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Biographical Note
Udall was the Secretary of the Interior for the President Kennedy and President Johnson Administrations (1961-1969). This interview focuses on Robert Frost's relationship with President Kennedy, Advisory Council on the Arts cultural evenings, the reorganization of the Department of Interior, and the role of the Cabinet, among other issues.

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JFK #3

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Third Oral History Interview

with

STEWART L. UDALL

March 12, 1970
Washington, D. C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Since you want to rush things a bit today....I had intended to go down the bureau-level appointments one by one, but I think perhaps we might save that for another day. I have a few odds and ends of things that we might put in today. One I'd like you talk about a bit is your rather special relationship with Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg and the whole arts council [Advisory Council on the Arts] situation. I think the appropriate place to start is with Robert Frost's participation in the inauguration. How did that come about? And does it go back beyond that?

UDALL: Well, I'm to write, one of these days, a piece on this for a magazine that will spell a lot of this out. I think for purposes of this interview, let me sort of summarize it.

I met Frost, actually, as a congressman in the spring of 1959. We had him to our home. He was the consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress. At that time in his life he'd developed great skill at having press conferences. He made a lot of news. One day he said that the White House had consulted him and two members of the Supreme Court had talked to him, but nobody from Congress had consulted him. So I called over. I sent him a note and said I'd like to have a dinner for him to meet members of Congress in our home and that's where our relationship with him began. We had a private dinner in our home. A friendship began to ripen.

Then after the election in '60, he had been barding around, as he said, on the west coast, and he came to Tucson, my home town, for two or three days. We knew he was

coming. We had a lot of talk with him. While he was there, the idea had just flashed through my mind because he had predicted Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] election, you know. In fact, it had gotten a front-page story early in 1959. He said the

next president was going to be from New England. Although he and Kennedy had never met until after that although they were both from Boston – which was rather surprising – they had formed.... Kennedy quoted him, "I have miles to go before I sleep." There had been a feeling linking the two men together.

So I had the idea and I talked with people. While Frost was there, I didn't say anything to him about it because I didn't want him to be disappointed if something didn't happen. I had the idea of Kennedy inviting him to be on the inaugural program. The original idea I had was kind of a poet's benediction of some kind – I hadn't thought it through completely – and I tried this out on Mrs. Morrison in Cambridge, who was his secretary and the person that handled all his affairs. She thought it would be a good idea, that he was up to it.

So when I met President Kennedy the first time at Georgetown – as we discussed – when he was talking with me about it, I brought it up. I said that as far as I knew this had never been done and that I thought it would be very fitting to have this grand old poet on the inaugural program. Kennedy reacted immediately in a favorable way, and he made a fascinating, very perceptive comment. He said, "Well, I think that's a good idea, but he's a master of words and I'm going to be sure he doesn't upstage me." He said, "Let's not have him give any kind of a speech, or they'll remember what he said and not what I said." He said, "Maybe we can have him recite a poem." Well, that was the beginning of it. Then when I saw him a week later, he gave me the go sign on it because I had then made other phone calls to be sure that he was up to it. So an official invitation went out. Then Frost came to Washington just before the inaugural. And, of course, the story of him participating is all recorded on television. I'll write some of the details on this.

President Kennedy – I think the next day after the inauguration – had him over. There was a front-page picture in the *New York Times*. This further sort of strengthened the bond between them. And they had him in the White House a couple of times.

The story actually had a sad ending. That's the real interesting thing that I'm going to write about it because it's something that…. Some people have guessed at it, and it's never been told. The next major thing I did with Frost was – at a dinner in our home where Ambassador Dobrynin [Anatoly F. Dobrynin] was there – to encourage him to go to the Soviet Union. Dobrynin liked the idea and encouraged it. Frost said he'd go if the President asked him to go. Kennedy wrote a nice letter and Frost wrote a beautiful letter in response. So it was all set. We went. Much to my surprise – but not to Frost's because somehow he felt that he was going to get to see Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] – Khrushchev saw him, and under very fascinating circumstances because Khrushchev was moving the cuban missiles in and was making a lot of other moves at that time. No one knew that. This was the first week in September.

Frost had a fascinating visit. But when we returned to New York, when we flew in – he was then eighty-eight; he was in the last year of his life – he was very tired. And I exercised bad judgment. The television people were all there and they wanted to interview him. I should have said, you know, "He's too tired." So they talked with him and he gave some good talks. He'd just seen Khrushchev two days before. But he threw in something that was inaccurate in that he said he got the impression that Khrushchev thought we were too liberal to fight. This actually was an old phrase he had used to taunt people at Harvard. This made the headlines. It infuriated President Kennedy, apparently. And I had one…. That was the sharpest, I think, he ever got with me on the telephone. I never did.... I got to talk with him some weeks later about this. He didn't have me.... I delivered a long report to him on my visit and my conclusions and my own visit with Khrushchev.

But he said about Frost's comment, he said rather sharply, "Why did he have to say that?" I said, "Well, I don't know." I can explain it really. I don't think because I talked with him that this actually happened, that Khrushchev actually either said or implied that. In fact, Khrushchev had said something to me, the very same thing that he said to Frost, and Frost had interpreted it in a different way.

In any event, he expected to see…

MOSS: What was the original?

UDALL: Well, the original was a very earthy story, which was Khrushchev all the way through. He said – bear in mind now, this is the first week in September. Senator Keating [Kenneth B. Keating] and others were making speeches saying something's going on in Cuba and so on. And Khrushchev, in the early part of my interview.... He said the same thing to Frost the next day. It was just a day between our visits. He said, "I notice that some of your senators are making big speeches and are threatening what ought to be done to Cuba and so on." He said, "Their statements remind me of the story of Tolstoi [Leo Tolstoi] and Gorky, Maxim Gorky [Alexei Maximovich Peshkov] – a conversation they had one time. When Gorky was a young man, Tolstoi was an old man. Gorky asked Tolstoi about his sexual prowess. Tolstoi reply was, 'I have the same desires but not the same performance.'" Khrushchev said, "That's the way your senators are. They have the desire, but they can't perform." This was, you know, that we were blustery and so on. Although he wasn't directing this against Kennedy, it was against the senators, you see, Keating and Capehart [Homer E. Capehart], and other senators that were criticizing and saying things ought to be done.

And Frost.... I checked this later with his interpreter, Frank Reeves [Franklin D. Reeves], who later wrote a book about this.

He clearly said.... In fact, Robert.... I went over the whole conversation with him, and this never came out that Khrushchev had said anything like this. But he had told this story. So this was Frost throwing off a phrase and, so on.

Well, Frost expected to see President Kennedy and report to him on his trip. He had his mind set on that. And nothing happened. Kennedy gave him the cold shoulder deliberately. Frost, in late September, even sat down and composed a letter that he never wrote, or started to draft one. He was only in Washington once more, and that was during the Cuban Missile Crisis. They had this first national poetry festival. Again he was.... And Kennedy, although that was during the crisis, probably knew because there was front-page news, along with the missiles, the fact that poets were meeting in town. But no invitation came; he never heard a word from Kennedy.

Then, in late November, the last thing they collaborated on, except this was closed circuit television and Frost was in Boston or New York.... President Kennedy.... They had a fund raising dinner for what later became the Kennedy cultural center. This was the first big kickoff. All of us were in.... And Frost recited a poem, participated in it, and so on.

A week later he went to the hospital in Boston. He was then eighty-eight. All of us were very fearful that this was the last. It appeared on the front page: "Robert Frost is ill, in the hospital." So everybody saw it. The President saw it, no question about it. And Ambassador Dobrynin, everybody, you know, showered him with wires. People sent flowers. Nothing came from Kennedy. It finally got so embarrassing because Mrs. Morrison even was calling me and saying that this was preying on his mind. "He isn't talking much about it."

I made some hints at the White House. Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] and Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] finally did something. The President never did do anything. And he sat there for five weeks in the hospital. When we went up to see him, just before the end of his death, he tried to rationalize it in his own mind that the President was very busy. He never said anything, but he said, "Those people around the President, they're...." He expressed displeasure. It could have ended on a happy note. It didn't. That's the truth and it has to be told. I'll never understand it. I don't know why, whether it was an oversight or anything else. I called or sent a note to Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln]. I thought, you know, who would I be to tell the President that he was being thoughtless and that he ought to do something, that I'd pass the word along. That was the end of the story. It's an interesting little human thing.

The other thing that I did do though – and I started this sort of not knowing where I was headed: I had the idea that the

the Cabinet, as sponsors, with the First Lady as an honorary chairman kind of – and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] graciously agreed to do this although she never came to any of these particular events.... There was a Washington official community, the Congress, the Supreme Court, the top people in the Administration, the diplomatic corps. From time to time we would have cultural evenings and invite, in the beginning, leading American figures, artists of various kinds. This would add a dimension and a feeling to the community and to the feeling of the Kennedy Administration for cultural values.

We began with Robert Frost himself in May of 1961. He gave a recital with black tie, and everybody came. It got off to a terrific start. We had Carl Sandburg in the fall of the same year. And Carl – I think that was one of the last public appearances he made – was failing then and his brilliant form.... I mean, these were very memorable evenings. We later

had Marian Anderson, Thornton Wilder. Then I decided to make it international. And we had David Oistrakh and Claudio Arrau and others.

MOSS: Casals [Pablo Casals]?

UDALL: Casals. No, well, no...

MOSS: Was this a different...

UDALL: Well, Casals.... I had gotten this started, and in the summer.... I was going to have Casals in the fall and I had made overtures to him, but Mrs. Kennedy's people learned of this and they decided to have him at the White House at one of the state dinners. So they upstaged me on that, which was fine. I was delighted.

It went very well those first years. I continued it on into the Johnson years, and it sort of petered out in an unhappy way. Perhaps, to me, the best program we had was an evening with Archibald MacLeish and Mark Van Doren in the spring, I guess, of ‘67. 1 It was the last thing we did. I was really rather bitter because none of the members of Congress came. I couldn't see a single congressman there. These two old men who really were the finest that we had, then and today, were at the top of their form. I had the feeling that it was losing its interest somehow, and I never did do any after that. I just sort of gave up in disgust. But it did add a little element and dimension, I think. We had different Cabinet members who would be the master of ceremonies for the evening. Like I had Rusk [Dean Rusk] when we had Oistrakh, the Russian violinist, and others, and so on.

MOSS: Why do you think it began to fade?

UDALL: Oh, I don't know. Maybe it was just this one bad evening. I don't know. You know, there could have been – although my recollection was that the Congress that evening was not in session.... It sort of revealed the thing that I had always known about because I was in Congress, the kind of Philistine level of Congress, and the fact that none of them would have wanted to come and hear Mark Van Doren and Archibald MacLeish and wouldn't have realized how superb it was. I thought it was to me, as an evening, as good as anything that we had. Also the members of the Cabinet seemed to lose the interest that we had in the beginning. You know, the Cabinet had changed; there were others, you see.

We did this on a shoestring and I had to assess Cabinet members. It normally cost them forty or fifty dollars apiece to pay the expenses. We didn't pay anything – I mean, this was a command performance for the artist – but we had certain expenses that we had to pay that usually would come to four or five hundred dollars – invitations, engraved invitations, and all that sort of thing. I got the feeling that some of the members of Cabinet, too, were – because we weren't all well-heeled, you know, that maybe this was an imposition. So I don't know. I was unhappy with myself. I was unhappy with the whole situation, but I just decided after that one, well, that's the last one I'll do.

But it added to the feeling that, particularly in the Kennedy years, there was a concern and an interest in this. And it brought a unique group of people together. The diplomats really came out and the leading people in the Administration, and it made for quite an exciting evening because otherwise, you know, the normal cultural events in Washington – unless it's a dinner at the White House – you never have something official Washington is to. And we would have a reception or something afterwards to which members of the cabinet and a few other selected people came. I think it added a little extra dimension to the cultural thing in those years.

MOSS: How did Mrs. Kennedy get things done when she wanted them to be done? For instance, the lighting of the monuments, the so-called *son et lumière* thing. How did this work?

UDALL: Well, I had much more intimate relations with Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Alta Johnson] than with Mrs. Kennedy. Mrs. Kennedy usually worked through her people, you know, on things. She and I, I think, rarely sat down and talked. But she would tell her staff people, indicate what some of her ideas were; memoranda would come over, and we would talk about it. In fact, I remember a phone conversation with her in particular. She had this *son et lumière* idea. We discussed it; I was very enthusiastic about it; we agreed to see what could be done about it. But I did feel, because I exchanged little notes with her on these cultural things we were doing, that she was, although she never came.... We had three or four, I guess, while she was in the White House, and, you know, all the pressures that went on there I didn’t necessarily

feel that she should have come. But I felt that she did appreciate this and that it added something to what she was trying to do. You know, the thing they did later with the Mona Lisa and so on. This all fit into the same pattern of trying to upgrade the arts in American life.

MOSS: What about on the restoration of the White House business? Did you and, say, the [National] Park Service get into this very much?

UDALL: No, this was.... The Park Service, of course, had responsibility for the grounds and for the interior and whatnot, but Mrs. Kennedy.... Naturally, any First Lady should have pretty much of a free hand and that was an initiative she took on her own. My people simply cooperated. But I don't recall being brought into it too much, except I recall some correspondence where we were trying to get – she wanted replicas, exact replicas, of the chairs that were in the famous Adams [John Quincy Adams] house of Quincy, Massachusetts, which is one of our national historic sites. We helped out with that. But she had her own group and her own advisers that were developing the plan that was carried out.

MOSS: Okay. Moving on to a different series of subjects and back to the business of the transition in the department itself, what kind of cooperation did you get from Seaton [Frederick A. Seaton] and his people in the way of office space, briefings, and that kind of thing? How helpful was it?

UDALL: Well, unfortunately, I sort of blame myself in a way. I had bad transition on both ends. Hickel [Walter J. Hickel] got mad at me. We had probably the worst transition going into the Nixon administration in 1969. And Seaton and I not…. We were pleasant, but he was rather seriously disappointed by the 1960 election. You know, he wanted to be vice president. He liked his job, which I did, too. And this sort of showed in a way. He had me down to lunch fairly early on. This was before I went back to Arizona. He gave me a few insights. Actually, when I looked back upon it later, he didn't tell me very much; he wasn't too forthcoming. In other words, he took an attitude of being courteous and so on, but not of telling me the kinds of insights and information that would have been of maximum use to me. Now, they set up an office and I moved someone into it and so on. But it was a rather routine transition in the sense, too, that I don't think he had any very strong ideas – he certainly didn't advance them to me – about how the department should be improved or what changes should be made. He seemed to feel that he had done a good job, everything was running well, and the thing for me to do was just pick up where he left off and carry on. Well, anybody is going to feel that way to a degree, but you also, if you have some self-criticism, recognize there are some things that should have been done that you'd like to do. And you're going to pass the word on to another fellow, even though it's a different political party, that certain changes could be made.

MOSS: Aside from changes, what other things might have been useful that he didn't provide?

UDALL: Well, he didn't tell me as much either as I thought he could've about the career service in the department, the strong people, the weak people. You know, his judgments would have meant something to me because I respected him. I think McKay [(James) Douglas McKay] was a weak secretary; I think Fred was a good secretary. But, as I say, he just apparently didn't feel strongly that he wanted to influence my judgment on changes that could be made and on the people in the career service who were strong or anything of that kind. He had essentially a rather complacent attitude towards the department. He had sort of ended with a flourish, with creating some additional wildlife refuges, the Arctic wildlife refuge of Alaska, and he made the statement to somebody, “Well, let's see if Udall can top that,” and so on. He had a little bit of a competitive attitude apparently and so it was kind of “Well, here's the new boy. Let's put him in the ring and see what happens. But let's not help him too much.” You know, not that he was uncooperative or anything of that kind, but you sort of have the feeling when you sit down with somebody whether he really, sincerely wants to extend himself. I didn't feel that on his part. So I didn't make any unusual demands.

I wish, looking back, that, for example, I had had more insight, more understanding, too, because there are several of these bureau chiefs.... I like the fellow who's the head of the Bureau of Mines, you know, it took me four or five years to get him out. You know, he could've told me, said, "Look, here's a weak agency. This guy here is somebody that I've been dissatisfied with, and you ought to try and get him out. He's really not a good bureau chief." But there was none of this kind of guidance at all that came from him.

MOSS: Were there any surprises that you ran into, aside from the Ankeny [Marling J. Ankeny] thing, that he should have really warned you about?

UDALL: Well, no. Nothing, I guess, that was too surprising. As I say, it was rather routine and done with dispatch.

MOSS: He didn't leave any booby traps for you.

UDALL: No. He didn't leave any booby traps. He made a few last minute decisions like one major decision on the oil import program that a lot of people were skeptical about. It benefited certain oil companies. And he made some decisions that I approved of and admired – setting aside wildlife refuges, things of that kind. He was good in that sense that he didn't make any effort to set up problems for me. I think I'd give him credit on that.

MOSS: Now, coming aboard, how did you go about remolding Interior to suit your style and your objectives? What was there that you had to do?

UDALL: Well, I began, when I look back.... The overwhelming problem you had in the beginning was these personnel matters. You really had too little time to select people. I heard Admiral Rickover [Hyman G. Rickover] say once that his job, running this Polaris submarine program, the work that he's done in the Navy Department, that he spent a third or forty percent of his time identifying and training talent as an administrator. That's maybe a little bit of an overstatement, but that is one of your main jobs if you're bureau chiefs, your presidential appointees, your other top people.... If you pick the right man, this is a very important decision. And, of course, in all this haste, under the senatorial pressures that I was describing of having to pick people in a hurry, you were foreclosed from the kind of leisurely analysis that you could make later on. I would, with some of my major appointments later, you know, spend weeks on it and talk to a lot of people, interview several people, and so on. In fact, the longer it went on, the more elbowroom I had, the more free I was from the kind of political pressures that you get with an out administration coming in, where everybody wants a piece of the action.

So I was not able because of all of these pressures – and they continued on into the first few weeks of the administration.... I still didn't have all of my jobs filled and so on, so that I couldn't give too much serious thought to internal reorganization and changes. And I felt, too, that I ought to feel my way. You know, nobody had given me any guidance. Oscar

Chapman, the last Democratic secretary – and I talked with him – Oscar, again, was sort of like Fred Seaton in that way. You know, "It's a great department." Otis Beasley [D. Otis Beasley], who is the assistant secretary for administration, had been under him, and he said, "You just follow Otis's lead. He's very sound," and so on.

So that some of the initiative we might have taken towards internal reorganization of a sort, I could have accomplished myself – not where you'd have to ask Congress for reorganization, general reorganization, but things that we considered later. There was very little of this. Well, this is understandable in a way because a new team.... The first thing you've got to do is learn your job and get acquainted. In fact, there are strong demands on you to get out in the country and make speeches and be visible and all of that sort of thing.

One of the good things that I did do in the beginning – one of the best things.... President Kennedy had set up a little committee, headed by Clark Clifford, to study each of the departments and to make recommendations. They didn't have any sweeping recommendation in my department. One of the things they recommended is that I have a

science adviser. No previous secretary had had one. I accepted this recommendation and went to work on it and brought aboard a very prestigious science adviser, Dr. Roger Revelle, one of the leading oceanographers. I not only brought him aboard, I used him. I mean he became one of my key people and helped a great deal to educate me to understand the scientific and technological side of the department. I used him also as a kind of troubleshooter to find out how well some of the areas were performing scientifically and to help me make judgments on this. So this was one good change that I made immediately. But by and large, it was an attempt to get organized, get moving, get new policies evolving and developing. And these were the things that we concentrated on because it's quite a bewildering time for any new Cabinet member, unless he's had that experience before or perhaps unless he's been a governor or some thing of that kind, to have. But anyone who has not administered a large organization, just trying to understand how it functions and mastering your new responsibilities is an enormous task, aside from picking your team at the same time, too.

MOSS: I presume then, that there was no really serious consideration of incorporating the Corp of Engineers or the Forest Service or the water pollution problem into Interior at that time.

UDALL: No. I believe the Clifford report spoke about…. I think the Budget Bureau people early on were hinting to me that some of them would look with favor if I were to propose reorganization plans and proposals. Of course, I opted against that in the beginning for the reason, primarily, that I was ring-wise.... Politically, I was just off the Hill and I knew that for me, right at the beginning when I moved in, to propose major reorganization that would augment my power, two things would happen. Number one is that you would be picking a quarrel – situation being what it is and Cabinet officers being what they are – with whoever you were trying to take something from. Also, unless you had the support on the Hill, that this would look like a power grab at the

beginning and that you would perhaps attract enmities and opposition that you wouldn't have. The thing to do was to get down the road always and bide your time and wait till the timing was right. That's what I concluded.

When I brought.... The water pollution program came over as a major move I made. We did it. The timing as well as my own personal prestige at that time, I think, were the crucial factors on succeeding.

MOSS: Okay. You mentioned your position vis-à-vis the other cabinet members and so on. Did your view of the Cabinet as an institution change with the way that President Kennedy did or, I suppose did not use it, to be more appropriate…

UDALL: Well, you know, I had no expectations with regard to.... I didn't begin with any idea of what the Cabinet could or should be. President Kennedy and those around him obviously

came to some early conclusions for a limited role for the Cabinet: that the Cabinet was not a viable institution, you know, as a sounding board for major decisions and so on. It became clear rather early that the Cabinet meetings, as far as the President was concerned.... He did not have an intention of making it into a major focus for decision making. It was more a matter of unifying the effort of communicating on common objectives, of having the kind of general briefings that would acquaint everybody with the general thrust of the Administration, as an opportunity for the President to give us directions that would apply to all departments.

I was naturally somewhat disappointed. I'm sure everyone was. Some of them expressed it. Not that I thought then or think now that Kennedy was wrong in feeling that the Cabinet as – what we might say the classical idea of the Cabinet – the senior advisers to the President, who would sit and consider major issues.... Clearly, I think that the one thing above all this that militated against that was the Cold War and the overriding importance of the decisions relating to military power and diplomacy, and the fact that presidents had to set up and did set up – Truman [Harry S. Truman], Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], and the rest – the National Security Council or the group of advisers who were advising on that. Well, obviously this had to be a small group. And obviously other cabinet members, not having responsibilities in this area, their views would not be important. Well, this then tended though to say "Well, now, since that is a very vital function, and this has to be ongoing," and here's where you would have what people would normally think of as the Cabinet sitting, deliberating, arguing and so on.

Was there another role that the Cabinet could have served? The interesting thing about Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] is that he took the Kennedy pattern and practically followed it. There was very little change really. President Johnson was not innovative in that respect. At least in my view, he used the Cabinet almost the same way Kennedy did – same role, Cabinet. It was very rare that either of them went around the table asking opinions and so on. It seemed to me, however, that they could have gotten more effective use of the Cabinet perhaps by, not necessarily breaking it down into component

parts – you know, having a domestic Cabinet that would exclude the Secretary of State and Defense – the way President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] has done.... Again, I don't think the jury's in yet, and won't be for a while, as to how effective this is, of having different groupings of Cabinet officers who work on and meet regularly, you see. But I think it would have been very useful for the President....

I don't think either of the presidents that I worked for understood the degree to which Cabinet officers were eyes and ears for them. After all, we got around the country a great deal more. Their own staff is tied right to them and has to stay with them. Some of us were politically astute, some were not, but all of us had a finger on the country's pulse in a way that you couldn't have there in the

White House. It seemed to me that it would have been useful to the presidents, on occasion, to have a kind of wide-ranging, wide-open discussion session where the President would essentially throw the ball out and see what happened on such things, for example, as a discussion of national priorities, giving, in that type of discussion, perhaps some of us to argue against such things as spending so much money in space or cutting down, of arguing that the domestic programs were being starved vis-à-vis the military or space programs. In other words, having a wide-ranging discussion of national priorities where you would get very lively and vigorous exchanges. This might give a president a lot of insights and arguments and everything else.

I always had the feeling, too, that…. For example, you know, President Kennedy was getting ready and was thinking about starting something like what became the poverty program under President Johnson. Well, I think you could have had a discussion of that. You spend an hour and a half or two hours some morning, you know, and advise everybody well in advance, "We're going to have a discussion," and have the whole idea debated and discussed, with everyone coming prepared, not just tossing off judgments. This might have been time well spent for a president, if it were properly staffed, properly handled, and properly set up.

I remember a meeting in October of 1963 – about a month before President Kennedy's death – that Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] had in the White House to discuss with some of us the ideas on the poverty program. This was Secretary Wirtz [W. Willard Wirtz], myself, Secretary Freeman [Orville L. Freeman], I think. We were sort of the domestic side, the liberals. I think Walter Heller was there. We had a very good discussion. I mean it went on for over an hour, and a lot of us were making real contributions. We were arguing points out; we were literally shaping ideas. When we left, I said to Walter Heller, "Well, damn it, the President should have been there. This would have been a very useful session for him to hear this." He said, "Well, you know, Ted – Ted Sorensen – he's very good at summarizing things and he'll report it all to the President." And I said, "But Walter, you can't put on paper.... Some things just can't be put on paper. The arguments, the interchanges, the points that were conceded, the new ideas that were brought up, and the whole thing – this to my mind.... I don't know what the President's doing today, but this would have been time well spent for him to sit there. There are occasions when he ought to be exposed personally

to us, not just having us talk to his aides and having them report so and so argued this, so and so argued that."

I felt that way then, and I still feel that way, that the Cabinet role was too limited. I'm not quarreling with the basic judgment that the Cabinet should not and cannot, in this time at least, function the way it did a hundred years ago as something where the President sits down and discusses the rather simple agenda before him and gets

everyone's views the way a Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln] or someone else would.

MOSS: I get the impression from a good deal of the reading on the Kennedy Administration that the President and the people around him almost insisted on a programmatic approach to things, rather than the kind of freewheeling, inquisitive, curiosity-investigative kind of thing that you've been talking about. Is this fair?

UDALL: Yes. That's a very good description. It was kind of a minuet really. There was a little agenda, and it was all there. He would have a report from the Secretary of the Treasury [C, Douglas Dillon] on the balance of payments problem, which was usually very boring; the Secretary of State would report.

President Johnson later went on a greater length into reports. He used it as kind of a pep rally on legislative program, you know, getting your bills through and all of that sort of thing. But there was never, or it was relatively rare....

I remember when President Kennedy called the Cabinet in for a quick meeting one morning to tell us about the Bay of Pigs. This was at the time it had already broken, I think, that morning in the paper. He called us just to tell us, and, I guess, so you could say to the reporters he had the Cabinet in to report and discuss. Actually there was no discussion, except Arthur Goldberg, Secretary of Labor. I remember him saying, just blurting out, and just volunteering his advice. He said, "Well, Mr. President" – this was right at the end of the meeting – "I don't know all about the facts on this, but as an old".... What was this strategic service branch?

MOSS: OSS [Office of Strategic Service]?

UDALL: OSS. "As an old OSS man," he said, "my opinion would be the prestige of this country is on the line. If you start something, you finish it." President Kennedy laughed rather nervously and said, "Well, Arthur, at least we know where you stand." But, you know, the die had already been cast. This was sort of.... The thing was very clear Goldberg's opinion wasn't.... It was too late anyway, but, I mean, he was going to give it. And that was interesting.

But I thought that, as I say, for the President to use Cabinet people – if he has confidence in them and their sensitivity – also to get a feeling of the mood of the country and of inviting the kind of open discussion that…. On important issues where the country's changing, where there's changing policy, or there are people who feel you should be breaking

new ground, this could have been very useful, such as, for example, in the early sixties of discussions of the various solutions

to the racial problem and where we were heading and so on. But most people have – President Kennedy had this to a degree: President Johnson with his pension for secrecy to a greater degree.... They want to have their real heart-to-heart sessions with small groups. The larger the group gets the more nervous they are. Somebody's going to talk to the press and so on, or a big argument occurs between two Cabinet officers and the one that loses the argument leaks something to the press, and all of this sort of thing. That inhibited the two presidents that I worked for, too much so I think.

But I do believe – and I've said something about this publicly within the last year – that particularly if the President would have an unusual Cabinet meeting, maybe something that would last a day, maybe go up to Camp David, everyone come up and relax and just have a real slam-bang session on national priorities and national purpose.... If you had this staffed right and everybody understood the format and everybody could go prepared, I think this could have been enormously helpful to the President in focusing his attention on the differing judgments within the Cabinet as to the way that programs were working; as to the budgetary and policy priorities, as to emerging issues of concern, because it would have stretched everyone's mind and have caused them not simply to think as a department head, but to think as a senior adviser in terms of whether the country has the right goals and is moving in the right direction.

MOSS: This is what I was wondering about. You mentioned thinking as a department head. How difficult would it be to get a department head to allow himself to be as politically and personally vulnerable as a free-wheeling discussion makes you? There are penalties you pay for being honest in an open discussion later on, vying with another department head for something.

UDALL: Well, my guess is that where you've got mature people and all, it could have been, particularly if the President himself indicated and welcomed it – hard discussion and dispute and so on.... It would have depended in part in the way that he handled it. And it would have meant that people like me, for example, would have had a crack at some point of trying to shrink the size of the space program or head off the SST [Supersonic Transport] or make the arguments against some of the new big investments in hardware and technology as against people programs and environment programs and things of that kind. You know, the President's decisions on the budget, for example, every year, are decisions on, national priorities. They all tended to think of it in terms of the structured departments. This prevented the kind of overview that, I think, would have been very useful to the President.

MOSS: Do you think that a man like Rusk, for instance, who saw himself as almost a personal adviser to the President would have accepted this kind of situation?

UDALL: No. Dean Rusk wouldn't because he saw his role as the President's not only senior adviser but chief counselor on foreign policy. I found Rusk in many situations. He not only was inclined to be very closed-mouthed in almost any kind of meeting, but he considered that he had, by right of his senior position, the right to have the last word privately with the President. Of course, this didn't make for open discussion either, but this was something personal that he felt. It would have been very easy for a president to, by showing that he wanted wide-open, freewheeling discussion, get this sort of thing going. I think it would have been good for the individual cabinet members to argue out some of these things and to really hear, for example, from some of us raising questions where we thought on the basis of our analysis and our point of view, from our point of vantage, that certain military programs were useless or that our foreign policy in certain areas was ossified and so on. At least if you weren't just tossing off opinions, but you had thought it through and you went prepared the way that I know I would have been prepared, I think you could have had some fascinating discussions that might very well have led a president into certain areas where he wanted to make new judgments, where he wanted to have studies made, analysis made, and so on. But there was too little of that. One almost had the feeling that the good old cabinet quarrel, the type FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] had, was bad form.

MOSS: All right. Now you and, say, Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] and one or two others probably could have really enjoyed this kind of thing. Were there others who didn't quite fit into this kind of a situation? Day [J. Edward Day], for instance, would he have?

UDALL: Well, of course, everybody has something to contribute. It's true you get ten people as we started out with in the Cabinet, or twelve as we ended up – that's a lot of people. It means also that somebody…. I mean that you have to have a kind of agenda at least, and you also would have a range of.... In any cabinet you have your conservatives, you have your liberals, you have your different points of view, and then you have your differences in personality – the Rusk who doesn't want to say anything except his own little set speech, that really doesn't want to clash with anybody; the sort of open, articulate types that enjoy freewheeling discussion. But I think the whole thing comes out, like it does with any human situation, that if the person who's presiding can always call a jump ball and throw the ball up again and keep it moving in the right way….

The closest thing we had to this sort of thing was a couple of dinners in the fall of 1967 under President Johnson. At the time the Vietnam policy was beginning to come under very heavy criticism across the country, and President Johnson asked Secretary Rusk to have meetings of the Cabinet. Really, what he was suggesting is that he

explain the policy to us so that we could better explain it to the country. This was President Johnson's idea, but it ended up as kind of a freewheeling discussion and we really got into

some rather sharp exchanges. I don't think in that instance because, you know, the President wasn't there, nobody was reporting to him.... I know we didn't budge Rusk, who was the person I was trying to budge, but it did demonstrate to me that this kind of exchange of view that we had at that point, it would have been very useful to have had it months earlier.

We were there.... Our feeling then was, you know, everybody was locked in on a policy and there was no maneuverability. I felt personally, politically that the President was headed over the cliff. I couldn't express any judgments about the policy itself, but just the political judgment....For God's sake, where are we headed? You know. And said so very bluntly and so on.

So I think that the presidents ought to.... I know it's much easier, it's much cozier to have your small little group and your friend or two, your Harry Hopkins or somebody that you really talk to. You can do that as well. But I believe the Cabinet could be a more flexible instrument and make a greater contribution than I saw it make under either of the presidents I worked with. But there wasn't a great deal of difference between Kennedy and Johnson. Johnson kind of took the Kennedy format and stuck with it.

MOSS: One final note on this for this recording. Were there any times in which you found it difficult to get to the President as a Cabinet officer?

UDALL: Here, again, when I look back at my relations with President Kennedy now.... I mean all of this is hindsight. I was then much younger and greener and not filled with some of the confidence I have now, I guess. But I think all of us in that early period because still of the Cold War feelings I mean, the President's great burden of world peace and nuclear weapons and all of this weighed so heavily on him that our job as Abe Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff] once expressed it to me.... Of course, Ribicoff quit really very unhappy. I don't know what he put on tape, but I know he was very unhappy because he felt his Cabinet role was cramped. It didn't prove to be what he had thought it to be, and he felt he was closed off by the President's staff at the White House and became a lackey. He used that phrase. Not a lackey for the President, but a lackey for his assistant, see, and this was what angered him. He once made a statement "Well," he said, "my job is to keep my problems off the President's desk." I didn't have the strong reaction he had to it, but with the responsibilities that I had you did sort of adopt the feeling at that period of time that the less you bothered the President.... You know, don't bother the President unless you have something very important. Frankly, the way President Kennedy had his staff set up, and the way the insiders, the inside circle, the way they operated, they encouraged this feeling. In fact, they wanted you to deal with them and not with

the President.

So President Kennedy and I therefore didn't have a great deal of communication. I mean, we communicated; we went on trips together; we would talk on the phone infrequently. But when there was something important.... Usually he initiated the calls rather than I did. I usually had the feeling, "Well, I can send over a memo."

One of the things that I did that I – because I used this very effectively in may own department – wish President Kennedy had done.... We had weekly reports. It was a thing that he instituted where we were identifying upcoming problems, reporting on things. I did these myself. Most members of the Cabinet, I think, had assistants write them. It was the only diary really, when I look back, that I kept. These went over to Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.], who was his Cabinet Secretary. I never knew whether Kennedy read them or not. There was no feedback, there was no flowback on it, and my guess always was that maybe he didn't see them. But I wrote them for his eyes as though he were going to see them. The fact that there was no feedback bothered me, except occasionally he made comments or said things that indicated that he had seen it. But you didn’t have a feeling.

I found this with my department officials a very effective way to work. I would spot things and send something down to them, or ask for information about this, or it would suggest something else. It caused a very good feedback and forth of ideas and data and everything else.

But I feel now, looking back, that the.... I wished I had demanded more time with the President and had the freedom not simply of going over to discuss a problem or a decision.... If I had been president in this period, I think that there might be a period every two or three months where you might deliberately set aside time on a more leisurely basis – you know, maybe in the mansion instead of in the executive office – where you’d simply talk with your Cabinet officers individually – if they wanted to talk, you know – about their own thoughts, about their department and the country, and what their hopes were and so on. I remember in the winter of 1962, I guess it was, I had a lot of ideas. This was after I had been in a year and a lot of my ideas had been crystallized and I could see the direction I wanted my department to move in. Rather than so a memo, I sent over a request or called over to Kenny O’Donnell [Kenneth P. O’Donnell] and told him that I wanted to see the President. “Well, what do you want to see him about?” You see. You know, when you had to have a general.... I mean I told him, I said, “Just to have a general discussion.” Never got to see him. And this to me was wrong. It was a mistake.

MOSS: That's the end.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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