Joseph W. Alsop Oral History Interview – JFK #2, 6/26/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Joseph W. Alsop
Interviewer: Elspeth Rostow
Date of Interview: June 26, 1964
Length: 45 pp.

Biographical Note
Alsop, a journalist, author, Kennedy friend and associate, discusses his relationship with John F. Kennedy, reflects upon the Kennedy administration regarding issues such as White House staff, political appointments, White House dinners, and the President's relationship with Charles de Gaulle, among other issues.

Access
Open.

Usage Restrictions
According to the deed of gift signed December 13, 1988, copyright of these materials has been passed to the United States Government upon the death of the donor.

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
Joseph W. Alsop, recorded interview by Elspeth Rostow, June 26, 1964, (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 Interview of Joseph W. Alsop

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, Joseph W. Alsop, of Washington, D.C., 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 a personal interview conducted on October 20, 1979 at Washington, D.C., and prepared for deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) During my lifetime, the transcript shall be available only to those researchers who have secured my written authorization. Thereafter, the transcript shall be available to all researchers.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript; however, access to the tape recording shall be for background use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase, or quote therefrom.

(3) During my lifetime, I retain all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter the copyright in both the transcript and tape recording shall pass to the United States Government. During my lifetime, researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations from the transcript and tape recording without my express consent in each case.

(4) During my lifetime, copies of the interview transcript or tape recording may not be provided to researchers except upon the donor's written authorization. Thereafter, copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the library to researchers upon request.

(5) During my lifetime, copies of the interview transcript or tape recording may not be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.

Joseph W. Alsop

Date: 12/13/88

Certified Claudine X. Weiher
Archivist of the United States

Date: 12/28/88

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY

Addendum to the Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews

of Joseph Alsop

Interviewed by: Elspeth Rostow

I, **Elizabeth Winthrop** hereby remove the restrictions on the use of the tape that states "The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript; however, access to the tape recording shall be for background use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase or quote therefrom" of the personal interview(s) conducted with **Joseph Alsop** on **June 18, 1964; June 26, 1964;** currently at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

Elizabeth Winthrop
Donor

8/22/13
Dated

Susan K. Donius
Director for Presidential Libraries

12/11/13
Dated

JOSEPH W. ALSOP
JFK #2

Table of Contents

Second Oral History Interview

With

JOSEPH W. ALSOP

June 26, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Elspeth Rostow

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ROSTOW: Let's begin with your recollections of the choice of Lyndon Johnson as vice presidential nominee in 1960.

ALSOP: I've already given you some papers bearing on what I know about the choice of President Johnson for the vice presidency, and I don't think it's necessary to go further into the detail of that episode, in which I had a certain share, except as it's worth describing briefly the president's suite when Phil Graham [Philip L. Graham] and I got there. All the politicians--or rather, several

of the politicians, particularly John Bailey [John M. Bailey] and Abe Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff], were biting their nails in the outside room. I'd already talked to Abe and John, who of course come from my state, about my intention to go to the president and say that he must choose the present president. Phil Graham later formed the impression that the president's mind was by then made up, but I must say that my political friends were very far from sure that it was made up, because we got an enormous welcome.

The whole room was full of John Bailey's cigar smoke, general disorder, and a certain atmosphere of triumph as well, and in the middle of it, Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln], looking very cool and rather undernourished as usual. She put us right in the president's bedroom, or the candidate's bedroom, and there he was, looking as he did in those days,

ridiculously young, not particularly tense, not even particularly overdriven in a fairly disorderly room. That gift

[-60-]

that he had for making you come to the point--naturally we wanted to come to the point--that gift which he also had of making you come to the point, we plunged right in and made the pitch that I've described. I think that the Oral History Project ought certainly to ask Kay Graham [Katharine Graham] for the memorandum on all these matters that Phil Graham dictated before he died.

There's only one other detail that I can add, which is somewhat amusing. Before his fall, Bobby Baker [Robert G. Baker] told me something of what had passed in President Johnson's suite where the atmosphere, of course, was very different. Bobby, I would judge, had started out like all the other Southerners, opposed to the president accepting the vice presidency--the present president accepting the vice presidency. At some point along the road, he evidently changed. I would judge, again, because he thought that President Johnson was going to change, was going to accept, and he wanted to be on the winning side. At any rate, he told me

[-61-]

that Senator Kerr [Robert S. Kerr], to whose protection he subsequently transferred, actually took him into that bathroom and gave him (and I quote) "a hiding as though he were a high school boy" (unquote).

I think it's worth saying something, too, about the president's relationship with President Johnson as I saw it through President Kennedy's eyes, at least from what he said to me during the period of President Kennedy's presidency. It had three aspects: (1) A rather humorous insistence on the constant need to humor and consider the then vice president. President Kennedy was well aware of the power of that particular ego and its tendency to inflammation, so he was quite frank about making a very conscious effort to consult at all times, to include the vice president at all times, and to treat him indeed as a vice president ought to be treated but often is not treated. Once or twice, no more than once or twice, he indicated a certain impatience to me

[-62-]

because he could not get the vice president to voice a positive opinion of his own in the many meetings to discuss policy, particularly foreign policy, in which, of course, they both participated. It was apparently President Johnson's habit when he was vice president to listen and to say, in effect, that he is vice president and that he fully supported the president's policy whatever it was going to be or whatever it was. He did not choose--in my opinion, did rightly--to take an independent position.

ROSTOW: Does this hold true for space, in which he had an independent authorization from the president….

ALSOP: I have no idea whether it held true for space. These were larger policy issues than space was under consideration and more controversial. In my opinion, in this case Vice President Johnson was right and President Kennedy was wrong. It was a reflection of President Kennedy's too short observation of the real workings of the American government that he should expect the vice president to have or want the vice president to have

[-63-]

powerful opinions of his own. The job of a vice president is to be a spare part, and who can replace the president with the minimum of disruption and difficulty if something happens to the president. And if the vice president is included and informed, he'll be a good spare part, but if he's included and informed and develops an independent policy so that he's constantly saying, "Well, I thought that, and he did this," he's obviously going to be a very bad spare part. It's of a piece with the misjudgment of the State Department and the role of the secretary of state, of which we spoke previously….

ROSTOW: Could the president perhaps have in mind President Eisenhower's difficulty when asked whether Vice President Nixon had participated in decisions and said he could perhaps think of one if he were given a week? He was really trying to defend the vice presidency, was he not?

ALSOP: No, no, no. It was a genuine---it wasn't very important, but it was a genuine impatience, and,

[-64-]

I think, because he really valued his vice president's opinion. He thought very, very, very highly of Johnson. He'd laugh about him because he is a strange figure as a man, not like anyone I've ever known, and certainly, the president, used to say, wasn't like anyone he'd ever known. And anyone who has this, if you want, somewhat monstrous, more larger than life-size configuration, has this comic side, but he had a very, very high admiration for him. He said he was unquestionably the strongest and best man in the Democratic Party, barring himself, and the natural replacement if anything happened to him.

To these two little points that I've already made, neither of which should be at all overstressed, one should add a very important further point, that with the slightly wry, dry humor and with the occasional impatience and with the constant effort to keep the vice president happy, the president also said again and again that his vice president could not be playing it straighter,

[-65-]

that he couldn't be behaving better. And, of course, with his knowledge of the character of the man, with his knowledge of President Johnson's passion for action, passion for power, he

genuinely admired his ability to control himself in a job in which there was neither action nor power, not to whine and not to develop grievances and so on.

There were always, of course, people trying to make bad blood in one way or another. And as I knew both men quite well, I used to try every month or so to go and make a little bit of good blood, and sometimes it was not so very easy because someone would have told President Johnson some perfect lie about what Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] had said there would be some other wretched, silly, imaginary crime in his head that would be making him miserable. It wasn't, of course, necessary to make good blood on the other side because the president had too much work to do to be worrying. It's remarkable to me, given the nature of the dynamics of the situation and the amount of bad blood making that was indulging in Washington and the

[-66-]

hostility between the kind of people that President Johnson evidently saw and many of the people close to the president, it's remarkable to me that that relationship always did hold up. And I think it's fair to say that with all their….

But two very powerful men, essentially in competition and very ambitious, simply cannot be close friends; it's not a physically possible thing. It's remarkable to me that given that, each behaved on his side in this difficult relationship so well, and this is a point that President Kennedy was well aware of. On the matter of personalities in the president's administration, I think maybe it has a little bit more that's worth saying.

He used to talk very frankly to me, I'm proud to say. First of all, I think I may have had a minor role in the reappointment of Allen Dulles. Bobby Kennedy came to me at dinner here, rather early in the campaign, sometime in August I would guess,

[-67-]

and talked casually about who would make a good new head of the CIA. And I was actually profoundly shocked, because I don't regard the head of the CIA as an essentially political appointee that changes every time there's a change in party in power. Furthermore, I had a great admiration for Allen Dulles and still do. And I made a bit of a fuss about continuity and also said what I still believe, that Allen Dulles had done a damn good job as the head of the CIA. Bobby said, "Well, what about the new face that the administration wants to present to the world?" And I said, "Well, the hell with the new face. That matters much less than the continuity and good mean receiving their desserts." And I subsequently said that to the president when got an opportunity during the campaign. And Bobby, who is the only one I can judge by, has told me that this had a certain influence. I don't know whether they in the end were very grateful for that or not, but there it is. [Interruption]

[-68-]

ROSTOW: Had the president anyone in mind to replace Allen Dulles?

ALSOP: I never did find out. Then there was another incident of minor interest, in which

Phil, again, played a more active role than I did. I knew, because the president had told me, that he was very anxious to make one big, conspicuously bipartisan appointment, and he asked me about it. His mind was running on people like Jack McCloy [John J. McCloy], and I ventured the opinion, which I still think was correct, that if he wanted the appointment to look truly bipartisan, it was quite fruitless to reach back to the great men who had served Mr. Truman, although they were Republicans. I told him the famous story of John McCone, who had supported Mr. Eisenhower very ardently, both with money and in every other possible way, in 1952. Conscious of all he had done, he then came on to Washington, hoping, I would guess, to be at least Secretary of the Air Force. He reported into Mr. Charles (Engine Charlie) Wilson, and Mr. Wilson told him in a somewhat arrogant tone,

[-69-]

which did not at all please Mr. McCone, that he, McCone, was (quote) “taken with Trumanism” (unquote) and therefore unemployable. [Laughter]

I pointed out to the president that this really in a ridiculous way applied to most of these men who would serve their stint in anyway in any case, and that the practical politics of the matter was that he had to get someone who had served President Eisenhower with distinction if he wanted to seem bipartisan, which I believe very strongly he needed to do. He said he’d been thinking pretty much along those lines himself, but he couldn’t--among the people who were serving Mr. Eisenhower--he couldn’t think of anyone whom he really wanted to employ, except perhaps Doug Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], and he wasn’t quite sure whether Doug would be loyal, as he put it. It was very, very easy for anyone who knew Doug Dillon to assure the president that loyal was one thing that he certainly would be; if the president gave him a job, that he would be loyal to the man that he served until he resigned the job.

[-70-]

After this conversation I got hold of Phil--he and I were acting as sort of partners in those days--and Phil called the president up and made a strong pitch in Doug‘s favor. We both had thought that Doug was far and away, of the younger and more energetic Eisenhower officials, was far and away the ablest and most national minded. So Phil made a big pitch for Doug, too. And unless I’m mistaken, Phil actually made the telephone call to Doug which prepared Doug for the evening visit he received from the president--he practically came in through the window in the middle of a dinner party offering the secretary of the Treasury. [Laughter] I only say all this because there again Bobby told Doug much later, who then, very much moved, told me, that this had an influence on the president’s decision. I can’t see why in God’s creation it should have, but it’s interesting and curious and shows the odd way things happen.

ROSTOW: May I ask whether the president regarded the appointment of McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] as an act of

bipartisanship or did he simply choose him on quality grounds?

ALSOP: I didn't know at all; you see, I knew nothing about the McNamara appointment. I went abroad almost immediately after the election because I didn't want to be entangled in all that; in my business you either use up your credit trying to find out who's going to get what job or, you go away. It's better not to use up your credit because everybody forgets that you've been the first to find out and you need credit later. So I don't know anything about McNamara. I do know that the president came to admire McNamara extravagantly and to regard him as his very best of all his appointments.

He was also deeply satisfied by his appointment of Doug Dillon. And I must say, I think when you consider all the different points of view about fiscal policy and economics, that economic policy was tranquilly reconciled without any real friction--although people were constantly trying to create it, God knows--and that a meeting

of minds was achieved between as strangely an assorted group as Bill Martin [William McChesney Martin, Jr.] and Walter Heller and Doug Dillon, of course, by the president's presidency. When you think of all that, it turned out pretty damn well, particularly in view of the great success that the Kennedy administration had with an intelligent, active, but (in my opinion) conservative fiscal-economic policy. It was one of the president's most underestimated successes. It's a success, in turn, which, in my judgment will contribute greatly to President Johnson's reelection.

ROSTOW: What about other people around the president?

ALSOP: What about other people? He was openly, I regret to say, contemptuous of Governor Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson].

ROSTOW: Always?

ALSOP: Always. He loved to hear jokes made about him, and I was only too eager to make them.

ROSTOW: On what grounds did he….

ALSOP: He saw him as a self-regarding, posturing fellow. He came under the--he came more than will within the category that the president disliked the sort of attitudinizing liberal. I can't recall precisely any specific thing the president said about Governor Stevenson, but I've never heard him say anything about him except in the tone of irony, and I certainly have heard him say more than once--after the second Cuba, for

example--things that revealed a marked lack of admiration both for his judgment and degree of resolution. It was terribly funny, actually, because his relationship with--I'm afraid the secret of a good relationship with Governor Stevenson is gross flattery thickly laid on, and the president couldn't ever really bring himself to flatter Stevenson in the way Stevenson wanted to be flattered. He used to make Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] call him up and tell him he was doing a wonderful job and kind of massage his ego. But of course that wasn't nearly good enough, particularly if he was also

[-74-]

quite often making Mac Bundy call him up and tell him to stop doing something or other or not to come or something else. [Laughter] So that I think it's fair to say that Governor Stevenson really didn't like the president, and I'm quite sure the president didn't much like Governor Stevenson. On the other hand, President Johnson, who has never had any hesitation about gross flattery thickly laid on if he thought it was the smallest degree useful, did what was indicated, and I'm told the relationship is sweet evening breeze.

It's very funny, because there were certain kinds of things the president couldn't bring himself to indulge in false patriotism or false religion or false appeals, in general, in public. Certain kinds of duplicity---he could be very rough, very ruthless, very tough: he could deceive an enemy, but phony slavering, with phony compliments of someone whom he really didn't have a high opinion really stuck in his throat like a fishbone; it wouldn't come out.

[-75-]

ROSTOW: It's in a sense, similar to his reluctance--not reluctance, inability to put on funny hats or in any way….

ALSOP: It was a sort of sense of his own business of "nothing common nor mean." He just couldn't bring himself to doing certain kinds of things that he regarded as…. I don't know exactly what, infra dig or bad style or what. We've discussed the State Department already.

ROSTOW: Well, just another point on this: At the same time, his manners towards older people were always impeccable, I gather, and he behaved himself extremely well towards people senior in age around town for whom he had no great warmth. So in a sense he….

ALSOP: No, but he had beautiful manners with elderly people, of course. And then he was interested in them if they had anything to tell him. It always moved me very much that Alice [Roosevelt] Longworth, who's, of course, my cousin and my dear friend--her relationship with this very young

[-76-]

administration. She has never liked any administration since her father [Theodore Roosevelt] went out of office. The president and Jackie, I think it's fair to say, admired her because she has a great deal of style in many different ways and, also, a little bit as a kind of monument, a very vivid and lively monument. They were very nice to her, and she really fell in love with the Kennedy administration. She was prepared to vote for him, the first Democratic vote she would ever have cast in her life. They were very fond of her. She really liked Bobby, I think, better than she liked the president. It always amused me in the sort of high period of the Kennedy administration it was wonderfully intense and full of life and really very dashing. You remember at those big dinners that Kay Graham or the Dillons or somebody like that--they were always turning up. And they were always very gay, and everyone was very young, and most people were rather good looking, and it was really wildly unlike any

[-77-]

ordinary administration rally. All the other ladies would be grinding their teeth because there would be Alice Longworth invariably--or almost invariably--sitting between Bobby and Mac Bundy and the three of them making so much noise that you really almost had to stop short. They were topped by someone of eighty. All these people, including the president, could have very easily been her sons, and I think if you really work at it, Bobby might have been her grandson. So that's one aspect of the….

ROSTOW: She once said she had an "incredible appetite" for Kennedy, if I remember the phrase.

ALSOP: She really adored them, and they really adored her, it seemed to me. They were very nice to her. It meant a great deal. She was--it was very moving to me, because I admire her extremely, but she's had, in many respects, a very successful but not a very happy life. It was wonderfully sort of sweetening and cheering when you're suddenly seventy-six to have--wonderful kind of

[-78-]

last flowering, if you see what I mean.

ROSTOW: Yes, I believe so. You mentioned dinners. Do you recall your first dinner at the White House?

ALSOP: That was terribly, terribly funny. Finished me for caviar; never liked it since. Arkady [Inaudible] who's a very nice man, had sent the president and Mrs. Kennedy the nicest Inauguration present I've ever seen in my life, ten pounds of caviar. Rather imposing. And they were kind enough to ask me and the Franklin Roosevelts, I remember--I don't remember anyone else, but I think there was one other couple--to dinner on Sunday night; the first time they'd ever had anyone in the White House.

ROSTOW: It was the night of the first reception in the White House which took place that Sunday afternoon after the Inaugural.

ALSOP: I expect so, yes. Anyway, the House was empty, and I remember they were very far from settled in. I remember Jackie saying, "Oh, Joe, do you know what I've just discovered? There are

[-79-]

twenty caligraphers, all writing away in the cellar." And sure enough there were, because they'd stopped doing that for very small dinners a little later, but all those copperplate place cards, copperplate menus, the whole thing was there.

And it was a great shock to me, because I hadn't seen the White House since Franklin Roosevelt's time, when I knew it very well. And in those days it was what I would describe as sort of an old-fashioned gentleman's house: I mean by that it was what the French would call *digne*; it was suitable, very handsome, a lot of hideously ugly things, some very pretty things, all mingled together. It was just like a house a sort of nice family had been living in for a great many years. When I went back, I found that it looked precisely like the presidential suite in the Muehlebach Hotel, only not quite as nice. There wasn't a single pretty thing in it, and there wasn't anything that wasn't fake or phony. I have never seen anything like it. It made you want to sink through the floor it was so awful. I was genuinely upset.

[-80-]

Here was all this caviar, and it was very, very gay--a lot of champaign before dinner. I remember they took us on a tour of the House, and the first noteworthy item was in the Oval Room upstairs, there were a pair of things like portholes, which I noticed; no one had noticed them.

ROSTOW: Portholes leading where?

ALSOP: Well, that's it. I said, "Well, what the devil are those?" They were on either side of the door. The usher came in, and the president asked, "What are these portholes?" And the usher opened them, and what they were, were Mr. and Mrs. Eisenhower's his and her television sets. The usher explained that Mr. and Mrs. Eisenhower didn't like to look at the same programs but liked to look at their programs together, so they'd have their dinner on trays, one here, one there, and the portholes would be opened and they'd watch--one a Western, I suppose, and one something else, I don't know what. At any rate, there were these

[-81-]

portholes with built-in televisions.

Then he went into the--you remember, the president's bedroom is just next door to the Oval Room--and he took us first into his bedroom, and there was this gigantic piece of furniture, a huge highboy. I think it was given by David Finley, and it was really the only good piece of furniture that was still visible anywhere. It was backed up against the door. The president gave a rather wicked, wry grin, jerked his finger at the highboy and said, "That's the door to Mamie's room." [Laughter] It hid the door. It was so silly. You know, we ate ourselves silly with caviar. They didn't want, you know--and this is also worth knowing--they didn't want to have it changed at all just because they were president and Mrs. Kennedy instead of Jack and Jackie.

ROSTOW: But they did change it, certainly.

ALSOP: The president, I was even told, was quite offended because I wrote him a letter as soon as he was elected saying, "Dear Mr. President," and something

about, "I want to be the first to call you this. I want to tell you that I view your election with mixed feelings; I've never been more happy about any president's election in my time, but it's always been my observation that the president of the United States has no friends but history, and he's very lucky if he has history. There is nothing more I value in these last years than our friendship, and I do feel that I've lost a friend while I've gained a president." And roughly speaking, "I'll see you when you're through with your present job." I did this partly from genuine emotion and partly because I wanted him above all not to feel that I was going to try and presume, in fact, on our past friendship. He never answered the letter. Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] subsequently told me that he was quite offended by it when he received it.

By the same token, that evening Franklin was calling him Jack still, which shocked the life

out of me. In fact, I told him to stop. At some point in that period, very early period, still saw quite a lot of them, Jackie told me I was being too respectful. And I wrote her a letter and said, "Well, now, damn it, you have to treat the president of the United States, whoever he is, that way. You've got to bear in mind for all of us not just our old friend; once he's president, he's the repository of all our hopes and fears and, therefore, in some sense a sacred object, and you can't not treat him that way. It's quite false and wrong to do anything else." I think she was quite cross.

ROSTOW: Did they understand later?

ALSOP: Well, I think they both came to understand, and I think they both came--I'm quite certain they both came to feel that I was right. Whether they remembered

what I'd said or not is quite another thing. But I think they did remember, at any rate, in a kind of a general way, because unless I'm very much mistaken, this is the last private

[-84-]

house that they more or less regularly and willingly came to. And sometimes he would even ask if they could come, and this is because--it's the result of being an old man with lots of experience--I never forgot what was not due to him but due to his office. I never did anything except work very hard to--Susan Mary, too--worked very hard to keep anytime they came completely quiet and very hard to make sure that anyone you asked was just asked because it would give him pleasure rather than doing you good or please another old friend or something else like that. Sometimes you had to be quite ruthless about that. But once a man occupies that office, you have to be ruthless if you're going to take his time at all. You have to consider him and not anybody else. And so they used to come here, and I was always very proud of it.

ALSOP: Presidents with quite different personalities than President Kennedy have had cronies; did anyone fall into that rather rewarding role in this administration?

[-85-]

ALSOP: No, he had in some sense a kind of court, if you want. All presidents have courts and a lot have cronies. But the people who belonged to this court, most of whom were men I liked very much and still do like very much, were people with no political role whatever. And if you're a newspaperman, you can't not have a political role; I mean, you can't suddenly stop being a newspaperman, and so you can't join a court in that kind of way. You can't just be the cozy old thing that any old thing can be said to; you know, it's not possible to do. This is true with politicians and some kinds of businessmen and so forth. But if you're nice and Lem Billings [K. LeMoyne Billings] or Bill Walton or Chuck Spalding, it's quite different. Those are people with a deep devotion to him with whom he could relax, who weren't cronies exactly, but…. I don't know how to describe them. I would not say that they went on being his friends because they never, never, never once forgot, and after the first six months he never once forgot, he was president of the United States.

[-86-]

ROSTOW: Despite all this, don't you think that he had a quite remarkable capacity for, not only for friendship, but for holding the loyalty of people? It struck me….

ALSOP: Of course this was the extraordinary; this was, indeed, the unique thing about President Kennedy. Because if you think about it, great men are not loved, at any rate, by the people who are close to them. Roosevelt was not loved.

ROSTOW: Not even by Harry Hopkins?

ALSOP: Harry Hopkins didn't love Roosevelt. He greatly admired him; he wanted to help him; he thought he could be useful to him. He was his weaknesses. He was bored to death by him quite often. I remember dining there--the last night I ever dined there was in the war in '43--and Harry and Louie Hopkins [Louise M. Hopkins] were living in the White House. And there was a lot of female royalty there and Alex Wilkert and me. And the president was tired and didn't want to--tried to make other people talk but all the female royalty

[-87-]

only wanted him to talk. So he started off on the kind of thing that, you know, he could say without even thinking--like toothpaste from a tube, sort of like automatic racking. It was the most boring 1910 Racket Club stories about Mr. Freddy Cabar and such New York personalities. I thought both Harry and Louie looked exactly like things in Aspic--glazed with boredom. Harry contrived to get around Roosevelt. He knew his character. He knew if the thing was presented this way, he would be impressed; if it was presented that way, he would not be impressed.

This was not, as far as I could see, ever the case with Kennedy. On the other hand, I think the common attitude is a story that's hard to tell now days without giving what might seem to be a false meaning to it. I remember lunching with Ros Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric], who is, after all, not a very emotional man and a man with a very long experience in the world, just a day or so after the president died. We had a long standing luncheon

[-88-]

engagement, and for some reason we didn't break it. We were talking about it, and Ros suddenly burst out and said, "You know, Joe, when the president died, I suddenly realized that I felt about him as I've never felt about another man in my life." What he meant was, of course, in a kind of way--as I say, now days it's difficult to use that word--but in a kind of way he loved him, and I think that this was true of an enormous number of people who were exposed to President Kennedy. I know it was true of myself. I never minded anything as much as his death, even my own father's death. I remember Mac Bundy saying the same thing to me; his father had died only a few months before, and he was deeply attached to him. And it wasn't, you see--the great point is, it was not because he had great powers it was because he was what he was in some sort of way, because of "nothing common did nor mean," you know. Well, go ask Doug Dillon. I'm sure Doug will tell you that no relationship that he's ever had with

[-89-]

anyone has ever meant so much to him as his relationship with the president, and yet it wasn't a very intimate relationship.

ROSTOW: Do you think this was realized by most of us before November?

ALSOP: In a measure, surely; but not how much it was.

ROSTOW: Exactly.

ALSOP: I mean, I didn't realize--if you asked me, "How would you feel if the president should die?" I would have said it would be bloody awful; the worst thing that I could possibly think of. But I wouldn't have thought that it would practically send me off my rocker. I wouldn't have expected Ros Gilpatric suddenly to say out of the blue the kind of thing that he said to me, and above all the rest, what we both remember. This is a very puzzling thing about President Kennedy because, you know, I've been around an awfully long time and I've seen a fair number of fairly big men, and none of them had this capacity, with the possible exception of Churchill [Winston S. Churchill]. I've always wondered--I think he probably did have it.

[-90-]

But no one else that I've ever known in public life had it. It was of crucial importance. I'm not at all sure that it wasn't, in some measure, a handicap to him.

ROSTOW: Why?

ALSOP: Well, because you have this sort of--people like the group that saw him…. Well, because it's much more important to be adored by--for a political leader, it's much more important to be adored by the Congress and by the people who don't know him than to be adored by the people who do know him. You see what I mean?

ROSTOW: The unhappy phrase: the images that one….

ALSOP: There's one other thing about his life that may be worth mentioning: They always gave you too much to drink. They had the best wine I've ever had in any house in Washington, including the French embassy, very markedly including the French Embassy. They may have, I think, perhaps, made a special effort when Susan Mary and I went there because the president thought we had good wine

[-91-]

and knew something about it. But they always gave you too much to drink. It was very hard not to take that one extra glass that didn't make you drunk but it made you wake up the next morning without a very clear recollection of anything except of having had a darn good time. You couldn't do a sort of play by play conversation. Maybe that was why I….

ROSTOW: You're not stressing this as a subtle security device?

ALSOP: I'm sure it wasn't. [Laughter] That's very funny because neither of them drink

very much. We'd start off with this perfectly wonderful white burgundy which is--you might just as well put an ice pick in you liver as to drink any quantity of it, but it was so good you couldn't resist. And then along comes superb claret and then that champagne that he was so fond of that I always thought was overrated. You really had to use great self-control not to take that extra glass and a half--always amused me. Of course, I never

[-92-]

knew quite why that was true, but it was undoubtedly true.

ROSTOW: You've not mentioned daiquiris; I gather they didn't tempt you as much?

ALSOP: No, no, no. They used to give me--well they'd give me a double shot right before dinner.

ROSTOW: It seems to me that we've covered a good many aspects of the president as a man. We have other….

ALSOP: Oh, yes. Let's do five more minutes about the president and gossip. He told stories marvelously. I never can remember stories so I don't remember the stories he told, but he was a wonderfully funny storyteller. In fact, he was a very, very funny man.

ROSTOW: Was he a mimic at all?

ALSOP: No. President Johnson is a marvelous mimic, but President Kennedy was a wit, genuine humor. I wrote, and I still think, he was first humorous president since Lincoln. He was humorous about himself. He was very, very, very, very funny and not often and in a very kind of piano, wry

[-93-]

way. But it gave salt to everything. Of course, he adored gossip. There is a grave shortage of gossip in Washington because, as I always say, real estate replaces sex in this city, and he wasn't very interested in discussing virility. [Laughter] He loved gossip, and we'd get back from abroad--there's always a little gossip in London, after all--and he'd ask, "What's the news?" He had a very human fondness for gossip and all that.

ROSTOW: Did he tell or just received gossip?

ALSOP: Yes, he'd tell it if he had any. Or I would say sometimes he'd tell it. But he loved it. I remember the first time he dined here with Susan Mary. Susan Mary had a great success with him because he asked her what Macmillan [Harold Macmillan] was like, and Susan Mary told him David Cecil's story about Macmillan when

Lady Dorothy [Dorothy Cavendish Macmillan] was having her famous walkout with [Inaudible]. The whole Cecil clan and Cavendish clan formed up in a body and married off [Inaudible] to Lady Dorothy's cousin, I

[-94-]

think it was. Everyone said, "Well, that's out of the way, and this terrible problem is over," instead of which Lady Dorothy went along on the honeymoon. And David Cecil said, "Shows what a strange man he really is, because all he did about his wife going along on this honeymoon was to go away for the weekend to the country and be sick, out the railroad train window." [Laughter] It's a true story, by the way. He remembered that story. He got very fond of him in London, I think, but he remembered the story always. He loved stories like that.

ROSTOW: Did he allow himself to gossip about the many transients all through the town after his presidency?

ALSOP: Well, after all these transients didn't provide much material for gossip, you know. Not a great deal. But he was very frank about people. You always knew what he thought about people pretty well (at least I thought I did): who he was impatient with; by whom he was impressed, that sort of thing.

[-95-]

ROSTOW: What qualities in people do you think made him most impatient?

ALSOP: Twaddle and cowardice.

ROSTOW: Cant, too, perhaps.

ALSOP: Cant is what I mean by twaddle. Cant, he couldn't bear cant. He couldn't stand demagoguing when they are closed.

ROSTOW: Ever discuss Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] with you?

ALSOP: He couldn't stand Bowles. He couldn't stand any front. Then, of course, he didn't have the guts to deal with him the first time. That was a ridiculous episode.

ROSTOW: How do you explain his gentleness in dealing with people and dislike of firing them?

ALSOP: I never did understand it because he looked kind of ruthless but he really wasn't at all. They sent young Arthur [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] over to

make peace with Bowles. I can remember it. Of course, the proposal that was made to the president filled him with perfect contempt. “Imagine suggesting that,” he said to me.

ROSTOW: Which proposal?

[-96-]

ALSOP: Well, because, you see, the first Bowles crisis, which I guess I had a minor role in settling, Bowles was in great agony and telling everyone and sundry that only he had been right about Cuba and other endearing things of that kind. Young Arthur was sent over to pacify him and--I’ve always wondered whether it wasn’t because Bowles spent such a lot on his house in Georgetown and didn’t wish to vacate it; I didn’t understand what was behind it all. At any rate, Bowles literally proposed to young Arthur that they put George Ball up one and give him the substantive authority that had belonged to Bowles, but leave Bowles the perfectly empty title of Under Secretary with none of the authority. It’s an extraordinary arrangement, if you think about it, for a man to suggest and to accept, but young Arthur duly brought back this message and the president accepted it and Bowles stayed on I can’t remember how many months, until the second Bowles crisis, which was handled by

[-97-]

Mr. Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] rather more ruthlessly. But again, it was Sorensen that was sent to see Bowles the second time, not the president.

ROSTOW: As I’ve been re-reading your columns this time, you’d been writing roughly on the level of Chester *delindus est*….

ALSOP: You see, there was quite a business at the beginning of the administration between all the sort of Stevensonites, who kept trying to capture the administration in one way or another, and the sort of hard-headed persons like, if you want, Bob McNamara, Mac Bundy, and Walt--very much Walt--and others who didn’t want the administration captured by the Stevenson world opinion viewpoint. The president had a certain weakness for sort of virtuous intellectuals.

ROSTOW: Maybe the explanation--could it also be that he felt that he wasn’t sufficiently secure within the party and needed that wing for awhile longer?

ALSOP: No, I don’t think so. I don’t think that he ever thought that they brought many votes.

[-98-]

He never thought that.

ROSTOW: If these were the qualities that annoyed the president the opposite are obviously the qualities that he admired. Of whom did he speak most enthusiastically from ‘61 on among those around him?

ALSOP: I suppose McNamara.

ROSTOW: You say he admired Macmillan. Did he talk to you about de Gaulle [Charles de Gaulle] at all?

ALSOP: He used to say about Macmillan that he was a gentleman, that he was a real gentleman.

ROSTOW: You mentioned last time, he also used the phrase about the secretary of state.

ALSOP: Yes. I’m not sure that he admired him, but he liked him.

ROSTOW: What did he say about that great gentleman, Charles de Gaulle?

ALSOP: He couldn’t understand him. I used to tell him (and he, again, would say I was right) you can’t understand de Gaulle--no American can understand de Gaulle, because no American can understand making

[-99-]

vicious public rows about where you sit at the table, and unless you understand that and, indeed, sympathize with it, you can’t really understand de Gaulle.

ROSTOW: True.

ALSOP: And it’s worth noting that he was…. I thought at the beginning that he was wrong. I used to talk to him a lot about the French relationship. I thought we ought to try and do something on the nuclear front, try and establish some kind of relationship with de Gaulle. I now think I was wrong in urging that; no one will ever know. The president, you know, was like an Irish gom beem, an Irish money lender, about that nuclear authority, and he wasn’t about to share it if he possibly could.

ROSTOW: He had the McMahon [Brien McMahon] act, also.

ALSOP: He had the McMahon act, but it was quite possible to get around that. That was the first phase. And then our discussions of de Gaulle. And then I went to Paris after the last crisis. This is

[-100-]

interesting, I think--my experiences are of no importance, but it's interesting, I think, because my account of this experience came up three or four times subsequently in conversations with the president, and I think it might have had a great effect on him.

I had lunched with Maurice Couve de Murville privately, who was in those days a very close and old friend of mine. (We're not friends any longer). It was after Laos, and I suppose I annoyed him--after the first Laos crisis--I suppose I annoyed him by quite accurately pointing out to him that the French Secret Service apparatus in the Far East was a very undependable source of information because: (a) they were money corrupt; and (b) they were viciously anti-American because in various conjunctures, particularly in 1954, we blocked their way to making a great deal of money. They were going to sell South Vietnam to a local Al Capone, General [Inaudible]. Having installed him in charge,

[-101-]

they were going to clear out every drawer and then clear out with him. And we stopped that. At any rate, I said something about this, warned Couve as a friend. But he didn't know these people; I knew them. And I suppose he didn't know anything.

Anyway, what climaxed--you know, we talked about American policy: I said I thought American policy would develop and has developed, and we weren't about to give in. And he suddenly screwed up his face in an expression of absolute hatred and said, "You can't have your way everywhere in the world. To begin with, you're not rich enough anymore."

I told the president about that because it struck me as the most extraordinary dropping of the mast that I'd ever seen--or seen in a very long time. And he used to bring it up again in discussions with France, and it helped to make him aware that there was a genuine, genuine deep resentment, sort of a sense of rivalry, dislike

[-102-]

and all that. By the end, he had wholly given up; I mean, here was no thought in his mind that any dialogue with de Gaulle was even remotely possible and all you could do was confront him with facts.

They were all to optimistic, of course, about making Europe--mostly on account of Jean Monnet, in my opinion.

ROSTOW: What do you mean by that?

ALSOP: Well, Monnet has this power to mesmerize Americans. I never understood it. I saw it work since the second day he came here when he started to work on me.

I don't mesmerize very easily, and he never really mesmerized me, but I guess I introduced Jean to the American political community. He came over here on the purchasing commission [British Supply Commission] in the war, and I had lunch with Purvis [Arthur B. Purvis] that day and saw Jean, immensely impressed by him, introduced him to all the people who were then my close friends and sort of partners in the awful interventionist group--I was a very junior partner--such

[-103-]

as Dean Felix Frankfurter, all of whom he proceeded to mesmerize. I think he rather mesmerized Dean Rusk; he mesmerized Foster Dulles [John Foster Dulles] for that matter; I think he rather mesmerized Mac [McGeorge Bundy] for awhile; And it even, to an extent, alarmed me because they were taking advice about American policy from a foreigner who, after all, had a quite strong and very obvious *parti pris* of his own. This same thing happened over the EDC [Economic Development Council]--I had seen all that. But it was very interesting.

[-104-]

[END OF INTERVIEW - JFK #2, 6/26/1964]

Letter #1:

Dear Mr. President,

Until Charles Bartlett's column of yesterday burst on my attention, I had always thought that nothing could drive me to mention to you my own small share in you nomination at Los Angeles. But Charley's nonsense now drives me to do what I had never before imagined doing, simply because I think you ought to have the real facts, and I am a first hand witness who can give them to you.

In brief, the story starts when I ran into Phil Graham at luncheon, on the day when President Kennedy was making his decision about the vice presidency. I had already made up my mind to put in my two-bits worth in favor of a Johnson nomination; and I asked Phil to come along, since I felt his support would increase the effect very greatly; and we had a way of acting in partnership until his tragic loss. He did not know President Kennedy nearly as well as I did at that time, and at first he was hesitant; but I told him not to be an idiot, and went up to the main Kennedy suite to ask Evelyn Lincoln for an appointment. She said "the Senator" would see us in a few minutes; and we sat about talking with John Bailey. He was pleased when I told him Phil's and my intention, because he thought that our advice, coming from outsiders with alleged intellectual tendencies, would add some weight to the recommendation already made by most of the senior political leaders, like himself. Subsequently he was told, as Bobby has told me, that this was indeed the result.

Before very long, we were admitted to President Kennedy's room. I told Phil I intended to leave the main sales talk to him, but wished to make the introduction, so to say. I said, in brief, that Kennedy "couldn't not" offer you the vice presidency for two very good reasons; first, you were bigger by head and shoulders than any of the other possibilities; and second, he had to think of the country's interests if anything should happen to him. At this point, he put in: "That's right. I've got to think of that, and Lyndon is the best qualified for the job by a very long shot," or words to this effect--I didn't write them down at the time but remember the sense. I added only one other point; and this was for two reasons. First, Herman Talmadge, who did not want to accept the vice presidential nomination, had non the less warned me, with some bitterness, that you would do so. Second, I had concluded that it would be your duty to accept, and knowing you, I thought you would reach the same conclusion and would do your duty. So I finished with great emphasis: "But I want to warn you, don't make the offer to Lyndon Johnson just as a gesture, in the expectation that he will refuse. I think he will accept, and you should not make the offer, therefore, unless you truly want him on the ticket." To this the president replied, with equal emphasis, "Of course he will accept, if the offer is made to him. I've figured that much out." Phil then made a longer, and I must add, much more moving plea than mine.

There is no question, in short, that the offer to you at Los Angeles was made in the expectation of a refusal. The opposite is the case, as I can testify without hesitation.

Letter #2:

March 25, 1964

Thanks for your kind note. I am so happy that you were pleased to have the facts that I was able to supply.

There were two points which I should have included, if they had not slipped my memory. Since writing my letter to you I have talked to Kay Graham, and since she has a very long memorandum contemporaneously prepared by Phil (whom I miss more and more every day) she was able to refresh my memory on these points.

To begin with, Phil got the impression in that first talk in President Kennedy's hotel room that he had already made up his mind to offer you the nomination. I thought he was only leaning that way and had not reached a final decision. Phil's impression was perhaps correct; but in any case it clearly proves the nonsensical silliness of the story that be had made up his mind to chose someone else.

Secondly, I know that when I begged the president to think of the future, I added, "You can't risk leaving this country to Stu Symington; you know perfectly well he's too shallow a puddle to dive into." Whereat your predecessor who had heard me make this unkind but unhappily accurate joke before, grinned broadly and said "You know damn well I'd never do that."

I may add that after writing you, I ran into Bobby Kennedy and discovered that he was as much upset by Bartlett's "damn fool, totally inaccurate piece" as I was. I note this in passing because I am normally sure that some of the rather nasty people in Washington who so much enjoy making bad blood will have told you, with much circumstantial detail, that Bobby was the sole source and inspirer of Bartlett's piece. Similar people, perhaps identically the same people, told Bobby that you had personally commanded Bill White to write his piece denouncing the Justice Department for wire tapping and other evil practices. Bobby did not believe them; yet all of this impels me reflect that we live in a most imperfect world.

The President
The White House
Washington 25, D.C.

Letter #3:

June 9, l964

Just a line to say that your piece in "The Reporter" is the first genuinely accurate account of Lyndon Johnson's nomination in 1960 that I have seen anywhere. Furthermore, it. is admirably concise and well written.

For once in a way, it is a story I know pretty well because I was responsible for getting Phil Graham into the act. He did not know President Kennedy very well at that time, and he was reluctant to go with me when I suggested that we visit the just chosen nominee to tell him jointly that the vice presidential place must be offered to Johnson. But he came anyway, and Evelyn Lincoln found a little time for us without much delay.

At that time, the president had already been advised by Dave Lawrence, John Bailey and some of the other party bosses to make the offer to Johnson, but I think he was still rather worried about the effect on his Northern supporters. At any rate, John Bailey and Bobby Kennedy both told me, as did the president himself, that Phil and I played a certain role in the final decision, as non-bosses and non-organization Democrats, so to say, who were proferring the same advice as Lawrence, Bailey et al. I let Phil do most of the talking, but I made an interruption, insisting above all on two points. First, I said that he must above all consider the chance that "something might happen to him" and he could not risk leaving the country in the hands of Stu Symington or Scoop Jackson, of whom I knew he did not have a high opinion. Second, I warned him that he should not make the offer to Johnson with the mere intention of going through the motions. This was because, Herman Talmadge, the shrewdest of the Southerners, in my opinion, had told me with great bitterness that Johnson would accept if the offer were made to him. I quoted Talmadge. On both points, the president voiced strong agreement with me remarking of Stu Symington, I am sorry to say, that "he was a pretty shallow puddle to dive into."

The president finally asked Phil and me to stick around "until this thing is over". But as a reporter, I have never like being too engaged in such matters so I begged Phil to go and see Johnson and bowed out myself. This was, I would guess, a contribution of some importance; for the one thing that is missing from your story is the role that Phil played, not just on the occasion that you describe, but on-several different occasions, of keeping the thing glued together despite the bitterness and suspicions that divided the two camps. From our meeting with Kennedy until the announcement of the vice presidential choice, Phil actually spent almost all his time in the Johnson suite, and unless I am mistaken, he called President Kennedy quite a number of times from there, to straighten out problems as they arose.

The real interest in all this, of course, that I can testify as a first hand witness that the president had not the smallest intention of offering the vice presidency to either Jackson or Symington, on the ground that he did not think they qualified for the presidency in case something happened. But the… I think you have got slightly out of… in your piece is the degree to which President Kennedy was influenced by his opinion, stated several times to Phil and me that "Johnson is much the best man if anything should happen to me." It seemed

to me at the time and I still believe, that this opinion had quite as much a role in his decision as the political factors which you rightly stress.

Philip Potter, Esq.
The Baltimore Sun
National Press Bldg.
Washington, D.C.

Joseph W. Alsop Oral History Interview
Name List

Kick Hartington	Kennedy, Kathleen
John	Kennedy, John F.
Stu	Alsop, Stewart
Nixon	Nixon, Richard M.
Jackie	Kennedy, Jacqueline B.
Charley	McNary, Charles L.
Johnson	Johnson, Lyndon B.
Roosevelt	Roosevelt, Theodore
Roosevelt	Roosevelt, Franklin D.
Eisenhower	Eisenhower, Dwight D.
Truman	Truman, Harry S.
Byrnes	Byrnes, James F.
Marshall	Marshall, George C.
Acheson	Acheson, Dean
Bob	Lovett, Robert A.
Radziwill	Radziwill, Stanislas
Khruschev	Khruschev, Nikita S.
Chip	Bohlen, Charles E.
Alphand	Alphand, Herve
Duchin	Duchin, Peter
Pam	Turnure, Pam
Walt	Rostow, Walt
Rusk	Rusk, Dean
Bundy	Bundy, McGeorge
Kafollete	Kafollete, Robert M. Sr.
Kafollete	Kafollete, Robert M. Jr.
Humphrey	Humphrey, Hubert H.
Norris	Norris, George W.
Black	Black, Hugo L.
Couzens	Couzens, James
Evelyn	Lincoln, Evelyn N.
Phil	Graham, Philip L.
Abe	Ribicoff, Abraham A.
John	Bailey, John M.
Bobby	Baker, Robert G.
Kerr	Kerr, Robert S.
Dulles	Dulles, Allen
Engine Charlie	Wilson, Charles
McCone	McCone, John
Doug	Dillon, Douglas
McNamara	McNamara, Robert S.
Stevenson	Stevenson, Adlai E.

Bill	Martin, William McChesney Jr.
Walter	Heller, Walter
Alice	Longworth, Alice Roosevelt
Lem	Billings, K. LeMoyne
Harry	Hopkins, Harry
Louie	Hopkins, Louise M.
Ros	Gilpatric, Roswell L.
Churchill	Churchill, Winston S.
Lincoln	Lincoln, Abraham
Macmillan	Macmillan, Harold
Lady Dorothy	Macmillan, Dorothy Cavendish
Cecil	Cecil, David
Bowles	Bowles, Chester B. **
Arthur	Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr.
Sorensen	Sorensen, Theodore C.
DeGaulle	DeGaulle, Charles
McMahon	McMahon, Brien
Maurice	Couve de Murville, Maurice
Jean	Monnet, Jean
Puruis	Puruis, Arthur B.
Foster	Dulles, John Foster