always seemed to me a possibility that he did. It wasn't so much that I, as the White House correspondent, ever got any privileges out of it, but the *Times* as an institution did because of what we were. For instance, after some major event or during it, our Bureau Chief, Mr. Reston, or various other members of the staff probably were able to get more and better explanations of things than some newspapers did because we would print it and because they trusted us to handle the material well. That's not quite the same thing as getting news leaks in advance of other people. I wouldn't say the *Times* has ever been favored in that way. If so, I just really

can't quite recollect it.

GRELE: Did the President or any of his staff discuss with you; the *Times*, the policies of the *Times*, or the attitudes of the *Times*?

WICKER: Yes.

GRELE: In what contexts? We probably can't get to all of them but do you remember some of the main ones?

WICKER: Well, I remember the main one. It was after President Kennedy's second State of the Union Address which, I guess, was in '62. The *Times* wrote a rather critical editorial. The tone of the criticism was not that the President was wrong in his proposals, but that he hadn't gone far enough. They were saying, "You should move farther; you should do this; you should do that." It was quite a critical editorial. But the point was that they actually in a sense were like a blocking back for the

ball carrier. They were saying, "Let's go farther, let's move faster." They were not saying, "You're going the wrong direction." So I didn't think it was anything that Kennedy should have been upset by myself. Politicians are always upset by the least critical word. I went in on some routine mission to talk to Ted Sorensen that morning -- afternoon, perhaps it was. I can't remember at all why I went in to see him, but I used to go see Ted frequently. He was reading the *Times* editorial when I came into the office. As I recall the incident -- Ted, by the way, disputes this version of it just as to the wording, but I recall it rather plainly; he and I have not fallen out over this so there's no point in not putting it in here -- he said to me, "If this is the attitude the *New York Times* is

going to take, then our relationships with you (meaning me, personally) can get very sour." I took this to be a threat at the time that if the *Times* was going to be critical editorially, then the staff and so forth were not going to be very generous in giving news to me. I took that rather seriously because at that time I knew that some of the reporters had been penalized in this way.

GRELE: Who?

WICKER: Hugh Sidey of *Time Magazine*, I think, had been shut out after some critical articles had appeared although he was personally much closer to the President than I was. There had been some reporters who felt that they had been penalized for writing unfriendly stories. Other than the Sidey incident, however, I really don't know too much about it. Anyway, because of that atmosphere

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I took it seriously. I argued with Ted to begin with that I didn't write the editorials, as he well knew. In the second place there was no reason for them to be all that upset about this editorial; that, in fact, looking down the road, it was a good thing to have the leading newspaper in the country, in general, side with the President and try to get him to even farther than he was willing to go. But he was upset by it. I came back to the office and reported this to Mr. Reston. I don't know, I never discussed it with him. But I understand he called up Sorensen and discussed this with him. The net effect was the relationships never got sour, and as far as I know the *Times* never changed its editorial policy. In other words, it was just a conversation, and there was no literal effect from it. Even if Ted Sorensen

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is right, that I misunderstood him -- and I don't think I did -- but even so, the real point is that nothing happened so it was merely an anecdote.

GRELE: Did President Kennedy ever discuss any of the policies of the *New York Times* with you?

WICKER: Well, now I"m having to separate in my mind what President Johnson may have said at one time or other and what President Kennedy said. I wouldn't think so. I don't believe I ever had any communications from Kennedy on *Times* policy as such. During the time that I was White House correspondent, James Reston was Bureau Chief. Of course, James Reston is the most famous, most eminent, in fact the best journalist in the country, perhaps in history. There was much more direct and personal communication between Kennedy and Reston at that time

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than between Kennedy and me, which is understandable. I imagine Mr. Reston's been interviewed in this series, but he would know more about that kind of thing than I would because if Kennedy had had a complaint about *Times* editorials and policy, and I think he did, he would have gone to Reston I'm sure and not to me. And he would have done it personally.

GRELE: Did anyone on the Kennedy staff, or did President Kennedy, ever comment to you about your colleagues such as Mr. Reston or Arthur Krock?

WICKER: Well, not in any general sense. Yes, I've had stories that appeared in the *Times* criticized to me. Mr. Krock, of course, at the White House was regarded as a critic and that kind of thing. I don't ever recall feeling that any of my colleagues were being so criticized that I had to

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really stand up and fight back -- except once. That was in the case of David Halberstam, who was our correspondent in Saigon at the time. Halberstam was a frequent object of criticism. This was back in the Diem government days. He was writing a lot of political stories that were detrimental to the Kennedy policy, so they thought. I've always thought David did splendid work there. As you know he won a Pulitzer Prize. I think most of his political predictions certainly were borne out and his political judgments and analyses. But the Kennedy people were upset by this. As David has written in his book, *The Making of a Quagmire*, President Kennedy went so far as to raise the subject with our publishers, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, which I think is far beyond the limits, in my own view, of what any President is

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entitled to do about his press critics. That incident is in Halberstam's book.

In my case, again at Hyannis Port one night, when a group of us were sitting around in the dining room at the Yachtsman Hotel where the press party stayed in Hyannis Port, Ken O'Donnell was there. I can't remember who else; there were perhaps three or four of us. The discussion was generally about the situation in Vietnam. It was an unexceptional discussion about Vietnam. Somehow the question of Halberstam came up. O'Donnell was quite critical of everything he had been writing, which didn't disturb me because I knew the way they were. But finally, O'Donnell said to me -- as he put it, and I'm quoting him -- "You know we've got CIA reports on this fellow that show that, with all that stuff he's writing about the war, he's

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never been to the battlefront. He never goes out of Saigon." That was too much, I thought. I said, "Well, there's two things I want to say about that. One is, I think it's outrageous that you've got CIA reports on an American correspondent. I think, furthermore, that if you have those CIA reports, you ought to go over and really find out what the hell the CIA thinks

make up an accurate intelligence report because that isn't true. And I know it isn't true." Then we argued back and forth. "Well, we've got the reports," he said, "It is true." "It isn't true," I said. It was not an unfriendly argument, but I felt that that was out of bounds in several ways. I felt that it was personally demeaning our own correspondent, who happens to be a close, personal friend of mine. So I was influenced that way as well as through a professional feeling. But it was, in effect,

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saying that Halberstam had been filing fiction and making up stories that he had no personal knowledge of, which I knew was simply not true. I knew it, in the first place, because I know David. I just knew that it wasn't true. Ken and I didn't fall out about this. I just didn't like it and responded quite sharply. We wound up that he still maintained his position; I still maintained mine.

About a month later, an article about Halberstam appeared in *Esquire Magazine*. It showed David in a combat correspondent's garb, you know, the big Australian hat, wading through a muddy river somewhere in Vietnam with what were obviously South Vietnamese troops. About the same time, he wrote a piece from Saigon about the problems of covering out there in which he told about what he was doing. There were about three or four different

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passages where he cited, "When I was in such and such a place, Corporal Joe Smith of Oklahoma City told me thus and so." And then maybe an anecdote about some lieutenant -- "We crept forward under mortar fire" -- this kind of thing. So I cut the picture out of *Esquire Magazine* and circled these particular passages in a *Times Talk* article -- that's our employee publication -- and sent them to Ken with a little covering note. I said, "I wish you'd refer this to the CIA." I never heard anything further from him.

GRELE: Why I asked the question earlier about Mr. Krock and Mr. Reston -- I have been told that John Kennedy was particularly upset with Arthur Krock because he had been such a close personal friend and then he was so critical.

WICKER: Well, I think that's right. I think you'll find…. I happened to have been privileged

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to read Mr. Krock's manuscript in this series of interviews. I think Mr. Krock felt very much the same way. Their families had been so close. Mr. Krock took what, to those who know him, is a typical attitude, and I think a perfectly civilized and responsible attitude, that it ought to be possible for two men whose families had been so close to disagree politically, and even disagree violently politically, without having any personal disagreement. We know that this is possible because it's happened too many times in human history for it not to be possible. Yet a politician, particularly the Kennedy whom I do not pretend to know

very well in a personal sense, but this is a very competitive family, and my impression is they set great store by personal loyalties. They feel, perhaps more than is wise, that you're either for them or against them. I'm giving you

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impressions now, not knowledge, but that's my impression. I think because of those things they were unable to accept so severe a political critic as Mr. Krock in so influential a place as the *New York Times* editorial page. They were unable to accept him as a friend despite the long history of friendship between Mr. Krock and Joseph P. Kennedy [Sr.] and the boys themselves. I'm theorizing because I don't know but I think that's right.

There's a very good anecdote about this. I have never been sure how personally bitter President Kennedy was at Mr. Krock. I don't think he was all that bitter. I've since in later years once or twice been thrown in the company of Mr. Krock and Robert Kennedy at the same time, and I know there's been no evidence of strain there. Mr. Krock was just, so far as I saw, really stricken,

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more so than most of us, shattered by the assassination. There's an amusing anecdote that I think throws some light on this. Have you ever seen the famous picture of President Kennedy that has been widely published? It was a picture taken from the rear. It shows him leaning forward over a table on his hands. He's reading something, and he looks as if he has the very weight of the world on his shoulders. This picture was widely published as a sort of poignant dramatization of how burdened down a president is, what cares are on his shoulders and so forth. That picture was taken by our photographer, George Tames. He is a wonderful photographer. He had gotten an assignment and then gotten permission from the White House, and he was going to spend some time in the President's office just taking pictures of him as he went to work -- quite a common thing. He was shown into

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the office. As he walked into the President's office, the President was in this posture as shown in the picture. George, being an excellent photographer, recognized it as a good shot; light coming in over his head… It was perfect, you know. So he quickly raised his camera and took the picture. Just as he clicked the shutter and got the picture, President Kennedy straightened up, turned around and sort of roared, "That goddamned Arthur Krock." It turned out that what he was leaning over reading on that table was one of Arthur Krock's columns. But as George tells the story at least, it wasn't the act of an outraged man who would like to kill Arthur Krock. You know, it was just exasperation that here again Mr. Krock had come through and belabored him about something. But it was perfectly plain. Anyone who knows Mr. Krock as well as I do

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and who covered Mr. Kennedy as closely as I did would know there was a world between them in their political viewpoints. But after all, there must be thirty years between them in age, or forty years between them in age, or forty years between them in age. These are two men brought up in entirely different times and in entirely different sections of the country with different milieus, different outlooks, shaped by different influences. In the family sense they came to be close friends. But then when it became Mr. Kennedy's duty to be President and to express his political convictions through the presidency, it remained Arthur Krock's duty to be a commentator for the *New York Times* and to express his opinions that way. Never the twain shall meet.

I myself have always felt that if there was real personal bitterness because of this, I feel that that is rather small on the part

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of the Kennedys. I can understand the irritation, and I can understand, perhaps, if Mr. Krock was not quite the boon companion that he was in earlier years because of this. But if they really felt that a friend;s firmly expressed political and economic and ideological convictions had to mean the end of a personal friendship, then I think that is a very small view to take.

GRELE: I've also been told that…

WICKER: I don't really think that's the case, not insofar as anything that I've ever seen. But if it is the case, then I think it's a small position.

GRELE: I've also been told that the newsman described by Ted Sorensen in his book is Mr. Reston.

WICKER: In what context?

GRELE: That there was a certain Washington newsman who they didn't pay any attention to because

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he was going to change his opinion every day.

WICKER: You'd have to ask Ted about that. I don't remember that passage. I don't know I would say this about Scotty. Scotty has always been a columnist unlike for instance, Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop]. I don't say this in criticism of him, but Joe Alsop tends to take very strong positions and reiterates them and hangs on to them. Joe is almost a crusader for views of one kind or another. I think Scotty is much less that, than someone who tries to convey a mood, who tries to convey an atmosphere, who tries to work to the meaning of something, whose own personal views come out in the column in a much less marked and crusading manner than most columnists. Scotty also is one who calls his

shots pretty much as he sees them. He would not be at all above, or see anything wrong with, criticizing President Kennedy in his

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Wednesday column for, let us say, some step in foreign affairs that Scotty would think was wrong or was not wise and in his Friday column praising him for being a generally effective President and then in his Sunday column maybe hitting him again for something else. Scotty never felt that one was either all for somebody or all against him. If that allegation is true then perhaps that is the explanation of it because otherwise…

GRELE: Well, I don't know whether it's true. It's just what's been told to me.

WICKER: If, on the other hand, they just meant that he was a man without opinion and who was standing on shifting sand, then it was a very shortsighted judgment. But then I've found that politicians' views of newspapermen tend to be about as shallow and about as ill-informed as they accuse newspapermen's views of them being.

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Never the twain shall meet, and that's the way it should be.

GRELE: There was at one time among the staff, or at least I have heard, criticism of Lester Markel. Was this ever transmitted to you?

WICKER: No, I never heard anybody talk about Mr. Markel. Mr. Markel, of course, always has been a controversial figure in the newspaper world. I think he saw President Kennedy several times during his presidency. Mr. Markel, being the sort of man he is, probably went to the President with an attempt to persuade him to do something. So that may have…. But I never heard any of that. I just don't know.

GRELE: Did John Kennedy ever discuss with you any of your particular articles that you wrote about him or his Administration?

WICKER: Yes. Well not really discussed, but I mean I got the word. He had a backgrounder for the White House press at Palm Beach, Christmas

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of 1961 and '62. My recollection is it was after the '61 thing. Pierre sent me a telegram in which he said that President Kennedy thought my article outlining what we had been told in the backgrounder was the best of those that had been written and was an excellent job generally. About a month later -- maybe not that long -- quite soon thereafter, we flew out to Columbus, Ohio. He did, and the press party went along. He was to make a speech there -- some kind of political speech for Mike DiSalle [Michael V. DiSalle]. It was

pouring down rain at the airport. The press plane got in first. We were just waiting for him to come in. When he came in, he was in the rain -- a very heavy rain. He went over to the fence where there was quite a crowd and shook hands and so forth. I got out of the press bus and was following along behind with several other reporters. He

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turned away from the fence to go to his car and saw me. He came over to me -- this was two or three weeks after the backgrounder -- and in the pouring rain we shook hands and said (I can't remember quite what) "That was a very good article you wrote the other day." I knew he was referring to the background article.

I once wrote a piece on Massachusetts politics in 1962 which I thought was pretty learned after two or three days exposure in Massachusetts. He sent word via Pierre that if I'd drop in on him sometime, he would tell me what Massachusetts politics was really all about. So I gathered that he didn't think too much of that article.

GRELE: Did you ever drop in on him?

WICKER: Not for that purpose, no. I remember I sent word back to Pierre. Pierre called me, and I said, "You tell him to set the date

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and I'll be there." Let's see, after the 1962 backgrounder, Pierre told me personally in Florida the same message. Again our article was the best. I don't really take that too personally because that kind of thing the *New York Times* is made to do, that kind of article. We gave it plenty of space. We didn't try to jazz it up. The *New York Times* is just the kind of newspaper, and I hope I'm just the kind of reporter, that we would do the kind of article Kennedy would want done on that. We wouldn't go looking for obscure things to jazz up and play up. One of those backgrounders -- I've forgotten -- AP or somebody wrote something with a crazy lead on it and it caused an absolute uproar in Great Britain, for instance. I don't know what it was now -- something of that sort.

GRELE: Were you White House correspondent for the *Times* at the time of the debate over whether

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or not Mr. Bowles [Chester Bowles] would leave the Administration?

WICKER: Yes. That had two focuses -- foci, loci, or centers or something. Quite early in the time that I was White House correspondent -- I would say in the summer of '61 -- we were in Hyannis Port on a Sunday at the end of a weekend, and Reston broke a story. He wrote a story with the Washington dateline which appeared in our Monday morning edition, which came out at 9 o'clock on Sunday night, saying that Chester

Bowles was about to be relieved of office. There was a great flap. All the other newspapermen were getting call backs on it up there and trying to match it and so forth. To the best of my knowledge and Reston never said, that story was true until we broke it. You would have to ask Reston how he came by it. It's always generally been supposed that Chester Bowles

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leaked the story to protect himself. I don't know. In any case, as a result of our story and the wide spread publicity given the thing, the deal was called off. Chester Bowles was kept in office there for a while. Then some weeks, or perhaps even months, later there was a gigantic fruit basket turnover in the Administration. I can't remember all the details now, but the end result of it was to ship Chester Bowles off as a special ambassador of some kind.

GRELE: Did anyone…

WICKER: I don't believe I wrote any of those stories because that was the kind of high level thing that at that time Reston was very much involved in. He had far better sources than I, but I recall it very well.

GRELE: Did the President or any of the staff talk to you about the reports?

WICKER: Never specifically, no. I talked to a great

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many people over the years about that Chester Bowles thing. But I don't recall at the time that I was involved in it at all. We have a peculiar system on the *Times*. I have changed it somewhat since becoming Bureau Chief myself. At that time the White House correspondent…. That kind of thing wouldn't have been, unless he happened to stumble on it, his business. Under Scotty's system when he was Bureau Chief, State Department correspondents pretty much followed foreign affairs right into the White House. The Treasury correspondent would follow economic affairs right into the White House. The White House correspondent, as such, kept up with the President's personal movements, did a lot of domestic politics, covered the daily briefings and that kind of thing. But I was often chagrined in those years because stories that I wanted to write

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went to, in effect, a specialist on the staff, a specialist in the subject of the story. So a lot of those things I just didn't write. I knew about them, was involved in them, perhaps even did some telephoning or leg work for the reporter, but I wasn't responsible for the story.

GRELE: You were the reporter who first raised the question of Mr. Fred Korth and the TFX in a press conference.

WICKER: At a press conference, did I first do that at a press conference?

GRELE: You write the story before the press conference. The story came out in the *Times*, and then the press conference was two days later.

WICKER: I don't recall the timing. I know that I wrote the story which first disclosed that Mr. Korth had resigned because of some indiscreet correspondence he had had. It seems to me after that, I asked a question

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at a news conference…. What did I ask? That would have been in '63, wouldn't it? Korth resigned; the resignation was rather abrupt, and the letters were abrupt as between the two. They weren't cordial letters or anything. There was speculation that Korth had resigned due to McNamara's [Robert S. McNamara] decision not to build a nuclear carrier for one thing; other speculation of a kind that I can't recall nwo. Arthur Krock picked up somewhere in his voluminous sources -- I don't know where but not in any such way it could be written -- he picked up a hint that something was afoot about Korth, something had gone wrong. I began to check on it. I got enough to know that it involved correspondence on Navy stationary.

GRELE: From whom?

WICKER: From Korth. Letters that he had written on Navy stationary.

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GRELE: Do you know whom you got this from?

WICKER: I don't remember. I honestly don't; I'm not withholding, but you know that's three years back, and who I was talking to then or where I was, I just don't know. But I got that much. I put several calls through to Pierre during the day. Pierre's responses to me, while they had not given me any information, had clearly indicated, and in fact, he almost went so far as to say that there was something wrong but not what. Finally, I went back to Pierre late in the day, and I said, "Look Pierre, I'm going to lay my cards on the table here. You'll see what I'm getting ready to write. Maybe you'll think it better to straighten me out if I'm wrong." I said that. I said, "We understand that Mr. Korth has been asked to resign because he has written certain letters on Navy stationary. This was very

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much like the case of Talbott [Air Force Secretary Harold E. Talbott] in the Eisenhower Administration who had resigned in a conflict of interests case writing letters soliciting

business for a private firm that he had been connected with and would be connected with again.

Anybody who looks up my story on the Korth resignation will find that that set forth that case. Pierre said instantly, "Well, the analogy to the Talbott case is wrong." But, he said, "you are right about the rest of it." I said, "Well, what do you mean? Talbott was soliciting business on the Air Force stationary or whatever it was." "Well, in this case," he said, "there was a distinction." I said, "Well, can I not say that Korth was requested to resign because of improper correspondence or something of the sort?" Pierre said, "No. Improper is too strong." I said, "Well, how about

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indiscreet?" He said, "That's just right." So I wrote the story which one can find in the files of the *New York Times*.

That was on a Friday, and that was an exclusive story. The very next day -- this was not long before Kennedy's death, as those dates show -- we went up to the University of Maine. Kennedy made a speech. Pierre came over to me during the ceremonies. I was sitting in the press section. He leaned over and whispered to me, "That story this morning was handled just right. I didn't see anything wrong with it." Well, I was on this trip with Kennedy, and we stayed in Boston that night. I think on that Saturday with all the sources here in Washington and from the beginning point of what we had written in the *Times*, a lot of newspapers, including the *Times* itself but other

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reporters, came along and elaborated the case. I think at some point that even the text of some of these letters was disclosed.

My recollection is Mr. Korth had just simply written letters that would have been very politically embarrassing if disclosed by some opponent. They just weren't wise in that context, rather naive for reflecting his lack of political experience and so forth. I don't think anyone has ever alleged that there was really anything culpable or legally actionable here at all. That is reflected in what President Kennedy said in his news conference.

GRELE: We have talked of two or three articles that were especially pleasing to John Kennedy. Do you recall any which particularly annoyed him?

WICKER: By me? Well, I don't know what annoyed

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him personally or directly or what, but some of the stories I had objections registered to. Warren Weaver [Warren Weaver, Jr.] is one of our reporters and he is stationed here and works for our city staff in New York. But in Washington he covered New York City affairs as they were reflected in Washington. I guess in 1962 the question was who would run for the Senate in New York on the Democratic ticket? Morgenthau [Robert

Morgenthau]. No, Morgenthau ran for governor, didn't he? Who ran for the Senate? Donovan [James Donovan] eventually ran for the ticket on the most absurd Democratic ticket in New York history, just about. But there was a question whether Mayor Wagner [Robert F. Wagner] would run or not. I had, by talking to various White House assistants, in some cases in just an informal sort of way, found rather strong sentiment had been expressed by one or two of them for a man, a member

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of Congress…. My memory for names is failing me badly today.

GRELE: Stratton? [Samuel S. Stratton]

WICKER: Sam Stratton. I told this to Warren Weaver who was really responsible for covering that story. In the meantime, he had picked up some information here and there, too. So he wrote a story in which he said that there was increasing sentiment for Sam Stratton as gubernatorial candidate, I guess it was at that time, and that some of the sentiment was strong in the White House. With typical copy editor's precision, a big headline came out in the *Times*, "White House Favors Stratton for New York Governorship." I'm sure Mayor Wagner was on the phone in about two minutes. But anyway, Pierre ate me out royally for that story because he said, "Warren Weaver has never set foot in the White House that I know of. This must have

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come from you." I said, "It did come from me, and what's more it's true. That headline is not true, I grant you. But if you'll read that story very carefully, you'll find the story doesn't say that. What's in the story is true." He said, "You mean to tell me there are White House assistants around here who favor Sam Stratton?" I said, "I don't know whether there are White House assistants around here who specifically want Sam Stratton to run for the governorship, but there are White House assistants around here who say, as the story says, that Sam Stratton looks like a pretty good candidate." But Pierre was very angry about that. Somebody obviously had chewed him good. I guess it must have been the President.

GRELE: Were many of your conversations with Pierre like this -- an explanation of terms?

WICKER: Oh, yes. Pierre was a very ebullient fellow.

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He would josh with you a lot. He would also blow and speak pretty strongly. You know you could have shouting matches with Pierre without a bit of heat in them really and some with heat in them. I don't ever really remember being heavily criticized for a story except stories that we were all criticized for. For instance, the famous

Mount Vernon dinner for President Ayub Khan. Everybody wrote stories about that suggesting or indicating that a lot of money had been spent on it. The White House got upset about all those stories. And it got upset by many things, but I can't ever remember…. I was never hauled on the carpet in that sense, certainly not by the President himself.

GRELE: What was your opinion of year end briefings in Palm Beach?

WICKER: Well, they were wonderful because President Kennedy was very good at that sort of thing.

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He was very good at least at the impression of candor. Now I think he was pretty candid in those things, but I say at the impression of candor because you came away feeling you had been told a lot and that you knew a lot. They were very sweeping. He would devote an hour to foreign affairs, then a coffee break, and an hour to domestic affairs or vice versa. Usually the group there was basically pretty solid reporters. The questions asked were good. He could develop a theme. He was much freer than in the news conferences. It wasn't helter-skelter. Reporters would follow up other reporters' questions more than they do in news conferences. You could develop quite a bit. I thought the stories that came out were pretty good. I objected to the ridiculous form we had to go through ascribing stuff to friends of the President and that kind of thing when he came out and did practically the same thing on television in

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'62, if you will recall, with Bill Lawrence and a couple of other fellows. I didn't see much reason why all the things that he told us in these backgrounders couldn't have been put on the record, or why they couldn't at least have been ascribed to the President and paraphrased.

GRELE: Was any record of the backgrounders ever kept?

WICKER: Yes. In fact they made a transcription. They had a shorthand man there with one of those machines. These were both at Palm Beach. The transcriptions were made available to the press. That is, you could go up and check out a copy -- they were numbered -- just to make sure you were accurate. We usually had about a day's grace in writing these things. Then you had to turn it back in. There was only one thing that I recall in the whole briefing

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that was put off the record, in either one, that I remember. That is, in 1962 after Mr. Nixon had been defeated in the California gubernatorial race, somebody asked President Kennedy if he thought Mr. Nixon was now dead politically. He said, "Well, I'll answer that but only off the record." He went ahead to answer it off the record which meant you couldn't write that at

all, not at all. But it was put in the transcript nonetheless. I, being a sneaky sort of fellow and also having a sense that there was historical value in this in the future, checked out a copy of the transcript and typed off this off the record part which I still have. I've never written about it. Although I believe, perhaps after President Kennedy's death, in something that I wrote about Mr. Nixon I perhaps wrote and said the

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late President Kennedy believed that Mr. Nixon had done so and so.

GRELE: The article, "Mr. Nixon Walks Alone?"

WICKER: It may have been, or it may have been just some other article. I made no great point of it because it wasn't…

GRELE: What was his opinion?

WICKER: His opinion? If I have that document around here I'll be glad to turn it over to the Library. Well, it's in this backgrounder transcript, and I'm sure the Library must get that transcript.

GRELE: That's really why I asked the question because if the record was kept, we have it. It would be sort of useful for us to use it.

WICKER: Yes, well, if the Library has the transcript of the two backgrounders, that is in it. He said in effect that he thought Nixon had made a grave mistake by running for Governor of California; that even had he

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won, governors have such a difficult time it wouldn't necessarily have projected him forward as a candidate; that if we would look at the circumstances of that time, which was December 1962, or maybe the first days of January, we would see that Governor Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] was far and away the leading candidate for the Republican nomination. Nonetheless, Rockefeller had weaknesses which at that time included his divorce but not his late remarriage. He firmly believed that if Mr. Nixon had stayed completely out of the California race, as of that day -- the moment he was speaking -- Nixon, and not Rockefeller…. Rockefeller was reelected in '62 but by a shrunken majority and in a not very good campaign; he was facing a tax increase that he had pledged he wouldn't make, a lot of things

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like that. He said he thought if Nixon had stayed out of all that and had practiced law, he would have been the leading candidate for the Republican nomination at that time and not Rockefeller.

This is historically important because if that is true -- and it seemed to me to be a tenable proposition, and President Kennedy was a good judge of these matters -- you will recall that what projected Senator Goldwater so much like a rocket in the race was that Rockefeller had a great lead, then about May of that year when he remarried (married Mrs. Murphy) Rockefeller tumbled something like a hundred points in the polls right away. He was knocked into a cocked hat overnight. There was nobody else. Nixon was the defeated candidate for governor. The Goldwater people were given their great opportunity,

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and the Goldwater boom began at that moment. If President Kennedy was right, I suspect it would have been at the very least a two-way fight between Nixon and Goldwater for that nomination in which case my money would have been on Nixon. Goldwater won the nomination fundamentally because he really didn't have any opposition, or no unified opposition. So I'm reasonably sure that that view that President Kennedy expressed did have historical importance.

Also, the transcript came in handy -- I wish I could remember what it was, but there was something…. Oh, I remember what it was. In the second backgrounder of '62, President Kennedy, discussing foreign affairs, was asked -- I've forgotten the phraseology of the question -- but in some way what he thought

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about the allies or something. He said he had learned in two years that there were some things that you had to go ahead and do and that you couldn't worry too much whether it was going to be popular or not. The AP, as I recall it, Frank Cormier of the AP, who was covering the White House at that time for them and still is, chose that for a lead for a story which I think is all wrong. In the context of that background it was not the most important thing. There was so much that I think a sound professional approach was to put a generalized lead on the story rather than to pinpoint this fact. But Frank made his own professional judgment and wrote the story. In paraphrasing the thing, his particular phraseology made it look as if Kennedy said, "We intend to do what we please regardless of our allies."

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Well, in Europe that made an enormous headline. The British correspondents, who were not in on the backgrounder, then rewrote from the AP. This is all they had to do. The British newspapers being what they are -- many of them, particularly those who don't have correspondents over here and don't know the situation -- heightened this up ever more, "US to Be Policeman of World," and that sort of thing. It was a terrible mess. Ultimately, President Kennedy released the transcript, that part of what he said, to several of the responsible British correspondents here who then attempted to set the record straight and

write what he had said in his backgrounder and put it in some perspective. At which point most of the American correspondents got mad because they had not been allowed to have the actual transcript and

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quote Kennedy and say this is what Kennedy said. They were paraphrasing and saying, "Friends of Kennedy said President Kennedy said this," and that kind of thing. So there was a big flap about it, but like most of these press wars it was a tempest in a teapot. It was very serious to President Kennedy, though, because he didn't want this taken as his attitude in Europe.

GRELE: What was your opinion of the opening of the White House? I've been told that under the Eisenhower Administration all news contacts were channeled through Sherman Adams, but under President Kennedy the whole White House staff was available to newsmen.

WICKER: I think I'd correct that and say in the Eisenhower Administration, as I understand it -- I wasn't a White House correspondent --

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they were channeled through Jim Hagerty [James Hagerty].

GRELE: Hagerty, yes.

WICKER: Well, I had no experience with that, but I certainly thought, and think, that it was much better to have it as the Kennedy Administration did. It was quite free and open. You could go to anybody, and they could either talk to you or not as they chose. I see nothing wrong with that. I think the channeling of press contacts through one man both gives him too much power and is too limiting upon the press and its proper function. I don't see why a special assistant to the President should be any more shielded from the press than a senator or a Secretary of the Treasury.

GRELE: Just as a matter of professional interest, how valuable was Mr. Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.]?

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WICKER: I am not a good witness on that because in the things that I was called upon to do at the White House I almost never really had to go to Arthur as a news source and rarely did. I may have called on him two or three times in the years that I covered the White House. My recollection is that of the times that I talked to him, Arthur was helpful in the sense that he is an astute man and had a good sense of what President Kennedy was going to do. But generally speaking, for the things that I called on

him to ask about, my impression was that he was not really at the center of those things and did not really have first hand information. His opinions were valuable. Now others who dealt with Arthur more directly on matters in which he was specifically and directly involved, Latin

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America, UN affairs for instance, would have a different impression, but I'm not a good witness on that.

GRELE: What were your opinions of the press conferences?

WICKER: I thought President Kennedy's press conferences were good. They got less good as time went on out of natural influences. One thing, I think he came to feel that he couldn't be as open as he had been to begin with. He came to feel that the news conferences were a chore. He came to feel that the questions were not very intelligent or well organized -- and I certainly agree with that. He came to feel that it was not the best forum for him to make his views known, that too often things got truncated and not followed up and so forth.

For my part, I thought they were a

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wonderful tool for President Kennedy because I've always thought that a great deal of the Kennedy mystique, so to speak -- the widespread impression of President Kennedy that got around, this feeling about him -- was because the people saw this very striking, able and eloquent man on television. They saw him in action. Eisenhower was the only President who had ever really been seen in action before, and he wasn't all that impressive. You didn't really see him live at the moment of contact. You saw him on tape later. But for people sitting in their living rooms, or bars, or whatever at 4 o'clock in the afternoon seeing President Kennedy with that wealth of material he always had at his command; that wealth of statistics; that intimate knowledge of detail -- he really had a remarkably broad grasp of things, I've always felt, a detailed knowledge of so many

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things you wouldn't even expect him to know were occurring -- his ability to answer questions forcibly; that same thing I mentioned in his backgrounders, that appearance of candor even when perhaps the really astute reporter knew he wasn't being entirely candid. I think this was one of the great weapons President Kennedy had. I think the great public impression of President Kennedy that exists to this day, and is greatly exaggerated by now, was created primarily through his news conferences on television. I always enjoyed them. He was funny. You could pretty well count on a couple of good stories out of a Kennedy news conference -- out of any president's news conference. He had a way of saying things and a

way of looking at things that we supposedly sophisticated, intellectual liberals felt was extremely civilized and literate. We treasured that,

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even when perhaps on closer inspection, we might disagree with substance. I thought his news conferences were great.

GRELE: Were you there the day he…

WICKER: I think he got to think they were a little bit less than great in the long run. I will agree with that. I think just to study the transcript revealed that the thing kind of went downhill in the long run. But the first year of his news conferences were just simply unprecedented in Washington in my opinion.

GRELE: This will be my last question for today.

WICKER: Okay.

GRELE: Were you at the news conference when he became angry at Sarah McClendon?

WICKER: Yes. I had a good view of that because in those days when we had the news conferences in the State Department auditorium, the first two or three rows of the auditorium

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were assigned seats. The *New York Times*, being one of the eminent publications, had a front row seat. They started out with the AP on the left and moved right across the row. It just so happened my front row seat was immediately and directly in front of the President's podium. I was about as far from where I sit now to where you sit in front of him at all times. I did see that and he was, I think extremely angry, and, I think, intemperate in his response. This was one of the few times that I saw him get out of control. If he was concerned, as I'm sure he was -- that's what his anger was about -- for the smearing of these two State Department employees, if he was concerned about their reputations and that they were being slandered as he saw it -- and I think he was right -- then it only made it worse, in my opinion, to force

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Sarah to name them and to make an issue of the thing. My own opinion is, while I admire the sentiment and felt the saem anger in a sense and am certain it was genuine, I think he would have done better to say, "I won't discuss that," and let it go. But I suppose politically in a way he couldn't. Or he could have, it seems to me, have said something about, "Well that kind of discussion is only going to further smear the reputations of men who may not deserve

it. And if you want to ask me that privately, I'll answer for it," or something. I think his answer was intemperate, but at the same time, I sympathized with him.

GRELE: Thank you very much.

[END OF TAPE I, SIDE II]

[END OF INTERVIEW]