

Herbert S. Parmet Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 8/9/1983
Administrative Information

Creator: Herbert S. Parmet
Interviewer: Sheldon M. Stern
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Biographical Note

Herbert S. Parmet is the author of *Jack: The Struggles of John F. Kennedy* and *J.F.K.: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*. This interview focuses on the transition between the Kennedy and Eisenhower administrations, John F. Kennedy's relationships with his family members, and his personal life, including his health and marriage, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

HERBERT PARMET

August 9, 1983
Ogunquit, Maine

By Sheldon M. Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Why don't we begin. Using the terms from the prologue to the first volume, you talk about the divided legacy, the myth, the Kennedys' impact in the world. I wonder, just in general terms, where you were when you began writing the book, and to what degree the writing of the book altered your sense of the legacy, altered your sense of Kennedy's place in history.

PARMET: Well, as a historian, as an academic historian, working in the field of recent American politics, that is post-war American politics, I was becoming fairly saturated with the revisionist views of Kennedy, that I took to be pretty much as a result of new information, reassessments. And at the same time I wondered how much of it was a product of disillusionment. Much of that was very disturbing to me personally, for the very simple reason that there have been very few political heroes that I've had, one of them was Adlai Stevenson, and Kennedy for me, in 1960, began to become a credible substitute for Stevenson, at the point where I felt that we couldn't get Stevenson. I suppose I wanted to believe the portrait of Kennedy, that Jim Burns' [James MacGregor Burns] book had. Jim's book was very important to me, you know. And having since told him that, Jim said that's exactly why he wrote it, it was to get people like me, you know, over to that side.

So that there was a real conflict, that began with the conflict of the citizen, shall we say, who was a Kennedy follower, possibly as much, certainly this is a very common story, as much for Kennedy himself, maybe more so. That is because I wanted to stop Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] in 1960. And then, of course, that whole process of wanting to believe, wanting to find some kind of faith. And on the other hand the writings of my contemporary historians. So that I was really in the position of wanting to know whether I had been had, or whether Kennedy did represent any kind of genuine conversion to liberalism, or whether he was the kind of opportunist that many people charged him with being in 1960. It's a time when Eric Sevareid, for example, I think was Sevareid, who said that there wasn't much difference between Kennedy and Nixon. And Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] in fact responded with a little pamphlet to try to indicate that difference. So that I was really in a sense ready to start from scratch, Sheldon, and to see which way I would be taken by my research. And I would say, as much as anybody can honestly say, 'cause I realize the limitations upon the lack of objectivity, the inadequacy of objectivity, is that I was receptive. Bringing my own biases, of course, but I was receptive to going one way or the other.

STERN: O. K. We'll come back to this. I have some other questions along those lines I want to conclude with. I was very interested with a brief remark you made early in the book about the differences in interviewing Kennedy people and Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] people from the Eisenhower book, that the Eisenhower people tended to stress his values, tended to stress America's needs, that sort of thing. While the JFK people centered on the man himself.

PARMET: That's correct.

STERN: I wonder if you could supply a little more detail. I found that a fascinating observation.

PARMET: Yes. With the one.... I think I should preface this with the fact that the Kennedy people, by and large, display a temperamental kind of intellectual liberalism, both temperamental and intellectually. Without pursuing that, as though it were apolitical mission on their part, the Eisenhower people seemed in that sense more ideological. They were more concerned with the conservative mission than the Kennedy people were, rather than with the personality of the man. George Humphrey, for example. There are a number of people. One very good example, George Humphrey talking about Eisenhower spent about three hours, in very close discussion, of the importance of the Eisenhower administration in rescuing the country, you see, as it was at that time--from its liberal drift, and bringing back fiscal responsibility, you know, and all the various cliches. And through Humphrey I got a great deal of Eisenhower's own thinking. And much of it was very home spun, and very homey kinds of economic terms. The Kennedy people were very much, first of all, taken with Kennedy as a personality to a much greater extent, and stressed

Kennedy's intelligence and were far less concerned with ideological missions or ideological goals per se. They were attempting to bring about this, talk more in terms of Kennedy as a rationalist, but mostly the qualities that the man, the personal qualities of the man. This is not to say that the Eisenhower people didn't talk about personal qualities. But it was in a very different vein. It was a very different vein. There they talked about warmth. There is a great deal about warmth. With Kennedy there is a great deal more about sharpness. Sharpness was a very important factor. And an enormous amount of confidence in the man. And I suppose a lot of this, remember, in all fairness, is due to the fact, that after all Kennedy had what, 1037 days or something like that. And the Kennedy people really began to fall upon, rest upon the situation or the excuse, however you want to put it, that the amount of time was inadequate to fulfill the mission. Therefore they were really in the position of talking about the man himself, and what the man would have done largely because of his personal qualities. Where as with Eisenhower, with two full terms, that excuse was lacking. And they were much more likely to defend, or support at that point, their ideological position. I think that's one of the major differences that I've found between the two.

STERN: That's fascinating. There's a point that I was going to bring up later, but it sort of fits now, so I'll bring it in at this point. What was your perception as you, in terms of the evidence, you discovered of the Eisenhower, Kennedy relationship, particularly during the transition, and then during the Kennedy years? My own sense of that was that it was a very tense, charged relationship.

PARMET: Well, Eisenhower felt Kennedy's were.... Yes, well, well first of all, I think the first word would be that Eisenhower.... I think Eisenhower's view of Kennedy, going through 1948 to 1960, was not terribly different from Truman's [Harry S. Truman] view of Kennedy, or Sam Rayburn's [Samuel T. Rayburn] view of Kennedy. I mean, the fact that they were Republicans or Democrats really didn't matter very much. Visualizing how Kennedy was rather presumptuous, and I'm thinking of Sam Rayburn's term that he was somewhat of a "piss ant," which was a favorite term that Rayburn used, and loathed, loathed the audacity of that young man, and hated the father, and hated the entire thing. I.... That came across very clearly. As a matter of fact I would say that one way of underscoring it is that Eisenhower preferred, even preferred Nixon to Kennedy in 1960. Because as you know, Eisenhower had done a great deal to derail Nixon during the earlier part of the period. So that I think the prospect of the possibility of having Kennedy elected was sufficient for Eisenhower to work with enthusiasm about his "Dicky," in getting his boy Dick elected as president. I don't think that Eisenhower completely overcame that, and I think that Kennedy was very well aware of that. The material that I saw, and certainly the interviews that were done with Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] seemed to confirm that. A lot of the other things....

The fascinating thing about doing this kind of work is the various bits and pieces that do fit together. And they do fit together and they establish a consensus. The documentation,

the oral histories that you have at the Kennedy library, and my own interviews, establish a very clear consensus that Eisenhower's feelings about Kennedy were in large part contemptuous. He felt that a lot of the problems he brought on were self created. Kennedy, on the other hand, was the consummate politician and recognized Eisenhower's standing in the country, conscious of the need to maintain support among conservatives. In every single way, he tried to ingratiate with Eisenhower, turn to Eisenhower, and solicited his support. One of the more dramatic things, I don't know whether you're aware of, was the use of John McCone [John A. McCone]. John McCone was a liaison between Kennedy and Eisenhower, because he had been close to Eisenhower. There was that point where the Kennedy Justice department discovered the truth about Sherman Adams. The depth of Sherman Adams' involvement with Bernard Goldfine, and the amount of money at that point, was, came to something about \$150,000. Goldfine had continued to send, had been sending, Adam's checks all along, which Adams had been laundering in effect, turning them into certificates of deposits of various banks in Washington. This was pretty damning material. We knew of course, it, when added to the, to what we had known in 1958 about the [Inaudible] I mean, this was far more significant than what the public knew about....

STERN: This information about the money is now public. This is general information...

PARMET: Well, I'll tell you, yeah, I....

STERN: ...because some of the new Eisenhower books still claim, for example, Bill Ewald's [William Ewald] book...

PARMET: Yeah, yeah.

STERN: ...he says that Sherman Adam's improprieties were, compared to what came later, little more than double parking or something....

PARMET: Well that's why I didn't have much respect for Ewald's book. I, it's, you're right. I happened to review that book and it was statements of that sort, that destroyed the book for me, a great deal of credibility. I had no doubt about [Inaudible] the story, it first came from Alsop, Joseph Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop]. I pursued it through other sources including Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]. Ken O'Donnell was very clear about it. I spoke to O'Donnell about a year or so before his death. In December, what year.... If you check his death you'll know when I spoke to him, up in his office in Boston. O'Donnell said yes, he and the attorney general, I'm not sure whether the president was directly involved, he probably, he, at that moment, but he was before the entire thing was over. They looked over the documentation. Clearly there was enough of a case to warrant prosecution of Sherman Adams at that point. This was FBI [Federal Bureau of

Investigation] material detailing basically what I'm telling you. The Kennedy decision was to use that as another device for keeping Eisenhower at bay. What they did was to have McCone, and I believe it was McCone, McCone would never admit to us. I've checked this with a number of other people to find who the emissary was. But there was an emissary. In fact McCone was not talking about it. There was an emissary. Spoke to McCone briefly. He wouldn't talk about it.

STERN: It could have been Douglas Dillon [C. Douglas Dillion], but it's hard to tell.

PARMET: Yeah, it could have been, yeah, could have been any number of people. The odds are, would have been, McCone but, you're right, it is hard to say. And I don't think that the most vital part of it. The most vital part of it was that this emissary went to Gettysburg, showed the material to Eisenhower, and Eisenhower said that he would prefer to let that whole matter drop. In other words, he would appreciate that courtesy. The Kennedys were only too glad to have demonstrated to Eisenhower their good faith and their willingness to cooperate. So what you have there in effect is two presidents conspiring to cover up for the corruption of the assistant to the president, Sherman Adams. And of course the reason for the move was Eisenhower's political indispensability for Kennedy. I was surprised. One of the things I was surprised to find in the documentation that had been released, not too long before I wrote the book, and I recall that letter in the book was Eisenhower's, Kennedy's asking. I thought that was rather remarkable. Kennedy turning to Harold Macmillan [Harold Macmillan], the British prime minister, and asking Macmillan to write to Eisenhower to explain why it would be unwise to commit American troops to Laos. Eisenhower had laid down that challenge to Kennedy in that meeting of January 19th, in 1961.

STERN: Right, right.

PARMET: And there's no doubt that it was a challenge. Well, for Kennedy to have turned to Macmillan, to use Macmillan as a liaison of Eisenhower, it's kind of remarkable, remarkable sensitivity on one hand, concern of Kennedy for cultivating Eisenhower and keeping Eisenhower in line. And of course right after the Bay of Pigs, one of the first things Kennedy did was to meet with Eisenhower at Camp David. This went on all the way through. There was never, there was a clear pattern where Eisenhower was constantly consulted. Eisenhower was constantly persuaded in a sense to do the patriotic thing and not attack the Kennedy administration. So it was.... As far as Kennedy was concerned, he had no illusions that Ike was being won over to his side. He didn't really care. He really didn't care as long as Ike either kept his mouth shut or made some kind of supportive statements.

STERN: Right, that's really interesting. Of course....

PARMET: That's all he cared about.

STERN: It is documented that Eisenhower was literally in the last days of the Kennedy administration, was working very hard in terms of planning for the '64 election. And he was obviously hoping to get somebody like Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] or Scranton [William W. Scranton] nominated so that they could possibly defeat Kennedy.

PARMET: Uh-huh.

STERN: No doubt about that.

PARMET: Right. Right. Right. Yeah, I mean, to Eisenhower the whole Kennedy thing was an aberration. And especially you mentioning that, thinking about Ike's role, with Scranton on that, that famous television interview. Ike [Inaudible] at that point. Or in a sense pulling the plug on Scranton, who was left looking absolutely idiotic. A most embarrassing kind of thing. But Kennedy was conscious of Ike's political value, all the way through.

STERN: That's really a fascinating

PARMET: Remember Eisenhower had political standing.

STERN: Yeah, oh, sure.

PARMET: You know what's remarkable, what's remarkable about it, Sheldon, is to reconcile, the public response to Kennedy, this Sir Galahad, this knight in shining armor, the great inspiration, with their simultaneously high regard for Eisenhower.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: There are two different segments of American thinking which allowed them to simultaneously have these kinds of devotions which didn't seem to conflict at all. They were just seen as utterly different personalities, but there was some place in the American political and cultural climate for each type of man. And very often there was some overlapping. There was some overlapping which is fascinating.

STERN: Yeah. I think that this, I can't recall whether it's in your book, or Ewald's book that, that memo at the Eisenhower library in which he calls the Bay of Pigs a

profile in timidity.

PARMET: Timidity.

STERN: Whatever it is. Yeah. That's....

PARMET: He wrote that in his diary. Yeah. Ike, Ike wrote that in his diary.

STERN: Obviously, he didn't say that publicly...

PARMET: No he didn't say that....

STERN: ...which is more interesting.

PARMET: Farrell's book. Farrell, the printed version of Eisenhower's diaries, Farrell reprints that. Yeah. And that by the way contrasts that to Eisenhower's public statements of support.

STERN: Right.

PARMET: I mean Eisenhower, he appeals to Eisenhower's patriotism. That was the way to appeal to Eisenhower.

STERN: What was the date of the Sherman Adams's thing? When...

PARMET: It was, I'm quite sure it was in '61. It never got down cause I could never get, and I did try to pursue that by the way, through the FBI. That's personal.

STERN: Sure.

PARMET: You cannot get that type of personal documentation. I made some efforts anyway, to really satisfy myself, but the various things that I've seen place it early in the administration, would have been '61. Incidentally, it has been, before my book came out, and I was worried, I was frankly, quite frankly, I was concerned about using it. I was concerned about using it because of any kind of libel thing if I couldn't back it up. Well, before my book came out, Schlesinger used it in his book on Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]. It appeared there, and it may have appeared, yes, it may have appeared in Jack Anderson's [Robert B. Anderson] book. I think it did, because Anderson had first blown the whistle on that in a newspaper column. So at that point I decided to go ahead and use it, [Laughter] since it had already appeared. Let Arthur get sued first. But I was satisfied that it had occurred, aside from any kind of legal problem.

STERN: It's especially interesting when you think of the portrait of Bobby Kennedy's Justice Department in Navasky's [Victor Navasky] book.

PARMET: Yeah.

STERN: And his feeling that, you know, that they pursued everything. He is very, very positive about that. And yet I don't seem to remember as much about, about this. I mean there is, I know that he talks about Sherman Adams. But I don't think he knew about this. I might be wrong.

PARMET: Who, Navasky?

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: I don't think so.

STERN: No.

PARMET: No.

STERN: No. I don't think he did.

PARMET: No. I don't think so.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: And I can say that fairly securely because I was fascinated when I first uncovered that material, and I remember where I did uncover it. I think I did at, must have been [Inaudible] interview at Columbia. I think I first saw that at Columbia. And I pursued it at that point, and certainly I did Navasky's book. And I would have known it, and that's why I'm aware of the Anderson book. At that point I was aware, I was very conscious of it and went through a period of concern about trying to veri--confirm it. For my interest, of course, was that it showed the, what I indicated before, the political consideration of candidates. And much more than I was, I wasn't really concerned about racking up Sherman Adams anymore, let him live. I mean I, you know, I met Sherman Adams, I spent some time out in [Inaudible] Mountain with the guy, and, you know, [Laughter] and there was no point seeing him behind bars. But the point was for me, as a Kennedy biographer, during this administration, showing the administration's role. What you're saying though, about the Justice Department pursuing everything, it no way conflicts with that. I...

STERN: Are you going to say that they subordinated political considerations all the way?

PARMET: In some ways in every administration, political, the subordination of political considerations may be inevitable.

STERN: Depends on the issue.

PARMET: That's right. Depends on the issue. But, no, this was sufficiently important. This political consideration was sufficiently important for them to show Ike they were doing him the courtesy.

STERN: Yeah. It's a very interesting point when you think of the example of the [Inaudible] case and the Landis [James M. Landis] case and where they did pursue these things....

PARMET: That's right.

STERN: And yet here is an example where it was the previous administration, and yet they obviously let it go...

PARMET: That's right.

STERN: ...for political reasons.

PARMET: That's right.

STERN: The Delany case.

PARMET: That's right.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: Yeah. Delany's case in particular was shocking, it was, that was rather poignant, too.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: That was rather poignant.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: But...

STERN: It's a fascinating insight into the nature of politics....

PARMET: Especially, you know, especially since Land-, you know especially since the motivation was not as clear in the Landis case, because Landis, if you read Ritchey's [Donald Ritchey] biography, Don Ritchey's biography, you know Landis, I mean Landis was that way. I mean was that way, and he was sloppy, and he was, you know, he tended to overlook many of these personal affairs, as many of us will some times. But he just did it to a greater degree.

STERN: Well, that's fascinating. I'd like to just, we kind of got off on this, because of the, some of the things that you mentioned early on in the prologue to your book. I'd like to go back now to the beginning part of the book, to some of the issues concerning, for example, the, this whole theme of Jack as the successor to Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.]. And you very carefully I thought, in your book, balanced the accounts of some people saying that yes he had been pushed by his father, et cetera. How do you see that? Is your own personal assessment essentially the very balanced one that you put into the book? Or do you lean in one direction? Do you think he really was pushed by his father? Do you think that it, or do you think it just sort of happened by itself?

PARMET: Yeah. I don't think, I don't think he had to be pushed.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: I've thought about this a great deal. And I'm convinced that his time had come. That it was his, and I think I used the term primogeniture in the book. It applied, it applied in that sense, because it was a natural case of Jack's assuming the responsibility, taking his brother's place. It did not require real coercion. 'Course he knew what, that it was what his father wanted. But his father, his father symbolized the family, it was what the family wanted. It was the family's aspiration. Even, I mean after all, Joe junior's candidacy was the family's aspiration. And it was simply that Jack was next in line. And as much as it was difficult for him, and I think it was difficult for him, and everything I have read since that point confirms that including, I'm now reading the Ralph Martin book. In fact it's, a galley here somewhere, it's right over there, confirms some of that. It's.... There was then a responsibility, and I don't think there are too many questions about it. You don't find any evidence of resistance, nonetheless. There's no evidence of resistance. And I'm aware, I'm aware of the, of Jack Kennedy's statement to Bob Considine [Robert B. Considine]. It was Considine in the 1950s who made the most explicit, had the

most explicit quotation, which Martin picks up in his book, of Jack's being designated. I think that's a little overstated. I think it's overstated. It was in the air, it was in the atmosphere. The grand fall, the Honey Fitz [John F. Fitzgerald], too. No, he wasn't forced. It was difficult for him. That's the only thing, the only thing is this. There are two things. Jack's physical condition at that point was awful. Personality was not geared to it either. He had to overcome both of those handicaps. But there was no question about the fact that it was a mission that he had to undertake.

STERN: One of the things that was most striking to me, particularly in volume one was the whole, the whole family context. I really think that that's an area that not enough work has been done in. I think for example, that the oral history collection of the library failed badly in the early years when a lot of this, I mean when it would have been possible to talk to a lot of people about the family. About the period when JFK was younger, before politics, or an early, early political period. I think there were questions that could have been asked about the relationship with his father and his mother.

PARMET: I knew somebody who lived right in Cambridge that you missed.

STERN: Who was that?

PARMET: That Kathlee--that Lynn McTaggart got, her new book on Kathleen that's coming out in the fall.

STERN: What's the person's name?

PARMET: John B. White. John B. White, so it's a very common name. He lives in Cambridge. He's quite an eccentric, and he dated Kathleen quite a bit. He was quite in love with Kathleen.

STERN: That's an example.

PARMET: And he worked with, he worked with, Kathleen on the Washington Times Herald. And he knew Inga Arvad [Inga Arvad].

STERN: Hmm!

PARMET: He, I corresponded with him briefly. I didn't pursue him very much for my work. I didn't have to anymore than I needed to. But I was aware of him, I talked to him, and I corresponded. I knew he was eccentric right a way. And, but Lynn McTaggart who's just written this new book on Kathleen Kennedy that's coming out, pursued him quite a bit. And you ought to get him down.

STERN: [Inaudible]

PARMET: There's no question about it.

STERN: Absolutely.

PARMET: There he is, there he is in Cambridge.

STERN: Absolutely.

PARMET: You'll find him a bit of a nut. A nice nut. You know [Laughter], a nice nut.

STERN: I can find him in the phone book, I assume.

PARMET: Yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Sure. Sure.

STERN: Ok, there are so many things about the family. For example, I was absolutely fascinated by some of the things you said, some of those quotes about Jack's reaction to his mother.

PARMET: Yeah.

STERN: The fact that she didn't come to visit him at school, saying, you know, "Where was she all those times, on her knees in all those churches, and all of this...." Now, reflecting a level of hostility, there's something there which you never, never see in the standard portraits of that family, and anyone who knows anything about the realities of family life and the realities of the way people are, you know that these things exist, even the relationship with his, with his older brother, which I think, again there's been a gap there. I tried to do an interview with one of their old football teachers, coaches....

PARMET: Yeah.

STERN: I can't recall his name offhand. I'm sure it will come to me in a minute. But when I asked him about whether he ever saw any example of overt hostility between them on the football field, on the theory that that was a place where they could take out some of their natural....

PARMET: Right. Right.

STERN: His reaction was, "My goodness," he said, "they were perfect gentlemen."

PARMET: Yeah. Yeah.

STERN: You know the very nature of the reaction suggested that I was right, but he wouldn't talk about it.

PARMET: I'd like to comment about that.

STERN: Ok, great.

PARMET: Yeah. About Joe and Jack.

STERN: Good.

PARMET: And, I'm pretty convinced about this. And it took me some time to come to this position. Well a part of the mythology, it was the "Golden Boy" concept of Joe. I think Joe was a much, in many ways, less pleasant, and less attractive human being. I'm aware of the fact that he was a better student and a better athlete. And he was supposed to have had a very strong personality. I think that as self-centered as Jack was, Joe was far more so. As self-indulgent as Jack was, Joe was far more so. Joe comes across as being abrasive, in many ways. It was a word that I would never use with Jack Kennedy. I think that because Joe was this lost prince, he was the [Inaudible] I think because he was a lost prince, it was easy to develop another mythology, and that was the mythology about what would have been. And after all, Jack in that sense becomes a second-stringer, he's the man who comes into pinch hit. And as we all know, the substitute is not as good as the, you know, I'm mixing my metaphors here, the substitute is not as good as the original cast in the show, on Broadway. And, so I think it was fairly natural that this kind of mythology should have been built up. But if you go into the family relationships, I think that you'll find that Jack emerges as a more sympathetic, he's just a nicer guy than Joe.

And it was true in Jack's relationship with Kathleen, although Joe came close to Kathleen when they were in England together, before Kathleen's death. Before Joe's death, that is. He died before Kathleen. But that's just one of the many kinds of mythology created. Another, of course, was when you go about Rose, her book, Times to Remember, is a marvelous fantasy. I mean, that's a never-never land. When I finished reading that book, I just wondered about its, it seemed to me to be so clearly spun out of fairytales. It was a world that existed in Rose's mind. And there's no doubt that she did retreat into that kind of world along with retreating to the church, the comfort of religion. Alone with this kind of fantasy from the harsher realities of her world. So one can understand, literally, Joe Kennedy was no easy matter, you know, and if she found her salvation that way, fine. But there were many, many components to creating this, this Kennedy aura. And, I think I'd stress here that many of these things were not diabolical, they were not intentional. They came about from many

different reasons, all before the public relations aspect, the political public relations aspect of when Jack entered political life. So one of the things that I found myself doing was stripping away some of that baggage, which had blocked any kind of view, clear view, or the Kennedys were lying. And, arriving at my own perception of Jack's role in his entire family [noise interference].

STERN: It's so hard to pull apart some of the stuff. Another very good example is the whole thing about Rosemary and her "retardation" and that whole thing. And the operation that was performed which only, relatively recently, has really become known. And the fact that Eunice's article in 1962 which admitted that she had a so-called retarded sister. And yet, there is at least one oral history, I can't remember, one of, in the mental health interviews of the Kennedy doctors, who said, well, she was not really retarded, she was schizophrenic, which would raise a very different issue, doesn't it, especially in the context of 1962, when schizophrenia was seen as solely an environmental...

PARMET: That's right.

STERN: ...phenomenon, as opposed to today where, logically it's seen as chemical [Inaudible] So then, you know, you consider, now gee, why did she write that article? Was it politically motivated, the stigma would be lesser. There's so many things that are fascinating.

PARMET: It was. Well, remember stigma, there was a great deal of stigma attached to any kind of mental disability.

STERN: Right.

PARMET: Whether or not one's in public life. I mean, I've known, I know a particular case, of a person who does have a child, this is a person I knew, remember, maybe twenty-five, thirty years ago, who had a child at that time and it was not until I got to know that individual very well that I realized that that family had a child in a mental home. And this had nothing to do with political life.

STERN: Sure.

PARMET: So, that put within the context of the period, I think that it's understandable, but the official Kennedy explanation, of course, for Rosemary, which you're aware of, is that she was teaching retarded children up in Wisconsin. And that of course is where she still is to this present day. She lives there now. But that was the explanation. I think it came, it came out, yeah, there was the book, the article that used it in '62, Jim Burns' biography once again, biographed in 1960, still has the teaching story Jim

relied on, on of course what was the official explanation which he could have got.

STERN: Another element, of course, in that whole thing is with the whole health issue, which at one point in your book you said was like going into national security classified documents, just trying to unravel this whole story. One small element of that, the whole question of his back. You make a, you made a remark that I'd would love to ask something about, the whole question of the genesis of JFK's back injuries, just the origins of them. And you said, for example, that Torbert Macdonald gave the Blairs [Joan and Clay Blair, Jr.] a very distorted account. I wonder if you might be able to elaborate on what you meant by that?

PARMET: Yeah, I'm trying to recall that. It was an account that was totally inconsistent with what we knew about the realities of his back problems. I'd have to go back, you know, to the Blair's book. But I do remember it as a fairly extended passage in which Macdonald just about pretended that Jack had no problems with his back. You may be more familiar with that, in that context.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: It was totally, it was totally contradictory of everything else. I could not understand that. I happen to, and then, simply, by trying to reconcile that, I then have to speak to the person who was present when Torbert gave the interview. And there was a good woman friend of Torbert's, and she told me that Macdonald, which was, this was very consistent of Macdonald, was not receptive, for one reason or another to the Blairs. I don't know whether it was both Blairs. I think it was both Blairs, or just Clay. He was not receptive.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: He was playing with it, he was playing with it, that's all. [Laughing]. It's a [Inaudible] do that sometimes.

STERN: That's very interesting.

PARMET: So, in other words, write that off. Dismiss that, dismiss that entire thing.

STERN: What was your assessment of the Blair's criticism of JFK's performance in terms of PT-109? I mean...

PARMET: I think it was unfair.

STERN: You do.

PARMET: I do think....

STERN: I did an interview with Bob Donovan [Robert J. Donovan]...

PARMET: Oh yeah, sure.

STERN: ...a few months ago and he was obviously [laughing] very distressed....

PARMET: Yeah, well Bob went out there and I spoke to Arthur about that. So I pretty much know what he thought of you. But I think Donovan's right, and you know, you know, I can only.... Donovan knows that much better than I do, and he went out there to get an entire book on just that, just that episode. But I think for all the reasons [Inaudible] the entire situation. I think the real thing, I mean the real thing that people do obscure was the fact, was his leadership of the survivors. And his pulling McMahon by the kapok with his teeth, swimming for several miles, and then keeping those men going, that was the powerful factor. Which those men never forgot. Barney Ross, by the way, I don't know whether you noticed....

STERN: That he just died, yeah.

PARMET: Died just a few days ago. So that, no, he wasn't a hero insofar as the Amigari was concerned, the ship. I don't think he can be blamed for that either. So, I think the Blairs were out to.... That was his most detailed chapter. It was quite a bit.... That's his area.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: Yeah. You know, that's his area. He did that Bradley memoir afterward.

STERN: Right.

PARMET: And he did a book on submarines before that. Blair's expertise, his greater expertise, I suppose is that kind of military affair. But I thought it was unfair.

STERN: That's interesting.

PARMET: I know, I know, he can be iconoclastic.

STERN: Right. He was trying so hard to find something.

PARMET: That's right, that's right.

STERN: I don't really think he did. After the entry into politics, particularly I think your assessment of Joe senior's role in '46, etc. is, I think, I don't have any questions about that and most people sustain it. I was a little surprised that you didn't use the Mark Dalton [Mark J. Dalton] quote in which he said, remember he was the campaign manager....

PARMET: Yes, yes.

STERN: Quote, unquote, in which he said, very explicitly, in the interview, he said that, "I didn't really run that campaign at all, the candidate's father ran the campaign." He says it, explicitly.

PARMET: Yeah, yeah.

STERN: And I was a little surprised you didn't use it....

PARMET: Yeah.

STERN: And, of course, the use of the [Inaudible] Company, using an advertising company in 1946 was not a usual thing.

PARMET: That's right.

STERN: That's right, quite unusual. I mean, now obviously it's very different [Laughing].

PARMET: That's right

STERN: You don't proceed without one!

PARMET: That's right, the first thing you do is sign up a company.

STERN: So that was fascinating, and your whole account, really, of the, I wonder if you might elaborate a bit about the whole question of JFK and his relationship with his father. I had a fascinating little thing with Larry Fuchs, I'm sure you know that interview. I know you cited it.

PARMET: I read the Larry Fuchs interview.

STERN: Yeah, I wonder if you still have the little amendment which had been added. I hope you did, maybe you didn't, because at one point, he mentioned this talk he had with JFK on the beach in Hawaii in which they had talked about their fathers and problems of coming out from under the influence of a dominant father. Even though their experiences were so different, yet there were certain similarities and there was a sympathy between the two of them and I literally just picked up the phone and called him at Brandeis and I said, "Do you remember any more detail about that discussion?" He said, "As a matter of fact I have a five-page memo I wrote to myself about it." And I said, "Would you give that to us?" And he said, "Sure." So in the mail it came a few days later....

PARMET: Good.

STERN: And it's now tacked onto the interview....

PARMET: Good.

STERN: It's a five page account of this discussion. I don't know if you ever saw it.

PARMET: I don't think I did.

STERN: Maybe it came after you did your work.

PARMET: It could have, Sheldon.

STERN: It did supply some more detail.

PARMET: It's very hard for me to be, to be totally secure about all those things since I saw so many things.

STERN: Oh sure, I understand that.

PARMET: And I remember the outstanding things about the Fuchs interview, especially his comments about Eleanor Roosevelt, you know, and things like that, but....

STERN: How would you assess Kennedy's relationship with his father? Is what you say in the book pretty much what you feel personally? Did you shade that in any way?

PARMET: No, I didn't shade anything. There was no need for me to shade anything. I mean, one of the strengths of my entire involvement in the enterprise, in this

entire enterprise, was my not having any obligation in any way, other than to myself as a historian. I think that the father's role in that was absolutely clear. And the father's role continued to be strong going into the president's from 1946 to 1960.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: But the one thing that I change in the book is that there is a bit of a turnover of individuals. It begins to, the team begins to reflect more of Jack's people rather than the father's people. So the father's role, although pronounced, very palpable all the way, become less and less of a factor. But there were always certain basic things.

STERN: Yes, for example, if you compare your book to Schlesinger's standard book, I mean the portrait of Joe Senior's role in the '60 campaign is very much more pronounced in your book, I think. I mean, there's no doubt he seems to have quite.... And I think that's been confirmed by other people who are still very active. I don't think you get that much of a sense of that in Schlesinger's book. I mean, it's there, but it doesn't seem that important. And I have the sense in your book that he's not insignificant.

PARMET: He was extraordinarily important, absolutely. I think that Arthur Schlesinger's book does reflect, to a certain extent, the minimization of Joe's role. Remember that the two were not seen together, would not be photographed together during the campaign. Yet there was the key father in the closet. Not until election day, you know, when people going to the polls, did they meet again on the lawn at Hyannis Port.

STERN: That's right. You didn't see him until the acknowledgment...

PARMET: The father was there.

STERN: ...on the Hyannis lawn the morning after the election.

PARMET: That's right. The father was there. The father was working on the phone from Beverly Hills during the Democratic convention. He was there all the way through. When I asked Kenny McDonnell about his comment in the book that he did with Dave Powers [David F. Powers]....

STERN: Kenny O'Donnell, yeah.

PARMET: Kenny O'Donnell about the phone calls that Joe made. I mean he was very clear about that, the behind the scenes role. It was a powerful one. You see,

in 1946, in 1946 what was there besides his father. In 1946 it was the father, it was the father plus some of the relatives, in that background, in Boston and Cambridge, that made Jack's victory in the primary possible. It was practically 100 [END OF SIDE ONE]

[SIDE TWO]

STERN: The office people, Joe Kennedy's people, being essentially a support staff, not every member of Congress or every Senator has that sort of thing. I mean, that's obviously very unusual to have that kind of support, people to write position papers, do research and all that.

PARMET: Yet there was a resistance to that. You see, there continues, not only in the [Inaudible], but there continues to be on the Kennedy people a resistance to that kind of reality, Sheldon, that transcends that political need, the contemporary political need. John Bartlow Martin, for example, reviewed my first volume in the Chicago Tribune, and he was somewhat upset with me for having emphasized Joe's role. Martin, being defensive of Kennedy, said it was really Jack who did it and not Joe. To an extent, to some extent he was right. Joe was, you know it's not a terrible mystery, Joe was a very great handicap. A good deal of Joe's, a good many of Joe's assets were canceled out by his own personal liabilities, and Jack had to pay the price, as well as get the benefits of that. Now how you want to sort that out is really going to depend on your evaluation. If you're taken with Jack Kennedy as an individual, as Arthur Schlesinger is, as John Bartlow Martin is, you're going to minimize Joe's role and you're going to want to minimize Joe's role and say it was Jack who really did it. But that should not overlook the extent of his activity in the campaign.

STERN: Well, I think you're both...

PARMET: Joe was never inactive about anything.

STERN: Absolutely.

PARMET: He'd never let anything go by chance. You know that.

STERN: Yeah. On the whole of the Addison's disease and his health, you said it was like trying to unravel a national security classified issue. Would you say that there was clearly a coverup?

PARMET: Sure.

STERN: No question about that?

PARMET: No question about that. As a matter of fact, I can charge, and I pretty much have charged Dr. Travell [Janet Travell] and Dr., oh, he's still practicing in New York....

STERN: Wasn't that Burkley [George C. Burkley]?

PARMET: No, not Burkley. Another one who refused to be interviewed, as a matter of fact. He was the only doctor who refused to be interviewed. Whatever, signed a statement, you could go back and find that. I can charge those doctors with a medical coverup, because they responded to the Kennedy demand. You know what happened, the Kennedy demand for a medical statement, and they lied. Their demand came about because in the Edwards', Mrs. Edwards [India Edwards] of the Democratic National Committee, who at that point...

STERN: Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson].

PARMET: ...joined with the Johnson camp and John Connally [John B. Connally, Jr.] made the charges before the convention. Well, quickly, the Kennedy people rushed to get a statement from those doctors, Travell and this other doctor, whose name will come to me at some point. And their statement seemed to exonerate, to give him a clear bill of health. But beyond that point, the statement was also made that Kennedy was not taking any medication. This is utter nonsense. The Journal of, the archives, well, in the American Medical Association, archives of surgery had an article which very clearly showed the extent of the Addison's. And we know, and I know from doctors, and not only doctors, but people who were close to Kennedy as well, claim that Kennedy continued to take cortisone through his presidency, all the way through. Bill Walton [William Walton] carried the bag for him with the medicines in the campaign, in his 1960 campaign. Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver] doesn't deny this. In fact, he's the one who told me that Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] has Addison's also. So what was a medical statement like that worth? That medical statement was almost what I had suspected Dr. White's statement exonerating, giving Eisenhower a clean bill of health, you may recall, in early 1956. [Laughter] It was, with having been a dissembling, although maybe White was correct in that. One shouldn't, of course, naturally have any implication for White's statement. But I was jaundiced when I heard that White statement in 1956. I should have been more jaundiced about the particular Kennedy statement, the Kennedy doctors in 1960 because that really was a tampering with the reality.

STERN: Would you say that it would be fair to conclude that if not for cortisone, he would not have had a long political career. That he probably would not have lived long.

PARMET: That's correct. Very fair to conclude. That's right.

STERN: What about the, well, there's probably more you could say about that, but....

PARMET: I'll just say one other thing about that. I'll say that without the advent of the cortisone, he would not have run for the presidency.

STERN: Oh, I understand that.

PARMET: He could not have.

STERN: What about his relationship to, his marriage to and relationship to Jacqueline [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]? Did you find in doing your research, were there any new things, things that surprised you about that? I mean, what's your total assessment of that relationship. I've often been kind of. A little intrigued by just the basic question of why did she marry him. She must have, for example, known his personal reputation. It's an intriguing thing. The whole nature of that relationship is extremely fascinating, and I don't think it's really been....

PARMET: I think there's a conflicting view about Jackie and that part of it. You can go back to see Jackie as she was at the time they were married in '53. One conflicting view is that she was rather naive about sex or pretty much indifferent to it, about sex. Sex wasn't quite tidy, you know, sort of messy. It really wasn't all it was cracked up to be, and sex wasn't very much on her mind.

STERN: Not a surprising attitude for someone who had her father.

PARMET: The name had escaped, but I was about to come to that, right. And then there's the other possible view of knowing Black Jack Bouvier [John Bouvier], knowing that kind of background, after all, she was the product of a culture in which that was not at all surprising. That's what real men did. You know, just as they played football and talked sports or whatever it was. I had Torby Brooks wife tell me that it is with her in almost the same terms. She said you must understand that we came out of that culture, and we accepted that, that when Torby and Jack went off and did things like that, what could we do about it. You accept it.

STERN: This was Torbert Macdonald's [Torbert H. Macdonald] wife.

PARMET: Yes, that's right, his wife, who's still alive, not far from here, in fact living two houses from where we are right now. Phyllis Brooks. I think the thing

though that probably surprised me more than anything else though was not that, was their essential conflict over money, Sheldon. I didn't realize the extent of Jack's own frugality. If he weren't as wealthy, we'd call him cheap. [Laughter] But since he was so wealthy, we have to call him frugal. That reminds me of a line in the hit song, "Finnian's Rainbow." But at any rate, I think that's what surprised me. There was complete conflict there. And it was a source of very great tension. And it added a strain to their marriage. In fact, when I, I had Wilbur Mills [Wilbur D. Mills] tell me that the only time he ever saw Kennedy angry was when he happened to be in the office when the president was looking over a bill that his wife, that Jackie had run up, and at that point there was an explosion. But that goes all the way through. Salinger [Pierre E. Salinger] details some of that in a book, too. The bottles and taking charge of the bottles, the liquor bottles in the White House, and that whole exasperation with Jackie over money. Well, it was exasperation to some extent, it was a tension over sex, there's no doubt about it. She was very much aware of what he was doing. Whether or not she really accepted it in part because of her background or whether she was offended by it or didn't accept it, she knew that friends like George Smathers [George A. Smathers], probably Topper Thompson [Frank Thompson, Jr.] were leading him to things that good husbands practicing fidelity shouldn't go to. She was aware of that. And their conflict over politics, her indifference to politics and such, ignoring it, reluctance to get involved, I mean, there are a lot of strains.

STERN: Do you feel that their relationship.... A number of people, Laura Bergquist, for example, who as you know committed suicide, told me that she felt that their relationship was improving dramatically toward the end. Did you feel that that was the case?

PARMET: No, I didn't really feel that way. I didn't feel that way. I'm not too sure of why I didn't feel that way, but I guess I'll tell you some of my suspicions of why I feel that way. I think, first of all, my own feeling is that the marriage would not have lasted had he not run and won the presidency. I don't think it would have lasted, regardless of whether it took a million dollars from Joe Kennedy, you know that story...

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: ...to keep Jacqueline in line. Regardless of, aside from that, he wouldn't have paid him the million dollars, of course. If he did, it's never been verified.

STERN: Right.

PARMET: It may be one of those stories that someone picked up, and because everybody else picks it up, it sounds good. I don't think it [Inaudible] very much. I'm

sure like all marriages, it had its better moments, but when you examine the number of times they managed to be separate, even when Jack went over to France, when he went over to Europe in, this was during his first trip in June of '61, the time he went to see Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev], he met with Khrushchev in Vienna. And then they came back, they returned to London at that point, Jack's back was terrible, Jacqueline went off to Greece at that particular point. I think there's a [Inaudible] but at least it's not from my traditional notion of a solicitous wife, at that point, of a very good marriage. Nor to it, it seems strange that, later on, after the death of Patrick [Patrick B. Kennedy], which is just twenty years ago this month, when they lost the child, she went back off to Greece. They were just banking on the fact that it wouldn't cause scandal. And she went to Aristotle Onassis' yacht at that point. And the fact that the president was aware of the possibility that it raised for scandal is demonstrated by his asking Frank [Inaudible] and his wife to go over there, to accompany Jackie, to make the thing look better, put a better gloss on the entire thing. And there were other sort of conscious suggestions that Jackie real relationship with Onassis, some kind of relationship with Onassis, had been formed during that particular trip. There are some intimations of that, one of them contained in a book by Mary Gallagher, in Mary Gallagher's book.

STERN: That's fascinating.

PARMET: If there were reconciliations, they were a few nice moments here and there, not very much. You know it was during that period, beginning of December '61, that he entered into a closer relationship with Mary Meyers. He found that out that a married [Inaudible] was clearly different from a kind of quality of the relationship that he had with Jackie. It was what I tried to indicate that it was a qualitative relationship he had was different with Mary than he had with Jackie. If you take all these things and try to stack it up against the evidence for an improvement in marriage, I have no doubt where the weight is. I know where Laura got that impression from, I know she covered Kennedy [inaudible] talking to her and Fletcher [Fletcher Knebel]. Very tragic. I always thought he would die first, because he suffered from cancer.

STERN: He had cancer, right.

PARMET: He probably found this whole thing unbearable. Anyway, he's since moved to [Inaudible]

STERN: Oh, I didn't know that.

PARMET: [Inaudible] Princeton man. He sold his own beautiful house.

STERN: Beautiful house.

PARMET: Wasn't that a beautiful house.

STERN: Beautiful.

PARMET: Loved that house. But he sold it and he's living? But I'd have to be convinced.

STERN: Okay, well, I just wanted your candid view. There's a line in terms of the question of Kennedy and McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy]. You say, quote, "Cynics would always suspect the timing of JFK's entry into the hospital," unquote. I wonder to what degree that reflected your own view. In fact, the most remarkable thing about your coverage of that whole issue was the Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] statement that even Sorensen said that he couldn't pair against McCarthy.

PARMET: Yes, that's right.

STERN: That astounded me.

PARMET: Astounded me, too.

STERN: Sorensen has almost never departed from....

PARMET: It astounded me. There are a few things that Sorensen said that astounded me.

STERN: So you were then very surprised by Sorensen's remark about not having paired against McCarthy?

PARMET: Oh, yes, he said he was.... Sorensen was disappointed. I think Sorensen gave me, well, Sorensen gave me the very clear impression that he was disappointed. He said he was at the other end of the telephone. I don't know whether you could have timed the admission. I'll tell you why the thing about the hospital. Going back to the original.... Remember this, the vote on the [Inaudible] could have come up. There could have been a vote on the plans resolution. That's on earlier. It was no effort for Jack to go into a hospital. What there was a prepared statement that Jack was ready to make which was I thought was a disingenuous kind of statement. It was really a cop-out, in a sense. So there was, he had this enormous problem with the [Inaudible] That was not a matter of timing for it, because had he timed it he would have put himself in the hospital in June. I think it was June when the, or early July, you know, you should go back and check those dates when [Inaudible] So that I think that would be, there's no basis for it. But what

Sorensen said is absolutely correct, and it became a very handy excuse. I mean, he wasn't comatose. Jack was not comatose during that period. And believe me, if it were politically convenient for him to have issued some kind of a statement from his hospital bed at that moment, he could have done something. And it's really what Sorensen was saying.

STERN: On the whole question of Profiles [Profiles in Courage], for example, your line that deceptive is installing a Chevrolet engine in a Cadillac. I've read some of the reviews of your book, I don't see that anybody has really faulted you on this.

PARMET: No, I don't think a single person has. From the reviews I've seen, I can't say I've read them all, but I have not counted any. I'll tell you why, I think. The suspicion that he had not written it has been so strong anyway that very few people took that as an important revelation. I think they took it as a confirmation of what they had already believed, and it was really as simple as that. I think that....

STERN: There are, of course, more serious question though. It is an ethical question.

PARMET: Oh, that's an, yeah. This is why I made a comment about a Chevrolet engine in a Cadillac, because it is deceptive. It's not really the package that the purchaser thinks he's getting, and that exactly the thing with the Pulitzer Prize, except it goes?

STERN: Think of the incident, what was it, a year ago, to the effect that black woman who wrote....

PARMET: Oh, yes, the Washington Post. Yes, but you see, she, of course, this Cook [Janet Cook] woman, there was a great dilemma about that, and, of course, we know what happened with it. But think of Kennedy's situation. Look, he had used Clark Clifford [Clark M. Clifford] to get a retraction from Drew Pearson....

STERN: Right.

PARMET: And by the way if you look at Clark Clifford's oral history, it's an interesting confirmation that Pearson was right. You don't even have to read between the lines very carefully. In Clifford's legalese, why doesn't Clifford pursue it? Why does he advise Kennedy not to pursue it? Because at best the litigation would be going for many years, and he may not win it. The best thing to do is get a retraction. And what's the motivation for retraction. Pearson doesn't want to be tied up in litigation for many years, and plus the amount of money. So the suspicion had occurred for a long time. But what could Kennedy have done. Once he had, once the retraction had been offered, once he had

continued to deny it, could he have refused the Pulitzer Prize at that point. Of course, the other side of the coin is that there was active lobbying for the prize itself.

STERN: Then you're not as sure....

PARMET: Okay, let me answer.

STERN: Okay.

PARMET: I found material after the book came out....

STERN: Did you?

PARMET: Yeah, that confirms it. I wish I had had the material. Yeah, there it is in the Arthur Clark papers in Princeton. The instrument, the most direct instrument was Choate [Robert Choate], Choate of the Boston Herald, who was on the committee. He was the man through whom Clark was lobbying. I was right about Clark lobbying. I was right about the fact that [Inaudible] did not make his hand visible, his hand was not going to be visible, and that he was lobbying. But it's quite clear, if you look at it, and Choate was used as an instrument for that lobbying. So I could have been force--I could have added a little more documentation. But it's there.

STERN: Also, of course, an extension of that is what the chapter on the so-called literary campaign where, again, you have the letter, the article to Foreign Affairs going with his cover letter when it was clearly written by Ted Sorensen.

PARMET: That's right, that's right. Churning out articles for everybody. I mean that was, Sorensen was really in charge of all that stuff.

STERN: It raises very profound questions about modern politics...

PARMET: It certainly does.

STERN: ...and very disquieting questions, to say the least. Another thing involving Sorensen, the whole question of the religious issue, in the period from '56 to '60. I think it's an extremely interesting question.

PARMET: Yeah.

STERN: Because there's little doubt, and after reading your book, no one can seriously

doubt that while the Kennedy, while JFK and Kennedy campaign clearly were worried about the religious issue, on the other hand they exploited it. I mean they saw room for exploitation to use that issue. And they did.

PARMET: Sorensen's argument explains exactly why.

STERN: Sure, exactly. And so it's not surprising then, in some of my interviews with some of the Republicans in the '60 campaign, people who worked for Nixon, have confirmed that they were furious, because they felt they were being had on this question, that they were being put in a position where they couldn't say anything about religion because they would then appear to be bigots, but on the other hand, then, the Kennedy was using it to its advantage. They had a very genuine issue there.

PARMET: But they're right. It was multi-faceted, though, Sheldon.

STERN: It was very complicated.

PARMET: It really was. And one of the things that I attempt to do on that religious issue, one of the things that I attempted to highlight and, of course, the problem with doing this kind of work, obviously, as you know, is wanting to, you need to highlight something, point it out without putting it out of balance here, without making it disproportionately important.

STERN: Right.

PARMET: But I do think it was of some significance, was the difficulty of getting Catholic Democratic politicians lined up behind Kennedy. I mean, you have the [Inaudible] described that, I think it's my book, I've forgotten already which is my book, of Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff] in a room saying, "Isn't it odd," or he said it to me, I think Mr. Ribicoff said it to me in my interview with Ribicoff, that, "here am I, it's got to be the only Jew in the room, in a room full of Catholics, who's supporting Kennedy, who feels that he should not back down in the face of this issue." That was one of the real obstacles, the obstacles of getting anywhere within the Democratic Party, getting the nomination, overcoming the Catholic governors, the opposition of Catholic governors who in that day, in 1960, carried a hell of a lot more clout than since the reforms...

STERN: Sure.

PARMET: ...that were instituted in the early '70s.

STERN: Right.

PARMET: That's why a guy like Mike DiSalle's [Michael V. DiSalle] support became so important.

STERN: Or Lawrence [David Lawrence].

PARMET: Yeah, sure. And Lawrence had, as you know, very strong lists of Asians. He was one.... You know, it was hard to get Lawrence on the plantation. It was very important, it was big news when he did get on.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: So that, yes, there were advantages, electoral advantages. But there were disadvantages among Catholic Democrats and, of course, in the final analysis, if we go along with the [Inaudible] Research Center, the University of Michigan, and say that it resulted in that loss of a million and a half votes, you may then say that there was a disadvantage in that for the advocacy of his presidency.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: Strength of his presidency.

STERN: Yeah. It wasn't too?

PARMET: Absolutely.

STERN: And it may have come close to costing him the election. It's very hard to say.

PARMET: But it cost him some strength in the presidency itself...

STERN: Yes, that's right.

PARMET: ...having won.

STERN: That's right.

PARMET: But if you look at the picture of Jack's face, and the tone of his statement at the Hyannis Port home when he acknowledged that he had won, when those returns were in, and the composure of Bobby standing on the side, you can say that it was a decidedly adulterated victory as far as they were concerned. It was not a victory to really have uncorked the champagne.

STERN: Right. You notice that if you look closely at that little film clip you see Kennedy's hand....

PARMET: Yeah, yeah.

STERN: ...?

PARMET: Yeah, you can see it in their whole demeanor.

STERN: It was better than losing. [Laughter]

PARMET: It was better than losing, but now what they had bargained.

STERN: That's right. Another point, not a major thing in your book, but something of specific interest to me, because I've done about six or eight oral histories on this, which was Kennedy's relationship to Adlai Stevenson. Again, another one of these, I thought, very ambiguous relationships, ambivalent, too, of course, Bobby comes into this as well. Do you subscribe to the notion that if Kennedy had run in '56 for vice president that it would have been an absolute disaster for him. I mean, I think you could write a very different scenario saying that he could have emerged as being, as very much of a national figure if he had run for vice president...

PARMET: I think so.

STERN: ...and lost. I think that's part of the mythology.

PARMET: That's right. I think that's a little too simple. I agree with you totally.

STERN: It's too pat.

PARMET: I think it's too pat. I think that it makes too many assumptions. I mean, after all, Ed Muskie [Edmund S. Muskie] came out of the '68 race so strongly that the Nixon dirty tricks department had aimed, put him in their gun sights. And if we realize what Jack Kennedy was emerging like at that point, and if we give any credence to the fact of his, the importance of his appearance at the convention in 1956, in helping him become known as a national figure, being introduced to the public, then let's assume that during the 1956 campaign, campaigning along with Stevenson he would have developed a certain amount of credibility on his own.

STERN: Right. I think that's probably true. What about, one of the things that also

fascinates me was his relationship to the press. It is an extraordinary thing, and I've pursued this and done some interviews recently with some of the journalists who knew him very well, and there's no question that.... Laura Bergquist, for example, said that he had the most disarming way of using candor, which is not the same thing as candor.

PARMET: What is it?

STERN: You know, that he used candor to win their support. Of course, you tell the story about Fletcher Knebel, which so many people which so many people have told....

PARMET: Yeah, it's a good story.

STERN: And when I interviewed Knebel he said to me that when he went home that night, he felt very dirty because he knew that he ought to say that he knew what the truth was, and he didn't tell the truth.

PARMET: I like this guy. He's a nice man. I can see where he's....

STERN: He didn't tell the truth because he knew that if he did he would be cutting himself off from the possible president of the United States. He won't have access. So there it is, but clearly Kennedy did have a way of dealing with journalists which they liked very much, and he was very candid, up to a point, although he would explode that candor. But, what was your perception of that whole thing? Certainly, if you contrast Nixon's....

PARMET: Oh yeah. Well, first of all, to exploit.... Well, you're using the press, every president hopes to be able to use the press, hopes to be able to manipulate the press along his own lines. I mean, Eisenhower, when he was still supreme commander during World War II, used the press, used the press very well to help prepare, in a sense, his popularity in the United States back home. Every president tends to use the press. Now Jack, it was Jack Kennedy, was a great contrast, of course, with Nixon in his use of the press, Kennedy enjoyed them. Kennedy's own inclinations tended to be journalistic, he was always interested in journalism as you know, and he was very much involved in the kind of work they were doing. And he was very good at the kind of rapport that appealed to them, and it was very, very hard for a candidate to bulldoze them. It really was. If you look at those clips in the Kennedy Library, if you look at his news conferences even, you can see at times where he seems to be suppressing things that he really wants to say. There are points where you can see that gleam in his eyes. You know, if you knew Kennedy at all, you pretty much know what he's thinking on many, many points. And the press knew that. The press

knew that he could not really mislead them with a straight face for very, very long, that it would come out in one way or another. They felt they had an opportunity for some pretty good frank talk with them, although we know he did mislead them in a number of cases. A number of private papers I've seen, the [Inaudible] offhand background, sure, he did manage to be misleading. But he cultivated them, they were among his best friends, which was very handy.

STERN: Okay, let's move on now to the second volume. I was curious, really just in a methodological sense, as to why with the first volume ending with the announcement in January of '60, and then basically then you began the second volume with the convention and only touched on the primaries incidentally when you dealt with the religious issue. Was there a reason for that, not dealing in more detail with that six-month period.

PARMET: Yeah, I didn't want to get, I wanted to get on with the presidency, and I think the structural purpose is there for the book, structural and artistic purposes. I felt that much of that ground had been gone over very thoroughly that the time had come to cover that in more [Interruption--phone ringing]....

STERN: So then you decided simply to, basically to leave....

PARMET: Yeah, I felt that I had to be fairly selective, Sheldon, in the material that I could bring to this book, and without putting that, without making it disproportionate to the entire work, and, of course, I didn't have the time, the time, the stringent time it would take so I could talk about it. Therefore, you will notice, that I spent more time in analyzing the West Virginia primary, the religious issue, to try to set that straight, rather than go through each and every one of the primaries.

STERN: Yeah, I think this was true, for example, also on the question of the Johnson selection at the convention. That has been hashed over by so many people. There's nothing new to be said about it.

PARMET: Right, right.

STERN: You pretty much know what happened. I would use that, by the way, as a good example of the fact that even though we know everything, to this day I don't think anybody knows absolutely for sure....

PARMET: Well, I thought that I would supply some of the details that, to my mind, clinched the, two things about that. It clinched the idea that Jack originally really wanted Johnson, really for his, obvious political reasons, or wanted

Johnson, not as Schlesinger maintains, did not really hold it out hoping, assuming Johnson would refuse it. I think there's no basis for that. Kennedy worked too hard to pursue that at Los Angeles. And I think, secondly, it showed the indecisiveness that [Inaudible] because once having made the offer to Johnson, after all, what was Bobby really telling Jack. He said, "I made my commitment to all these labor people, all these liberals, and we've been cultivating them now for the last few years in competing against Stevenson. Now you're about to blow the entire thing." That's how O'Donnell also felt. At that point, Jack began to have second thoughts about it. But I don't doubt that there are other forces that took over. And I suspect the one place where I speculate there is that the ambassador's been involved.

STERN: You conclude, for example, early on in the book when the administration began, you say Kennedy didn't march, he tiptoed, which I thought was a great line, by the way. But the cautiousness of those early months, do you, how much of that do you feel was related to the narrowness of the victory? Do you think it was more deeply rooted than that?

PARMET: You mean was he finding excuses?

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: Yeah, I went over that with, probably the man I discussed that most closely with was Walter Heller who after all was concerned with economic as a very important area. I think that, here again, Heller's very, I think a candid guy and I think he's also very loyal to Kennedy, although the emphasis was on the narrowness, and now only the narrowness, but I think people very often forget the arithmetic of the Congress, the committee lineup. I think Heller would frighten the hell out of me, frankly, the committee lineup in the Congress aside from the fact that the Democrats actually had less strength than they had had in the preceding Congress. I think that of itself was important justification. I do also believe that there is some truth to the fact, and I've stated this in the book, that it was just too many cases easier for Kennedy to find reasons for the [Inaudible] to find reasons to put off things. I think he tended to be temperamentally cautious in such matters. So I do think that they came together, very much so, very much so. One possible scenario, for example, that I suggested to Heller in that discussion was to use the aura of the honeymoon. I pointed the fact that, I said you people came in with such enormous expectations, once the votes were in, and that's another thing, over sixty percent [Inaudible] voted for Kennedy, and that sort of thing that happens very often. Why didn't you seize that moment and move on? And Heller acknowledged that looking back there in twenty years or so that that's a possible view of things, but that's not the way it appeared to them at that moment. But I think that one of the reasons is true, aside from having acknowledged all the other problems, to some extent has to be Jack Kennedy's own cautious personality, and you can't really quantify that.

STERN: No, you can't.

PARMET: There's no way. You can quantify the other, you can't quantify this part.

STERN: There are a number of people who were close to him who have said that certainly not all the mysteries that.... He was not a man who made decisions before he had to make them.

PARMET: That's right. That's right. There are many, many examples of that. Look at the housing order, for example, if you follow that one all the way through. Sure. I think that's....

STERN: And, of course, contemps. I think of a discussion I had with Bobby Bernstein about this once, and you think of his, in that article he wrote in which he talks about, says that FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] should have nationalized the banks in March of '33. I remember saying to Bobby, "Bobby, that's very easy to say, but you have to see what the context was. He maybe could have, he perhaps could have gotten away with it, maybe. I grant you that, but the political results would have been so traumatic." [Laughter]

PARMET: Absolutely. He had the banks with him at that moment.

STERN: That's right.

PARMET: He had the surviving banks with him at that moment. It leaves out certain things.

STERN: That's right. And it's that sort of position, Bobby's position in that sort of issue it seems to me you could easily say the same sorts of things that Kennedy should have done this and he should have done that without having an adequate enough sense of what the context was.

PARMET: I happen to be working on a bank project right now. That's what's in this machine, where this part of the case, this is [Inaudible] bank of New York, where there such strong endorsement of Roosevelt and his moves in '33. Seeing it as strengthening, enabling them to survive doing the things that needed to be done. That's the same thing with Kennedy there in '61. You take these things out of context, you're really rewriting history.

STERN: That's right.

PARMET: Anybody can write, then it becomes a game that anybody can write.

STERN: That's right. I think it's a very dangerous business. On.... Go ahead.

PARMET: No, it's what you say, going back to the first question you asked me. That's the kind of realization I had, Sheldon, when I first came into the project. I was wondering whether my colleagues were simply using it as an outlet, pitting Kennedy as an outlet for their own frustration, their own disillusionment. Or whether I was being naive, and then it did become too open. Anybody was able to write the history as he wanted to.

STERN: That's fascinating.

PARMET: My friend is going to be charging this one, my colleague, front page Times book?

STERN: I've heard about that. Let me just go back to something we talked about a little while ago, because I think there's another element to it. The question of the press. It's a fascinating point, this whole thing, which isn't [Inaudible]. There's no point in going into it, about Kennedy and women and that whole business. But [Inaudible] there, too, is an element which relates because, I mean, I've done some interviews with journalists, they all knew about it, most of them knew about it.

PARMET: Oh, sure.

STERN: Why didn't they say anything?

PARMET: Well, that's what, the question's been asked many times. It's been asked on radio and TV.

STERN: And Nixon has been known to say that if I had been doing this, they would have blown the whistle on me. Who knows. I don't know. I doubt it. I think....

PARMET: It's a misunderstanding of the basic nature, the basic dynamics of the question. The basic, start with the fact that the person needs access. Next step, bread and butter. If you're White House correspondent, you won't have access to the White House. You may as well be sent to Topeka, you know, and cover the Kansas legislature. It was simply regarded as off limits, out of bounds, and you only went into that sort of thing if you were prepared to sacrifice your career and everything else. I mean the

womanizing, alcoholism or God knows what else does go on as it does with any normal set of people, exacerbated by conditions in Washington for a lot of reasons. Of course [Inaudible] to a much greater degree, so it has been exacerbated. But the press, for all those reasons, simply gossip among themselves, speculate.

STERN: One major journalist, whose name you'll recognize immediately, said to me, I asked him was an effort made to hide these things. He said, "No, it was very, very open, and we all saw it in many, many cases." But then he sort of sat back and he said, "But you see, that's part of the whole thing." He said, "The issue in this sort of thing is that it has to be flaunted. If it's kept secret, it loses half its value." That, he said, was the whole psychology of it with people like that, which I think is a very interesting point, and yet at the same time, he said they knew that we would not report it.

PARMET: I knew a woman who was an interior designer for the Kennedys who told some of these stories back at the time of [Inaudible] And she knew about it.

STERN: I had a friend who was a White House, what do they call them, interns?

PARMET: Oh, yes. White House interns.

STERN: White House fellow?

PARMET: Fellow, yes.

STERN: She came back in 1962 to Massachusetts and she was over at the house and she said, "All the stories I heard." We all laughed and said it's impossible. A president? [Laughter] Okay, on to a more serious note. I was really somewhat surprised at, in your chapter on Laos, the material on Laos, I was going to ask you this question and suddenly there was the conclusion before I got to ask the question. There was Chalmers Roberts [Chalmers M. Roberts], when I interviewed him, categorically stated that he thought that we didn't go into Laos, Kennedy's, and Bobby was involved at the time in the decision not to go into Laos was directly related to the Bay of Pigs. Did you get that from people other than Roberts or is that something you never thought?

PARMET: No, I think it's a couple things that I put together, including the meeting with Macmillan which predated it. I think a couple things I put together convinced me very clearly that Kennedy was not about to go into Laos, despite the Bay of Pigs. You can say that the Bay of Pigs may have clinched it, maybe clinched that decision, but I don't go along, for the reason I indicated, but for that conventional wisdom. I think Kennedy was looking for ways to avoid going into Laos.

STERN: Well, you make that very clear. Yet, the other side of the coin, which I was fascinated by, was your conclusion adding the rest of the Vietnam quote, which is, I've almost never seen anybody add that, that second part of the quote when he said...

PARMET: Oh, yes.

STERN: ...“ [Inaudible] win the war on their own...

PARMET: Oh, sure.

STERN: ...[Inaudible] I don't intend to withdraw. ” Almost invariably that's dropped.

PARMET: Yeah, I was surprised when I saw that.

STERN: Yeah, I was surprised, too.

PARMET: I was surprised. That's when I first came across that.

STERN: That's a very revealing quote, and yet I think you also have a general remark in which you say you don't think Kennedy had probably made up his mind, and personally I think that's probably true.

PARMET: You know what's also revealing, probably more, as revealing, at least as revealing as that quote, is from the interview Bobby Kennedy gave, I think with John Bartlow Martin, in 1964, where Robert Kennedy gave to John Bartlow Martin. Remember, that was not an afterthought after the controversy of the Vietnamese War.

STERN: That's right. It was before the....

PARMET: That's right, before the controversy. Very important. Almost all the other comments are after the controversy.

STERN: That's right.

PARMET: Bobby at that point said to Martin that we were in there as much for psychological as well as political reasons. I don't think he talks about the.... It was not a matter of withdrawal. Withdrawal was not a question. He talks about the fact of continuing the commitment. It's very clear. There's nothing about withdrawal in that.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: It's about determination.

STERN: I think the evidence strongly suggests that it's a very good example of what we were talking about before, that it's the kind of issue that Kennedy would not decide on until he had to decide.

PARMET: That's right.

STERN: And I think at the time of his death he had not decided.

PARMET: He had not decided.

STERN: I think he was looking at both sides.

PARMET: Rusk [Dean Rusk] was strong about that, too. You notice that?

STERN: Yes.

PARMET: He was pretty indignant. Of course, he had a stake in it, because of his role with Johnson. So he's not the best witness in that sense. But I think that it's probably true that Kennedy had not discussed with Rusk the withdrawal situation. I think the closest Kennedy came to about alignment was saying we should have had the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] overthrow Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] just before the actual overthrow and install the government that would have invited us out. I think that's the closest thing that Kennedy really came, you know, that's on the record.

STERN: Yeah.

PARMET: It's showing his lack of desire to be there, a kind of willingness, a kind of eagerness to get the hell out of there. We missed a couple boats on that, but anyway, that's another matter.

STERN: One of the unresolved issues.

PARMET: Including elections, where we should have said, "We won, now, let's go out."

STERN: On Castro [Fidel Castro], I talked at some length with Laura Bergquist, for example, that, this is an area she knew a lot about. Would you go so far as to

say that there was a vendetta, a Kennedy vendetta against Castro. She thought it was a very, she thought that Kennedy admired Castro in many ways, that it was an admiration that he couldn't admit to publicly, but there was something about Castro that fascinated him. She said he would talk to her at great length about Castro.

PARMET: Yes, there's....

[END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE]

[TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE]

PARMET: ...Here I think we can. He did admire Castro. I think he respected Castro. I think that for a number of reasons. Castro was somebody with whom he could identify in certain ways. I think, Sheldon, that it's almost, I hate to use the old cliché, love/hate relationship, but the two questions that respected Castro are not mutually exclusive.

STERN: Sure.

PARMET: I think it was, he saw Castro all the more as a rival, as a rival charismatically, but as a rival charismatic leader of what, a third or fourth-class power, who had allowed himself to become a client state of the Soviet Union. And he had bested him in the Bay of Pigs. The major reason for the failure of the Bay of Pigs, after all, was a reason for Castro to recover quickly, to respond and move his forces. And Kennedy did not want to be beaten. It's sacking all the political advantages that he derived, he thought of at that point, backing firmly against Castro. Well, I think there was that kind of psychological thing. I think there was a mutual hate/hate feeling of respect and admiration and he determined to get the guy. And I think Castro had that toward Kennedy. I think it's fairly clear. Look, Castro's explanation about the assassination attempt and Kennedy's involvement, it's interesting. He exonerates Kennedy. He says he didn't have any control over his CIA. And before the assassination of Kennedy, so it wasn't a manner of eulogizing Kennedy. Castro made the statement that Kennedy might go on to become the greatest president since Abraham Lincoln. Harris Wofford [Harris V. Wofford, Jr.], by the way, got me on the radio show we did. He said, he talked about the statements afterward, and it was after the assassination I sort of acceded to Harris on the radio station, but I was not sufficiently insecure, so I looked it up afterward, and I was absolutely right. Castro has made a, before the assassination, it's very clear. I think there was a mutual admiration.

STERN: Are those the remarks that he made to the French journalist?

PARMET: Yeah, that's right.

STERN: [Inaudible]

PARMET: [Inaudible] before the assassination, sure. So I think there was respect. Look at the two-tiered kind of policy that Kennedy had toward Castro in 1963 which suggested that Bundy [McGeorge Bundy], to my knowledge, I can't remember, but Kennedy certainly accepted and Stevenson continued that at the U. N. [United Nations]. Castro for a while seemed receptive to that.

STERN: Fascinating Bill Attwood [William Attwood] material.

PARMET: Attwood, yeah, which Attwood then became a central figure in. I think it's fascinating, the relationship between the two of them. And I, by the way, I've offered this very often as an explanation, a refutation on, I've done this publicly on radio and TV, to questions often asked about didn't Castro kill Kennedy, attempt to kill Kennedy. And I've gone through all this, saying it is an utterly ridiculous kind of suspicion. Johnson came in, and that was the end of any kind of relationship, any kind of move toward rapprochement, normalization. Yeah, I mean, it's totally absurd. There is a fascination the two men had for each other. I think Kennedy.... Well, if Kennedy pursued these policies, it's very hard not to explain, it's very hard to explain Kennedy's policies toward Castro without appearing to exonerate them. Because here we are twenty years later, with the Reagan [Ronald Reagan] administration that is pursuing Central American policies that in many ways are even more blatant.... This covert operations are more overt, far more overt, than, let's say, the operation mongoose and many of those other things. This is twenty years later. It's not ninety miles off the coast, you know, but take it back to the climate again of the early 1960s, put the entire thing together, and this is not to exonerate Kennedy, not to say he wasn't in his own way obsessed by Castro, but if Kennedy, you know, if Kennedy was obsessed by Castro, so were the American people obsessed at that point.

STERN: The polls showed it.

PARMET: All the poll showed it. Absolutely. I mean, they were far more upset by Castro than they were by Khrushchev.

STERN: One out of four Americans, in 1962, endorsed unilateral American invasion of Cuba.

PARMET: There you go. There you go. Sure.

STERN: Not to mention you could get a majority for something short of that.

PARMET: That's right, that's right.

STERN: You have to see that. And that's so often the case, I mean, the context of the thing....

PARMET: You have to put it in the context.

STERN: Another good example of that is civil rights. My assessment of your book was that, and I'd like to see where you define this, is that I felt, I've always felt that Carl Brauer overestimates the leadership quality of the Kennedy administration in civil rights. I think he does.

PARMET: I agree with you. I'm inclined....

STERN: And I think that's what your book does. I think you had to address the balance somehow.

PARMET: Yeah, yeah. I think Carl, I think that Carl's book was sort of the other side of the point of Harvey [Inaudible] book. You know Harvey?

STERN: Yes, I know him personally very well.

PARMET: Well, Harvey, he has acknowledged to me that if he were writing this book from the Kennedy point of view, it would have a different kind of tone, closer to the way I wrote it in my book. I think that Carl is probably reacting to some of the more extravagant stuff, you know, the Bruce, some wild stuff, a very good example is Bruce Miroff, the Miroff kind of stuff, which is far more extravagant and not really based on any immersion of the sources, and.... I'm satisfied with it. As far as I'm concerned personally, that is most satisfactory chapter, personally. If I were asked to single out the chapter that I liked best, enjoyed writing, and may be the most revealing about Kennedy, in so many ways...

STERN: I think it is.

PARMET: ...it's the civil rights, the whole civil rights thing.

STERN: The whole issue of his caution, the whole issue of his....

PARMET: All comes into play in that one.

[END OF INTERVIEW]