

Stewart L. Udall Oral History Interview – JFK #8, 9/17/1970
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Udall was the Secretary of the Interior for the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations (1961-1969). This interview focuses on John Kelly's appointment as assistant secretary, oil interests, helium contracts, President Roosevelt's Hyde Park home, and the creation of a Kennedy myth, among other issues.

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Stewart L. Udall
JFK #8

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
155	John Kelly's appointment as assistant secretary
158	President Kennedy's special assistants
159	Oil import quotas
160	Cabinet committee on oil imports
164	Transition from Kennedy to Johnson Administration
165	President Johnson's attitude towards the oil industry
166	Canadian oil
168	Government stockpiling
168	Helium contracts
171	Franklin D. Roosevelt's Hyde Park Home
172	The Kennedy myth
Addendum	"Thoughts About the Kennedy Legacy"

Eighth Oral History Interview

with

STEWART L. UDALL

September 17, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By W. W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Let me start off by asking you about the people who were appointed to the mineral resources area under John Kelly. It's my understanding that most of these were holdovers and they stayed simply because they were technical people, career service people, and that there wasn't any real need to do much shifting in that area. Did you feel any inclination to clean house there or take a good look at it?

UDALL: No, I didn't really. Well, I did after I was in for a while, but Kelly was rather negative influence when it came to that whole process.

MOSS: In what way?

UDALL: Well, he was.... Senator Anderson [Clinton P. Anderson] was very unhappy with some of my early appointments, objected to President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] and, in effect, demanded that New Mexico have at least an assistant secretaryship. I was all ready to give that appointment, I had practically decided, to Leif Erickson of Montana who was an old Democratic party war horse. Mike Mansfield [Michael J. Mansfield], of course, was then the majority leader, and this seemed to make quite a lot of sense. Montana's a mining state. And Anderson moved in. He was chairman of my committee, chairman of the Interior [and Insular Affairs] Committee, and he was very insistent, very demanding. And he came up with Kelly. Kelly was not my idea. He came up with Kelly and pushed him very hard and we looked the whole situation over and I think

talked with the White House people and decided that it was important for me and for the administration to keep Anderson happy because he was the chairman of the main committee we'd be dealing with. So I just told Mansfield and Senator Metcalf [Lee Metcalf] that – and they didn't complain too loudly; they were unhappy – and we went ahead.

MOSS: Do you know of any direct presidential interest in Kelly's appointment?

[-155-]

UDALL: No, no, there was none. But I mean Anderson, in late December, before we came in in the transition period, called Kennedy and raised hell about my first appointments, and that New Mexico was being left out, and that they demanded consideration. So the President got in at that point and alerted his people as to Anderson's point of view. And so there was presidential interest in that sense, yes. Kelly, of course, is an independent oil man out of the oil industry, saturated in their values and in their philosophy, and a very strong-minded individual. He came in and what he did the first couple of years when I was getting my feet on the ground and so on, the thing he very cleverly did with me as far as oil in particular was concerned, not quite so much on minerals.... See, he had worked in the department, I think, either during the war or before, and was knowledgeable government-wise. He'd also been, I think, the state engineer of New Mexico and so was experienced as an administrator. And he would kind of in a very subtle way say, "Well, look. Oil is the most volatile, dangerous, explosive subject, and I know it extremely well and you kind of stay out of it and let me handle that."

It was more his satisfaction with the bureaucracy rather than mine. I didn't have time in the first year or two to really get acquainted and to know everybody. I found when I did get into it later that there were some very good and some not so good highly professional people. The director of the Bureau of Mines, for example, Ankeny [Marling J. Ankeny], and the coal mine safety man that he had, or that was in there, that the coal industry had put in; I was unhappy with him from the beginning. But John's attitude was, "Well, you know, they're here, and it'll take a lot of using dynamite to blast them out, and let's work along with them and get along." And he seemed to get along. It was more my complaining about the lack of leadership and the lack of direction.

So as long as he was there – which was, what, three or four years – he more than my other assistant secretaries ran his own show, and was what you would call a strong assistant secretary; not any more strong in some ways than John Carver [John A. Carver, Jr.] was, but this was an area where my familiarity with it in a general way was relatively limited. I didn't know the oil industry; I didn't know the mineral industry. And Kelly enjoyed his role of sort of being Mr. Oil in the administration because that gave him great prestige and everything with his colleagues in the oil industry.

In saying all that, I'm not saying that John wasn't himself, you know, public spirited according to his own likes. He naturally saw most major issues the way the oil companies and the mining companies saw it. But he also was sophisticated enough that he tried to understand the movement of things, the trend of things, and was not just a status quo person. But essentially because of his knowledge and my lack of knowledge, he tried to use that to say.... Well, you know, he never said, "Let me run the show," but I mean that was the

attitude that he took and that's the reason Orren Beaty and I found ourselves increasingly unhappy and increasingly clashing with him. It was a clash that he and I finally had a year or so after President Kennedy's death that lead him to leave the department, where

[-156-]

I moved in an asserted my authority and made some decisions that he didn't like.

MOSS: Okay. On what things were you beginning to find that this relationship was giving you trouble, his way of running things was giving you trouble?

UDALL: I suppose the two major things under his supervision, I mean we were plugging along with the coal research program which was a new program which was nothing very innovative. The oil import program, the whole question of oil policy and energy policy was, of course, very major, and he had the bureaucrats under him and wanted to run that with a rather tight hand. And the Bureau of Mines – it seemed to me in later events confirmed that – had weak leadership, was really under almost complete domination of the coal industry. You didn't have the corrective force that you sometimes have when the labor unions and management are in disagreement. Under John L. Lewis and the pact that was made back in the early fifties, it was a very cosy relationship between labor and management in coal. They didn't want any boats rocked and they wanted to go ahead and just keep doing things the way they were doing, and I sensed that as we got on the road.

Kelly was a politician and even the things he didn't like, his attitude was, "Well, there's not much you can do about it." And he was right to a degree because they were formidable, and when I began trying to do even some of the things Kelly and I agreed upon like the residual oil program, to loosen it, to throw it overboard, the coal industry people, including you see Boyle [W. Anthony Boyle] of the United Mine Workers [of America] and the fellow that was representing the National Coal Association, the National Coal Policy Conference, Joe Moody [Joseph E. Moody] and these fellows; they'd go over my head and go right to the White House and talk to Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and Feldman [Myer Feldman] and the President and people, in effect, appealing over my head to the President and his people in the White House for the state of coal. And finally I had some bruising battles and I got some changes made, but there were strong forces that were at work there to just go along, don't rock the boat and keep doing what we're doing with a few little changes.

MOSS: All right. Well, what is it that makes it possible for them to go to the President and for you to be in a tight spot and not really be able to réclame, I guess, is the word to use on this? How do you fight your battle?

UDALL: Well, with many of these programs, you know, I had the actual authority to make changes. But you have to telegraph your punches, as they say in boxing, and therefore, if we were getting ready to do something, and they found out about it, and if they thought they were really trying to head me off, they'd grab the coal state

senators, Jennings Randolph, in particular, Bob Byrd [Robert C. Byrd], and they'd ask for appointments and they would, I think they saw the President a time or two on some of these matters. And so this then, Sorensen, Feldman would call up and say, "Well, come over. Let's discuss this." And we would discuss these policy questions.

And then, increasingly, as we began to go on down the road, particularly

[-157-]

with the oil import program, the State Department began to get into the picture. And they had a legitimate right to because you have Venezuela and Canada and everything else. But again, Kelly loved to have me out of the picture, he to be my agent clothed with full powers, and then he would handle all these things. And you know, he was always stressing how sticky this was and how I could get hurt, and let him handle it and so on. But that didn't mean simply because they went to the White House that I lost necessarily because I would have a chance to present my arguments, and we would make changes and adjustments because the White House people were also beseeched by the New England people who wanted more liberal oil programs, for example, things of that kind.

But on things like oil shale which became, was one of the things that we wrestled with for all eight years there; this was a matter really of making new policy, and we had quite a free hand under both presidents in that area, that and the areas like mineral leasing policy and so on. In some of these matters, Kelly alone didn't have the full say because you had other bureaus in the department like the Bureau of Land Management. The solicitor would get involved in this whole thing. And I increasingly began on a gradual basis to get the solicitor's department and their people in the middle of these mineral and oil decisions as a way of protecting me against Kelly making decisions on his own.

MOSS: Now, how much on top of all this did you find the White House people, Feldman and Sorensen?

UDALL: No, they got in. They weren't on top of it really. They would get in the way the President's White House staff people do when there was a major decision, when there was a major controversy, I would try to keep them advised on major things, keep the President posted in my weekly reports to him, but they were usually going to get in, and were brought into it if there was some major decision that was controversial. And there were divided groups and there were congressmen and senators who were making phone calls and saying don't do this, don't do that. And particularly if the congressmen and senators tried to sway me and found they couldn't, then they would go to the White House and see if they could get them to turn me around.

MOSS: I was wondering because these special assistants and so on have a broad range of things they have to be concerned with, and I was wondering just how detailed their information was, how detailed their grasp, how strong their grasp was of any given situation. This one seems to be a good one in which they might not have a thorough grasp of the situation.

UDALL: Well, of course, these were complicated things, and they would be quite ignorant to begin with, but the type of people President Kennedy had were very quick learners and very knowledgeable, and they'd have briefing papers furnished and everything else. When I went over to talk with them they knew what the issue was, and in that sense, they were

[-158-]

doing a job for the President the way the whole system was set up of trying to protect what they conceived to be his political interests and his interests in terms of his policies.

MOSS: Okay, let me go ahead in some detail on the oil import quota thing before I go off in my initial direction. Let's see, it was very early in the administration that you, I guess it's mid-February of '61, you suspended Seaton's [Frederick A. Seaton] order that had permitted certain additional companies to get residual fuel allotments, and you set some hearings on the whole question. All right, first of all, do you recall why you suspended Seaton's order and why you set the hearings?

UDALL: Well, this was, I think, a recommendation of Kelly's. In fact, Kelly suggested, and I, you know, being very new.... Oscar Chapman, who may or may not have had some axes to grind, he and Kelly, not necessarily in concert although they probably had talked together on the phone, they suggested in that earliest phase that I bring in as a sort of outside.... Trying to get some outside initial advice and guidance, two of the people who had served Harold Ickes as well were Democrats and had good, were broad-gauged people. They were J.R. Parten [Jubal R. Parten] from Texas, who was a liberal Democrat oil man close to Rayburn [Samuel T. Rayburn] and Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], close to the New Deal people – Ickes had used him – and a fellow by the name of Howard Marshall [J. Howard Marshall]. And so they came in and spent three or four days sort of as unpaid consultants, you know, talking to everybody. And then I spent some time with them, and they felt, and I think Kelly agreed (if he was aboard at that time) that since the oil import programs were relatively new and had only been in, in fact, no more than two years, that it was a good time to find out how they were working, to let everybody be heard. Seaton had also made several oil orders that looked suspicious. One of them Drew Pearson [Andrew Russell Pearson] had featured that he made the day before he left office on the 19th of January, and that one of the main beneficiaries was Cities Service [Companies]. Alton Jones, the president of that company, was very close to President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], one of his close friends, had a farm up there with him.

I don't think I reversed that order ultimately, but we did air it because we wanted everybody to know that we weren't unaware of the implications of these politics. I think that worked out quite well because it was a way.... I sat in on some of those hearings. I spent some time, of course, a complicated subject. A lot of the oil industry leaders came in and the other people, the oil consumer groups came in, and you sort of gave a forum for everybody to be heard. And I think that was a useful exercise.

MOSS: Okay, you had these hearings and throughout most of 1961 there was sort of a

back and forth as to just what was going to be done about the oil quotas with nothing really being decided, as I understand it reading over the material. And then, in December of '61, a cabinet committee under Frank Ellis was set up to review the import quota policies.

[-159-]

Do you recall why and how, at whose initiative and so on this was set up?

UDALL: Well, this was where there was a kind of overlapping responsibility, except Kelly always said – and to a substantial degree this was true – that although the oil import program was set up under emergency power and that the Office of Emergency Preparedness had played a crucial role in getting it set up because you were using their statutory authority and they had to make a finding or a recommendation to the President and the President acted on it, but once it was set up, Kelly's view always was, "Well, their job is done. They're out of it." But they always said that they were in the middle of it and they had to review it themselves, and we were asserting that we were the ones that would do the reviewing. And I think Ellis and his staff people became assertive to a degree and they either were curious about what we were up to or thought we were going to do some things they didn't like and pressed the idea of them making some kind of study. Of course, they weren't administering the program, you see; we were. They were, in effect, outside looking at it in terms of defense, the national defense interest. And whether there were – I'm not sure now – whether there were people in the White House who favored that or whether we went along with this to appease Ellis.... See, Ellis was from Louisiana. He was from an oil state. He was trying to grind axes, and Kelly constantly was very negative about them and fought them off, or tried to, and that they had no business getting into it unless there was some kind of crisis or emergency; and that we were the administrators of the program.

Except Kelly, when you got through all the hearings and you did everything, he essentially all along, the sort of thing he favored was the status quo, and I always called it, used to refer to it later in terms of the oil import program. You see, they had set down a program and it had certain.... They built into the quota system favoritism for historical importers. And then there were certain other broad ground rules that were questionable, to give refiners part of the cut of oil imports, including inland refiners. And there was always a question of whether these equities were right and whether they should not have been changed. Kelly essentially favored what I came to call later the approach of saying, "Well, the system isn't perfect, but it's pretty good, and therefore, let's just go ahead and follow the formula. Let's not disturb it." Because you start disturbing it, you're taking quotas away from somebody and giving them to somebody else and that'll always make somebody mad. Well, of course, it will. But that was a matter of judgment as to whether the program was right.

So I characterized it as simply standing at the door passively passing out the tickets to everybody every month or six months, whatever it was as the program came around. And we later, it was along in '64 and '65 after the Kennedy Administration when I began to get bold enough to start tinkering around with the program and demanding that they surface alternatives for consideration. Because most of the administration in that early period was essentially just carrying out the Eisenhower formula for oil imports. Although of course,

residual oil was a very different matter. This surfaced rather early as a rather hot subject because our residual oil production in

[-160-]

this country was declining, and there was an enormous increase of demand for residual oil for industry and for electric power companies and for home heating on the East Coast.

MOSS: Particularly during those cold winters there.

UDALL: And they were feeling the pinch, you see, of short supplies, feeling that the prices were forced up, and feeling, and I think quite rightly, that the U.S. domestic oil industry, including the majors who were some of the importers from abroad of residual oil, that they wanted to have rather short supplies because this helped keep prices up.

MOSS: In looking this story over of the move to the OEP [Office of Emergency Planning] on this, I saw it in a sort of devil theory thing, reading too much into it perhaps, as a move to get the whole thing out of Kelly's hands. It looked to me as though throughout the early part of '61 there wasn't much being done or it wasn't being done satisfactorily, and this move to Ellis's group or at least to the White House was a ploy to get it out of Kelly's hands and get something done. Is there any justification in that?

UDALL: I wouldn't.... Whether the Ellis study was set up because Ellis was a self-starter or because some of them in the White House thought that, you know, that they were dubious about Kelly or about my knowledgeability on the program at that time, I don't know; but I do have a distinct recollection of Kelly presenting that to me all along as though Ellis was trying to horn in on our program and our responsibilities. Ellis was a lawyer from Louisiana and he had oil ties and connections, and that he had some changes that might involve skullduggery and that we better guard our prerogatives and resist any attempts on his part to move in and change the program. While I was more for, rather than just backing up Kelly in a blank check way, of letting these outside people get into the picture. I never resented the White House getting involved, naturally, because this helped to air issues. It helped to bring issues up that I felt we ought to know about. If the program wasn't good, well, who was complaining about it? If it favored some companies over others, well, which companies were they? Why had it been set up the way it was in the beginning, and what was wrong with it, and so on?

MOSS: Okay, now following this in mid-March of '62, the House of Representatives began holding hearings on the subject. Do you recall how they got into the act and why, and what your reaction was to it?

UDALL: Well, no. They always got in...

MOSS: Annually?

UDALL: No, no. When they were sparked by the oil industry people and the independent oil men in particular who with Democratic congressmen had a pretty good clout, they would go to the Texas congressmen in particular, to the oil state congressmen, and they would say, "We're not

[-161-]

happy with this. Changes are needed, and you people put pressure on Udall and Kelly and see if you can't get things done that we think ought to be done," whether it was reducing imports or increasing them, or changing the formulas, or whatever it was. And when we didn't act to satisfy various congressmen or senators, why, they would sound off. They'd make statements for the press and finally, you know, two or three times, there were hearings. In fact, we later ended up in '66 and '67, I went up on the Hill and met with Texas and Oklahoma congressmen, usually in Congressman Mahon's [George H. Mahon] office where they were telling me what they wanted and what they felt was wrong and so on. And that began rather early.

MOSS: As I understand it, tighter controls benefit the independents and the coal people and the loose ones benefit the big oil people. Is this too simple?

UDALL: Yes, that's too simple. As a generalization that's true, however, in a vague general way. The independent companies.... Naturally the big, the major international companies always had mixed feelings, or rather, divided loyalties as it were, because they were U.S. producers, and they also were producing abroad and they wanted to bring some of their production into this country. So they always were for more, had a more liberal attitude towards – say, "Well, imports aren't so bad, you know, we need some imports. It's a question of how much and whether it should be increased." Whereas the smaller companies, the independents considered that the imports were too high and that high imports were a threat to domestic production.

Now it all comes back to me now. The man who was the real leader and who pushed most was Senator Robert Kerr from Oklahoma; you know, he being a Democrat. And Kerr, that first year or two when Lyndon Johnson moved out of the Senate and moved on in, moved to be the vice president, Kerr then was either the chairman or ranking member of two important committees. He was on the finance committee. And I always felt that there was a flagrant conflict of interest in his case because he was a big small oil man, but big by any other standards with his Kerr-McGee [Oil Industries, Inc.] oil company. And he made no bones about it. He'd always talk about us and what you're going to do, but he was protecting his own interests. And the focus that he had.... I think fortunately for the country maybe, he died after the first year, or was it two years, but he went in to see Kennedy, and Kerr as a.... He almost.... He had the effrontery really and he was one of the toughest, ablest men in the Senate. And as a quid pro quo for his support which I think was absolutely crucial to Kennedy's trade bill out of the Senate Finance Committee, he insisted on some kind of lid being put on oil imports.

MOSS: Okay there's a...

UDALL: He actually saw President Kennedy and I think I was told – I was not there – Kerr talked with me and he took me down to his ranch and waltzed me around that fall trying to educate me to see the things

[-162-]

his way, but I was told by Mike Feldman or somebody that he actually demanded that Kennedy put something in writing as to what Kennedy would do if Kerr went along with this. Have you heard this?

MOSS: Well, this, as I say, is the story that was out at the time. I don't know whether Drew Pearson picked it up or somebody else that Kerr was boasting that he had in his safe at his office a signed piece of paper saying that the President was going along with him on the oil thing. Do you recall that story at all?

UDALL: Well, I remember his very earthy language. I can remember being, it just must've been three or four of us and I think we may have gone down.... We may have started with Feldman or Sorensen. Then we went down to see the President. And Kerr was talking about how damaging this was and he said, "I'm not going to stand aside and see my people fucked." (That'll look good on your tape.) That's what he said to the President. And he was very rough and he was very demanding. And we put a limit on the program. We put a lid on this famous 12.2 formula. You see, what was happening – it comes back to me now, you see – is that as the program started, it had no upper limits, and the way the formula worked out and everything, it had a tendency to grow. And what Kerr wanted was a formula with a ceiling, and it became what was called 12.2 percent of the total, you see. Now we managed to liberalize it sufficiently so that that was not frozen to the total as of a given year. And each year as the U.S. market increased, that 12.2 percent would increase, but it essentially was a phrase. And I think Kerr professed to speak for, and I think was speaking in a real sense for the independents. That's what they wanted, but he was also representing himself as an oil man, which I considered outrageous.

MOSS: Okay. Now, there was, was there not, in computing this formula or applying it, a six month lag?

UDALL: Yeah, that's right.

MOSS: You were actually, when you set up new figures, they were actually based on considerations that were six months over. And it's my understanding that you were trying to do something to make it more current.

UDALL: Well, that was another thing that everyone was complaining about, that the program was not based on correct figures, and I think we changed that,

brought that up-to-date. But they were always constantly hacking away and trying to tighten it up, trying to make little things that would reduce the overall imports.

MOSS: Okay, now, shortly after President Kennedy's death – and I get this from a *New York Times* article and I'd be interested in your reaction to it in light of what we talked about before – it says on the ninth of December of 1963, Secretary Udall announced that the authority to set national oil policy was being returned to the Interior Department, reversing JFK's practice. Now what's the implication of this?

[-163-]

UDALL: This is a fascinating story and it involves President Johnson and myself, and I might as well put it all in the record at this point. Immediately after President Kennedy's assassination and President Johnson had taken the reins, almost all of the news magazines, you know, with their Washington inside columns and other columnists and so on, with the speculation of what would Johnson do with Kennedy's cabinet. And they were all agreed on one thing, which was that I would be first to go, and this was...

MOSS: Because of Los Angeles?

UDALL: ...because of Los Angeles, you know. Johnson's got a long memory; Johnson is vindictive; Udall did Johnson in, therefore, Johnson will even the score. That was the kind of crude thinking. And I've recently learned within the last six months that Jack Brooks, congressman from Texas who for some reason was in Johnson's company quite a bit the first few weeks that he was president – you know, with going to church with him and was one of those quite visible with Johnson – he told Congressman Frank Thompson [Frank Thompson, Jr.] last spring, as late as last spring, that he had advised Johnson in those first few days that he was president. He said, "Well, for political reasons to see you through the 1964 election, you ought to keep all of Kennedy's cabinet except for two people." And he said, "Two of them were just so loyal to Kennedy that they couldn't possibly be loyal to you," and it was Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and Stewart Udall. Jack I always thought was a friend of mine, but he said that was the advice that he gave Johnson, and he was saying in retrospect he thought Johnson made a mistake not taking his advice.

And I was sure, although President Johnson and I had some interesting contacts and pleasant contacts – I mean I had repaired my fences with him to a degree, and I had gone out of my way to indicate that certainly there was nothing that should be an impediment to our having very friendly and fruitful relations. And I always suspected, my guess was that Frank Ikard, congressman from Texas – and Frank knew me fairly well, and Frank had been on the Ways and Means Committee; he was an old hand. And in 1959 or '60, somewhere along in there, he left Congress and became the top man for the American Petroleum Institute and in Washington was their chief lobbyist. And Frank was very shrewd. And I think.... I'm just as sure as I'm sure of anything, because Frank would've been regarded as spokesman and old

Texas congressman – Johnson knew him and trusted him – that he went through and talked to Johnson.

So I was sitting, in the days after President Kennedy's death, I had already received word that I was to head up, be the head of the U.S. delegation to the independence celebration in Kenya about the twelfth of December. I had been there earlier that year and had climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. And so one of the questions, aside from the larger question, would I be around at all, you know.... It would not have surprised me in those days if Walter Jenkins, let's say, had called up and asked me to come over, and you know, wanting the new President to have as little embarrassment as

[-164-]

possible, to say that, you know, the President wanted his own man, and you know, be nice about it, and want me to quietly leave. And I would have had no choice, and I would've done so. But that didn't happen. But I sat there wondering, well you know, "Is he going to drop the axe on me?" But the date on Kenya was, the time was running out so something had to be decided, and I think that's what ultimately forced it. So I finally received word – I was very nervous – the President wanted to see me on this very same day, the ninth, or was it the eighth.

MOSS: How did you receive word?

UDALL: Oh, it was just from the appointments secretary: "The President would like to see you this morning or this afternoon," Whatever it was. I went in to see Johnson in his office, just the two of us. I don't think there was anyone there. And he, of course, was then riding high in the full flesh of his new office. And he made it very plain, he referred to me two or three times as a Kennedy man, that I was a Kennedy man. And he sort of rubbed that in a very subtle way, to make it plain, I think, to me that he had the authority, if he wanted to exercise it, to get me out as a Kennedy man. But then he, after probing me a little bit and so on, said – he didn't say anything at all about asking me to stay. He didn't do that with most of the cabinet, the Kennedy cabinet, you know, calling everybody in to say, "I want you to stay for a year," or, "through the election," or anything. You know, we just went along day-by-day.

But what he said to me made it plain he was going to keep me at least for a while because he said, "Well, now, let's understand one thing." He said, "I'm from Texas. Texas is the dominant state in the oil industry and they're all going to think that I'm trying to be a Texas president." And he said, "I want oil out of the White House." He said, "I want to have the same relationship" – actually, it was a different time and a different thing in a way – "that Franklin D. Roosevelt had with Harold Ickes, you see." Johnson the old congressman was thinking back. This was very shrewd politically, and it worked. And he said, "I want you to go outside and to tell the press people what I've just told you." See there was no directive signed. None was needed really. It was a matter of a president saying orally and making it plain that – he was very explicit – no oil decisions. So I walked out. He called his press secretary. Pierre Salinger took me out and I tried to repeat as accurately as I could what

Johnson had said, that he wanted oil out of the White House, that he wanted to have the Roosevelt-Ickes relationship, that he wanted me to make oil decisions.

Now for months, even years after that, a lot of people were very skeptical of this. Well, now, you know, was this just a window-dressing, were they really pulling the strings in the White House, did I really have the authority? The oil press people for months and even two or three years later would occasionally write, "Well, you know, does Udall really have the authority, or is Johnson pulling the strings?" because a lot of people were suspicious of Johnson, the way he operated. The truth of the matter is, other than two not so terribly important things, Johnson did mean it and I

[-165-]

did have the authority.

Now, the difference between Johnson and Kennedy was this, because the oil and coal people in the Kennedy period, as I've described to you earlier, would have no hesitancy at all in going right to Feldman and Sorensen, or getting some senator and trying to get the president, you know, just like talking about Kerr and talking to the president and so on. And there was no embarrassment about this at all, which was entirely proper and everything.

With Johnson, I think the President himself, other than any very private or very discreet conversations that he had, avoided talking about oil. You know, people tried to talk with him. He may have listened to somebody, but he handled himself so that this thing would not catch up with him. And I think most people that tried to talk about oil said, "Well, you know, the President's taking himself out of this." But if somebody was very insistent, why, they would have them go talk to the same people, Feldman, Sorensen, Lee White. In fact, the one big flap we had where the President really called a shot – Johnson – and didn't want anybody to know it, he called it through Lee White who was then his, by that time had Sorensen's old job as his special counsel, his chief lawyer at the White House. And this was very embarrassing, and of course, Johnson never said anything to me. This was all round about and with a lot of shadow boxing with what Lee was telling me. Except John Kelly, again, had always advised me, you know, once this happened – he always stressed this because he always wanted to keep the White House out too on everything, and he'd tell, "Well, they better not be calling us over there, better not be talking to us or the word's going to get out that this whole thing is a fraud, you see."

So it was significantly different, and you see, what I could do then when I got to making the controversial decisions I made, like putting the refinery in Puerto Rico, the special oil deals that I made for Puerto Rico and for Virgin Islands, and other changes, I had the Samson's locks then and I would tell my press conferences, and I would tell my staff, "Yes, you know, we have the authority. The President gave it to us." And the only question was, you know, would the rug be pulled out. And I would always do that with Feldman, Lee White, and these other people, say, "Well, look, if you've got some ideas, I'll listen to you, if you think these coal people have got something to say, but the President said that I'm to make the decision. Now if you're asserting that you have some directions from him, naturally I'm working for the President, and if he didn't mean what he said." – you know, I played this sort of game with them. And it worked most of the time except on these few occasions when Johnson really was putting his finger in oil. And there were only a couple in five years.

MOSS: Let me back up a minute and ask you a question that I neglected to ask earlier. Was there any change in the way that the White House was operating on oil when McDermott [Edward A. McDermott] replaced Frank Ellis as head of

OEP?

UDALL: I don't think so significantly. McDermott was really more of a

[-166-]

Kennedy man, closer to the Kennedy people. Ellis was kind of an operator, saw himself as a high-powered operator. Everybody was suspicious of him. But essentially the OEP staff over there, they were the ones that were always saying, "Look, we're important and assert our prerogatives," and so on. So I got along better with McDermott. He was more straight. You can deal more directly with him.

MOSS: Okay. Let me ask you a little bit about Kelly and his international role. He did quite a bit of traveling about. He went down to Columbia to talk to Betancourt [Rómulo Betancourt] and he went over to Europe to the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] meetings on oil supplies for NATO and this kind of thing. How did State Department and Kelly work together? Did he stay strictly on the technical end, or was there any problem with the State Department at all on this?

UDALL: Well, Kelly was with the State Department like he was with the White House. I always thought he was wrong on this, and increasingly when they got irate, they would come to me. But he felt that he had the main responsibility for administering this program and that the State Department was meddlesome when they got into it, and that he always pictured it to me that they were putting the interests of Venezuela ahead of the U.S. and that he'd.... And for some reason that I never did fully grasp, he attended these NATO meetings and went to Europe two or three times a year. And I think he felt this was a way, because he touched all the bases and he'd occasionally report things to me, of him keeping his finger on all of the currents and developments in Western Europe in the oil industry. You know, the international oil industry was and is one of the big industries of the world, with all sorts of ramifications and internal cabals and everything else. And so Kelly got around a great deal and we ended up....

Oh, another thing I have to tell you too that was very significant. We were no sooner seated in our desks, it must've been the second or third week in February, when the conservative government then in power in Canada did a beautiful rush job on us. You know, they knew as politicians the time to strike and make a move was while we were still in the early stages and didn't have our feet on the ground. So they asked to come down. I'm sure they, well, undoubtedly had to have subjects they wanted to discuss. This was a couple of cabinet ministers. I think somebody sat in from State Department on this. But they didn't ask us.... Their oil discoveries in the late fifties had proceeded quite well in Alberta and Saskatchewan and so on, and they were building up capacity and they wanted to penetrate the U.S. market more and more. And under the Eisenhower oil import program, Canada was

exempt for very good reasons. And so what they did was to come in and lay down a very ambitious schedule: "We're not asking this thing, this is our schedule, you know, we're exempt, and this is our schedule as to the imports." And actually they did so successfully, they overran their own schedule, which is very habitual. Kelly and the independents were horrified at this, you know, because this was Canada moving in and taking more markets in the upper Midwest that would otherwise go to Oklahoma and

[-167-]

Kansas and so on. And this immediately tabled the thing that we wrestled with all the eight years I was there, and had all kinds of weird arrangements as to how we sort of had a gentlemen's agreement with regard to Canadian imports because, you see, as a factor.... Although under the program itself, the way the Eisenhower administration laid it out, Canada was exempt. As we later worked it out with a kind of gentlemen's agreement, they were exempt, but we would work out schedules, you see. But the more oil that came in from Canada, the less there was to come in from the rest of the world, and this put Canada and Venezuela at loggerheads because Venezuela's imports and Middle East imports would be reduced and Canada's went up.

And Canada essentially very brilliantly moved in and most of this increase in the program went to Canada, and the rest were kind of on a plateau.

So this was the thing, and Kelly would talk to the Canadian people, and I had a lot of dealings with the Canadians. Of course, President Kennedy from the time of that first trip he made, they set up this economic cabinet committee that met. And we would have those meetings every year, and oil was always a major topic. I discussed with their ministers and we would discuss it at the cabinet sessions with Rusk [Dean Rusk] and others presiding.

MOSS: Okay, there are several other subjects we've got to cover here. How did the stockpiling thing hit you and the Interior Department? The Symington [W. Stuart Symington] Committee began to crucify George Humphrey, I guess, on the whole business.

UDALL: Well, of course, we were.... I think Symington was essentially right. And I think this was an example, you know, in that post-Korean period, the idea of building up big stockpiles as though you were going to have all conventional wars was a basic misconception. And it was amazing how much money they had spent and what they had stockpiled. Now Interior, we got into that in the sense that, you know, we were involved in part of the program, but our industries, the mining industries and so on, who had been the main beneficiaries of the stockpiles, they again were for the status quo. And Kelly tended to take their side and to argue, well, the program wasn't so bad and so on. But President Kennedy and his advisors when they began to look into it, the Council of Economic Advisers, the Bureau of the Budget and everyone, saw that there was a lot of waste in it. There were a lot of excesses and that you ought to help your budgetary position by disposing some of these surpluses and getting your stockpiles down to a rational level. So we didn't play a very noble role in that. I didn't get into it a great deal, but I got into it enough to know that Symington and the issues he raised were pretty close to the target.

MOSS: Okay. On the helium contracts business. You had the four companies, I believe, that were getting something of a windfall, or at any rate, the contracts as negotiated gave them more than they ought to have been getting. As I understand it, this was a simple business of the department having overlooked a few things, and there was nothing really

[-168-]

venal or anything in that. Is that correct?

UDALL: Yes, this was uncovered by, you know, leaks out of government. Drew Pearson or somebody brought it up. And this was sort of Kelly's, the first time his face got red. He was put in an embarrassing position because this helium was right out from Amarillo and that area in his back yard, the program had been set up. It turned out, when I put my solicitors on it, that our contracting officers had really drawn very poor contracts. They had just been out-foxed by these companies, and the companies did.... There were windfall elements in it. It was brought out. I faced up to it in my press conferences and otherwise indicated that I was unhappy with them and that we were going to renegotiate. And I wrote tough letters to the companies, and the companies had a good thing and their lawyers advised them in effect to tell us to go to hell. They were going to stick with their contracts.

MOSS: Yeah. GAO [General Accounting Office] got into it too.

UDALL: That's right. And we never did come out looking very well on that. But Henry Wheeler, the head of the helium program, I always felt that he did a very poor job. Now, whether there was any corruption on his part, it's never been brought out.

MOSS: One of the rather singular things that I find in all my research on the Interior Department and so on, that there's almost a complete lack of any hanky panky, any problems really come out looking pretty clean. Is it really that good, to be blunt?

UDALL: Well, you see, the Interior Department, as I think I've said before, where you're running a resources bank where under the Eisenhower administration with McKay [James Douglas McKay] you have the giveaway charge, and you literally can sign a piece of paper and part with resources that belong to the people; and if you're not a good steward of these resources, if you don't properly protect the public interest, why, you're naturally subject to criticism. Of course, Teapot Dome still hangs like a long shadow over the department and always will, I hope. I used to occasionally talk about Teapot Dome and our own uneasiness there, but I don't know of any instances. There may have been people who were pulling an oar for too much, you know, for vested interests, but I don't

think that there was anything that was dishonest or corrupt or anything of that kind. I was very curious.

There's a new book out and it goes all the way back into the Kennedy administration period because it's essentially a focus on my administration, and this is a book [Elusive Bonanza] about the oil shale controversy by Chris Welles, W-E-L-L-E-S [Christopher Welles]. He sent me a copy of it. And I don't come out exactly as a white night on this except he clears me of all the wild charges that were made by some of these people that there was a giveaway, said there was just no giveaway at all. We may not have been

[-169-]

quite as alert on a couple of things, but he pictures me rather accurately as a person who was very aware of the pitfalls, very aware that I could sign leases and do other things that would've constituted a giveaway, but I was proceeding very cautiously. I was bobbing and weaving; and with Congressman Aspinall [Wayne N. Aspinall], who was the chairman of my other committee, demanding that something be done all along, that I had to respond to that. I had to appear to be doing things, but I certainly was not anxious to begin dealing off the public resources, and when you come to the end of the administration, we didn't. We spent all of our time studying it.

In fact, that oil shale committee I appointed that I put Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith], Cohen.... That was a curious thing about Kelly and that ought to be said to Kelly's credit. The idea of having an oil shale study group – this was I guess not long after President Kennedy's death, sometime in 1964 because the thing was bobbing around and heating up. And Kelly came in to me with a list and much to my surprise he had General Gavin [James M. Gavin], he had Galbraith on the committee. He had Ben Coleman on. We later took some names off and put some others on, but I wanted a group of tough-minded people who had different points of view, who would raise, who would see to it that all of the pitfalls were revealed and all of the policy considerations were discussed.

MOSS: Okay, let me ask you, since we're talking about this, you got two guys under you really, Carver and Kelly, who are more or less user-oriented; who are if not people who are giveaway types, at least they're very sympathetic with the user point-of-view as opposed to the preservationists point-of-view. How do you deal with this? How do you live with it?

UDALL: Well, maybe it was in part a case of taking a lemon and making lemonade, but as an administrator.... Because it seemed to me that the user groups, the people that had vested interests or contemplated vested interests in the resources of the country, that their views ought to be heard and ought to be aired. And if to a degree I regarded Kelly and Carver in some aspects as advocates of that point of view, to protect myself as administrator, as long as they weren't grabbing balls making important policy decisions on their own and you could create a counterforce to that – and the counterforce became to a substantial degree my own staff, the solicitor's office – or any time that you could pit bureaus that had different philosophies against each other, or any time that you had a bureau director, let us say, who maybe was strongly public interest oriented....

And so the disputes that erupted between Frank Barry [Frank J. Barry, Jr.], the solicitor, and his people and Carver – although some people thought it was a very disorderly way to run a department, to have them shouting at each other as they did a few times in my office – you know, they were airing the differences. And since I regarded myself as sitting in the middle as a judge, this was very helpful. And so I didn't, you know, a lot of people or some of the cynical types, you know, would feel that someone that'd express the attitudes or ideas that Carver or Kelly did on certain matters, that they were people

[-170-]

inside who were trying to carve out big chunks of public domain and hand it out to somebody. Well, I mean, they were honest according to their own lights. They were trying to further development or to further these interests, and as long as there was nothing corrupt on their part – and there never was that I could ever ascertain – and that this was a legitimate point of view and one that should be heard, I just chose to regard it as something that was valuable to me.

But the other double check you always had – and that's where Orren Beatty and these people that checked the flow of papers and policy matters and everything else – was to be sure that on any matter of consequence that issues were brought up and argued out before policies were made or papers were signed or anything of that kind. And of course, the methodology the department had developed over the years for handling policy decisions – the way the papers flowed around, the review by all the agencies or assistant secretaries who had a responsibility – this helped surface these issues, surface the differences, and then when differences could not be resolved, you know, you keep pushing it back down. "Well, talk about it and see if you can work out a compromise." And when they couldn't, why, they'd bring their arguments to me.

MOSS: Okay, one quick one and then I have a think-piece one I want to put on the other side. Do you recall a situation at the FDR Hyde Park home in which Jimmy Roosevelt [James Roosevelt] had sold a piece of the land off and Abba Schwartz came around to you and said, "Hey, we've got to have this back for the estate," and the government went ahead and bought it; do you remember the circumstances on that at all?

UDALL: Yeah, it's a little bit vague in my mind. I remember it well because I went up there and walked over it and looked at it. And I don't know whether it was Jimmy or FDR, Jr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] or who it was, but there had been – I don't know if this was sold off, or was it contemplated they would buy it? My mind's vague on that. But this was crucial to the view from Hyde Park. You know, it's on a hillside and could look down there. And some of the President's old friends and people that loved Hyde Park were very concerned about this, and there was an effort, I think, made to get somebody to put up private money. And then I was rushed up there and looked at it. And I forget how it was resolved, but we did work it out.

MOSS: Do you remember anything on the preservation of the Roosevelt cottage on the estate at all?

UDALL: No, I don't, not on that.

MOSS: Okay. Okay, let me flip this so that we won't run out when I ask you...

[Interruption]

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

[-171-]

Let me ask you as a final question on the series of interviews... You said at the beginning that you did now want to do this interviewing "with tears," as you put it. Looking back and looking over the material that has come out on President Kennedy, there seems to be two levels at which you can look at the man. Lasky [Victor Lasky] wrote a book called *The Man and the Myth*. There's been a lot of criticism of the myth perpetuators; of Sorensen perhaps for his *Kennedy Legacy* being a bit romanticized, the whole Camelot thing, trying to make the man more than he really was. How do you look back on that? Is there a Kennedy myth now that is not quite accurate to the man? And how do you see the man?

UDALL: Well, it's only a question of any man, certainly any man who gets to be president of the United States is going to have the certain lieutenants, friends, close friends that surround him, that see his finest qualities, that don't want anything negative in the record. And that was the reason that I, quite frankly, resisted the idea because it would've seemed to me even, you know, to say some of the things.... I don't think I've done too much to throw acid on the Kennedy myth in my interviews with you. But I felt intimidated in the sense that I wouldn't want to say honest things that would be negative. I think President Kennedy is the type of person like few of our other presidents, because of his youth, his personality, the charisma that he had, that it was inevitable that there would be more mythmaking and that it was inevitable that there would be more of a kind of suspense and excitement and interest in his personality, in how he did things. And it's hard to know always, of course, where truth ends and myth begins. I myself think that President Kennedy had a capacity – he certainly had a capacity that President Johnson didn't have in my view – both to attract and compel a certain kind of devotion, you know, that would go beyond the ordinary. I think he had a way perhaps of reaching and leading the country, not the Congress maybe, but the country, that others have not had. I think had he not been assassinated, we might not have as much turmoil and dissension as we have in this country, because of that capacity to sort of command the interest of the country and to get the majority, the vast majority of people to believe in the nation's leadership. I'm one who, for example, thinks President Kennedy – well, I don't think he made the decision, I don't think he was even halfway across the bridge, would not have gone into Vietnam, because I think he would have recognized the fact that there was a high degree of possibility that this would tear the country apart, and he was very sensitive to that in a way that I think President Johnson was not. I don't think President Johnson ever really had the sensitivity to grasp this.

So I believe in parts of the Kennedy myth because it's a charismatic person, but I don't want the myth-spinners to inflate it to the point where it distorts the truth. And so I think essentially, particularly when we get down to the kind of mundane interviews that we've been doing, that history demands that we get at the truth as near as we can, and that's what I wanted to do and that's the reason I'm pleased that I waited these seven years to do my interviews.

MOSS: Okay, fine. Thank you very much. If there's anything in the future that we see upon looking back over these, we want to get back to you, may we do so?

[-172-]

UDALL: All right. Fine. Yes.

MOSS: Fine. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-173-]

ADDENDUM

NOTE TO THE RESEARCHER

The following pages were received by the John F. Kennedy Library in November 1973 and were accessioned as a miscellaneous papers donation from Stewart Udall in March, 1996. They have been placed in the oral history of Stewart Udall in order to facilitate their use by researchers.

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THOUGHTS ABOUT THE KENNEDY LEGACY

By Stewart L. Udall

So much has already been spoken and written, what is there left to say--a decade after that horrifying day at Dallas--about John F. Kennedy and his legacy? We have had a glowing "history with tears" in the immediate aftermath; and more recently the revisionist historians (who have conveniently forgotten the cold war consensus of the early Sixties) have issued negative pronouncements about the record and personality of the young President. Yet neither the debunkers nor the Camelot myth-makers have got to the heart of the Kennedy presidency.

We should begin any re-appraisal by conceding we cannot see Kennedy plain until we get a better perspective on his time. It is inherently unfair (whether one essays praise or blame) to measure any short-term leader by work only begun. (What would be the verdict on Lincoln, say, if he had, been fatally shot on the way to Gettysburg?)

For my part, I wish JFK had concentrated more on domestic ills and on changing our national priorities -- and less on the clashes of the cold war -- but who can say what course he would have followed had his term been extended to 1969? Kennedy's biggest tests lay ahead of him: we can only surmise what he would have done to cope with the problems that tore the country apart in the 1960's.

We do know, however, that as a leader John Kennedy had uncommon gifts. While he was alive he did more than hold the country together: he made us believe we could be better--and do better; he inspired millions of young Americans to make commitments and sacrifices; and he persuaded us the pursuit of excellence was a vital part of our national purpose.

Moreover, one of John Kennedy's memorable achievements was the hold he gained on world opinion. When he died, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan wrote that JFK "...seemed, in his own person, to embody all of the hopes and aspirations of this new world that is trying to emerge ..." If Macmillan was right, this was a remarkable thing to accomplish in three swift years. It is clear Kennedy was loved and revered by millions of ordinary people around the globe because somehow he had the capacity to lift their hopes, to catch their imaginations. If fifty years from now Kennedy is revealed as the last American President who was a true global leader idolized and revered in all parts of the world, this phenomenon alone will give pause to future historians.

It is admittedly an act of faith, but I will always believe the larger tragedy of both John and Robert Kennedy was that they were just reaching the pinnacle of their powers when they were assassinated. I watched JFK up close the last five years of his life and I believe he grew more--and had a greater capacity for personal growth--than any postwar leader. I doubt that we have ever had a President who was less a prisoner of his past than John F. Kennedy. He has a curiosity and an open-mindedness that allowed him to be constantly re-thinking his assumptions and broadening his outlook.

The education of John Kennedy was still underway when he died. I have no doubt whatever that his second term would have been a bold, venturesome period of new initiatives. Those who believe otherwise might bear in mind that JFK was Hobby's political mentor. Surely the extraordinary political odyssey of Robert Kennedy in the five years after

the President's death is a powerful hint of JFK's own capacity for personal growth and change. To illustrate the point further, I know with certainty JFK was never the rigid cold-warrior some of his rhetoric implied that he was. After I returned from an extended visit to the Soviet Union in 1962, I urged Kennedy to travel to the USSR and use his personal magnetism to improve the hopes for peace. He was obviously challenged by the suggestion, and fascinated by my belief that, underneath the bluster, Khrushchev and the other Russian leaders had an inordinate respect for him and for this country. I will always believe that a detente with the Soviets -- and China -- would have occurred five years earlier had Kennedy lived to serve a second term.

In many ways Kennedy was a cautious politician (he would have never overcome the albatross of his Catholicism in 1960 had it been otherwise). He was also a supremely rational human being. However, in an age when most men are scarred or stunted by the wars they must win to gain high office. Kennedy kept much of his idealism intact. He masked it at times behind the ironies of his self-deprecating wit--but it was a central part of his makeup.

To me, his finest speech was not the over-blown and over-praises: inaugural address. In my view, he revealed more of his inherent magnanimity in the appeal for detente he addressed to the Soviet leaders in his June 1963 American University speech which led to the Test Ban Treaty. And his idealism was in full flower when he dedicated the Robert Frost Library at Amherst a month before his death and gave what was surely the most noble speech of his presidency. Some of the words are carved in stone at the Kennedy Cultural Center in the capital--and they express Kennedy's finest instincts so well they deserve re-reading now:

“The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation’s greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested. For they determine whether we use power or power uses us. Our national strength matters; but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost.

* * *

It was no accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power. For he saw poetry as a means of saving power from itself. When power leads man towards arrogance poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.”

We are still haunted by the incandescence of John Kennedy's personality, and the promise shattered by his death. This is what keeps his spirit alive, and brings the quiet crowds to his graveside at Arlington. We cannot forget him, for he was (to use Shakespeare's immortal line) “one of the choice and master spirits” of his age.

ON THE HILLSIDE AT ARLINGTON (1973)

On fall-clad slopes
amid the soldier slain
they lie here now --
the silent brothers.

The death of young leaders
crushes more than human breath;
it rips polestars from their places
and makes them torches that flash and fall.

No unexpected avatar
catches the eye at Arlington;
epitaphs in stone
do not assuage old sorrows.

Then why do we stir our griefs
or yearn for cancelled constellations
when we know all meteors
sign the sky once--only once?

-- Stewart L. Udall

ROBERT FROST, KENNEDY AND KHRUSHCHEV: A MEMOIR OF POETRY AND POWER

By Stewart L. Udall

Robert Frost was not only one of the great pastoral poets of all time, he was also one of the brief candles of the Kennedy years. His friendship with the young President, his participation in the 1961 Presidential inauguration (the first for an American poet), his efforts to initiate “an Augustan age of poetry and power,” and his conversation in Russia with Chairman Khrushchev a few weeks before the Cuban Missile Crisis, made him an actor in the history of that period.

A friendship that began in our home in 1959 (when my wife, Lee, and I brought Robert into an intimate congressional circle) made me his closest friend in official Washington during his adventures in the corridors of power--and let me share his reaction to the men and events he encountered.

From one point of view, these encounters gave an improbable twist to the last years of Frost's life. Generally speaking, he was not at home with modern politics and 20th Century politicians. The very first night he teased our congressional guests with the assertion he “hadn't been happy with any president since Grover Cleveland.” On domestic issues, he had the anti liberal biases of a New Hampshire farmer, and the only overt “political poem” he ever wrote was composed in the 1930's to put down Franklin Roosevelt and his welfare state politics.

However, when Frost turned his attention to the outlook for humankind his politics became more expansive and ecumenical. Not surprisingly, the author of the aphorism “There's no gift like that of turning up somewhere else,” managed to turn up, at age 86, as an outspoken supporter of a young, liberal, Catholic candidate for President. All of his life Frost confounded those who tried to put him in pigeonholes: he taunted his conservative followers with this epigram, “There is more education outside of classrooms than in, more love outside of marriage than in, more religion outside of churches than in...,” just as he infuriated his Harvard neighbors with the assertion “a liberal is one who won't take his side in a fight.”

Frost loved life's paradoxes, and he took special delight in the circumstances that brought the North of Boston poet and Boston Senator into the same circle. Frost's friendship with John Fitzgerald Kennedy grew out of their first meeting in the spring of 1959 shortly after Robert had cast an early ballot for JFK at a press interview at the time of his 85th birthday. “Somebody said to me that New England's in decay--but the next President is going to be from Boston...” was his prediction. It made front-page news across the country. Kennedy sent a warm note, and a get acquainted conversation was arranged at the Library of Congress. “We knew right off we'd sized each other up right,” was the way Robert recalled their first meeting.

Of all JFK's personal qualities, I believe it was his idealism and the straightforward manner that had the strongest pull on Frost. Kennedy once described himself as “an idealist without illusions”--a characterization that also fit Robert Frost. Kennedy's thesis, in his book *Profiles in Courage*, that a public man's highest responsibility was to his conscience (and not to his constituency) reverberated in Frost's thought. I have never met men who enjoyed being themselves more than these two: they were unaffected, they enjoyed self-mockery, and each

of them used irony and humor to guard their “secret places” and keep the world at arm's length.

Frost appreciated the appeal of Kennedy's style before most of the journalists. To him, style was “...that which indicates how a person takes himself and what he is saying...” and another of Frost's definitions of style “...the mind skating circles around itself as it moved forward ...” is a perfect description of the naturalness and self-critical detachment of a JFK press conference.

There were other things that drew Frost and Kennedy together. Both men were intimately acquainted with death and tempered by personal tragedy. They understood the precariousness of the human condition and kind might not survive unless there was a politics of hope. I believe the old poet came out for Kennedy not only because he was convinced he would be “a fresh-start President,” but because he savored the irony that a Boston Irishman might be magnetic enough to cause Protestant America to rise above itself and put a Catholic in the White House.

These two guarded men knew that affection, like fine wine, should ripen slowly, so once they had met neither rushed their friendship. But while they didn't meet again face to face until Inauguration week (a year and a half away) they were nevertheless quiet collaborators in the 1960 campaign, Twenty years earlier, Frost had written, “The most satisfying thing is to write a poem. The next most satisfying thing...is to see poems turn up in quotations, become part of peoples lives...maybe turn up in a Presidential campaign.” As the 1960 campaign progressed, at political rallies across the country, John Kennedy used a familiar Frost quotation as a late evening farewell to his followers:

But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep

This emerging friendship emboldened me to propose that Frost take part in the Inauguration. When I met with the President-elect in early December to discuss my appointment to the cabinet, I suggested that Robert be asked to present “a kind of poet's benediction.” Kennedy's eyes brightened in approval, but he had quick second thoughts. “A great idea--but let's not set up a situation like Lincoln had with Edward Everett in Gettysburg. Frost is a master with words. His remarks will detract from my inaugural address if we're not careful. Why not have him read a poem--something that won't put him in competition with me?”

Those were my orders. A call to Kathleen Morrison, Robert's secretary, brought the suggestion that he read “The Gift Outright,” his “most national poem.” When we met a week later, JFK read this verse, thought it was “just right,” and gave orders to make Frost part of the inaugural program.

Frost was flattered by the invitation, but he felt confined in the “poet laureate” role assigned to him. He wanted to be more than a symbolic figure at the Inauguration despite the constraints suggested by the new President.

In all of his 85 years, Frost had refused to write poet-laureate poetry for public celebrations. His integrity as an artist caused him to reject any form of forced inspiration. But this occasion was exceptional, and without telling any except Kay Morrison he began work

on a dedication poem for the Inauguration. A new generation was taking over the reins of national leadership, and he wanted to put this event in historical perspective; he also wanted to refresh the country's aspirations, and to deepen Kennedy's commitment to excellence and the arts.

Earlier Frost had once written humorously, "I was a singer at my best, and when I could no longer sing I wrote editorials." His dedication verse--which he ultimately entitled "For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration"--was a historical editorial. He was still re-writing it and trying to memorize its lines when we picked him up the morning of January 20, 1961, to drive through the snow to the Capitol.

We escorted Robert Frost to his place "among the mighty" on the platform. A few minutes later, sixty million of his countrymen saw him step to the podium and attempt to read his unscheduled poem. But the lines were too new to be memorized--and the wind, sun and snow (his collaborators in many verses) robbed him of his sight. Vice President Lyndon Johnson tried to shield his paper from the blinding sun, but Frost sensed it was hopeless, squared his shoulders and flawlessly spoke the sixteen lines of "The Gift Outright."

Knowing Robert Frost was a perfectionist, I could see he was humiliated as he returned to his seat. ("I was ashamed," he said later. "I felt like the fellow who fumbles in the big game.) He had botched his surprise poem, but as Kennedy stepped forward to take his oath and deliver his address one sensed that Frost's stumble had added a poignant note to the ceremony, lending it a unity of feeling that was, at once, generous and deeply human.

As Kennedy spoke, his words revealed the reason Frost was on the platform. The language they used, the nobility of expression each employed, the breathtaking brevity of their words gave the ceremony an eloquence that was unforgettable.

Long before he knew Kennedy, Frost wrote, "Words are worse than nothing unless they do something., unless they amount to deeds as in ultimatums and war cries." The words of these two men were deeds that day--or so I choose to believe. In two years Robert Frost would be gone, in less than three Kennedy would be dead in Dallas, but the words the President spoke that hour are carved in marble on a hillside in Arlington, and "The Gift Outright" will be read as long as the English language lives.

But, of course, it was the message of the dedication verse that Frost intended as his special contribution. The last stanza of the poem bespoke his hopes:

It makes the prophet in us all presage
The glory of a next Augustan age...
Of a power leading from its strength and pride
Of young ambition eager to be tried...
A golden age of poetry and power
Of which this noonday's the beginning hour.

In the troubled years since the assassination of President Kennedy--years in which his world view and his vision have come under attack--I have often been asked about Robert Frost's "poetry and power" proclamation. Was it a case of "romantic phrase-making" by a senile man? Did he really believe John Kennedy could change the course of history?

To give convincing answers to these inquiries, one must first reconstruct the mood of optimism which prevailed on the eve of President Kennedy's Inauguration: there was a lull in

the cold war, Nikita Khrushchev was visibly liberalizing the Soviet system, the remarkable Pope John held out the hope that magnanimity might bring the world's religions together, and the newly-elected President was a buoyant, new leader who had caught the confidence and imagination of millions around the globe.

This mood--and these men--produced an interlude which encouraged the spacious, toast-to-tomorrow thinking exhibited in Frost's dedication poem. Robert dared to use champagne words to create the image of a "new Augustan Age" for two reasons: the realist poet was a romantic about American history--and he wanted to believe Kennedy had a chance to initiate a new order of leadership.

The following day, he elaborated on his hopes in simpler language when he told a journalist "Originality and initiative are all I ask of my country." If, centuries earlier, those artists and philosophers drawn into the governing circle of the Roman emperor Augustus had been a leavening exercise of power, why couldn't a mature American emulate this example? These were the thoughts of Robert Frost, a most unsenile octogenarian, as he contemplated the future and wondered aloud "how it will all turn out." What he liked to say in explanation of the nation's Founding Fathers ("They didn't believe in the future...they believed the future into existence.") revealed the faith which led Robert Frost to hope for "an Augustan age of poetry and power."

The Kennedys had Robert in for a private lunch their second day in the White House. As he left, after an hour of good talk. Frost handed the President an autographed copy of his dedication verse and scrawled on the margin, "Amended copy, now let's mend our ways."

Our next long visit with Robert came in September when we spent a long weekend at his farm in Ripton, Vermont. The euphoric mood of January had been shattered, and ominous events dominated the news: U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold was mysteriously dead in the Congo, there was grave doubt that the U. S. and U. S. S. R. could agree on a successor, the mortar on the Berlin wall was hardly dry, and Khrushchev was threatening another blockade of that beleaguered city. In addition, the day before, the super-powers had abruptly announced the resumption of H-bomb tests in the atmosphere.

A grim Frost greeted us at the gate with the question, "Well, are they going to blow up the world?" He was dismayed by the prospect that blind miscalculations might lead to a holocaust. As we walked in his woods, he mentioned "a stupid Armageddon" more than once. He was a mere spectator at the edge of events, but he sensed that his best hopes were being destroyed by the poisonous propaganda from both sides that magnified disputes and increased the risk of accidental war. The ideas he presented to Khrushchev a year later were evolving in his mind as he searched for the fatal flaw in our relations with the Communist world.

Robert Frost's last year, like his life, was a mixture of public triumphs and private anguish. Pneumonia had him at the brink of death in February 1962, but he rallied ("I wasn't quite ready to go") and came to Washington in late March for a unique national birthday celebration. At the White House President Kennedy presented him a special medal commissioned by the Congress. After the short ceremony, JFK kept his Vice President waiting while he took Robert into the Oval Office for a half-hour discussion of Frost's proposal for a cabinet-level "Secretary of the Arts" and other issues. This was their last visit.

That evening Frost's admirers in and out of government gathered in the great hall of the Pan American Union for a birthday dinner. There were elegant tributes by Adlai

Stevenson, Chief Justice Earl Warren, Mr. Justice Frankfurter [Felix Frankfurter] and Robert Penn Warren, but Mark Van Doren (a close friend) struck the most satisfying chord of the evening. Acknowledging Frost's literary "preeminence so strong and sweet," Van Doren observed that he had written more single lines "impossible to forget" than any living poet. He then proved his point by reading twenty or thirty lyric passages. Frost returned to the Capital two months later to finish his work at the Library of Congress and to address an outdoor meeting on the 100th anniversary of Thoreau's death.

The idea for his mission to Moscow grew out of a dinner party at our home. Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin was present and his lively exchange with Frost--about the "right kind of rivalry" between the two countries, and the need for a high-level modus vivendi--was so stimulating that at the end of the evening I suggested that Robert go with me to the Soviet Union in late August as a special ambassador for the President. Dobrynin was enthusiastic, and the evening ended with Robert wondering whether he was "up to it."

A few weeks later Frost wrote me to say he would make the trip if the President wanted him to go. President Kennedy endorsed the idea in a graceful letter, and the stage was set for the old man's last adventure. Robert Frost knew he was in the last months of his life when he went to Russia. He did not make the trip merely to read his verses and to meet Soviet writers. Earlier he had performed such literary chores abroad for his country, and he was well aware that the language barrier in the U.S.S.R.--where only a few of his poems had appeared in public print--would be severe. (One of Frost's famous aphorisms was "The poetry is what is lost in translation.")

Frost went because he cared about the future--and felt he could make a contribution to peace if given the opportunity to talk man to man with Nikita Khrushchev. His determination was fierce, and I never doubted that had he been given a choice between a Nobel Prize (rumored in Moscow, again, the week we arrived) or a visit with Khrushchev, he would have taken the talk, and passed up the prize.

I realized all of this for the first time during our long flight to Moscow, when several times he asked me the piercing question, "Will we get to see him?" I was dismayed that he had his heart set on "the big conversation," and when I told him the odds were heavy that neither of us would see the Soviet leader he became downcast. Later his frustration deepened, and in the middle of a listless poetry reading in Moscow, he growled at Franklin Reeve, his interpreter, "What the hell am I doing here anyway if I don't get to see Khrushchev?"

As we talked further on the airplane and Robert rehearsed his conclusions, I could see that he had summoned all of his creative powers to forge an argument that would appeal to Khrushchev. He took pride in his ability to put himself in another man's shoes, and it was obvious he had not only gone to great lengths to understand Khrushchev's situation, but in the process he developed a spacious perspective of "cold war" competition that was generous in its estimate of the potential of Soviet society.

This was not a difficult exercise for Frost. He had kept aloof from the knee-jerk anti-communism that dominated U.S. thought in the post-war period. In 1959, when some students asked him about Boris Pasternak's troubles with the Soviet hierarchy, he replied sharply, "Pasternak is a brave man. He wants to be a Russian and we're going to get him killed if we keep trying to use him against Russia." And at his birthday press conference the previous March he made this sympathetic observation about Chairman Khrushchev: "Think of his fears--of us in front of him, of what's around him, of the Politburo behind him."

Now, however, it was not fears, but future hopes, which Frost wanted to explore with Khrushchev. As he surveyed the long sweep of history, Frost became convinced that human survival depended on the gradual social and political convergence of the two systems (His insight on this crucial point was corroborated five years later when the British geopolitician, C. P. Snow, and the brilliant Soviet physicist, Andrei Sakharov, separately enunciated bold programs for East-West convergence.) In the acceptance letter he wrote to President Kennedy about his Russian trip, Robert said he would be “reporting and prophesying” and he outlined his convergence concept in these words: “I have thought I saw the Russian and American democracies drawing together, theirs easing down from a kind of abstract severity to taking less and less care of the masses; ours creeping up to taking more and more care of the masses as they grow innumerable.”

Frost told me that he was prepared to say this, and more, “straight out” to Nikita Khrushchev. He wanted to tell the Russian leader “to his face” that he considered him a courageous leader and admired his humanizing reforms. Robert had prepared his appeal with the care and craft he gave to the writing of poetry, and I could see he was ready to speak as an emissary of mankind, not for the people of the United States. He recalled that Aristotle had summed up the Greek experience by concluding that great nations at the pinnacle of power prevail only when they behave greatly. Frost wanted passionately to discuss with Khrushchev a hundred years of grand rivalry based on an Aristotelian code of conduct he called “mutual magnanimity.”

I knew Frost loathed Khrushchev's “coexistence” slogan, but it was clear he tactfully planned to conceal his distaste for it as he presented his own plan for the future. To him “coexistence” implied a sterile, negative view of the human prospect, as against the kind of contest-for-excellence which might serve as moral equivalent for war and poisonous propaganda.

In the end, history intervened and Frost got his wish. Khrushchev was on vacation at the Black Sea while we were in the Soviet Union. Unexpectedly, I was invited to fly down to Gagra for a conference on September 6th--and he scheduled a separate conversation the following day with Robert Frost.

At the time I was puzzled by our invitations. And when the Soviet Chairman spent a total of five and one-half hours with us on successive days--and took pains to give each of us explicit messages for President Kennedy--the mystery deepened further.

Neither of us knew it then, but the Soviet leader had an urgent ulterior motive in inviting us to Gagra. The shadows of a nuclear showdown--the first in history--were lengthening daily across the West. Nikita Khrushchev himself (as he later admitted in his book, *Khrushchev Remembers*) had made a “personal decision” in early July to install about sixty offensive Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles in Cuba--the first time Soviet missiles had ever been installed outside the borders of the U.S.S. R.

Thus, Robert and I had appeared, unknowingly, at the most anxious time of Chairman Khrushchev's career. His frightful gamble had put the whole earth in peril. If it failed (or rather, as he saw it, if President Kennedy misinterpreted his intentions) the crisis could plunge the world into nuclear war. If it succeeded, it would constitute a world-wide strategic breakthrough for the Kremlin. But Kennedy's reaction was crucial--and we were Kennedy's friends.

At the time we arrived in the U.S.S.R., Soviet technicians were feverishly preparing the launching sites in Cuba, and the missiles were being crated for shipment by sea. On the U.S. side, the evidence of this activity was still inconclusive (U-2 photo-reconnaissance flights were hindered by a seasonal cloud cover over Cuba). But events were closing the circle around Khrushchev and Kennedy and fateful decisions were only days away.

In Washington, the uncertain state of our intelligence reports put President Kennedy on the defensive. Prominent Republican Senators were openly demanding that the President “do something” to stop whatever was underway on the Caribbean island. To clarify the U.S. position, the day before Frost arrived at the Black Sea, President Kennedy held a press conference at which he bluntly warned that “offensive weapons” would not be tolerated in Castro's territory. This, then, was the diplomatic backdrop the day of the Frost-Khrushchev conversation.

At the last minute, their meeting was almost aborted. Frost was fatigued and running a 101-degree fever when he arrived. He went to bed and told Reeve he was too ill to make the twenty-minute drive to the dacha of his host. Khrushchev, however, wanted the talk to occur, and when he learned the poet was indisposed he first sent his personal physician and then went to Frost's room to keep the appointment.

I have the only copy in this country of a bedside photo of the two men taken by Lebedev, the Chairman's secretary. It shows a relaxed and self-confident Khrushchev sitting near a disheveled Frost who looks all of his 88 years. Though the poet has a deathbed pallor, there is fierce alertness in his eyes.

The talk began and rapport came easy to these two men who were masters of the art of banter. Khrushchev chided Frost for not taking care of himself and suggested he follow doctor's orders if he was going to live to be 100. Robert said he was “half as old as his country” and didn't trust physicians, but would be around for his nation's 200th anniversary anyway.

Frost then described his travels in Russia, and he praised his host for what he had done for poets and poetry. This was followed by a discussion about the relationship of artists to their society. Having tested each other, the two men began talking in earnest when Khrushchev asked Robert if he had “anything special in mind.”

Frost went right to the core of the issue he came to discuss--a *modus vivendi* for the long haul that would allow both countries to survive, contend and prosper. To establish a tone of magnanimity, Frost began by expressing ungrudging admiration for Khrushchev's brand of leadership. He conceded that the Soviet system was destined to be a vigorous force in the world, and he outlined his belief that constructive rivalry would lead to a gradual convergence of the two systems. Then, speaking from the depths of his concern, he told Khrushchev that this kind of East-West understanding was possible only if the leaders were high-minded and encouraged an open contest for excellence.

“Noble rivalry” was the right theme for “two nations laid out for rivalry in sports, science, art and democracy,” said Frost. Maintaining this lofty tone, he reminded his host that the ideas and deeds of poets and political leaders “shape the character of a country.” He underscored this point with one of his own aphorisms, “A great nation makes great poetry, and great poetry makes a great nation.”

Khrushchev studied Frost's face as he expounded his pithy argument. He intervened only once to say that the fundamental contest would be in the area of “peaceful economic

competition.” Otherwise, the Soviet leader took no issue with Frost's thesis, and at one point he exclaimed, “You have the soul of a poet!”

Frost next discussed the need for a code of conduct that would enable his “noble rivalry” to flourish. Leaders not only had a moral duty to steer clear of senseless wars but to create a climate hospitable to wide ranging contact and competition. If there was restraint, if the limits of national power were recognized, both sides would soon realize that “petty squabbles and blackguarding propaganda” had to be avoided. As Frost put it, “Great nations admire each other and don't take pleasure in belittling each other.”

On his initiative, there was a long discussion of the Berlin dispute. He presented his “modest proposal” for a peaceful settlement: he had the naive idea a “horse trade” of some kind could be worked out. Khrushchev rejected his proposal out of hand, saying “There's nothing to trade!” and recited a hard-line position statement on Berlin. Frost shot back that it would be the ultimate tragedy to let an “irrelevant issue” like Berlin ignite a nuclear war. Wise leaders do not magnify secondary disputes: “If there has to be a fight, “ Frost said, “let it be over an issue so big and basic it is humanly irreconcilable.”

There were further exchanges over Berlin, about the horrors of a nuclear war, about the meaning of economic competition and about the common cultural traditions of Russia and the U.S. Each expressed confidence in the future, and in the capacity of his country to meet the challenge of what Frost called “a hundred years of grand rivalry.”

After nearly an hour and a half, Khrushchev asked if he hadn't overstayed his time, and Frost thanked him for their talk. There was a final handshake, the Soviet leader asked Frost to tell President Kennedy about their conversation, and Robert presented him with a book of his poems inscribed “To Premier Khrushchev, from his rival in friendship, Robert Frost.”

When his host left, the old poet dropped back on his bed exhausted. He said to Reeve, “Well, we did it, didn't we? He's a great man all right.” Frost was elated. He had shot his bolt; he had performed at the peak of his mental powers. Khrushchev the man met his expectations, and (as he told his press conference in Moscow the next day) “there was nothing common or mean” to mar the conversation.

Robert Frost had no way of knowing whether Nikita Khrushchev agreed with his main argument, but he chose to believe he would use restraint and “take a stand for greatness” on the fateful issues. He did know that he had had another big inning for poetry and power, and that was part of his elation.

At the time I wondered why Khrushchev was so solicitous about Frost, and why he spent so much time with me. We realized later that he saw us because he was obsessed with President Kennedy's forthcoming response to his nuclear lunge. Would Kennedy order an invasion of Cuba? Would nuclear weapons be used by the U.S.? The condition of Kennedy's nerve, and his initial interpretation of Khrushchev's intentions, would be decisive.

The Soviet Premier saw us, then, because he needed us. In a few days the real purpose of the Cuban installations would be discovered. Khrushchev needed to send tidings of his sanity, to prove that he was still in charge. Our visits would give Kennedy a window into his mind, which was exactly what he wanted.

When I look back with the benefit of hindsight, Khrushchev's conduct was both conservative and cunning. He was trying, with deceptive twists and turns, to keep Washington guessing, to present a peaceful face one day and a tough stance the next. He

mentioned Cuba to me only once, and it involved a typical Khrushchevian anecdote. To show me he was abreast of Washington politics, he noted that “some Senators” were demanding that Kennedy invade Cuba. He said it reminded him of a conversation young Maxim Gorki once had with the elderly Tolstoy. Gorki asked Tolstoy about his sexual prowess, and the older man replied, “I have the same desires--but my performance doesn't measure up.” There was an earthy guffaw, and a sharp challenge: “That's the way your Senators are. They talk big, but they can't perform.”

But this was the only truculent outburst during our long talk. Otherwise, Khrushchev acted the role of a reasonable man who was genuinely fond of the new President and was trying hard to understand his political problems in an election year. He went out of his way to boast that he helped defeat Richard Nixon in the 1960 campaign (by refusing to release the RB-47 flyers until after the election). He blandly accepted President Kennedy's explanation, that a new U-2 spy plane intrusion over the Siberian Coast five days earlier was an accident. He asked me to deliver a personal gift of Georgian wines to the President, and as I left he said twice for emphasis, “You tell the President I want him to be my guest right here soon--and I want him to bring Mrs. Kennedy and the little girl, too.”

Khrushchev's final maneuver was to make me the courier of a “secret message”: I was to give Kennedy his flat commitment that he would do nothing to “heat up” the Berlin crisis until after the November elections. This was the kind of personal politics that ultimately led to Nikita Khrushchev's downfall. It was a clever, fascinating performance. I did not fully understand it until the Cuban crisis was out in the open.

Khrushchev's ominous game of nuclear chess didn't surface for six weeks, but at the very time we were at Gagra he was preparing another bold stroke that would have fascinated Robert Frost. He was preparing--literally--to use poetry to consolidate his own political power: he was reading a new round of deStalinization to exploit the gains in power and prestige resulting from his Cuban coup.

Destalinization was Khrushchev's most potent internal political weapon. His secret speech denouncing Stalin five years earlier was the chief source of his strength within the Communist party, but his control of the presidium was still tenuous. This, too, was a daring gamble, but it is clear now that Khrushchev was determined to alter the mode of party government, to realign high-level officialdom, and to sweep the remaining diehard Stalinists into the ashcan of history.

Literary men had already been selected to be the spear point of the new wave of destalinization. This was not surprising. Russian writers have been in the forefront of movements for political reform since the time of the great poet Pushkin. The young poet, Evgeny Evtushenko, and an unknown novelist Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, were to fire the first thunderbolts. On October 21, the fateful day John F. Kennedy alerted the world to the Cuban crisis, Evtushenko's poem, “The Heirs of Stalin,” appeared in Pravda. It was an emotional plea for vigilance to “stop Stalin from rising again,” and it warned

“Some of his heirs tend roses in retirement, thinking in secret
their enforced leisure will not last.
Others, from platforms, even heap abuse on Stalin,
but, at night,
yearn for the good old days.”

The publication the same week of *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, Solzhenitsyn's novel, was probably the most startling literary event in Soviet history. Solzhenitsyn, a personal victim of Stalin's paranoia, quickly achieved recognition as one of the great artists of the 20th Century. His book was a searing indictment of life in Stalin's slave labor camps. It, too, appeared in an official Communist journal.

We know now that Nikita Khrushchev personally approved the printing of these works. Robert Frost's escort on his journey to the Black Sea was Aleksii Surkov, secretary of the Writers' Union. Enroute, Surkov made the cryptic remark to Frank Reeve that he expected to transact "important business" with Khrushchev at Gagra. When the Chairman's Cuban gamble went awry, however, he was lucky to survive politically and his new destalinization campaign was quickly sidetracked.

Frost held a news conference at his apartment after returning to Moscow. Handling the inquiries with his usual skill, he reported that he had received a "private message for President Kennedy." The next day a front page story in the New York Times began, "Robert Frost said today that he and Premier Khrushchev had agreed on the need for rivalry and magnanimity in relations between the two countries." The story accurately reflected the highlights of the Frost-Khrushchev conversation.

Frost's adventure should have concluded on this positive note. There should have been a visit to Washington and a quiet report to the President. Unhappily for Frost, this denouement was not to be.

We returned to New York on September 9, with a long stopover at the Paris airport. Though Frost was in a mellow mood, he had been awake 18 hours by the time we finally deplaned and was bone tired. I should have stopped any further press interviews, but the reporters were out in force and anxious to persuade Robert to expand on his impressions of Khrushchev.

As he was beginning to repeat himself near the end of his New York press conference, Frost astonished me by suddenly blurting out, "Khrushchev said he feared for us because of our lot of liberals. He thought that we're too liberal to fight--he thinks we will sit on one hand and then the other." This was the fresh news the reporters were waiting for, and the next day the Washington Post carried the banner, "Frost Says Khrushchev Sees U.S. As 'Too Liberal' to Defend Itself."

Reeve and I both knew the poet had put words in Khrushchev's mouth. The phrase "too liberal to fight" was one Frost had used many times, but once he had attributed it to the Chairman the damage was done and there was no way to correct the record. From every standpoint it was an unfortunate slip: with one stroke, the poet had violated his own rules for "magnanimous conduct," had misrepresented Khrushchev's position, and had embarrassed President Kennedy. In a thoughtless moment, he had indulged in the very propagandizing he personally deplored in his conversation at the Black Sea.

The Cuban situation already had Kennedy on the defensive. He was stung by Frost's statement. When I reached Washington, at the conclusion of our conversation the President asked curtly, "Why did he have to say that?" I had no good answer for the poet, and it was obvious the President was resentful.

The extent of his resentment became clear in the following weeks. Frost was not invited to Washington for a debriefing; and Kennedy gave him no opportunity to present his “personal message” from Khrushchev.

As the poet brooded over his blunder at home in Boston, I'm certain he realized he had “crossed” Kennedy. He began to dictate a letter-report to the President in late September, but his heart was not in it and the letter was never completed.

I saw Robert next in Washington the week the Cuban crisis had the world at the brink of nuclear war. He had come to participate in a National Poetry Festival. His talk contained an undertone of bitterness toward the White House, but as the life-and-death missile confrontation evolved, Frost was strangely optimistic about its outcome. He admired the mutual restraint of the two leaders, and he was sure Kennedy and Khrushchev would “work it out peacefully.”

Frost's personal plight brought to my mind a prophetic conversation he had had with Andre Malraux at a Washington luncheon the previous May. They were discussing poetry and politics when this exchange occurred:

Frost: “The government can use a poet to serve its purpose--but when he is no longer useful, the government has a right to cast him off.”

Malraux: “Yes, but that is not the ultimate truth. Think of Caesar Augustus. The poet Virgil was used by him, was part of his circle of advisors. But today Virgil is the one we remember.”

Frost: “But that was a long time coming.”

Malraux: “But isn't that what we're for?”

During the last weeks of his life, Robert Frost made only one indirect attempt to communicate with the President. In late November, when Kennedy officially ended the crisis by lifting the naval quarantine of Cuba, he sent me this wire:

“Will you tell the President from me to day. Quote. Great going. Unquote. All the situation needed was his decision on our part. You and I saw that Khrushchev was tipping westward with all his heart. His be some of the praise.”

Robert was admitted to a Boston hospital in serious condition on December 8, 1962. Front page stories noted the event, and friends from all walks of life (including Ambassador Dobrynin and Ambassador B. K. Nehru of India) sent messages to his bedside. Yet no wire, no letter, no flowers came from the President. As his condition worsened and he was operated on for the removal of a blood clot, Kay Morrison called to report this neglect. She told me Robert hadn't mentioned President Kennedy (“I think he doesn't want to accuse him of pettiness”), but urged that I jog the White House to help his peace of mind. Discreet calls

were made--and Robert and Ethel Kennedy sent flowers--but the President's staff people, to my amazement, sent no message to the Boston hospital.

In early January, Lee and I went to the hospital for a visit. Robert's spirits had been lifted by a beautiful wire from Evtushenko. It read:

“I have read your poems again and again today, and I am glad you live on earth.”

The poet was weak, but his mind was still vigorous. He especially wanted to talk about the Russian trip, which he called “the time of our lives.” He still was proud of his performance--and he even mentioned going back for a final chat with Khrushchev. He made negative references to “those guys around the President,” but there was no mention of Kennedy himself. As we talked about the future, at one point he observed, “The only trouble with dying is not knowing how it will all turn out.”

Robert Frost died January 30, 1963, two months before his 89th birthday. The tributes of Kennedy and Khrushchev dominated the news stories as final eulogies were pronounced. He was cremated, and three weeks after his death there was a quiet memorial service at Amherst.

How does one explain the sad ending of such a felicitous friendship? It is not easy. These were complicated men, and one of them bore the awesome burdens of the Presidency. Robert, a stoic who nursed his griefs in private, did not openly discuss the issue with anyone. I think he accepted the initial snub, but he was a man of excruciating sensibilities and it was obvious he was deeply wounded by the President's continuing coldness.

Reserved men are often thoughtless men, and John Kennedy (for all his public charisma) was essentially a very private person. This trait made him a person who usually chose to ignore his critics, and was usually slow to either praise or blame his associates. Kennedy and I never discussed the final phase of his relationship with Frost. To my knowledge, he only mentioned the subject once. Nine months after Frost's death, at the Library dedication at Amherst, in a quiet corner he said apologetically to Mrs. Morrison, “We didn't know he was so ill.”

In any event, there is no doubt that Robert Frost would have applauded the developments in U.S.-Soviet relations in the months after his death. After the Cuban settlement, the two leaders took unprecedented steps toward mutual cooperation for peace. A “hot line” was installed to allow instantaneous communication between the Kremlin and the White House, and serious negotiations over a nuclear test ban treaty were initiated.

In June, in a major foreign policy address at American University, President Kennedy made his broadest appeal for understanding. This was the most generous conciliatory speech ever directed to the Communist leadership by an American President. The cold war clichés were absent as Kennedy called for a reexamination of U.S. attitudes toward Soviet society. He spoke of the two nations “mutual abhorrence of war,” called attention to a “common convergence of interests,” and expressed his willingness to enter into a treaty outlawing all nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere. This speech was, in one sense, an open letter to Nikita Khrushchev. It also validated Frost's thesis of mutual magnanimity--and the signing of such a treaty four months later was one of the lasting achievements of the Kennedy-Khrushchev years.

The lives of Frost and Kennedy touched each other a final time--27 days before the assassination at Dallas--when the President agreed to dedicate the Robert Frost Library at Amherst College. John Kennedy was in high spirits that day. He gave what may have been the most noble speech of his career. It was more than a personal tribute to Frost. He used Frost's inaugural theme as his text and delivered a soaring, powerful paean to poetry and power. His peroration included these words:

* * * * *

“In honoring Robert Frost we therefore can pay honor to the deepest sources of our national strength. That strength takes many forms and the most obvious forms are not always the most significant.

The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested.

For they determine whether we use power or power uses us. Our national strength matters; but the spirit which informs and, controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost.

He brought an unsparing instinct for reality to bear on the platitudes and pieties of society. His sense of the human tragedy fortified him against self-deception and easy consolation.

‘I have been, he wrote, ‘one acquainted with the night.’

And because he knew the midnight as well as the high noon, because he understood the ordeal as well as the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair.

At bottom he held a deep faith in the spirit of man. For he saw it was no accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power. For he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself.

When power leads man towards arrogance poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.”

After Khrushchev's death and ignominious burial last summer, as I contemplated the incredibly different lives of these three men, I realized how extraordinary it was that their paths had crossed. Yet for all their differences, the lives and deaths of this poet, President, and Communist leader contained a common thread of humanity. Each endured what Frost called a “trial by existence.” Each experienced the glory and tragedy of life.

These final thoughts brought to mind a verse. It was not one of Frost's--but I first heard it spoken from his lips as we sat side-by-side on the long trip from Moscow to New York. In the middle of a conversation Robert suddenly paused and recited from memory a fragment of a poem that obviously had a great meaning for him. It was the final stanzas of “The Immortality of the Soul” by Sir John Davies, a 17th Century English poet--and Robert said of them, “these may be the best lines ever written by a poet.”

I have chosen to end this memoir of poetry and power with these stanzas. They say something profound about life. They say something profound about the lives of Frost and Kennedy and Khrushchev:

I know my body's of so frail a kind
 As force without, fevers within can kill;
I know the heavenly nature of my mind,
 But 'tis corrupted both in wit and will.

I know my soul hath power to know all things,
 Yet is she blind and ignorant in all;
I know I'm one of Nature's little kings,
 Yet to the least and vilest things am thrall.

I know my life's a pain and but a span;
 I know my sense is mocked in everything;
And, to conclude, I know myself a man,
 Which is a proud and yet a wretched thing.

Stewart L. Udall Oral History Transcript – JFK #8
Name List

A

Anderson, Clinton P., 155, 156
Ankeny, Marling J., 156
Aspinall, Wayne N., 170

B

Barry, Frank J., Jr., 170
Beaty, Orren, 156, 171
Betancourt, Rómulo, 167
Boyle, W. Anthony, 157
Brooks, Jack B., 164
Byrd, Robert C., 157

C

Carver, John A., Jr., 156, 170
Chapman, Oscar L., 159
Coleman, Ben, 170

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 159, 160, 167-169
Ellis, Frank B., 159-161, 166, 167
Erickson, Leif, 155

F

Feldman, Myer, 157, 158, 163, 166

G

Galbraith, John Kenneth, 170
Gavin, James M., 170

H

Humphrey, George, 168

I

Ickes, Harold, 159, 165
Ikard, Frank N., 164

J

Jenkins, Walter W., 164
Johnson, Lyndon B., 159, 162, 164-166, 172

Jones, Alton, 159

K

Kelly, John M., 155-162, 166-168, 170
Kennedy, John F., 155-159, 162-164, 166, 168-
170, 172
Kennedy, Robert F., 164
Kerr, Robert S., 162, 163, 166

L

Lasky, Victor, 172
Lewis, John L., 157

M

McDermott, Edward A., 166, 167
McKay, James Douglas, 169
Mahon, George H., 162
Mansfield, Michael J., 155
Marshall, J. Howard, 159
Metcalf, Lee, 155
Moody, Joseph E., 157

P

Parten, Jubal R., 159
Pearson, Andrew Russell, 159, 163, 169

R

Randolph, Jennings, 157
Rayburn, Samuel T., 159
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 165
Roosevelt, Franklin D., Jr., 171
Roosevelt, James, 171
Rusk, Dean, 168

S

Salinger, Pierre E.G., 165
Schwartz, Abba P., 171
Seaton, Frederick A., 159
Sorensen, Theodore C., 157, 158, 163, 166, 172
Symington, W. Stuart, 168

T

Thompson, Frank, Jr., 164

W

Welles, Christopher, 169

Wheeler, Henry, 169

White, Lee C., 166