

Laura Bergquist Knebel Oral History Interview –JFK#2, 8/1/1977
Administrative Information

Creator: Laura Bergquist Knebel
Interviewer: Sheldon Stern
Date of Interview: August 1, 1977
Place of Interview: Princeton, New Jersey
Length: 33 pages

Biographical Note

Knebel, a journalist for *Look* Magazine (1954-1971), discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) personality; his relationship with Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy; his and Robert F. Kennedy's preoccupation with Cuba; and speculation on things JFK would have done had he lived, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation

Laura Bergquist Knebel, recorded interview by Sheldon Stern, August 1, 1977, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Laura Bergquist Knebel—JFK#2

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Second of Two Oral History Interviews

with

Laura Bergquist Knebel

August 1, 1977
Princeton, New Jersey

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: ...talking about that distinction that we mentioned earlier, the distinction between Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] the myth, the legend that's certainly come about since his death, on the one hand. And now, of course, we have inevitably, as with any major historical figure, we've got the revisionists—well, essentially the muckrakers, who are out to find all of the personal things and also, of course, to show us that all sorts of things happened in the administration, whether it's the Cuban raids and Alpha 66 and Operation Mongoose and the attempts to kill Castro [Fidel Castro] and all the rest of that. Now, all these things are important—I'm not trying to say they're not; they're certainly important—but despite all of this, the difficulty in so much of the oral history collection is that people tend to

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generalize. As you were saying earlier, you say he was witty—they don't give you examples. They say that kind of thing. And you can add that kind of documentation, it would be tremendously valuable. Exactly what was this guy like and how did you perceive him? Particularly that kind of story you told me about the inauguration, that kind of thing.

KNEBEL: It's very hard to think of anecdotes out of context.

STERN: Sure.

KNEBEL: I mean, unless you're thinking about a specific incident. That one anecdote was about when I went down to see him in Palm Beach before the inauguration, and I was very apprehensive about seeing him because he was the President now, you know. Up to that point he was Jack or the Senator, and I didn't know what to call him. And I had this illusion of going over to see him at the house, and he was very much the same. He was sitting around in his shorts, I think, he was on the telephone with his legs over the edge of the chair and he says, "Hi, Laurer." [Laughter] That was a big deal—I was "Laurer" to that, you know,

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because of his accent. He said, "Are you coming to the inauguration?" Well, this was very startling, and very casual. I said no. And he said, "Well, why not?" I said, "Because nobody invited me. I'm not on your list." He said, "Well, I invite you."

I think it was typical of this great kind of personal interest he took, and it was a genuine personal interest. I mean, he was curious about all kinds of things. I remember about what.... If I had a dress on that was kind of interesting, or I remember once I had a piece of jewelry, and he wanted to know all about it. Where did I get it? How much did it cost, and who designed it, and so on and so on.

STERN: He assimilated information, didn't he?

KNEBEL: He was like a sponge, he was like a sponge. Or for instance if I was not.... Sometimes I would not do all the stories in *Look* about him—I know that's the way it seemed for a while—and someone else would be out there and he'd say, "Where's Laura? Why isn't she in on this?" And he kept trying to get me to work on the campaign.

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Why couldn't I work on the campaign? All very casual...

STERN: Because of things in the book manuscript, examples of his wit and his casualness that sort of thing, I know it's difficult to ask you to just sort of pull these out, but....

KNEBEL: I'd really have to go through this. That whole Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] episode, that was one of the funniest.

STERN: No, I don't know about that. Maybe I do.

KNEBEL: You don't know about Caroline? Let's see how I put it. Stanley [Stanley Tretick] had been up at Hyannis doing a story on Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent

Shriver, Jr.] and he was snapping pictures, sitting on the Ambassador's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] front porch, and all of a sudden along comes Caroline. And she was *verboden*. I mean, he was there to take pictures of Sarge Shriver and his family, and the ground rules were, no pictures of Caroline because, first, Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] was very sensitive about the kids being snapped, of having her privacy being invaded, particularly on the family compound. So Stanley just took all these

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pictures which were absolutely fabulous. Here was just a little girl about three, four years old kind of haranguing and fighting with her cousins, and had her glasses upside down and they were charming pictures.

I tried for, I don't know how long to get permission to print them. I thought that we ought to ask for permission, and I'd go in to Pierre [Pierre E.G. Salinger]. And then I'd see the President and I'd say something like, "Can't we use them? These are charming pictures, and all the good they would do," and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But they would never let them loose. Jackie absolutely did not want them printed.

So about a year went by, and a lot of other publications had printed pictures of Caroline. I think Mark Shaw or somebody had gone and had a special session so I came a little wilder eyed. But *Look* decided to go ahead and print these pictures. Kennedy did not know about it. And when they found out that these pictures, which had sort of been put on ice, were coming out in *Look* magazine, the shit really hit the fan. And I remember that the President tried to get Stanley,

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who was at the supermarket, luckily, to chew him out. It was.... Such hell broke loose over this. I think the big thing was that we had broken a trust with the Kennedys.

STERN: Did he contact you directly?

KNEBEL: I think Pierre did. And I went down on a peace-keeping.... The editor and I went down on a peace-making expedition to see the President and to somehow make this up. I remember when I went down there to talk to him and try to set up some kind of working relation, he was in the Rose Garden making some kind of speech, and I went out in the Rose Garden and he looked at me and the look, if looks could.... It was like laser beams. He looked at me with this cold, flat, disinterested, hostile.... Wait a minute, hostile is not the word. It was just this enormously turned off, I had never seen him look like that.

STERN: He was clearly mad. He wanted you to see that he was angry.

KNEBEL: Oh, did he want me to see that and I was absolutely riveted by it. And he was sore. I mean, he was really sore about that for some time. We had trouble. But

then Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] said, "Oh, he gets over it. The President blows his stack. Don't worry about it. He liked those pictures, and it was really Jackie who didn't like them and raised a big fuss, so it will all blow over." But it took quite a while for it to blow over, and I think mostly it was the matter for him

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of a broken trust. Here we had been on the compound, we had taken pictures that we weren't supposed to take, we agreed not to print them, and we had printed them. That in his book was.... I don't think it was the pictures themselves so much. But I really knew what it was to be a target of his wrath. Even though it was over such a ridiculous, you know, nothing kind of issue.

STERN: I intend to ask your husband [Fletcher Knebel] this later, but do you know if he showed any personal anger about that article about the press, JFK and the press ["Kennedy and the Press"] that your husband wrote in '62?

KNEBEL: You're going to have to ask Fletch about that.

STERN: Okay. Apparently he was kind of angry about it. But I'll give you another example, that day when we went in on this peace-making mission or we were going to talk to him about some other stories, the editor and I, he said to us, "I hear that somebody from *Look* magazine or from your organization has been doing some snooping around about my secret marriage." I think Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] somehow had gotten wind, and I think it was Fletcher or Clark Mollenhoff [Clark R. Mollenhoff] or somebody in the Washington office had been doing a lot of digging on this, because that was a big story at the time.

STERN: But the Blairs [Clay Drewry Blair, Jr.; Joan Blair; *The Search for JFK*], deny that there was a secret marriage.

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KNEBEL: That's right. I don't know whether it's true or not. I remember saying to him, "Were you ever secretly married? He said, "No, I knew her and I took her to a football and that was about it." But he was very edgy about it.

STERN: It was a politically disastrous issue.

KNEBEL: But it was interesting that Bobby had called him and let him know that somebody in St. Louis or wherever it was, wherever the woman lived, had let him know that somebody was digging on this story. But Kennedy looked at my editor and at me and, said, "You print that story and I'll wind up owning *Look* magazine." And I said to him, "That sounds to me like a threat." [Laughter] But he wasn't kidding. He was kidding, but he wasn't kidding.

STERN: The whole question of his relationship with Jackie is, I think, one that tends to be very much sentimentalized because again, I think of the way it all ended obviously. But the more that people are getting into detail, the more that relationship becomes a lot more complicated. What did you see of it, that you perceived? I mean, how close were they? Was there tension between them? There are many, particularly in very recent times, people saying that she did not like at all being in the position of a politician's wife at all. There were stories of her hiding in the car while he was campaigning, and feeling left out and

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withdrawing, and that kind of thing. Did you ever see any sign of that?

KNEBEL: I think that was true when he was senator, that she really wasn't very much interested in politics and this was not her interest at all. I think that I had an interview where I went to interview her once when he was senator about what it was like, you know, to be wife of a senator and what he was like. She always said things were so dreary. "All these dreary questions." She said, "I suppose you're going to ask me about Jack's complexes, that he has a complex about his father and that his father has a complex about Jack, and Jack has one about Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.]." And this whole.... All that kind of business. But I think once she became First Lady, and once she got in the White House, I think things changed. She really became a personality in her own right. I went on that trip to Europe with them.

STERN: Oh, you did?

KENBEL: Yeah, the one....

STERN: When he introduced himself?

KENBEL: One to Paris and to Vienna. She made quite a splash, and actually became a political asset. Because up to that point people weren't sure that she was a political asset or not. They said, also in interviews, in the Dorothy Kilgallen column—I didn't say anything—but she was too fancy, she was too fey, she was too chic, and she was too social to be a president's wife, and the American people would never accept that kind of a person.

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But it turned out that she went over big. As I said, she very much had her own domain in the White House. There were her wing and his wing and the two just didn't....

STERN: That's, I think, a very striking point.

KNEBEL: She told me that later, after she got out of the White House. We had a long, long talk one day.

STERN: Can you tell me about that?

KNEBEL: Yeah, this was when we were doing, maybe it was during the memorial issue, and I had sent her a number of communications saying I was working on this special issue one year after his death, and there were some things I'd like to talk over with her. And I wasn't getting much of any place. With her I learned that it took a long time for her to really do things, at least for me. And I had lunch with one of her aides—maybe it was Nancy Tuckerman—and I said, “I don't know about Jackie. I'm beginning think she doesn't like us working stiff journalists, and Stanley and I aren't fancy enough for her. You know, she prefers these kind of elegant European—I don't know—*Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue* types.” And then when I saw Jackie she went to great lengths to assure me that was not the case. She said, “I've always liked you very much and I like Stanley, but you have to realize that I was in one wing and he was in the other wing, and that you were part of his wing.”

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And of course the President. I mean, he didn't mind about pictures of his children and stuff like that, so if we suggested something like that he was all for it and she was against it. And so she identified...

STERN: Do you think that this distinction between wings reflects in some ways that distinction we discussed before about the sort of pre-presidential Kennedy, the informal, Irish politician, with his buddies, his old friends from the navy, that sort of thing? While the other side—I mean, I think there's to some degree his side. Do you see what I'm getting at? His side of the White House is that private side, from which I think that logically she was excluded.

KNEBEL: Yeah, and I don't think she was very interested in it. I mean, I don't think, I don't know a lot of what went on—I mean, a lot of the political stuff—I don't think was of enormous interest to her. She was a very strong person. She had a very definite mind of her own, and when she made up her mind you could not budge her. And he couldn't budge her. He would say that to you. Many times I'm talking to him and I'd say, “Can't you influence her? Can't you answer her? Well, could you please put this complaint across?”

STERN: That's interesting.

KNEBEL: He'd say, “Nope, I can't.” All kinds of other stuff he'd say, “Okay, I'll give it a try.” But on these matters her word was law.

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I did a number of profiles on her, and I think that's how she survived in that family was just by being very private and stubborn and saying no and kind of carving out her own existence.

STERN: You know that, of course, would not be the standard Kennedy woman role by any means.

KNEBEL: No. Unh-unh.

STERN: Certainly very different from that of her mother-in-law [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy], for example.

KNEBEL: No. He was a very tough character to get along with, I would think. As charming as he was. But she was not railroaded. She could have been.

STERN: Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee] in his book says that he admired and valued her as a political asset by the time she certainly became one. And yet he perceived—I wonder if you think there's anything to this—a certain jealousy, for example, with her facility with languages, which he absolutely did not have even though he had studied them. That he was jealous of that tour of the White House in which she of course had fifty-five minutes of the hour, he just came in for a moment. That he made some sort of remark to Bradlee about the fact that he didn't like that. I think that's a side of him. It's an interesting....

KNEBEL: I mean, once I was supposed to do a profile on her and she wouldn't talk to me. I guess she had just had a baby at that point. But Pierre said, "Go talk to the President

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about it," which is a funny way to do a profile. I said, "Okay." I asked him about her, and that's what he talked about was, "Oh, she speaks all these languages." He was very impressed by that, by that facility. And he would also say, "I don't know why you're doing this profile on Jackie, because you don't know her. You know me. Why don't you write about me?" It was done jokingly. I didn't get any feeling.... I mean, I was not as close as Bradlee, certainly. I didn't get any of that.... There was a certain tension between them. How will I put it? Oh, she'd make funny remarks about him and he'd make funny remarks about her, none of which I can remember at this point. Joking.... She was supposed to have said once about his great charm, "How come we see so little of it around the house?" [Laughter]

STERN: She said that to you?

KENBEL: No, I heard that was what she said. And I know she would say like.... She was

very angry, apparently put off when Stanley and I did that story on the President and his son [John F. Kennedy, Jr.]. ‘Cause we did that when she was away. She had gone off to Greece and the President sneaked us the story. She came back and was upset about that. Later she said to me, “Stan and Jack were like two sneaky little boys. The minute I left town, they would let you in to do these things that I didn’t particularly want done.” So in that sense they worked at cross-purposes. But I think in a sense I think they got along

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better once they got into the White House. Because he wasn’t away all the time. And I know once....

STERN: She had much more of an independent role in the White House at that time.

KNEBEL: She had a role of her own, and I think probably she saw more of him, and also they had children by then, which made a big difference. The big difference was, when I first met them they didn’t have any children. He was extraordinary. He adored those kids. He was crazy about those kids.

STERN: You can see that in the photographs and in so many other things, that’s very clear. You mentioned that, I think, in your original interview—the extent to which you were very struck by how patriarchal, I think was the term you used.

KNEBEL: And I say, not only with his own children but with his nieces and nephews like at Hyannis. There would be eighteen or twenty of them—I don’t know how many of them—were just running all over the place. And he’d arrive on Friday night in his helicopter and they’d all run over yelling, “Jack, Jack, Jack, Uncle Jack.” And he spent a lot of time with them. I remember one of them would tell him some big long story of something that happened that week, and the President would say, “Now is that a fact?” treating them very adultly.

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STERN: That’s very interesting because that was in many ways the role his father had. Being away all the time and coming back on the weekends. A lot of the family recollections are of the tremendous excitement about Joe, senior coming back.

KNEBEL: You know I hadn’t thought about that, but that’s true.

STERN: It’s an interesting parallel there that he was in the same position. His cousin was, for example, talking about that, how much it meant Friday night and how much Rose Kennedy would get the whole household geared up to the return of Joe, senior. He would so dominate the conversation. The patriarch, and all the rest of that.

KNEBEL: That is interesting. Because in a different.... Jack Kennedy wasn't very patriarchal in personality particularly, but as he got older there was a very tribal feeling about him, about his kids, about his nieces and nephews, about children—very, very involved with them. Teddy's [Edward M. Kennedy] that way now, too, with his kids and with....

STERN: You said in the memorial edition that the last time or the last times you had seen him that you were struck by a sense of maturation on his part, that he seemed much more serious and seemed much more aware of the complexities of what he was in. Can you elaborate on that some?

KNEBEL: That was the last time I saw him, which was....

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STERN: How long was that before the....

KNEBEL: It was about a month before the assassination. Maybe it was six weeks. That whole thing was spooky. We waited so long to do this story on the President and his son, and then suddenly it came up. But I had not seen him in some time, and it struck me very forcibly that he was different and I wasn't sure that it was just this period because his son, you know—was it Patrick [Patrick Bouvier Kennedy]?

STERN: The baby that died?

KNEBEL: The baby had just died, but he seemed very serious, very sober. There was a quality, it was a somberness about him. In fact, kind of an edge of sadness.

STERN: That's the part that interests me most.

KNEBEL: I think I said, I talked to Jackie about this once, that I caught that and she said, "Oh, you caught that." She said, "Because that was true about him." I can't remember that we went into it any more than that. But I think he had a streak in him of fatalism or not knowing [unclear] but of the irony of life or something.

STERN: I agree, there's a good deal of evidence for that.

KNEBEL: And as I say, the first two years that I was working with him were still pretty lighthearted. That was the early days of the New Frontier, and all the excitement and the glamour, and all this stuff going on. Washington was

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really turned on by the Kennedys in the White House and all that kind of stuff. Then came the Bay of Pigs. Then came real solid, hard problems that wouldn't go away. Whether it was

that or the personal things in his life, he was heavier physically, he looked older, and he did have this vein of seriousness. Usually we had had a lot of fun and games, or a lot of bantering or, “What have you read?” or, “What’s up?” or, “Where have you been?” He had very, very little time for that. It was very businesslike.

STERN: Quite a number of people have made observations of that kind, seeing particularly the Cuban Missile Crisis as kind of a turning point, in that he had literally looked into the abyss, and the world was so close to the ultimate confrontation. And that really sobered him. I think that there is some truth to that, I don’t doubt that for a moment. It’s a very hard thing to document though, it’s one of the great tragedies of the fact that he isn’t around to tell us himself, to write his own memoirs, to tell us how he felt about it.

KNEBEL: I think that was a very sobering experience, as it should have been.

STERN: Oh, my God, it certainly should have been.

KNEBEL: I was in this peculiar position of, as I called him, I thought he was a fascinating human animal and also disagreeing with him—I mean, politically—or having great feelings of difference with him.

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STERN: Did you have any knowledge at all at the time of the kinds of things that were going on? Were there any hints around Washington of the covert operations against Cuba—all sorts of things that have come out since—Mongoose, and the Alpha 66 raids? I know Cuba was a special interest of yours.

KNEBEL: Yeah, I was very much in touch with Cuban affairs at that point. I have found out since that Kennedy—now, I’ll have to get this straight—under the Freedom of Information Act I asked, sent away for my security files and that Kennedy had me checked out by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] [Laughter] on what I was doing on Cuba.

STERN: You’re sure he initiated it?

KNEBEL: It was initiated from the President’s office.

STERN: Isn’t that interesting.

KNEBEL: I’ll have to get that out to corroborate, because I was really....

STERN: That’s fascinating.

KNEBEL: It really kind of shook me up. I’m not surprised at those things coming up

because, as I say, in my talks with him and also with Bobby, their preoccupation with this subject, and their obsession with Cuba...

STERN: Cuba?

KNEBEL: With Cuba, that's right. It seems to me it would lead to that. Bobby particularly. I tried to

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write down one anecdote about, once I went over to his office and I had just come back from Cuba. This was after....

STERN: This is the AG [Attorney General].

KNEBEL: The AG. I was there after the Missile Crisis, and also after the Bay of Pigs. One of the pieces I wrote, I had written that the Cubans I talked to had said that they had noticed the.... Fidel had had the invaders on television, the Bay of Pigs invaders—and a couple of Cubans said to me, “Did you notice who they were? They were so-and-so and so-and-so. We know him, he was a big Batistiano, and he was thus-and-such, and there were almost no Negroes.” Well, I just quoted a couple of Cuban families on this. I went to see Bobby and he said, “Have you read Haynes Johnson’s book *The Bay of Pigs?*” Which I think is something the Kennedys kind of commissioned or backed or informally gave information for. There was a footnote in it about me to the effect that I was a very gullible journalist, and said that there weren’t many Negroes in the Bay of Pigs invasion. In fact there were this many, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And Bobby took great.... It was with great relish he pointed this out. Calling me on my naïveté and whatever.

STERN: He was tremendously protective—wasn’t he—of his brother?

KNEBEL: Oh, yes. Totally devoted, dedicated, protective.

STERN: I think that’s one of the characteristics, of course, you would expect of his brother. But he

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certainly evoked that in associates, too. This fierce, absolutely loyal dedication.

KNEBEL: Do you mean Jack Kennedy or Bobby?

STERN: That Jack evoked that in people.

KNEBEL: Yeah. Bobby did, too, in a different way.

STERN: Later on especially.

KNEBEL: Later on especially.

STERN: Did you ever see any specific examples of that that you can remember? It's shot through the oral history collection, a tremendous amount of...

KNEBEL: I'm sure I did, and I just can't remember it. I say, particularly when I first met them and they were on the—what?—the rackets committee [Senate Committee to Investigate Improper Activities in Labor-Management] that investigating thing. Bobby took the lead in questioning, but he consulted very frequently with Jack. They were in the corridors, and they were so very close to one another. It was like alter egos, you know.

STERN: That's the point, right. That's very interesting. That gets also to a side of him which certainly needs more serious treatment—more serious, certainly, than the Blairs have done, which I think is.... I think they raise a lot of intriguing questions, but they don't come up with many answers.

KNEBEL: This is in relation to the loyalty?

STERN: The whole question of loyalty, right. One thing they did, I think, which is very important and useful, is that they interviewed a lot of people who broke with him over the years, particularly early friends

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with whom he eventually just sort of lost contact, or they just sort of drifted apart for whatever reason. And got sort of another side. That's a useful thing about the Blairs' book, I think. You get that sense.

KNEBEL: I haven't finished the book, so I don't know.

STERN: In that sense, I think it's useful. One of the problems with the oral history collection is the extent to which it's very heavily weighted on the essentially pro-Kennedy side. The point, of course, is not just to gather anti-Kennedy information. That's not the issue. The issue, though, is trying to come up with some sort of balanced sense of what this individual was really all about.

He said apparently to Ben Bradlee, and I think it's a marvelous line—I've got it right here. He said that, "What makes biography so interesting is the struggle to answer the question, What's he like?" Those are Kennedy's words to Ben Bradlee, as quoted by Bradlee. Now, of course, that's it. He's absolutely right. What's he really like? What's this guy really like? So many of the interviews are so general, they just don't get into these real questions at all. Of course it's not a question of gossip and things of that sort, but how did this guy

function in terms of his personal relationships? How did he treat subordinates? How did he treat associates? How did he treat family members? When he was very angry, did he

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keep his anger for very long? Was he a vengeful bitter kind of person? Apparently the evidence says he was not, pretty much as I can see.

KNEBEL: No, I don't think he was.

STERN: He certainly could blow his stack, as you said, but he tended to get over it.

KNEBEL: I know this one woman journalist that I mentioned in my interview, he didn't like her and he didn't like what she wrote about other subjects or what she wrote about him, and he would absolutely have nothing to do with her ever again.

STERN: Who was this? I don't remember.

KNEBEL: Her name was Elinore Harris. The first time I met him she had just done this interview with him, and he was very, very wary and weary. He was telling me all these stories about her, how she dropped all these confidences about things that she could not print about her other subjects. And in this case it was Montgomery Clift that, I think, she gossiped about. He didn't like that one bit. She could never get at him again. I remember after he was president she would come to me and say, "I don't know what it was, but I'd like to have some contact with him. Can you set something up?" But she was out, out, out. There were certain people who were in and certain people who were out.

STERN: Getting back to the question of Cuba, why do you think Cuba was such an almost—I'll use the word—an obsession with him?

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KNEBEL: I don't know. I don't know if he really felt that way.

STERN: That's my point. Did he really?

KNEBEL: Whether he really in his gut felt that Cuba, communist Cuba, ninety miles off the American shores was this enormous threat to our security...

STERN: I can't figure that out. That's absolutely the point.

KNEBEL: ...and all that kind of business. Or whether it was something he got stuck with during the debates.

STERN: Politically, yes.

KNEBEL: He made a big political point of that during the debates. So having done that felt that, well, okay, we had to go along with that.

STERN: I was particularly fascinated by your recollections of his fascination with Castro. He was very...

KNEBEL: Oh, yes. Endlessly.

STERN: ...interested in the details of his personal life, and what it was all about.

KNEBEL: That's right. What was his appeal? Also what I thought were, you know, funny questions like, "Why does he make those long speeches?" I mean, Kennedy would ask a question like that. It's like a conversation stopper. Because there's really no.... It leaves you kind of off balance, and then you have to come up with something. He wanted to know about what his appeal was, and about his sex life, which kind of threw me.

STERN: I wonder if he asked male journalists about those sorts of things?

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KNEBEL: Oh, I think so.

STERN: Or in what way might it be different.

KNEBEL: He knew about a lot of things. Stanley, whom I worked with, was then having an affair with a woman in Washington who shall remain nameless. I remember Kennedy once asked of his secretary, "Say, is Stanley still sleeping with such-and-such?"

STERN: He knew about it.

KNEBEL: He knew, he knew. How did he find these things out? People told him. Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] would bring all the gossip from New York. People like me who wandered in from the outside world, he would trap. I remember when they were making "Advise and Consent" down in Washington, Otto Preminger was down there. A lot of people in the White House were part of the cast. He couldn't go—this was early in the administration—but he got so excited he kept calling to find out what was going on. He didn't want to be left out, he was curious. What was going on?

STERN: That's a really fascinating side of his personality.

KNEBEL: Yeah. All this little stuff.

STERN: Right. Which is so absent from people like, for example, his predecessor, Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. That whole....

KNEBEL: I think he could operate on this very ideological plane or whatever you want to call it, political plane or abstract ideas, and then he also liked

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kind of stuff. So do I. I'm fascinated with who does what, and when, and all that

STERN: You seemed skeptical a minute ago that he was really committed to the destruction of Castro from an ideological point of view. That's the sense I got from the way you said it.

KNEBEL: Yeah. I just don't see him being that in the gut committed to the thinking that this was the greatest menace to the United States. I can see him having—it's like a bone in the throat, and certainly a big blow to his pride, prestige, to the administration, to his judgment to—you name it. And with Bobby there [would] certainly be a lot of get-evens involved.

STERN: Sure. There are even those who argue, for example, even McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the executive committee of the National Security Council was debating, What do we do about this? There were those who said, "Look, it's not really that important. What's the difference? A missile is a missile." But it was obvious from a political point of view that was unacceptable. Even if one could make the argument, and McNamara tried to make it. So what's the difference if you get killed by a missile that comes from the Soviet Union or a missile that comes from Cuba? Is it important enough to bring the world to the brink of nuclear war and maybe over the brink?

KNEBEL: Yeah.

STERN: But obviously from a political point of view that was not acceptable. I mean, with all the previous month, month

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and a half, with the Capehart [Homer E. Capehart] and Keating [Kenneth B. Keating] shrieking about offensive weapons in Cuba, and the administration consistently denying it, and now suddenly he's confronted with the truth of these charges. Obviously he had a political problem of incredible dimensions to deal with, in addition to the very real military imbalance of power and all the other issues.

KNEBEL: Even later when it was all over, and that was the year or two behind, it was a dropped subject, it was an irritant to him. I remember bringing it up once, it looked as if there might be some rapprochement, and I forget what was going on. I asked him about it. He said something about, "Well, some of your friends in Congress will have to answer to that." Or something very short. That was not his favorite topic. But I was in the peculiar position because I was going to Cuba, and I was covering the White House, and they were both kind of the same thing.

STERN: I gather from your initial interview, that he in some ways almost tried to kind of milk you, in terms of, as a source of information, almost to have you, Go ask these questions for me.

KNEBEL: I think he did that not only with me but with other people. If they were going some place that was of interest to him.

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STERN: Which inevitably almost becomes a sort of a presidential task.

KNEBEL: The first time I met him, I remember Teddy had just gone to Algeria on some kind of fact-finding tour, or maybe it was just a tour, and we all had dinner together and Kennedy was asking all these rapid-fire questions about Algeria—Algerian politics, what's going on? Pumping Teddy like crazy about what the Algerian situation was, which he knew a great deal about, to my surprise. That was very early.

STERN: That Teddy knew a great deal about it?

KNEBEL: Teddy had just come back from there. He was a brain-picker.

STERN: Was there any sense at all at that early a point of some of the.... That anybody had any idea about the covert things that were going on against Cuba? I mean, the attempts to kill Castro?

KNEBEL: I knew about them, or I heard about them.

STERN: That early, while he was still president?

KNEBEL: Yeah.

STERN: You did? Do you happen to remember how, or when, or from what source?

KNEBEL: No. There were so many plots that I heard about and the irony was, I would go to Cuba and I would be suspect by the Cubans as a CIA journalist or

something like that. I was sure the CIA was up to God-knows-what but at that time you couldn't put a finger on it. A lot of stuff has come out since then. Documented. But then it was just a

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feeling you had or just an intuition or just a hunch.

STERN: If you were to be asked—and I'll ask you the question he himself raised with Ben Bradlee—What's he like? How would, if someone were to say to you, just on the basis of your contacts with him, "What was this person all about?" how would you assess him?

KNEBEL: As I say, I call him a fascinating human animal. I've never known anybody like him. The combination of things.

STERN: Let me just interrupt for one second. Do you think you would have said that before his death?

KNEBEL: Yes.

STERN: All right, that's a very important point.

KNEBEL: Yes, because I had to defend him a lot. People would say.... People who didn't like Kennedy and knew that I was covering the White House and doing all these funny stories about the kids and all that. I was suspect of being a Kennedy fink, which I didn't particularly care about. And I would keep trying to say, "Look, I disagree with this man about a great many things, about many issues, for instance, like Cuba. I wonder about this hard-nosed, pragmatic administration. But he is without doubt one of the most interesting, bright, quick, and what I call 'educatable.'" Which I think is a very, very important thing about him. There's this flexibility in him. That's what kept me coming back to try and talk

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to him or argue with him, was this feeling that somehow if he had gotten enough information and if he was persuaded and if he read enough books and if he talked to people, that he was open-minded enough to change his mind or to change course. Which I certainly did not have about other presidents or a number of other politicians.

STERN: It's the kind of thing that leads to the endless speculation for example: would he have followed the course that LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson] followed in Vietnam? And of course one can make a very credible argument on both sides—yes, he would have; no, he wouldn't have. Did you see Tom Wicker's recent article...

KNEBEL: Yes, I did.

STERN: In which he, I think makes a very persuasive case that he wouldn't have, and the reason he wouldn't have is that he was capable of seeing that it was going to be a disaster.

KNEBEL: And also times were changing. I mean he was the end of the Cold War period in a sense. He was a product of the Cold War like we all were. It's a fascinating notion that Wicker advances that he would have taken '64, that he wanted Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] as the opponent so that he could run on a platform of peace and essentially what we later came to call détente and, "We came so close, let's not come so close again," and that kind of thing. Of course, we'll never know.

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On the other hand one can make a very strong argument, look at the people who led Johnson into Vietnam, Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow], McNamara—they were all Kennedy people.

KNEBEL: Right, all those hardnosed pragmatic New Frontiersmen. One could make a very credible case on the other side, and we'll never know.

STERN: One could make a very credible case on the other side, and we'll never know.

KNEBEL: That was another thing about him which was.... Like a Goldwater, his views were very different from Kennedy's on many issues. Kennedy liked Goldwater. He got a charge out of him. I guess Goldwater is a pretty likable person anyway. But that did not interfere with his liking. He was not an ideologue in that sense.

STERN: There is an element I think of calculation in that, too. I came across not long ago a letter in which an incident was described in which there was some sort of White House ceremony and Goldwater was involved in it. It was the Rose Garden ceremony, and it was in the summer of '63 or early fall of '63, and Kennedy took Goldwater up on the balcony and the photographers were taking lots of pictures, and Kenny O'Donnell said, "What are you giving that s.o.b. all that publicity for?" Kennedy said, "Leave him alone, he's mine." Meaning, of course, that he wanted to give him the publicity to help build him up for the '64 nomination so that he could cream him. That side, too. It's endlessly fascinating, that kind of thing.

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KNEBEL: Tough as nails.

[BEGIN TAPE 2]

STERN: That he got so much publicity and so much good press particularly from the intellectuals and writers with the Robert Frost poem at the inauguration. And yet even there was an element in him.... Well, he did appreciate him, or he did like Robert Frost poetry. In fact last week I interviewed a former teacher of his at the Choate School. He told me of incidents in which Kennedy was very impressed with Frost's poetry—this was in the early thirties when he was just in his teens. He wrote an essay on Frost's poetry. So there's obviously something very real there. And yet when Stuart Udall [Stuart L. Udall] suggested that Frost deliver a speech at the inauguration, Kennedy said, "No, no. Let him read a poem, because if he delivers a speech, they may remember what he says instead of remembering what I said." [Laughter] Which is again, I think—you know, that side.

KNEBEL: Somebody told me once, somebody who worked with him, that he was a great reader of Lord Byron and identified greatly with Lord Byron.

STERN: I never heard that.

KNEBEL: I ran across it someplace else recently, that he read Lord Byron. I don't know what Lord Byron said, but it seems to me that he had a sense of the fleetingness of life and that kind of.... And he died young, and very poetic. I remember

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that this surprised me at the time. But there was that side to him too. I call it prismatic. All these prisms. You could say one thing about him and the opposite was true. There were just so many facets to him.

STERN: I think that's what makes him absolutely fascinating. That's why Wicker's point at the end of the article, about the fact that this would be the most fascinating might-have-been in American history. I think it's absolutely true. We will always wonder what might have been. His capacity for growth, for learning was such that, who knows what the decade of the sixties might have been like?

KNEBEL: And this involvement that people felt with him. Like Wicker, there was Wicker, a newsman, and I was supposedly a journalist. But the tremendous involvement that I think people in my generation particularly, which was his, felt with him. And which I, as I said in my interview, I didn't realize he was getting across. I thought it was just a few of us that he knew, and if you knew him privately that you had this feeling about him, that publicly he did not get this across. He didn't publicly come across to somebody else. That this warmth or this wit or this, his "funnies" and his intelligence—a lot of things did not come across publicly, were not the kind of qualities that were good publicly. They were private qualities.

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STERN: Right, sure.

KNEBEL: But somehow, unbeknownst to me, I think this was in after the assassination. I think there were just a great many people who were very hooked on him for different reasons. Some saw him as, I think of, the amorous Kennedy family. Certainly had those kind thinkers. I had friends—an astonishing assortment of friends—like John Cogley who probably was one of his, who advised him on religious issues. He was the editor of *Commonweal* [*The Commonweal*] and a very distinguished Catholic journalist, and Irish, and was not given to be swept off his feet by politicians. He was tremendously involved with Kennedy.

STERN: What was his name again?

KNEBEL: John Cogley, C-O-G-L-E-Y. He was a very important advisor during the debates, on the Catholic issue. John and I use to talk about Kennedy at great length, and he was also working for Hutchins at the time, Robert Maynard Hutchins, who could not understand Kennedy's mystique. Because of course he was probably too rivalrous with Kennedy because he was young and handsome and bright, and all this kind thing, but he couldn't figure out why Kennedy ever got it. What was it that Kennedy had that had gotten him into the White House? And, was he as bright as said he was? Then complaining that he was not a big intellectual. John would find himself defending Kennedy to Hutchins just as I kept defending Kennedy to a lot of friends of mine.

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At the same time that I was very critical of Kennedy. It was a funny position to be in.

STERN: Did you ever see any evidence of his relationship with people like Johnson? Johnson as vice president?

KNEBEL: No, but I think Fletch could tell you about that because Fletch did a piece on Johnson as vice president. It was obvious that Johnson was rather uncomfortable around there. When he would come in and pose for pictures with the President, he would dutifully stand in back and not crowd in on the first row. It wasn't his cup of tea at all. I think Fletch's piece is, "The Boston-Austin Axis."

STERN: Oh, yes, I read that.

KNEBEL: So you would probably find out some stuff from there.

STERN: Is there anything else you would like to add?

KNEBEL: I can't think of anything offhand. As I say, as I go through these manuscript notes I do run across stuff. I don't know how I will weed them in with the

interview which I think is very, very general unfortunately and not enough of his personal anecdotal stuff is in it.

STERN: I hope we can convince you to donate all the manuscripts.

KNEBEL: I find every once in a while I meet up with an old friend from that period, we will sit down and start talking and then one of my recollections will trigger something in them and vice versa, and all of a sudden this material will come up. But if I sit all by myself then it just doesn't flow.

STERN: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

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Laura Bergquist Knebel Oral History Transcript—JFK#2
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