Pierre E.G. Salinger Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 8/10/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Pierre E.G. Salinger
Interviewer: Theodore H. White
Date of Interview: August 10, 1965
Place of Interview: Los Angeles, California
Length: 108 pages (NOTE: The page numbering in this interview is not contiguous with the previous interview. Also, there are two pages numbered 115.)

Biographical Note
Salinger was an investigator for the U.S. Senate Select Committee to Investigate Improper Activities in the Labor and Management Field (1957-1959); Press Secretary to Senator John F. Kennedy (1959-1960); and Press Secretary to President Kennedy (1959-1963) and President Johnson (1963-1964). In this interview, he discusses the White House press corps, TV network news coverage of the White House, press conferences, the press secretaries of executive agencies, and his own role as a liaison between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, including ferrying secret correspondence between John F. Kennedy and Nikita S. Khrushchev, and Salinger's May 1962 visit to the Soviet Union, among other issues.

Access Restrictions
Open.

Usage Restrictions
According to the deed of gift signed January 22, 1991, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

Transcript of Oral History Interview
These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character

recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation
Pierre E.G. Salinger, recorded interview by Theodore H. White, August 10, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of Pierre Salinger

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Pierre Salinger, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of personal interviews conducted on July 19, 1965, August 10, 1965, May 26, 1969 and April 18, 1970 at Los Angeles, CA and New York, NY and prepared for deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be made available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the John F. Kennedy Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.

Pierre Salinger
Donor

December 21, 1990
Date

Archivist of the United States

1/22/91
Date

Pierre E.G. Salinger—JFK #2

Table of Contents

Second of Two Oral History Interviews

with

Pierre E.G. Salinger

August 10, 1965
Los Angeles, California

By Theodore H. White

For the John F. Kennedy Library

WHITE: This is August 10, 1965. This is Theodore White speaking. I am in the home of Pierre Salinger. We are going to try to refresh our memories at this point on the job of press secretary during the Kennedy Administration [John F. Kennedy] and what his role is in the flow of news in America. Pierre, could you kick off by telling me what your impression of the job was in the first couple of weeks and the pressures that beat on the press secretary of the White House.

SALINGER: Well, first of all, let me say that the usual route of press secretaries at the White House has been one which has taken them through many stages of the political development of their president. Steven Early [Stephen T. Early] came up with Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] as a candidate and then as president. Jim Hagerty [James C. Hagerty] came up the same way with Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] after two unsuccessful campaigns on behalf of Thomas Dewey [Thomas E. Dewey]. I came up the same way with John F. Kennedy. Of course, the exception would be people like Charlie Ross [Charles G. Ross], and Joe Short who were Truman [Harry S. Truman] press secretaries who were directly from the press. But even there the general common denominator was the press background. I only say

this because I think that you arrive at the job of press secretary after having established a pattern of operation as far as the press in concerned which reflects the manner of the man that you work for and his idea of how the job should operate. The day you become press secretary puts you in an entirely different situation than the day before you were press secretary, even though you are dealing with the same people, for the most part, because suddenly you find yourself in a position where you are no longer speaking for a man who aspires to be a president or even a man who is waiting to be president, but for a man who is president of the United States. Therefore, the things that you say weigh very heavily, not only in the United States, but around the world.

I think the first impression that I had was really a feeling of an establishment. The establishment was the White House press corps which over the years had figured out the way they like to cover presidents and which in a very real sense tries to mold the press secretary to their way of seeing things as far as the press is concerned.

[-100-]

WHITE: I have only seen this from the other side as being one of the guys in the lobby. I've never seen it from your side of the fence. Now, I know that there are 1,800 people who hold White House press cards. I don't know if that was true in your day, but there are 1,800…

SALINGER: There were 1,200 in my day.

WHITE: Well, there are something like that right now. Normally, of those, what's the establishment? Thirty or forty guys?

SALINGER: At the most fifty. In a very real sense, less than that. When you get down to the establishment, there are different stages of the establishment. The inner establishment—at least considered…. I'm not talking from their standpoint—are the wire services. They feel that they have a special relationship at the White House because they reach more people than anybody else. Their argument is that the fellow who works for the *New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Bulletin*, or any newspaper you want to name in America, no matter how competent or how great he is, reaches a fraction of the number of people that they reach every time they write a story and send it on the wire—and that is true.

[-101-]

WHITE: You mean AP (Associated Press) and UP (United Press International) fundamentally?

SALINGER: AP and UP fundamentally.

WHITE: That's Merriman Smith and Al Spivak [Alvin A. Spivak].

SALINGER: At the time when I first started it was Marvin Arrowsmith [Marvin L. Arrowsmith] and Doug Cornell [Douglas B. Cornell].

WHITE: And Doug Cornell. How many hours a day do the agencies staff the White House?

SALINGER: If I were there twenty-four hours a day, they'd staff it twenty-four hours, but because of the system under which we operate, they go home when I go home and say that's the end of the news for the day.

WHITE: You put the lid on?

SALINGER: Right.

WHITE: Or did you put the lid on at a specific hour?

SALINGER: Not at a specific hour, but when I thought that the day was finished I would put the lid on.

WHITE: How would you do that, for example?

SALINGER: I would go out in the lobby and say, "The lid is on."

WHITE: Go ahead.

SALINGER: At which point everybody would go home. The only way we

then could break a story was to call everybody back in.

WHITE: And then you protected the guys after that hour.

SALINGER: They had total protection after that hour. Then, of course, there has been a growing second establishment in the press which is—I would say it was an Eisenhower development which really didn't come to fruition until the Kennedy administration—the networks. They also have a powerful story in the number of people they reach and the great influence they have. They felt, of course, that they should be on the same basis as the two wire services.

And then, the latest development and one which I was faced with as the first press secretary, was an entirely new approach: that was the approach of the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and the *Washington Post* which claimed with some justification, that they were now, in effect, wire services. They had fifty or sixty newspapers tied on through their news services; therefore, they were entitled to the same consideration as the AP and UP.

WHITE: You're taking this much too casually. I've covered

[-103-]

this for years, but I've not seen it before. You say the same consideration. What special consideration did the AP and the UP get beyond the fact that they always ride in the pool car right after the President? Were there any other special considerations?

SALINGER: Well, the AP and the UP were included in every single pool that we had, whether it was riding in the car behind the President, or riding in the President's plane, whether it was in a foreign meeting where you maybe only get three or four people into a certain situation. For example, I'm thinking of the number of people that were allowed on the steps outside the U.S. embassy in Vienna when Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev] and Kennedy met. You would always have in the basic pool the AP and the UP. If the President gave a speech from his office, the AP and the UP were always there and sat down. Of course, one thing I did try to do during the time that I was there was to expand the pools in order to take care of some of my growing problems. In other words, if you really wanted to go at it right, you had two wire services, four networks—Mutual considered itself a

[-104-]

network and pushed that point very hard—plus what we call the specials; plus a thing that I tried to do which was to include the foreign, either networks…

WHITE: You mean like Reuters?

SALINGER: Reuters, France Presse [Agence France-Presse] or Tass. I was the first person, I think, in history ever to include a Tass correspondent in a White House pool. But it was a pool covering, I believe, the visit of Gromyko [Andrei Andreevich Gromyko] to the White House. I figured that Tass has a legitimate right to be there. I started that as an establishment. Then, there was the prior method of operation, the way things used to be done. To change that at all was to do so at your own peril. Excuse me a minute. [Interruption]

WHITE: Pierre, you said that there was the previously established way of doing things and the implication is that then you had to change them. Can you describe roughly what was the previous way of handling the press there at the White House and what you wanted to change?

[-105-]

SALINGER: Well, to begin with, let's go to some of the elementary things. First of all,

I decided to change the locale of the White House press conference; that in itself was a struggle. The press conference had been held since the Truman administration in the Indian Treaty Room of the Executive Office Building.

WHITE: That's the presidential press conference.

SALINGER: That's the presidential press conference. It was obvious to me that that room was not going to be large enough to accommodate the people who wanted to come to the Kennedy press conference; therefore, I decided to move it to the State Department Auditorium. That brought us a terrific cry because somehow or other I was ruining the press conference; I was ruining the atmosphere; I was taking away from the intimacy of the White House press conference by putting them in this big room.

Of course, the second thing that brought down the wrath of the White House press on me was the fact that I was going to televise the press conference live. That was, of course, an invasion of the rights of the

[-106-]

so-called pen and pencil press. This was again going to ruin the press conference; it was going to make actors out of everybody.

WHITE: Just for the sake of this record, I'm with the pen and pencil crowd so you're being interviewed by a prejudiced interrogator. But, go ahead.

SALINGER: I would say that most of the so-called pen and pencil press were prejudiced against me at that time. It actually is ironic and amusing when you look back on it because a leader of the attack on me, Bill Lawrence [William H. Lawrence] of the *New York Times*, who four months later became the White House correspondent of the American Broadcasting Company, did an 180 degree flip around the press conference.

People like Eddie Folliard [Edward T. Folliard], who has covered presidents since Wilson [Woodrow Wilson] and for whom I really had the greatest admiration—really an honest and decent man—thought I was absolutely bringing the press conference to perdition. And then you had people like Pete Lisagor [Peter I. Lisagor] of the *Chicago Daily News* and others

[-107-]

who attacked me for having a televised press conference but who are now attacking Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] for not having a televised press conference, which shows that time marches on.

WHITE: Pierre, was this your decision? Or did you talk it over with Kennedy, Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], or Kenny [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]? Or whom? How was a decision like this made?

SALINGER: It was my initial advice to President Kennedy that he hold his press conferences live on television and the President agreed with me. Sorensen was opposed to the idea; Kenny O'Donnell was not wildly enthusiastic about it; Rusk [Dean Rusk] was dead against it when he became Secretary of State; McGeorge Bundy was dead against it. The primary feeling of Sorensen, Bundy, and Rusk was that the President, if he made some very serious error on television, would cause a great international problem. My counter argument was that the communications in the world had reached the point that if any president in the United States made that kind of a critical mistake, he was going to destroy whatever

[-108-]

situation he had around the world anyway. The fact that he was seen on live TV would not have a great effect. Anyway, Kennedy felt very strongly that he should go ahead with this. Of course, our argument—the one that we both had agreed upon—was that he had been so effective in the Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] debates. Second of all, the majority of the American press, which had been friendly to John F. Kennedy while he was a candidate for president through its editorial columns—I mean, the write-in columns—was universally against a Democratic president. We had to have a weapon by which we could go over the American press's head to the American people. The fact of the matter is that the time when President Kennedy started televised press conferences, there were only three or four

[-109-]

newspapers in the entire United States that carried full transcript of a presidential press conference. Therefore, what people read was a distillation of the press conference, what they wanted to distill out of it. We though that they should have the opportunity to see it in full. It just so happened that we had an average viewing audience of 6 million families or 18 million people. That, by the standards of the Ed Sullivan show or some of the things you might read about, was not a great rating, but it still is a fantastic amount of people who heard the President's press conference in full. Now, that is another change.

The third and, I think, a fundamental change—and this was a change that disturbed part of the establishment at the White House

[-110-]

which I will get back to and which I will explain to you in a second—was the fact that we turned the White House into an open beat. That is, we said that any reporter could go to any member of the White House staff, and interview him on any subject without having to clear with the White House press secretary. Under the Hagerty regime, you could not interview anybody at the White House unless you got Hagerty's permission first. On some occasions he set it up, and on some occasions he even sat in on the interview.

WHITE: Is that so? I knew that I would see Hagerty at the White House, but I was

also able to telephone a few old friends in the Eisenhower administration and speak to them without letting Hagerty know that I was doing

[-111-]

it. I felt it was risky at all times.

SALINGER: They did so at their own peril.

WHITE: What do you mean by that?

SALINGER: Hagerty wanted to control the output of the White House from the total standpoint of Sherman Adams on down. The reason that I know that this was a fact and a devastating change, as far as the White House was concerned, was that in the old days you could rely on Hagerty for the output of every bit of information about the White House. A reporter could sit around the White House lobby all day and just wait for Hagerty to give him the word. But, all of a sudden, I turned the White House into an open beat where a reporter who was willing to do a little work, could beat his companions with a good story.

[-112-]

WHITE: And did they resist this? You say there was resistance in the establishment of this?

SALINGER: Well, there was joy among those reporters who were enterprising such as the caliber of Tom Wicker, Sandy Vanocur [Sander Vanocur], or people of that caliber. But, there was total resentment among some of the old class, such as Garnett Horner [Garnett D. Horner] of the *Washington Star*, and Bill Knighton [William Knighton, Jr.] of the *Baltimore Sun*, who did not want to be reporters; they just wanted to be recipients for handouts. So they looked upon this as if some nut had taken over at the White House; they did not like the idea at all.

I used these three examples to show how the old order resisted the new. This was just a simple thing. For example, the old White House press room, which was on the right side

[-113-]

of the lobby when you walked in, was an absolute disgrace. The tables were covered with spittoons; the room was in a constant disarray. As you know, we cleaned it up and made it into cubicles. God, they put up signs saying Pierre Salinger Loan Company because it looked like a fellow going into a loan office to get a loan. They didn't like that either. Of course, they don't like the lobby now that President Johnson has changed it; they now call it the LBJ Hilton.

WHITE: That's right. They call it Dallas Modern.

SALINGER: Yes. So another change has happened.

WHITE: Let's go back to the handling of the press. First, there are the wire services; then, there is the intrusion of the networks. The networks are to me one of the most explosive political developments in the USA. You were the first press secretary who regularly

[-114-]

dominated the 6 o'clock or the 7 o'clock news. The evening news is now dominated by people out of Washington, as you know. Was it that way before you came? Or were you the first guy to open the gates of the White House to TV? I can't remember the cameras being in the Rose Garden before Kennedy. I can't remember all the cameras set up…

SALINGER: They were there for Eisenhower. Eisenhower really opened the way; Eisenhower and Hagerty opened the way to TV. We took it some steps further by allowing them to have a live TV in the Rose Garden on the things like the return of Commander Shepard [Alan B. Shepard] after the first sub-orbital flight, and things of that caliber. But, also we made some other departures. For example, we put President Kennedy on network TV shows. A network would come along with an idea. Let me give you a good example: David Schoenbrun,

[-115-]

who was the Washington correspondent for CBS for a short period of time, is a very difficult man, but a man with a lot of ideas.

WHITE: That's quite correct.

SALINGER: He came one time, wanting to do a piece about the Common Market. This was the time that we were having the big trade fights. I will say that of all the Washington correspondents that David Schoenbrun

[-115a-]

understood the Common Market better than anybody. He was a great friend of Jean Monnet. So anyway, he asked if President Kennedy would come on and explain the Common Market and American trade attitude. Well, I though this was a way to sell our program, so we put him on the show—this was a one-network show. That was unheard of; the fact that the President of the United States would appear on a program for one network without the other networks having the opportunity to have him on the same thing. I said to the networks, I said to the magazines, I said to the wire services, I said to everybody, "If you come up with a good idea for the President of the United States, we'll do it with you. If it's your idea, it'll be

your show whether it's an AP, UP story, or NBC, CBS, ABC, or *Life, Look, Saturday Evening*

[-116-]

Post or any magazine you want to name. If you have a decent idea, we'll do it with you."

WHITE: Let's do a parenthesis in this: clarify it for me. [Unclear], the most successful nonfiction show that Columbia Broadcasting Company [Columbia Broadcasting System] ever did was the tour of the White House.

SALINGER: Exactly. It was their idea.

WHITE: It was their idea.

SALINGER: It was their idea. They came to me. We thought that it was a tremendous idea so we said, "That's a CBS show." We got hell from the other networks. They said, "You can't make the White House an exclusive province of some network." We said, "You come to us with as good an idea and we'll put it on for you too. We'll do anything that you want."

WHITE: Yes. But again for the record now. NBC and ABC

[-117-]

were allowed to air the show at the same time.

SALINGER: That's right. We made that concession at the last minute because of the tremendous pressure that was brought to bear on us. But they had to identify on the air that it was a CBS show.

WHITE: Now, in a matter like this where great pressure is being brought on a show of this magnitude, you would discuss this with the President directly or would you talk it over first with Sorensen, Kenny, or Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy]?

SALINGER: I never discussed these matters with Sorensen; I never discussed this with Bobby or Kenny to speak of.

WHITE: You did not discuss press matters with anybody else except the President?

SALINGER: Occasionally, I would discuss it with Kenny. I never discussed press matters that I can think of with Sorensen on any major point.

WHITE: Yes.

[-118-]

SALINGER: But mostly I would go directly to the President. On these things, I would try to take the heat as long as I could personally. Then, when it just got too hot, I would have to take it up with the President and let him make a decision on it.

WHITE: What would be his reaction on a thing like the tour of the White House?

SALINGER: Well, I finally made the recommendation, in order to ease the pressure, that we should let the other two networks have access to it. In the final analysis, CBS was not too unhappy with that because it gave them a measure of recognition on the other two networks that they would never have gotten under any other circumstances. But I always argued with them that just because they are television networks—and they're very competitive, highly competitive,

[-119-]

in fact, cutthroat competitive—did not make them any different from the magazines. For example, Laura Bergquist [Laura Bergquist Knebel], came to me in early 1963. She wanted to do a story called "JFK and His Son." It was a great idea. And they did it. That was not in *Life*; that was not in the *Saturday Evening Post*; that was a *Look* idea and they ran it. *Life* magazine came to me and said, "We want to do a place called 'John F. Kennedy and the Navy' because he was a great Navy man." That was their idea; that was their piece and they did it. I had the same attitude with the networks. I remember when Walter Cronkite started his half hour television show, he came to me and said that he wanted to discuss having President Kennedy on his first show. We did it.

WHITE: That's right. From Hyannis. You did the

[-120-]

rocking chair thing out of Hyannis Port.

SALINGER: Right. And incidentally succeeded, as a result of that interview, in seriously distorting President Kennedy's attitude toward Vietnam.

WHITE: How is that so?

SALINGER: That is not very well known. I always felt that in these matters, in order to protect our integrity, that you had to give the networks total editorial rights. In other words, they shot a half an hour to put President Kennedy on twelve minutes. So they cut out some of his answers about Vietnam which seriously

distorted, in my view, his attitude towards Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem]. It made it sound that he was advocating the overthrow of Diem; in fact, it was quoted, after Diem's assassination, as proof that President Kennedy really wanted Diem killed. The fact of the matter is that if they had printed the entire transcript of the Cronkite

[-121-]

interview, it would have shown that he was extremely friendly toward Diem and wanted nothing of the kind. But they cut out the friendly parts that President Kennedy said and just left in the unfriendly parts.

WHITE: Do you believe that it is safe to permit a private network to edit the live words of the President? Now, I realize that a correspondents who interviews a man with pen and pencil…

SALINGER: That's the argument.

WHITE: …also picks and chooses. I worked both…

SALINGER: That's the argument. That's the argument the networks use. That is, they'll say a reporter will go in and talk for an hour with the President, make an hour's full of notes in a book, and come out and print a column of type which represents, maybe, a third of what the President says. So he's picking and choosing.

[-122-]

Why shouldn't the networks have that same right? I would like to guarantee them that right. But I would say that this particular incident frightened me terrifically because I think it did the President, and the country, a great disservice because it misrepresented the President's position on what was going on to become and already had and has since become a vital issue. We were a great deal more careful with Huntley and Brinkley [Chester Robert Huntley; David Brinkley] when they did the same thing three or four weeks later. He was on their first half hour show. They shot twenty minutes, or twenty-five minutes, in order to get ten. But we reserved the right to consultation with them on what ten they used.

WHITE: Yes. I don't want to go down that road now if we have time to do this in the future….

[-123-]

I want to talk to you about freedom of the press as applied to TV because I do not believe that the old-fashioned press and TV are equivalent things and I believe they should enjoy different kinds of freedom. I want to take you back step by step through the instrumentation of the White House press corps. You describe it and let me see if I can

reconstruct what you said. There is first the "inner in" thing of the two networks which staff the White House for sixteen hours a day with two men.

SALINGER: To show you how "in in" they are, by long time practice, the two chief correspondents of the wire services will come into the Office of the Press Secretary before every press conference, at which time they will ask you if the President is going to make any

[-124-]

statement of any importance on any subject. And you and they will discuss back and forth what you think the principal issues are which are likely to come up at the press conference, not for the purpose of planning questions, but to give you an idea of what the drift of the press conference is going to be in advance. Occasionally, they will say either…. The AP and the UP man has the right to ask the first question at the presidential press conference—and it rotates. You find out which one of them will be first up at the press conference; the other one finishes the press conference.

WHITE: I did not know that.

SALINGER: That's right.

WHITE: I didn't know that.

SALINGER: Not only do they have the right, but if the AP man is first up, the UP man will get the

[-125-]

second question. So they get the first two cracks at the President in every press conference.

WHITE: I did not know that. Do these guys come into your office in an informal manner or is this established custom that they come in?

SALINGER: It's an established custom. It is informal. They are bound not to report what they hear to their papers before, but it merely is to facilitate their coverage of the press conference beforehand.

WHITE: Therefore, the "in" thing is the two wire services?

SALINGER: Right.

WHITE: The networks follow next in importance.

SALINGER: The networks have their own "in" thing. There is what is called a network committee. This is not made up of the correspondents who cover the White House, but this is made up usually

[-126-]

of the bureau chiefs of the three networks in Washington—four networks, excuse me. I keep forgetting Mutual. They are the people you want, for example, when the President decides that he is going to address the nation about the crisis in Berlin or South Vietnam. You call those four men in and say to them that the President of the United States would like to speak tomorrow night at 7 o'clock, Eastern Standard Time, to the nation on the subject of Berlin. In other words, they are the first to find out that the President of the United States is going to give this speech because you have to request the time from them. They then go back to their respective networks and they come back and say, "All right, you can have the time at 7 o'clock" or they come back and say, "We'll give you an alternate. You can have the time at 8 o'clock." Or they

[-127-]

say, "CBS will give you the time at 7:00 p.m.; ABC will give you the time at 7:30 p.m.; NBC will give you the time at 8:00 p.m." At this point you will have to make a judgment. Usually, the judgment turns out that if you say we're going at 7:00, then you force them into line, and they all have to go at 7:00—or you say at 7:30. If there are three different networks with three different times, you end up by hurting one network or the other because they have something on the air that they don't want to kill. So they have that "in" group.

For example, on October 22, 1962 when the President was going to go on the air to tell the people of the United States about the Cuban Missile Crisis. Before I could hold my press conference at 12 noon, I had to call Bob Fleming [Robert Fleming] of ABC news at 11:45 a.m. and ask him for the time of the President's program. He

[-128-]

didn't know that it was for that day because I wouldn't tell him. All I said was the phrase that I used at the press conference: "It was a matter for the highest national urgency." I got the time on that basis. Nevertheless, he knew fifteen minutes before anybody else that we had something that was real hot about which the President of the United States was going to go on television.

WHITE: All right. I'm going through the instrumentation: wire services first; networks next. Next in order of importance to you, would be I suppose, the great metropolitan dailies, *New York Times*…

SALINGER: As much as I hate to admit it, you do take more cognizance of the *New York Times, New York Herald Tribune,* the *Washington Post*, some of these big papers.

[-129-]

WHITE: Does the *Los Angeles Times* rate there yet?

SALINGER: The *L.A. Times* did not rate there until the latter year of my administration, in fact, on into the Johnson years, because they did not have the kind of bureau in Washington which would merit that kind of attention. Nevertheless, I think that this is one of the flaws of presidential press relations because as great a newspaper as the *New York Times* is—this is Kenny O'Donnell's favorite subject. He used to go at me all the time. He'd say, "Why do you sons of bitches listen to the *New York Times* and believe it? The guy in Iowa, Kansas, or Nebraska never saw the *New York Times*, never heard of the *New York Times*, doesn't know that Scotty Reston [James B. Reston] writes in the morning, doesn't care what Scotty Reston writes." I think that he had a valid point; I think that was the point in favor of the wire services. We

[-130-]

did work with the wire services very closely, not only directly, but on background—almost an equivalent of what we would work with the *New York Times*.

WHITE: Now where in relative importance stand the news magazines with the press secretary?

SALINGER: The news magazines were very important. They also had privileges. Their privileges would extend to news—for example, let's say the President was going to get a message to the Congress on Monday. They come out on Monday. We would invariably brief them on the message on Saturday so that they could carry the message on Monday in their magazines on Monday, even though they went to press on Saturday—and nobody else had a right to find out what the President was going to say until Monday. So that was their privilege; you always took care of them that way. You could see that the

[-131-]

privilege was extended from group to group. But this is all based on a real establishment situation.

WHITE: All right. You used the word "establishment." I prefer the word "instrumentation"—that's like a piano. You say that you call Bob Fleming fifteen minutes before the President is to go on.

SALINGER: Fifteen minutes before I announced to the press that he was going to go on.

WHITE: Before you announced to the press that he was going to go on. When you have to press these buttons to reach public opinion, how fast can you do it?

SALINGER: Very fast. That you can do. First of all, because during the daytime, they are all there, therefore, you can call them in. And at nighttime, within a two or three minute period, I can have the two wires and the three networks on the phone on a conference call

[-132-]

and give them the same story.

WHITE: I didn't realize that. I was at your home in Lake Barcroft—that white phone there—could you arrange a conference call for all of them?

SALINGER: From that phone I could pick up the operator and say, "I want the AP, UP, NBC, ABC, CBS." She would have the five of them on the phone inside of two minutes.

WHITE: All on the same line?

SALINGER: All on the same line, all talking to me—at which point I would dictate a statement to them, and I would be across the country inside of ten minutes.

WHITE: I didn't know that either. Was that always procedure for the press secretary at the White House?

SALINGER: I don't know how Hagerty used to do that because we never got into that kind of detail with him.

[-133-]

My whole orientation with him was through the two rules that were available to me as the White House press secretary: what I had in the way of manpower and equipment—and, of course, it is an advantage; there's no question about it.

WHITE: But then the press secretary of the White House can…. The first button that you press, the all-call button for the American people, can be a conference call to the five major news services and networks.

SALINGER: That's correct.

WHITE: And within ten minutes you can have the wires of the TV companies putting out your all-call to the entire nation.

SALINGER: That's correct. That's correct.

WHITE: Good.

SALINGER: I'd say inside ten minutes.

WHITE: Inside ten minutes.

[-134-]

SALINGER: If you had a major press conference to hold the middle of the night, you could have forty White House reporters in the White House inside forty minutes, which we demonstrated with the Powers-Abel [Francis Gary Powers; Rudolf Ivanovich Abel] trade press conference which was held at 2:30 a.m.

WHITE: How would they get the news?

SALINGER: By telephone.

WHITE: By telephone. From the White House press office.

SALINGER: In other words, that one we knew was going to take place in advance. So I had five girls in the office and they started calling; they each had ten people to call; they called all of them within a matter of ten minutes each. So all the calls were made. But we later mechanized it. My principal girls, Chris Camp [Christine Camp] and Sue Mortensen [Sue Mortensen Vogelsinger], had a mechanized telephone on their desk so that they would push a button which would say, "Teddy White,

[-135-]

Chicago Daily News." They would push that button; the phone would automatically dial your home telephone number at which point they would pick up the phone and talk to you, and then push the next guy's button.

WHITE: How many such numbers did you have mechanized? Give me an order of magnitude. Thirty, forty, fifty?

SALINGER: About 250.

WHITE: What? This has never been in print before. Do you realized that?

SALINGER: Oh, I understand that.

WHITE: I do hope you put this in your book.

SALINGER: I want to have a transcript of this.

WHITE: This is fascinating to me because I think I know so much about this. [Laughter] And here I am like a boy. Let me take another episode. I am going to suggest a memory that we have in common—you've probably forgotten it—but I

[-136-]

want you to kick off something else. During the trouble in Alabama, there was one point—it must have been in the spring of 1963, when Kennedy ordered the troops on standby to come in near Birmingham. You and I were to have lunch. You have been up all day that day, you kept me waiting, and you came out of the President's office. You immediately hit a button and called Arthur Sylvester, and then you hit another button and called Sorensen; then, you hit another button and called so-and-so. You were giving instructions to Sylvester as to what to say and what not to say. You were saying, "The President wants no announcement of any numbers or of any unit designations and 'we'll handle it from here.'" Then, you called several other people and said to Sorensen, "The President wants a statement on this right away." Then, we went out for lunch, which was a hasty lunch.

[-137-]

Does the White House press secretary exercise a direct authority over all the other press secretaries in government departments or is that a matter of what the crisis of the moment is?

SALINGER: I don't know what they did in previous administrations. I really can't answer the question. In the Kennedy administration, the White House press secretary had direct control over the statements of every press secretary of an executive department of the government. In fact, I was held personally responsible for any statement made by any press secretary in any government department. Therefore, if the press secretary of the Post Office Department put out a statement which was displeasing to the President, it was my fault, not his fault.

WHITE: Then, in that case were statements cleared with you?

[-138-]

SALINGER: All.

WHITE: All.

SALINGER: All of any major importance. The order was first to clear the statements with the White House.

WHITE: You mean Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman], Manning [Robert J. Manning], Sylvester.

SALINGER: Everybody.

WHITE: Everybody?

SALINGER: Right.

WHITE: With a major statement to you, and you would clear it, or if too important, you would go to the President. You would take such a thing to the President.

SALINGER: Oh, absolutely. Many times I would go to the President and clear it. Many times. First of all, we would have the weekly meetings when the major press secretaries got together in my office. We used that as a vehicle.

[-139-]

WHITE: Would you name the major press secretaries and tell me the time and day of such a meeting?

SALINGER: The meetings were generally held on Tuesday afternoon, but they were sometimes regulated by the presidential press conference. We doubled the meeting into a coordination meeting on our press relations in the government and a preparation meeting for the President's press conference. The ones that regularly attended and always came were: George Reedy [George E. Reedy]—he was the Vice President's press secretary—Bob Manning of State; Arthur Sylvester of Defense; Dixon Donnelly of the Treasury; Bill Lloyd of NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration]…

WHITE: Guthman?

SALINGER: Guthman rarely….

WHITE: Is that so?

SALINGER: Only when we were in periods of civil rights

[-140-]

problems. He was not a regular attender. Wilson [Donald M. Wilson] of the USIA [United States Information Agency]; Stanley J. Grogan of the CIA; Duncan Clark [Duncan C. Clark] of the AEC [Atomic Energy Commission]. I think that that was the inner group.

WHITE: In other words, there was a community of information officers.

SALINGER: Oh, yes, very much so. I'll come back to this thing, but actually we did not perfect our communications until the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the three or four days prior to the President going on television, I decided that it was essential that we have an instantaneous communication system between myself, Manning, and Sylvester. So we installed a telephone system where I picked up the telephone and got both of them simultaneously or one or the other, or they could get me. For example, Sylvester could call me and have Manning on the phone simultaneously and Manning could get

[-141-]

me on the phone and have Sylvester on the phone. We were on the phone eighteen, twenty, twenty-two times a day during that thing. We maintained that system until I left the White House. I don't know whether it's still there. Those were my direct communications.

WHITE: I know that occasionally Bob Manning would sit at the presidential breakfast prior to the presidential press conference. Did any other press officer, besides Manning, sit in on such press conferences?

SALINGER: Occasionally Arthur Sylvester. Jimmy Greenfield [James L. Greenfield] sat in four or five times when Manning was out of town. No other press officer for the government that I can think of sat in on any of those.

Now, our press secretary meetings had two purposes. One was to find out what the other guys were doing, in order to reinforce the lines

[-142-]

of communication; and the other was to prepare for the President's press conference. Actually, in preparing for the President's press conference, we also did a lot of the coordination work that we wanted to do. We found out a great deal of what was going on in the other departments of the government.

WHITE: I think the value of the system is obvious.

SALINGER: It was not only valuable for us, but it was valuable for the President too.

WHITE: And for the government.

SALINGER: Yes.

WHITE: Arthur Sylvester's name has come into this conversation several times. We are both very fond of Sylvester. He is the most controversial press

secretary in the government. I'd like to speak about Sylvester on two levels. One, has he done a good job in explaining the war in Vietnam? I think that he has done a very, very

[-143-]

bad job in explaining the Vietnam situation. Secondly, the difference in staff between the press secretary of the Pentagon and the press secretary of the White House has always struck me as being grotesque. The press secretary of the Pentagon has hundreds and hundreds of people to do his bidding. His office is ten times as impressive as yours. When he presses a button, everything quivers to his command. There is a movie department there, a press department, a magazine department, a film library and more. I imagine there must be hundreds of people working in the public relations system of the Pentagon. The press secretary of the White House has always struck me as being thoroughly understaffed.

SALINGER: His budget was about 25 million dollars a year. My budget was about 125,000 dollars a year.

[-144-]

WHITE: You say his was twenty-five million and yours was…

SALINGER: In other words, the public information budget of the Department of Defense was about 25 million dollars, and my budget at the White House was about $125,000. First of all, let me say I think there is some advantage in having a compact, small press organization. I don't think you really need very many more people. I'd like to see one more person—I brought in one extra person. I'd like to get into that aspect of it because I think that it is crucial. This is my own concept of the job and that was decided that we should have an assistant White House press secretary responsible for the foreign press. I think that is the biggest failing of the Johnson administration. As far as press relations are concerned, they have completely ignored the foreign press. They have lost the

[-145-]

advantage that we created with the foreign press. The United States position, whether it be valid or not, is completely misunderstood, misrepresented, and, in some cases, ignored by the foreign press because they are ignored in Washington. They do not have access to the information that they had during the Kennedy administration.

WHITE: Would you tell us when you set up your assistant secretary for the foreign press? Would you tell us his name, what his functions were, and what fundamentally he did do while you were there? How many correspondents…

SALINGER: I don't know how you go at it historically. First of all, I started out to do

my job by holding a series of luncheons with the different foreign correspondents of Washington. I had lunch with the French correspondents, lunch with the British correspondents, lunch with Western Europe, Belgium, Netherlands,

[-146-]

Switzerland, and so on. In other words, I made a real attempt to get to know all these fellows.

WHITE: Would you invite them or would they request a meeting with you?

SALINGER: Generally, what we would do would be to let it be known that I wanted to meet them. These groups organized luncheons to which I was invited and at which I then sat down and spoke with them. I went to Toronto in April or May, 1961, and met a young Foreign Service officer there who impressed me very much. I brought him back to Washington as my assistant in change of foreign press. His name in Jay Gildner. Jay's job was to arrange background briefings for the foreign press, for fellows in Bundy's department and especially for various areas of the world; to arrange background briefings for State Department people, but to give them the

[-147-]

general impression that they had the same access inside the White House, and to facilitate that access, as the domestic press had. I think that it was a very successful program.

Gildner became a cropper for a couple of reasons at the White House. I'm very fond of him. He was not an aggressive person. He did a great job on what he was assigned to do. I guess we pushed him too far. We sent him to India with Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] which was a disaster on the trip.

WHITE: By a disaster you mean he kept the press away, or kept them in too close?

SALINGER: He didn't handle it well at all. He didn't seem to have the nuance to handle it. Handling Mrs. Kennedy's press was not the easiest problem in the first place. So we sent him back to the USIA, but in a much more elevated position than when he had come. He had been press officer of

[-148-]

the U.S. embassy in Toronto when I picked him up, and he became the liaison between the USIA, White House, and the State Department when he went back and has just been named the Public Affairs Officer of USIA in Israel. He was replaced by Mac Kilduff [Malcolm M. Kilduff]. Mac Kilduff did not pay as much attention to the foreign press as Jay Gildner, but he brought other talents with him, and he had wide contacts with the press from fourteen years at the State Department. Well, anyway, at the time when I was press secretary there was a constant flow of information to the foreign press, and I might say it worked both ways.

We sometimes picked up information to the foreign press which we would not have picked up unless we had this relationship. In other words, I could think of

[-149-]

situation where the Yugoslav, Polish, and Russian presses because they had somebody to come to at the White House, they would talk about things that were of value to us in the conduct of the American foreign policy. Now to go back to…

WHITE: Sylvester and the Pentagon.

SALINGER: Sylvester and the Pentagon.

WHITE: And the staffing.

SALINGER: Let me say that Arthur Sylvester, in my opinion, was one of the most valuable men the government ever had.

WHITE: Would you elaborate upon that?

SALINGER: The reason why I say this is because, first of all, he was totally loyal to President Kennedy. His liaison with me was the best of any of the press officers in the government outside, maybe, of Bob Manning. The Pentagon is a place where things go on that are so unbelievable sometimes

[-150-]

without the knowledge of the President. To have a man of Sylvester's capacity as a reporter was so valuable to us. I can think of a situation in which the Defense Department had decided to build an atomic testing site in Alaska, had budgeted millions and millions of dollars toward this matter, and had failed to inform the President of the United States that they were doing so. The only way we ever heard about it was that Arthur Sylvester called me one morning and said have you heard about this Alaska plan, which I had never heard about. I'd like to think of other incidents. I'd say there were half a dozen incidents.

WHITE: Would not the President hear about this through McNamara [Robert S. McNamara]?

SALINGER: He had not heard about it at the time that I brought it up to him.

WHITE: Why? Because McNamara would think it too

[-151-]

unimportant or too trivial?

SALINGER: Or in many cases it was the service people who had not brought it to McNamara, who were just going ahead and planning things.

WHITE: Do such things go on?

SALINGER: Absolutely. Time after time Sylvester caught these kinds of matters and brought them to my attention and I brought it to the President's attention and they were knocked in the head. I'd say on the basis of that service alone you would have to say that Sylvester was a tremendous help to the administration. Now, I realize that his personal relations with the press were not of the best. Yet when you analyze why, you go back to that famous statement that he made, first of all, about lying; and second of all, about information being a weapon. Really, about the only thing you could fault Sylvester on was the fact that he

[-152-]

was candid. If you go back to World War II, and if a fellow had walked up to General Eisenhower three days before D-Day and said, "Do you plan to invade Normandy?" he would have said, "No, I'm going to invade Sicily."

WHITE: Correct.

SALINGER: In a wartime situation—and the Cuban Missile Crisis was a wartime situation even though we were not at war—I think that the United States government has an obligation to defend itself against its enemies and to protect the American people. That's one aspect of that.

As far as news being a weapon, you have to be the most naïve idiot in the world not to realize that every statement which is made, whether it be by the President of the United States, his press secretary, the Secretary of the Defense Department, is a major factor, first

[-153-]

of all, in the entire atmosphere you create during a time of crisis, and second of all, the tactical situation. We decided to make statements at certain times for tactical reasons as well as for reasons of informing the American public. We had the problem in the Cuban Missile Crisis that our messages were not getting through to Khrushchev by the normal channels as fast as we wanted them to. So that we would make statements public at certain times knowing that they would be broadcast to the Soviet Union and that he would hear about them, the same way as he would make statements known to Tass because he knew that was the fastest way of getting them to us. To say that that is not a weapon…

WHITE: Le me get back now to Sylvester and again for the record. The one piece that I did on the Pentagon, I found no one in the whole

[-154-]

government more helpful than Sylvester who simply told me what was going on completely—McNamara's struggle with the generals. He set the thing up so that in three weeks I could do a job that would have taken me two or three months. But I was appalled by the bitterness against Sylvester in the regular press corps covering the Pentagon.

SALINGER: Again now you are talking about the establishment.

WHITE: I'm speaking of the establishment.

SALINGER: If there's anything worse than the White House press corps establishment, it's the Defense press corps establishment. They are a real establishment. They really decide how the Defense Department is going to be run as far as press relations. And they have relied for years on inter-service rivalry. That is how the Defense Department press has made story

[-155-]

after story. The Navy people feed them a story about the Air Force and the Air Force feeds them a story about the Army. When they found out that Arthur Sylvester was carrying out the press policies of his boss, who was trying to bring integration to this—I mean military integration to the Pentagon, they resented it deeply because suddenly they found themselves unable to prey on the bitterness and hatred of one service against another for the purpose of making news. Now, you can have all kinds of arguments about whether that's a legitimate thing to dry up that kind of source. But again, we get down to the heart of the ability of the United States government to conduct its business. The President of the United States had decided that the Pentagon would be under civilian leadership and that there would not be service rivalries. So Arthur Sylvester was carrying this policy out

[-156-]

at the press level.

WHITE: What provokes this question on my part fundamentally is the fact that this moment in 1965 we are facing a major crisis in Vietnam. I do not feel that that was ever adequately explained. I don't think that the Pentagon has ever explained or ever given the kind of clear picture we need to understand the kind of war going on there, nor has the State Department. I wonder how much fault there lies with Sylvester and the mechanism of the Pentagon.

SALINGER: Well, now just let me say this as far as the war in Vietnam is concerned. So much of the information about the war in Vietnam is controlled at the

White House level that unless you know the particular operative situation which is going on now, it is very hard to criticize either Sylvester or Greenfield or some outside

[-157-]

individual.

We have a very rocky history in the Kennedy administration as far as information is concerned. We went from an abysmally low—what I consider to be the worst possible way of approaching it (although at the time I was a supporter of that policy) but I am looking at it in retrospect—to some things that I thought were very good. But, for example, to have criticized Sylvester or Manning at the time of the Kennedy administration for some of the things that we did would have been unfair because some of the basic decisions were made by the President of the United States himself. And I believe that some of these decisions are being made by the President of the United States today. There is hardly a President who has served who wants to get up every morning and read bad news about Vietnam, even though it is

[-158-]

bad and he knows it is bad. So that the situation is set up in such a way so that only the good news gets back. I'm putting it as coldly as I can. Now, I want to differentiate….

This is a gut thing that I want to talk about because I think it is damn important as far as American security is concerned. In my opinion, there are two problems involved. One is the legitimate coverage of the news of a war. That, I believe, is the right of the press. Although we made some efforts to suppress that right during the time that I was at the White House, I think that that right exists and should be allowed to go on. But part of the reason that we went to the lengths that we did was the other side of the coin and that is where the press goes from the role of observer in a particular situation to an activist role where

[-159-]

it is playing an activist role in fomenting policy or attempting to foment policy one way or another, whether it be in the interest of the United States or not. I believe that David Halberstan of the *New York Times*, Neil Sheehan of the AP and several correspondents in Vietnam were activists, that they were not reporters. They were actively trying to bring down the government of President Diem, that they would go to any lengths to discredit him in the United States, to make the people of the United States think that he had to be removed in order for U.S. policy to succeed. I regret that he got the Pulitzer Prize for having brought about the success of this policy which I think was outside the bounds of journalism. If they wanted to bring down the government of President Diem, they should have gotten outside of the press and gone about it as lobbyists or activists or

[-160-]

something else.

This again gets into another philosophical subject. When you get a phone call which tells you that at high noon a Buddhist monk is going to burn himself up at the corner of twenty-second and Main Street in Saigon, do you go out and watch him get burned up or do you try to prevent him from burning himself up? Or if somebody calls…

WHITE: This is an interesting question.

SALINGER: This is a damn interesting question. If somebody calls us the city desk of the *New York Times* and says, "I'm on the twenty-second floor of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel and in fifteen minutes I'm going to jump to my death." Do you send a photographer out to get a picture of him jumping or do you try to prevent the guy from jumping? I believe the obligation is to stop him from jumping. If he jumps despite your

[-161-]

efforts, that is one thing, but just to coldly send a guy out to the corner and not tell anybody about it and cover his jump is also, I think, outside the realm of journalism.

WHITE: Good point. I want to raise one last point on press policy and then we'll go on to another subject. Again, I'll provoke you by a particular episode in which I participated. I was assigned to write a story about Dean Rusk for *Life* magazine, as you are well aware. I only learned recently after the death of President Kennedy that he had passed the word to both Sorensen and Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] and to a number of other people that I would certainly be around to see them and to cover and protect Rusk. Again, for the record, there were only one or two members of the White House staff—among whom you were not—who told me exactly what they thought of Rusk. I later heard from

[-162-]

Ted after I had written my piece some pretty strange things about Rusk which he has not put in his book. But I have learned from guys since that the President wanted me to be given a particular story about Rusk. When I went in to see the President, as you remember, he was the guy who leveled with me most on Rusk and gave me that devastating first interview about Rusk. Then, you called me back for a second interview with the President in which the President said to me, in effect, lay off and put an 180-degree twist on things. Now, how often…. I suppose you have to use the word manipulation of the press because I trusted the people at the White House completely. How often did such an episode take place? How often would you do that? Why was it important to do that? Was this a rare episode? Or what?

[-163-]

SALINGER: I had not participated in this particular episode. I don't know of any like

episode that I ever did participate in where I was asked by the President to call up people and say we wanted to put out a certain line…. I mean, to try to protect somebody that the President liked. I would say that there were times when the policy of the government was known, where we knew what we would like to see show up in the press from the standpoint of the position of the government, where we would talk among ourselves what that position was—and journalists were actively going around interviewing them. But, in terms of something like the Rusk story, I don't remember anything…

WHITE: You were not in on this.

SALINGER: Absolutely not. Well, first of all, expect for that particular interview with You,

[-164-]

I'm unaware of the fact that the President had anything but the highest regard for Rusk although he considered him a man who did not have a great many original ideas and who was a follower rather than a leader of the State Department.

WHITE: I gave you a full rundown of what he told me after that first interview. Then, you would say that as a matter of policy, this was a rare episode.

SALINGER: Very rare.

WHITE: All right. I think, if we can do another interview, we'll come back later on to press policy and…

SALINGER: I'd like to see a transcript of this interview because I think this will lead to a lot of questions. I think that there are a lot of areas we have not covered on this particular subject.

[-165-]

WHITE: I think we are just beginning to open a lot of doors, but I want to get tonight at a good or a major chunk of your foreign affairs experience. We can go on with these talks when I get back to New York and when you come and visit me. But let's get the central foreign affairs thing done now.

SALINGER: How soon can I have a transcript of this particular one?

WHITE: I don't know. I'm going to take them back with me now—I'm leaving on Tuesday—and then simply turn them over to Herman Kahn there and say—whatever procedures you have—expedite. Because…

SALINGER: This one I would particularly like to have.

WHITE: Because I have learned things here I never knew. Let me just cut this. This is August 10th. We have been recording at 3 ¾ speed. Pierre Salinger and I have just finished a talk

[-166-]

about the press secretaryship at the White House as he knew it during his years there.

[-167-]

[BEGIN TAPE 2]

WHITE: This is August 10, 1965. This is Theodore White speaking. I am tape recording Pierre Salinger at his home in Los Angeles at 3 ¾ speed. We are now about to talk on foreign affairs as he saw them and participated in them during the Kennedy administration. Pierre, I want to start you off with what I think is the major area of your personal participation, which is your dealing with the Russians during the Kennedy administration, and we will save for another evening your observation of the whole course of American foreign policy and its development under Kennedy. Could we speak first then of how you became part of the liaison between the administration and the Russians? Take over.

[-168-]

SALINGER: Well, as a matter of fact, I got into the whole matter by total accident. That makes the thing more interesting. In May, 1961, a NBC television producer named Lucy Jarvis called me in Washington and asked if I would appear in a television debate with Khrushchev's son-in-law, Aleksei Adzhubei [Aleksei I. Azdhubei], and with Mikhail Kharlamov [Mikhail A. Kharlamov] who was the press chief for Chairman Khrushchev. I said that I thought it was unlikely that any such debate would take place, but that if Mrs. Jarvis could ever arrange such a debate, I would be glad to participate in it. I must say that I agreed to do so, fully feeling that there would never be such a debate.

When President Kennedy went to Vienna in early June, 1961, I found that Mrs. Jarvis was already in Vienna. At the first meeting between Chairman Khrushchev and President Kennedy at

[-169-]

the American Embassy, Kharlamov was there. He took me aside and said, "Do you know this woman, Jarvis? What do you think of her idea of having this debate in the United States?" I said, "I think it's a very good idea and I would like to see you do it." He said, "Well, you know, I think it can be arranged. So tomorrow when President Kennedy comes to the Soviet Embassy, why don't you and Mrs. Jarvis have breakfast with me?" The next morning while

President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev were upstairs, we were in the room right below them. We had our own meeting. There was Kharlamov, Mrs. Jarvis, a couple of other fellows whom I don't remember at this time, and myself. Adzhubei was not there. I said that I would like to do it, that it would be a free and open debate, that it would be see by millions of Americans on NBC. Kharlamov

[-170-]

said, "I think I can talk Adzhubei into doing it. I will let you know in the next three or four days." As a matter of fact, in three or four days, Mrs. Jarvis got a telegram saying that Adzhubei and Kharlamov would come to the United States and debate me. I was to pick another American who would be on the debate with me. We talked awhile about Cliff Daniels [Clifton Daniel, Jr.]. We finally settled on Harrison Salisbury [Harrison Evans Salisbury] because he had been in the Soviet Union for a long time. I must say that the fact that they were going to come came as a shock to me. It came of somewhat of a shock to President Kennedy. But the fact was that it was announced, and it had to go forward. I spent ten days before the debate briefing myself totally on U.S.-Soviet press relations, learning about some of the failures in their system; in other words, putting myself in their position.

[-171-]

WHITE: Who would brief you? The Russian desk at the State Department?

SALINGER: The State Department. I was brief considerably by the CIA, by the USIA. I came into the thing very well briefed, and with what, I thought, was a friendly statement to try to put the thing on a friendly basis. I also communicated to the Russians that I would like Mr. Adzhubei and Mr. Kharlamov to come to Washington after the debate to be my guests for a couple of days so that we could have some talks about U.S.-Russian press relations.

They came to New York. I went to New York. The day of the debate I invited them for lunch in my room at the Carlyle Hotel. They came accompanied by the gentleman whom I had not met before but got to know very well, Georgi Bolshikov. Georgi Bolshikov was then the editor of *USSR*, which was an American language magazine printed

[-172-]

by the Soviet Union in the United States. He acted as interpreter for Kharlamov and Adzhubei, neither of whom spoke any English. It was a very friendly lunch. As I recall, Mrs. Jarvis bought several kilos of caviar to make the Russians feel at home.

The debate was taped about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. While interesting, it had a lot of polemic parts to it because everyone was on television trying to protect their position. The Russians had to protect their position at home. Certainly, I was not going to put on a face of not protecting the U.S. government. All in all, it was a very worthwhile endeavor. After the debate, we got on a plane and flew to Washington. I remember Adzhubei and Kharlamov

kidded me about the U.S. restrictions on travel outside of New York which applies to Russian citizens. I had never even thought

[-173-]

about it. I had just invited them. I never cleared with anybody about them to Washington, but there was no problem involved in it.

WHITE: Would you give us now the specific date?

SALINGER: I can give you the specific date. As I recall, it was around June 18, 1961.

WHITE: Good. Fine.

SALINGER: There's a transcript available. What we said on the debate is known. We don't have to go on about that or go into it. They came to my house. The first thing that I did was to get them bathing suits. There was Bolshikov, Kharlamov, and Adzhubei. They all went swimming in the lake where I live. Then, when they got out of the lake, I gave all of them sport shirts. We sat around and drank. I cooked chicken on the barbeque. The program was going to be on the air at 9 p.m. Finally, we got around to 9 p.m. We had had much to drink.

[-174-]

Ed Murrow [Edward R. Murrow] and Rogert Tubby [Roger W. Tubby] had joined us. I think that I had invited Merriman Smith and some of the White House crew. We had a very gay and drunken group. Somehow the chicken was totally uncooked; the center of it was red. Then, the thing came on TV and we watched it together.

The next day I invited Adzhubei and Kharlamov to go on a cruise with me down the Potomac on the President's boat, the *Patrick J.*

WHITE: Which he had turned over to you.

SALINGER: Which he had turned over to me for the purpose. During that trip we had what I thought was the start of the really interesting talks about how we could really improve communications between the United States and the Soviet Union. We talked about the possibility of exchanging, for example, journalism between the *New York Times* and *Pravda*. The *Pravda* man would have

[-175-]

a column every day in *Pravda* and could write anything he damn pleased in *Pravda*. We had a similar idea with regard to Radio Moscow and one of the networks where you would give a Radio Moscow man fifteen minutes every night on a major American network to say anything he wanted.

WHITE: Normally, in this kind of dialogue it is the American who does the suggesting and the Russian who says, “Ah ha, that’s an interesting idea.” Did they do any suggesting of their own? Did you find any positive suggestion flowing from them?

SALINGER: Well, in these things they were…. As I recall, the columnist idea was partly their idea and mine. We bounced it around. But this was not a deal where I just was throwing out everything and they were just saying “very good.” They were throwing out things too.

[-176-]

For example, Adzhubei suggested that we exchange children. My youngest son, Stephen [Stephen Salinger], would go to the Soviet Union and spend the summer. He would send his son, Nikita [Nikita Adzhubei], to be my guest for the summer. Actually I think the thing would have probably come off if it had not been for the fear of the Secret Service and the FBA that protecting Nikita Khrushchev’s grandson in the United States was more than they wanted to try. I did bait them some about the fact that Khrushchev would always get what he wanted into the American press, but that no Soviet correspondent had ever interviewed the U.S. president. They kept asking when the Voice of America was going to stop telling lies to people, and I kept asking them when they were going to stop jamming our broadcasts. On the whole, even though everybody maintained their position, I thought that it was a very wholesome and useful meeting.

[-177-]

Adzhubei went home.

I maintained a kind of contact with the Russian press and Bolshikov. In September, 1961, John F. Kennedy went up to New York to address the UN right after the death of Dag Hammarskjöld [Dag Hjalmar Agne Carl Hammarskjöld]. Before I went up to New York, I had heard from Bolshikov who said that Mike Kharlamov was in New York with Gromyko as his press secretary and would like to see me. I arranged to have them come up to my room at the Carlyle Hotel; in fact, I had to sneak him up from the basement from the Secret Service. When Kharlamov got up there, we exchanged pleasantries for a while. This was just after Drew Pearson, Walter Lippman, and Cy Sulzberger [Cyrus Leo Sulzberger] had all come out with major stories about Khrushchev. I said, “Don’t you think it’s about time for an American president to be interviewed by a Soviet editor?” He said, “You

[-178-]

bring this up at a very bad time. There are fifteen Russian correspondents who have applied for visas to come to the United States to cover the UN. All of them have been turned down.” I said, “Why have they been turned down?” He said, “I don’t understand it.” I said, “That’s a technical matter. Let me get on that. Meanwhile, the central point is what about this

interview?" Then, we got to talking about Laos which was a key issue at the time. He made some points about Laos on which I took some notes. At the end of the interview I arranged to see them again at 5 o'clock the next afternoon. I then tried to get the President on the phone to give him the information about Laos. He was very interested and immediately got Rusk up and on the phone. After they talked for awhile, the President dictated to me a statement which I was to read

[-179-]

to the Russians at 5 o'clock the next afternoon about this position on Laos. I took it down verbatim. At 5 o'clock the next afternoon, I dictated it verbatim to the Russians who took notes. In the meanwhile, I might add, I had worked with the State Department and had gotten the admittance of the fifteen correspondents to the United States which was a totally technical matter.

Five days later, I was in Newport. I got a call from Georgi Bolshikov. He said, "I have to see you right away. It's a matter of highest urgency. I want to come to Newport and see you." I said, "Well, don't do anything. Let me call you back in a half hour." I talked to the President. The President thought it would be a very bad idea for Georgi Bolshikov to come to Newport. He said, "Why don't you go down and meet him in New York?" I made

[-180-]

arrangements to meet him the next afternoon in New York. Bolshikov said that he was very annoyed that it was the next afternoon. So I flew to New York, and the first thing I did was to see Rusk, who was holding a series of meetings with Gromyko on Laos and Berlin at the time. The President sent me there because he thought that I should be briefed on Laos and Berlin before I saw him because the thought that was what Bolshikov wanted to talk to me about. I then went over, registered at the Carlyle Hotel, took a room and about ten minutes after I was in the room, Bolshikov showed up. Bolshikov had under his arm a folded newspaper. After he sat down, he unfolded the newspaper and handed me a twenty-six page letter to President Kennedy from Chairman Khrushchev. The letter was in two copies: one in Russian, and one in English.

[-181-]

WHITE: My God!

SALINGER: This was the beginning of the Kennedy-Khrushchev private correspondence in which I was to play a key role in the next year and a half.

WHITE: Did you read the letter?

SALINGER: I read the letter several times. Then he said…

WHITE: Do you want to tell us on the tape what that letter said?

SALINGER: No. I cannot. I mean, in other words, I don't have the immediate recollection of what the letter says. Since it is already part of the Kennedy Library file, I don't think it is necessary for me to get into specifics of the letter. I think that letter is available to whoever wants to find it.

WHITE: What was it? Generally…

SALINGER: The letter was on Laos and Berlin.

WHITE: Twenty-six pages.

SALINGER: Twenty-six pages. After he got through with

[-182-]

that, he said, "Now I've got another message for you. Your discussion about the interview with President Kennedy has been taken up with Chairman Khrushchev. The Chairman believes that such an interview should take place and wishes to tell you that either his son-in-law, Mr. Adzhubei, or the editor of *Pravda*, Mr. [unclear] will come to the United States in the next six weeks and interview the President." So I thanked Bolshikov and went right back to where Rusk was and handed him the note. He was astounded by the receipt of the note. Incidentally, Bolshikov told me that no one knew of the existence of the note in the United States except Gromyko; in fact, Menshikov [Mikhail A. Menshikov], who was then the ambassador to the United States, knew nothing about the note.

WHITE: Bolshikov permitted you to give it to Rusk.

SALINGER: Bolshikov told me to give it only to the President.

[-183-]

WHITE: But you gave it to Rusk.

SALINGER: I gave it to Rusk only after my consultation with the President in Newport. Rusk said that he wanted a night to analyze it. I was not going back to Newport until the following morning so he took it to Washington with him, had it duplicated at the State Department, and sent a courier back to New York who met me in La Guardia Airport the next morning with the message, which I then flew up to Newport with and handed to the President. An answer to that letter was delivered by me to Bolshikov. A number of other letters went back and forth with Bolshikov giving them to me in various places. One letter was delivered on the street in front of the Willard Hotel in Washington.

WHITE: Give me some idea of the time span of this mad episode?

SALINGER: Oh, there would be letters about every six

[-184-]

weeks or two months.

WHITE: And you were convinced that they came from Khrushchev?

SALINGER: Oh, they were. I was not convinced; I knew they were from Khrushchev. On one occasion I was unable to pick up a letter, and I called Sorensen. He accepted the letter on behalf of President Kennedy.

WHITE: How many people at the White House knew about this correspondence?

SALINGER: As far as I know, Sorensen, Bundy, and I were the only people at the White House that knew anything about it. There were a number of interviews. There were a number of other discussions with Bolshikov and others in between which dealt with these matters that gave us information back and forth. I have memorandums on all those. There is no need to go into those in detail. I am talking about

[-185-]

the general thing.

The next major thing that happened was that Adzhubei went to Cuba to see Castro [Fidel Castro]. He also made a trip to Brazil and some of the other countries of Latin America. I met with Bolshikov and told him that I thought it would be a good idea if Adzhubei would stop off in the United States on his way back to the Soviet Union. I was informed that he would. At the same time, I had been pressing with Bolshikov the idea of the Kennedy-Khrushchev television debate. Bolshikov said, first of all, Adzhubei would come up to the United States on his way. Following a conversation with the President, I was able to tell Bolshikov that the President would hold a lunch for Mr. and Mrs. Adzhubei [Rada Nikitovna Adzhubei]. Secondly, Kharlamov had indicated a willingness to meet anywhere in the world to discuss the Kennedy-Khrushchev debate. We agreed on Paris.

[-186-]

In January, 1962, I flew to Paris. Ed Murrow was in Lagos, Nigeria. He flew to Paris for a meeting with Kharlamov to negotiate the Kennedy-Khrushchev TV debates. Without going into a great deal of detail on the matter, let me say that in a meeting at the Soviet embassy in Paris, we came to a total agreement in principle on the fact that Kennedy and

Khrushchev would engage in a series of television debates. We drafted the agreement. We agreed on the date the first show would go on the air.

WHITE: What would it have been?

SALINGER: March 18, 1962. We agreed on the ground rules for the debate and how the film would be made. In other words, everything was to be agreed.

WHITE: Were they to be in the same spot physically?

SALINGER: No. Khrushchev was to do his fifteen minutes in Russia; we were to do our fifteen minutes in the United States on a subject to be agreed

[-187-]

upon in advance. The first subject was to be, How can we advance peace in the world? The fifteen-minute segments could be placed back to back by any nation in any order; in other words, the Soviets could put Khrushchev last if they wanted, while the United States could put Kennedy last or the British could put Kennedy last or the Poles could put Khrushchev last. We were guaranteed the widest possible dissemination behind the Iron Curtain. We, in turn, guaranteed the widest possible dissemination in the United States.

I came back to the United States, went to New York, had a meeting with the network heads to inform them that we had this deal. I was given hell by them because they had not been in on the decision. But after explaining to them that it was impossible to bring them in on the negotiations of the plan, they agreed that the

[-188-]

three American networks would carry the debate.

WHITE: By network heads you mean Salant [Richard S. Salant] or do you mean Paley [William S. Paley]?

SALINGER: By network heads I mean Salant, Hagerty, Goodman; Kintner [Robert E. Kintner] was there, I believe—the top brass of the network. I arrived back in the United States from the Paris meeting the day that Adzhubei came to lunch. At that lunch several interesting things happened.

But, first of all, I have to go back. There had been an overture through me for Bobby to make a trip to the Soviet Union. After the overture had been made to me, the story leaked to the *New York Times*. The *New York Times* carried the story saying Bobby had been invited to the Soviet Union. The President thought it was destructive for Bobby to go at that time so we had knocked the story down very hard and had said that he had not been invited.

[-189-]

He had not physically been invited, although an overture had been made through me through Bolshikov. Adzhubei came to lunch. He said it was unfortunate that Bobby could not come to the Soviet Union, but that he was extending an invitation on behalf of Mrs. Adzhubei and himself for Mrs. Salinger [Nancy Salinger] and me to visit the Soviet Union as their guests. The President said at that the lunch that I would go as their guest in the Soviet Union. Part of the reason why he had agreed to it so easily was that he thought if there had been a second turndown after the Bobby turndown, it would have been unfortunate. After the lunch, JFK took Adzhubei and Bolshikov up to the room and really read the riot act on Berlin to them so that it would get directly to Khrushchev.

Now we skip forward about six weeks to March, 1962, about eleven days before the debate.

[-190-]

Bolshikov called me up in a state of agitation. I went down to meet him and he said that the debates were off. The excuse that they used was that the United States had resumed nuclear testing. As you will remember, the Soviet Union had resumed nuclear testing some four months earlier. I told them I thought it was a disaster, a terrible mistake on their part. The President was very angry about it. But it was decided at the time for an open break to appear in the press about this matter would have made U.S.-Soviet relations worse at the time than they were already. So we decided to gloss the thing over by making it appear that it was a joint agreement to call off the debate. Out of that also came the decision that my trip to the Soviet Union should continue, but rather than as a family visit I should go into the Soviet Union as an individual. The purpose of

[-191-]

my visit there would be to examine Soviet communications media. At no time was I ever told or given any indication that I would see Khrushchev.

When I left for the Soviet Union in early May of 1962, I was under the firm impression that my trip was solely to see newspaper editors, TV, radio people, and so forth. I landed at the Moscow airport. It was the tenth of May. There was a huge crowd at the airport with a lot of press. There was both an American and Russian welcoming party. The American welcoming party was headed by Thompson [Llewellyn E. Thompson, Jr.]. The Soviet welcoming party was headed by Adzhubei and Kharlamov. As soon as I got off the plane, Thompson took me aside and said, “You are supposed to spend the night here at the embassy, but it seems you are being taken to a dacha outside of Moscow. I under-

[-192-]

stand you are going to see Mr. Khrushchev tomorrow.

WHITE: That was the first you knew?

SALINGER: That was the first I knew. We drove by the U.S. embassy long enough to

have a conversation with Thompson about what might come up the following day. Then, Adzhubei and Kharlamov took me to this dacha, which was about twenty-five miles outside Moscow. This dacha was where Nixon had stayed in 1959. That night we had a very quiet dinner with Kharlamov, Adzhubei, Viktor Sukhodrev, and a fellow named Leone Zimyanin. Kharlamov had been promoted, in the meantime, to chairman of the State Committee on Radio-Television. I was told at dinner that Zimyanin was going to be the next head of the press department in Soviet foreign office.

The next morning Mrs. Adzhubei showed up and Mr. and Mrs. Yuri Zhukov, who was then the

[-193-]

observer of *Pravda*. About 11:00 a.m. a whole lot of guys who looked like Secret Service agents showed up, surrounded the joint, and at 11:10 a.m. Khrushchev drove in. They had the total security arrangements like the President of the United States: the follow-up car, and the Secret Service agent sitting in the right front seat. That began the maddest two days of my life.

WHITE: Who was interpreting for you at this time, Pierre?

SALINGER: My interpreter had been Alexander Akalovsky, the interpreter for Nixon during the "Kitchen debates" and for Kennedy at Vienna. Kennedy's interpreter was Viktor Sukhodrev. In addition, Tom Sorensen [Thomas C. Sorensen], Ted Sorensen's brother who was the third man in the USIA at the time, was in my party.

I started out the day by taking a ride down the Moscow River in a power boat—

[-194-]

Khrushchev getting up in the back of the boat every once in a while taking his hat off and waving at the peasants who had lined the side of the river and were waving to him. Then, we went back and took about a four-mile hike through the woods with Khrushchev spending most of the time talking about horticulture and agriculture, which seemed to be his favorite subjects. Then, we went down to the skeet shoot area where we had a skeet shoot which lasted about fifteen minutes. Khrushchev hit about eight out of ten; I hit about one out of four; Sorensen never hit anything.

I finally sat down to lunch about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Lunch lasted until 5 p.m. We went through more courses than you can name. We started out with about ten vodka toasts and went through everything to the point where I was absolutely finished. When we got to the

[-195-]

end of the meal (at which point) four waiters showed up with plates full of shashlikh which was the main course. Khrushchev grabbed this plate of shashlikh and put it between us and said, “Gospodin Salinger and I will eat this together.”

The luncheon conversation was generally social, although we did get to a couple of areas. There had been the Stewart Alsop article which had given the indication that JFK was in favor of preventative war.

WHITE: Yes. I remember that.

SALINGER: I spent a considerable amount of time at lunch telling him that that was the wrong impression, that Kennedy was not in favor of preventative war.

WHITE: Khrushchev had, therefore, read the article and had seriously thought that Kennedy might be thinking of preventative war?

SALINGER: Very seriously thought about it. At least, he

[-196-]

raised the problem.

WHITE: Right.

SALINGER: Then, we had an interesting conversation about Nixon whom Khrushchev hated. He referred to Mr. Nixon as a—he said, “Mr. Nixon reminds me of a herring salesman who would sell spoiled herring as the real thing.” He had some other uncomplimentary things to say about Nixon.

Then, he told me a fascinating story about the Brandenburg Gate facedown between the tanks. If you recall, there had been a facedown between the tanks in late 1961. As far as the outside world was considered, the Russians had retreated finally—this eyeball-to-eyeball thing. As Khrushchev told the story, there had been about a twenty-four hour faceoff between these tanks, and, finally, Khrushchev called Konyev [Marshal Konyev] on the phone—and this is Khrushchev’s story. He said, “This could go on

[-197-]

forever and might lead to war. The United States can’t pull back their tanks because they’ve got world opinion behind them and the problems of the United States. Kennedy can’t pull those tanks back. But, if we pull our tanks back, their tanks will pull back, and this whole thing will be over.” Konyev did not want to do that. He said to Konyev, “You take your tanks and move them behind the building just away from the wall where you can’t see them. They’re there, but just don’t let them see them. I guarantee the Americans will pull back within an hour.” The Russians did that and the Americans did exactly what he predicted they would do. He used that as an example of how he maintained world peace at this point.

At the end of the lunch, Khrushchev said to me, “I want to have a private talk with you.” We went down to a little arbor of trees just

[-198-]

Sukhodrev, him, and me. We sat there for one hour and a half. During that hour and a half, he made a new proposal on the settlement of the Berlin crisis. We reopened the discussion on the Kennedy-Khrushchev debates. We discussed atomic testing and why the Soviets had broken the Test Ban Treaty. At the end of this discussion, I told him that I was not there as a negotiator of any kind, but that I would report everything that he said to the President. He said, “I’ll be in the Soviet Union another couple of days. I’m going to Bulgaria, but if you have any messages for me from the President, I’ll be glad to receive them.”

There were several things that stood out. First of all, he was deeply grateful to the President for inviting his daughter to the White House for lunch. He said, “You know no American president would do that.” He equated in his

[-199-]

mind Adzhubei’s position in the Soviet Union with my position in the government; therefore, he was doing for me what he considered was reciprocal entertainment—the Soviets are very big on reciprocal entertainment.

Second, he had the greatest admiration and respect for Kennedy. He thought Kennedy had come to Vienna as a man who had really done his homework; he knew what he was talking about—a vigorous advocate of the American position. He was a great admirer of Kennedy.

At the end of the meeting, we walked up the hill. Adzhubei was standing there. I started to say goodbye to Khrushchev when he said, “I’ve enjoyed this so much, let’s do this again tomorrow.” It flabbergasted me. Adzhubei said, “You can’t do that because I am giving a lunch for Mr. Salinger at the restaurant [Ayagui Restaurant] tomorrow.” He said, “Well, you

[-200-]

know those things can be cancelled.”

We got back to the embassy and at about 10 o’clock that night Adzhubei phoned and said, “We, indeed, are going out and having lunch with Khrushchev the next day.” So we had the second lunch. This time they invited Ambassador Thompson and his wife [Jane Thompson].

During the night, while I was asleep at the embassy, the United States landed ten or fifteen thousand troops in Thailand. Do you remember that incident?

WHITE: No, I don’t.

SALINGER: Well, Kennedy sent troops into Thailand to protect the integrity of Laos.

WHITE: Yes. I remember that.

SALINGER: That happened during the night.

WHITE: I was completely unaware that that happened while you were there.

SALINGER: That happened during the night between the first

[-201-]

and second meeting.

WHITE: I didn't associate the two things. Oh, Christ.

SALINGER: The next day we had some considerable discussion about Laos. Then, I made a tour around the Soviet Union which was disconnected with Khrushchev, but in the course of this time I spent some fourteen hours with Khrushchev. I have transcripts of all the conversations. I did not have any direct relation with Khrushchev thereafter, although I had conversations with the Russians on various matters back and forth.

There are two important things. The last happened recently and, therefore, is not a part of this. About two weeks after the assassination of President Kennedy, Alexander Zinchuk, who was the press attaché of the Soviet embassy, called and said that it was urgent that he have lunch with me. He started out the conversation with what I consider to be the most astounding

[-202-]

conversation I ever had in my life. He said, "Chairman Khrushchev asked me to have lunch with you. He knows you; he trusts you; and he would like to have your assessment of the new president of the United States."

WHITE: Oh, boy.

SALINGER: This was about as direct an approach as was ever made. I gave him the assessment which was that I thought that Johnson would carry out the policies of Kennedy, that he was a tough, firm man but one whom I was sure wanted to promote Soviet-U.S. relations. I thought it was astounding that they would make that kind of approach, but, I thought it reflected the kind of relationship that I had with the Russians over a long period of time and still have. There are a lot of other holes in this, but as far as the Library is concerned, they have transcripts of my conversations with Khrushchev

[-203-]

WHITE: I want to ask you one thing. Did you then have these conversations with Khrushchev early in May, 1962, in an atmosphere of good fellowship? Certainly at that point he must have already taken the decision to build the missile sites in Cuba. Give me your reflection on that.

SALINGER: It was very probable that the decision had been made at that time. We didn't discuss Cuba for some time during that meeting. In fact, he gave me a box of 200 cigars, which had been sent to him personally by Fidel Castro, in the course of this conversation. I have a box downstairs but not the cigars.

WHITE: But was he trying to kid you during this conversation? If he were really setting up an offensive threat, was he trying to kid you or was he doing another human thing which is to make ready for war on the one hand and seek peace on the other?

[-204-]

SALINGER: I have to say, looking back on things now, that Cuba was very far removed from my mind at the time. He did not try to do a snow job on me as far as Cuba is concerned because I didn't get into Cuba very much. The central issue at that time was Berlin, and the side issue was Laos. Our point, of course, at that time was that if we couldn't carry out the promises that had been made by Khrushchev in 1961 in Vienna on Laos, then we couldn't trust him on anything. Therefore, their good intentions on Laos were needed, and it was vital that they control the Pathet Lao and bring about a real neutral government—we were willing to go along with a neutral government in Laos, but they had to play their part and we would play our part in restraining Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan] and the rightest groups in Laos. I remember that conversation vividly. Cuba was a peripheral matter in May of 1962;

[-205-]

it was not a central problem as far as our conversation was concerned.

WHITE: All right. We'll talk about the Cuban Missile Crisis some other time. I want you to think about that between now and the next time we talk. I think we could break for the evening.

SALINGER: I agree.

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

[-206-]

Pierre E.G. Salinger Oral History Transcript – JFK #2
Name Index