

Donald M. Wilson Oral History Interview –JFK #1, 9/2/1964
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Wilson, Donald M.; Member, John F. Kennedy's Presidential campaign staff (1960); Deputy Director, US Information Agency (1961-1965). Wilson discusses his role as part of John F. Kennedy's [JFK] staff before, and during, JFK's time as president. He discusses JFK's personality and events such as the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis, among other issues.

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page 20 line 37 through line 38
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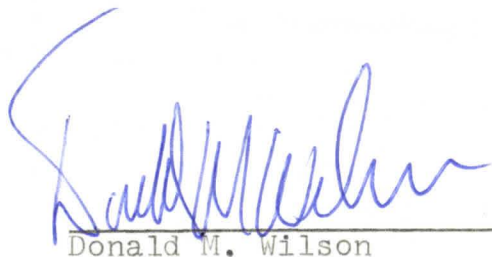
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Donald M. Wilson

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May 29, 1975
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Donald M. Wilson – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

DONALD M. WILSON

September 2, 1964
Washington D.C.

By James Greenfield

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GREENFIELD: Don, you knew President Kennedy a long time before many people knew him and perhaps a long time before many people ever thought of him as a Presidential candidate. Can you remember the first time you met Jack Kennedy and what happened?

WILSON: I met him in the spring of 1956 when I was the *LIFE* Bureau Chief here. I really don't remember the first time I met him, but I had a number of occasions to talk to him during that spring. In the summer of 1956 I went to the Democratic convention and was assigned to cover his efforts to become the Vice-Presidential nominee. I remember going up to his hotel suite right after Adlai Stevenson had thrown the convention open. The Kennedys were not prepared any more than anyone else was for what had happened. I was one of the first people to get there and Senator Kennedy and Bob Kennedy were there and a couple of members of the family and that was about it. Otherwise the suite was empty. And then suddenly things began to happen. One after another the major leaders of the Democratic Party showed up during all that night and the next morning.

But I have nothing particularly enlightening to shed on it, except that they worked all night long and they did a lot better than they thought they would do. But of course Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] won it and Kennedy didn't."

GREENFIELD: What about those early pictures -- those pictures we still see -- of President Kennedy on the Cape with Mrs. Kennedy -- those pictures that were taken before he was President?"

WILSON: All those pictures -- which have now become the most famous pictures of President Kennedy -- were shot in the summer of 1959 on one weekend at Hyannis. I had suggested to *LIFE* that they do a cover story on Mrs. Kennedy. At that time the Senator was an active and attractive Senator who was obviously running for the presidency, although he had not announced -- and I was sent up there with Mark Shaw and we spent the weekend at the Cape with my wife, who was along, and just the Kennedys. It was a lovely weekend... the weather was superb and Mark Shaw, the photographer, was able to spend the whole week and with them and their children and make those superb pictures... in the sand, playing with Caroline, walking away toward the beach. They are now the pictures that are probably the most famous ones of President Kennedy.

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GREENFIELD: Did either you or he consider himself a Presidential candidate at that time?

WILSON: Oh yes, he certainly did.

GREENFIELD: Did he say anything to indicate that, or was it just an assumption you made after that weekend?

WILSON: Oh, he was very plain about it. It was not an announced thing but there was no question about it whatsoever in my mind -- and it wasn't an assumption -- he used to talk about it.

GREENFIELD: Well, you - like me now - were once a journalist. What convinced you to go with Jack Kennedy as something other than a journalist? Was it that weekend or was it some other quality that you saw? Or just what was it that made you decide to join Jack Kennedy at one point?"

WILSON: Well, it was the qualities of the man. I got to know him fairly well over those four years and the more I saw of him -- the more I covered Washington -- the more I thought he was the most talented man in Washington to be President of the United States -- as far as intellect was concerned, as far as

his whole approach to government, as far as his approach to international affairs was concerned; it was that -- not anything else. I really believed that

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he was the most qualified man in town to be President.

GREENFIELD: What kind of relationship did you have with him as a journalist -- how was he toward journalists?

WILSON: He was totally accessible, and that certainly was one of the secrets of his success, both in becoming President and, I think, after he became President -- he really remained that way. He liked journalists -- he, at least at one time, had thought of becoming one himself as a career -- and liked talking to journalists. He perhaps got more out of them than they got out of him. He always asked them questions.

I travelled a number of times with him during his campaign to get the nomination. At that time I was *LIFE* Magazine Bureau Chief in Washington. One trip I remember vividly because it happened at such an historical moment. It was the night of the West Virginia primary. Kennedy won and this was the crucial turning point in his successful drive for the Presidential nomination. I rode back from Charleston, West Virginia, with him that night on the *Caroline* after the victory. We left Charleston about 3 a.m. and arrived at Washington's National Airport about 5:30 as dawn on a lovely morning was coming up. Jackie was curled up on a couch in the plane fast asleep. Senator Kennedy didn't feel like sleeping.

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He talked calmly about the West Virginia campaign. He said that his television appearances and his willingness to take on the Catholic issue head-on had won the election for him. Then, as we got off the plane just as the sun was coming up, he turned to me and said very simply, "Today we go to work in Maryland." He was referring to the Maryland primary, which was next. It was so typical of him that, although he had just won his greatest triumph, he already had set his eyes on his next goal.

GREENFIELD: What do you think attracted Jack Kennedy to journalists and why do you think journalists liked him -- what was it about him?

WILSON: Curiosity. He was an extraordinarily curious man. He wanted to know about everything -- and I mean everything. His interests were as wide as the skies, and I think that's what he liked journalists, because journalists are basically curious people and they have a vast storehouse of miscellaneous facts. He was a man who was always interested in miscellaneous facts, as well as pertinent ones.

GREENFIELD: Did he read a good deal even in those days -- because when he was President, of course, he followed the press very closely -- did he follow it as closely in his early days as well?

WILSON: Oh, he absolutely devoured it. He was right on top of everything.

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GREENFIELD: When did you first go to work for him?

WILSON: I went to work for him right after the Democratic Convention ended in the summer of 1960. I had more or less of an agreement with him and his brother Bob -- which I had made in January of 1960 -- that if he won the nomination I would take a leave of absence from *TIME*, Inc., and go to work for him. And so literally the day after the convention ended, I ended my employ temporarily with *Time*, Inc., and went to work for him. When I came back to Washington, my job in August of 1960 was to organize and put together the whole business of brochures, posters, pamphlets, buttons -- all that kind of material on the campaign. I had no real background for it other than my experience of eleven years at *LIFE* -- which really served me in pretty good stead for it -- and two days after the convention ended I walked into the Esso Building in downtown Wasington, where the "Citizens for Kennedy-Johnson" were set up, and found that I was strictly on my own. I went over to the Democratic National Committee, looked up what had been done four years before and eight years before, and I found it was pretty unimaginative; so I went to New York and hooked up with Bernard Quint, who was the Art Director of *LIFE* Magazine, and we went to work on posters and

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pamphlets. In fact I would say the three people who produced all that material in August of 1960 were myself, Quint, and Ted Sorensen [Theodore Sorensen], who really worked out all the content and decided what the subject matter should be.

GREENFIELD: Well, take something like a poster, was President Kennedy personally interested in anything of this sort?

WILSON: President Kennedy was fascinated with pictures of himself and extremely critical of them and so the poster was of great interest to him. The big problem in the summer of 1960 was whether to have a serious, mature poster or a smiling poster. At that particular time one of the major arguments being made by the Republicans was that he was not experienced enough to become President and therefore this led a lot of people around him -- and himself included -- in the beginning to think that he should have a rather serious, mature poster. I convinced him that he looked wonderful smiling, but it wasn't easy. What we did was line up a bunch of different pictures superimposed on test posters up at Hyannis one day, and he wanted to pick a serious one and

I prevailed upon him to pick up a smiling one. He finally went along grudgingly and the smiling one was the one that was produced in the millions and millions that appeared all over the United States.

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GREENFIELD: What was it like traveling with the President in those days -- you traveled with him on the plane -- what was he like on those trips.

WILSON: It's really true to say that he was the easiest man to work with one could ever imagine - almost unfailingly understanding and sympathetic and willing to listen to you -- and a cool man, never ruffled, always very incisive in his thoughts, but always humorous -- and it was just -- it was just a never-ending delight, in fact it grew all the time. He was right on top of the press and what they were saying about him - and there is no question that he really ran his own campaign. He was the chief thinker. He got a great deal from Ted Sorensen, who was of course right there the whole time, but he was really in charge.

GREENFIELD: How do you think the President evaluated his own chances during those days? Was it something of constant worry to him, do you think he thought he was going to win? What do you think?

WILSON: I honestly think he thought he was going to win right from the beginning. I believe that very much. I never had any feeling that he thought he was going to lose.

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GREENFIELD: In his mode of working, was he able to dictate, work late at night -- was he able to work around the clock? What were his modes of working during those days, do you remember?

WILSON: Well, it was never-ending. He certainly did work around the clock. He really got very little sleep, and he never did anything but work during the entire campaign -- with secretaries, with Sorensen, Dick Goodwin [Richard Goodwin], who was the number two man as far as speeches were concerned. I observed the speech production process firsthand. Although I really added very little toward the content of the speeches, I was involved with them very closely as far as the mechanics were concerned -- getting them out twice a day -- and he had a big speech factory back in Washington and also one in Cambridge, Mass., and speeches were sent out regularly by courier to the plane. The fact was that I would say perhaps five, at the most ten percent of them were used -- and what in fact happened was Ted Sorensen sat down and wrote damn near every speech of the campaign as we went along - with very considerable assist, which grew as the campaign went on, from Dick Goodwin. Joe Kraft [Joseph Kraft] and John

Bartlow Martin provided a much smaller assist, but they too participated. And the speechwriters back in the East were

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not getting any of their stuff on at all -- which caused a problem. Archibald Cox finally flew out to the campaign around the first of October because he was so frustrated and unhappy and complained that all this work that was being done and careful research and all was for naught. Senator Kennedy somehow or other soothed him and told him that he was valuable and he went back East and continued to work at the speech factory and Sorensen continued to write the speeches.

GREENFIELD: One of the things that everyone remembers on television is election night. Do you remember it -- because I remember you were at Hyannis during that period. What do you remember about that night?

WILSON: I was at the National Guard Armory in Hyannis in charge of the Armory operation -- which was the press operation. Pierre Salinger, who was the number one press man, was out at the house with the candidate and Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and Ken O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and a number of other chief operators in the campaign. I talked on the telephone constantly with Pierre Salinger and some of the others. The one most interesting event occurred about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning when the Western Union man handed me a telegram from President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] congratulating President Kennedy on his

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election. Well, at this time Nixon had not conceded and it was obvious that they had gotten mixed up in their signals and I was the only person in the place that knew about this. I promptly called out to the house and I got Bob Kennedy on the phone and I read him the first few lines of this telegram and he said, "Wait a minute" and he put Senator Kennedy on and I read him the entire telegram. Senator Kennedy's response was immediate: "There's some mistake on their part. Don't put it out -- don't say anything about it to anybody. Call Jim Hagerty [James C. Hagerty] right away in Washington and find out what the score is." So I put a call through to Washington and I got Jim Hagerty at the Sheraton-Park Hotel and he was very, very upset. I got the impression that he had written the telegram and had cleared it with the President, who had gone to bed earlier in the evening. When the President had gone to bed it looked as though Nixon was beaten and the President had given Jim Hagerty authority to release this when he thought the time was appropriate. Jim mistakenly had sent it, and he begged me on the telephone to talk to Senator Kennedy and urge him not to release it to the press. Well, I already knew from the conversation I had had with Senator Kennedy that he wasn't going to release it -- although I didn't say that to Jim. I said I would

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talk to the Senator and see what he said, "and I will call you back." And so then I called back to Senator Kennedy out at his house and told him that Hagerty was obviously on the hook with this thing and that Eisenhower had gone to bed and left Hagerty with the proxy and Hagerty had made a mistake and put it out too early. Senator Kennedy said, "Okay. Well, we'll sit on it. Don't do anything with it." So I stuffed it in my pocket and it subsequently was released around noon the following day, after Nixon had conceded. It was a telegram of congratulations and it asked Senator Kennedy to come at his earliest convenience to Washington "to confer with me about the transfer of authority in the new government."

GREENFIELD: You worked a great deal in those days with Pierre Salinger. What were Pierre's relationships with Senator Kennedy during the campaign?

WILSON: Well, rather interesting. I think when Pierre was first named as the Press Secretary, I don't think Senator Kennedy had much confidence in him. But he was the best guy available and so he picked him. And there was a steady and obvious growth in confidence between the two men as the campaign went along. Even in August I don't think Pierre was a very trusted figure in the Kennedy camp -- trusted in the sense of judgement and all that -- I don't think that they

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regarded him all that highly. I think they worried about him, but as the campaign went on he proved himself more and more and by the time the campaign ended, he was intimate and totally trusted and of course he was one of the first five people named to office the morning after the election.

GREENFIELD: Was he an actual adviser in the latter days of the campaign on general policy?

WILSON: He was primarily an advisor on press relations. The policy man as far as the content of the speeches was Ted Sorensen. As far as the strategy of the campaign went, the chief adviser was Bob Kennedy. Although he operated out of Washington, of course he and the Senator were on the phone constantly. As far as what states to go to and how things were going in each state -- he was the man. But as far as what to say and how to say it, what issues to hit -- I felt without any question Ted Sorensen was the pre-eminent adviser.

GREENFIELD: Who else was around in those days who had a direct and heavy influence on Senator Kennedy?

WILSON: Well, on the campaign itself it was really limited to Sorensen and O'Donnell and Pierre. Back in Washington was Bob Kennedy. There

were people such as Dean Acheson who were drawn upon for advice fairly heavily and I felt his advice was rather respected.

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There were a lot of others but I think they were the principal ones.

GREENFIELD: Well, Don, when you came into government you had a lot of experiences and lived through a lot of things with the Administration. Being with the USIA, you must have gone through the Bay of Pigs. Do you remember anything in particular about those times and the tribulations, both of USIA and the President of the United States?

WILSON: I had little to do with the Bay of Pigs operation. USIA was not informed and I found out about it before it happened in a strange way. I was called on the telephone by Tad Szulc [Tadeusz Witold Szulc] of the *New York Times*. He had been down in Florida and insisted that I join him for breakfast at his father-in-law's house in Georgetown, at which point he revealed all he had found in Florida -- only some of which he printed in the *New York Times* -- and said that he was convinced that an invasion was about to take place and I think he talked to me because I was a friend of his and he didn't quite know what to do with it. So I went to Ed Murrow [Edward R. Murrow], who was my boss, and Murrow promptly called up Allen Dulles. Murrow and I went over to see Allen Dulles and told him everything that Szulc had told me. Allen Dulles didn't give us a thing. He was very bland and he didn't admit that any of it was true and of course we knew it was by then -- you could just tell -- and Murrow was angry in a way but he was a

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loyal soldier and he realized, I guess, that he wasn't supposed to know about it. So we went back to USIA and pretty much operated in the dark during the Bay of Pigs thing. It was very unfortunate and poorly handled from all points of view and certainly from the propaganda point of view.

GREENFIELD: Well, how about the Cuban Missile Crisis? Was that the same kind of story? Do you recollect your own relationship during that time, both in the government apparatus and with the President himself?

WILSON: That was a totally different type of operation. Ed Murrow had just been operated on and was convalescing at the time and was out during the whole thing. He was up in New York State - so I was in charge of USIA. A Cabinet meeting was held on Wednesday, October 17, as I recall, of that week -- a routine Cabinet meeting to discuss keeping down expenditures in the government and keeping down levels of personnel. After the Cabinet meeting Bob Kennedy came up to me

and said "Will Ed Murrow be in town this weekend?" and I said, "No, he's too weak, he won't be able to come back to work for a long while yet." Bob was disappointed and then said, "Well, where will you be this weekend?" I said, "I'm going away to New Jersey." And he said, "Well, don't go." So I said, "Okay." And I

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cancelled my plans. On Friday, October 19, I received a call from George Ball's office at 6 o'clock at night and was summoned to his office where George Ball and Ed Martin [Edwin M. Martin], the Assistant Secretary for Latin American Affairs, briefed me on the situation. Their injunction to me was simple. When the President makes his speech, and at the time it was undecided what day he would make it, it was vital that the Cuban people hear it so they would know the facts. And of course, secondarily, at least in this original briefing it came second, was that the world should understand as completely as possible what the Russians were doing in Cuba. It was a rather difficult assignment because I was then told I couldn't talk to anybody about it, so I went back to USIA and mapped out a program, first of all for the Cuban aspect of the thing. I came to the conclusion that I would have to tell three other people in USIA what the situation was. This was Friday - the speech was on Monday. Saturday I went over again to see George Ball and Ed Martin and I told them what I proposed to do. Basically what I proposed to do was to ask the major broadcasting stations in the southeastern part of the United/ States - commercial stations - to turn their facilities over to the U.S. Government during the crisis so that the Voice of America,

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which broadcasts in Spanish, could be heard over all these frequencies in Cuba. All these stations could be heard in Cuba. As it turned out there were eleven of them that were the best. In order to put this operation into effect I needed to tell three people about it as USIA. One was the Director of the Voice of America, Henry Loomis. One was the Deputy Director for Policy and Plans, Thomas Sorensen, and the third was Hewson Ryan, who was our Assistant Director for Latin American Affairs. And Ball and Martin gave me approval to fill these three men in on the situation. I had alerted them the night before that they should be within telephone distance on Saturday so I called them in and told them what the story was and we went to work. They were the only people in USIA who knew about the situation until about noon on Monday when it began to break a bit when the fact was announced that the President would speak.

On Saturday I went to a meeting in the Oval Room upstairs at the White House. It was a very dramatic meeting - the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, General Taylor [Maxwell Taylor], Mr. Ball, Mr. Martin, Mr. John McCone, Mr. Lovett [Robert A. Lovett], Ted Sorensen, Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and perhaps several others, were all seated around the Oval Room. The President was in his rocking chair and the discussion mainly revolved

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around how long the story would hold before breaking in the newspapers and what would be the most advantageous time to address the American people. This was Saturday -- I would say in the afternoon -- and the question was whether the speech should be on Sunday or Monday. Of course a great deal was going on at that time -- the military was being cranked up and it was agreed at this meeting that if it could possibly hold until Monday it would be advantageous, but the President should be prepared to address the people on Sunday night. As it turned out it did hold and the President was able to address them on Monday. I went to a series of meetings, some with the President and some without, over the weekend. I know when the President heard that I had requested and received permission to tell three other people at USIA, he was very upset about it -- as he was during that weekend when he heard about anyone else knowing about it -- because of course he was naturally concerned that the more people that knew, the more danger there would be of this being revealed.

GREENFIELD: What was his own mood during that time, generally? How would you describe his mood?

WILSON: He was completely in charge. He was very calm and he was very serious. There was no humor that I can recall, at that

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particular time and everybody was working very hard. But the mood was somber and serious and very businesslike. The USIA operation, in getting the radio stations alerted, was an interesting one. First of all we had to determine which stations we needed, and then we determined who controlled the stations, i.e., who were the men who owned the stations who could make the decision to turn them over to the Voice of America. Then we made preliminary plans for telephone lines to be linked up to these stations from Washington without the stations ever knowing about it. On Saturday night I got permission from Mac Bundy to fill in Newton Minow on Monday morning about it because he, being head of the FCC, was important to the success of it. I was given permission to call Newt Minow on Monday morning and I called first thing Monday morning only to find that he had just flown to New York, to give a speech. So I tracked him down in New York and told him he must fly back to Washington immediately. I couldn't tell him on the phone what it was, but it was more important than anything. He got right on the plane and came back and came to my office about 11:30 and I told him about the radio station operation and he got one or two of his right hand men and they agreed that this was legal, that it could be done; they looked into their records to see that

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the right people were tabbed. We had a meeting that day with Minow, myself and Salinger and a carefully worked-out arrangement was made whereby Salinger would call up these eleven owners, one after the other, in a rapid-fire order, starting at 6 o'clock that night. The

speech was to be at 7. And we even wrote out on a piece of paper what he would say to each of them -- the same thing-- that this was a matter of national emergency, that he was speaking on behalf of the President, and we had phone lines arranged. I sat in Salinger's office and he called them all up, one after another - the operator had all the calls stacked up. Each man said yes, he would do it and the minute he said "yes" I was on an open line to Henry Loomis, the Director of Voice of America, and I would say, "such and such a radio station in Miami says yes" and then the phone line would be put in. Although the calls only started at 6 o'clock, by 7 o'clock when President Kennedy went on the air all of those radio stations turned off their American broadcasts and picked up the Voice of America in Spanish live. They stayed on the air for almost a month thereafter carrying the Voice of America at night. They didn't do it during the daytime in most cases because they couldn't be heard in Cuba during the daytime. That's how we informed the Cuban people of the American

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side of the missile crisis story.

There was a directive put out on Tuesday which specifically included me as a member of EXCOM, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, and I sat in on all the EXCOM meetings until the end of the crisis. Of course there's a great deal we did that can be better covered by others. One of the major efforts I was concerned with was in the field of pictures. There's no question that the release of the pictures of the missile emplacements in Cuba had a great deal to do with changing world opinion -- which I think started out to be very; well I won't say negative, but very questioning about the President's speech. Actually the President's original inclination was not to release the pictures and we had quite an argument at one meeting of EXCOM about whether to release them or not. In fact what happened was that they were sent out to major European capitals to be shown to top government officials only. In London -- due to, I think a combination of desire on the part of some of our people in the London Embassy and a certain amount of mishap -- they were shown to the press and got on television. Then the pictures were truly out of the bag and they were released back in Washington and it was the best thing that ever happened. The truth of the matter is it was not calculated that way. I really think they would

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have been released the next day anyway because I think we would have realized it was necessary; but it did happen by accident.

GREENFIELD: Didn't you prepare a lot of pamphlets and things for dropping over Cuba in those days?

WILSON: Yes. One story that has not been told was a plan to have a massive leaflet drop over Havana and perhaps several other of the major urban centers in Cuba. I was given the responsibility for organizing this and the psychological warfare elements of the military services were put under me for this and

we drew up a single-page pamphlet. On one side of the page was a full picture -- the clearest picture there was of a missile emplacement -- and on the other side in Spanish was a description of what the Russians were attempting to do by placing the missiles in Cuba. There was also a description of President Kennedy's actions in setting up the quarantine. The pamphlets were worked on in a most secret manner at the USIA and they were flown down to Ft. Bragg by one of our chief officers. He worked at Ft. Bragg with the Psychological Warfare Services of the U.S. Army, who had a printing press down there, and the U.S. Army printed up 6 million leaflets. These 6 million leaflets were loaded into plastic canisters and they were hooked up under fighter bomber aircraft and some of them were taken down to bases in Florida

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and some were kept at Ft. Bragg. The situation was so set up that I was able to report to the President later in the week that if given 12 hours notice, we could deliver 6 million pamphlets onto the island of Cuba. The President never gave the order. In fact at that time I did not mention how many pamphlets there were, as I recall, and about a week later when the crisis had finally eased and Mr. Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] had agreed to withdraw the missiles, the subject of the pamphlet drop came up. It was agreed that the pamphlet drop should be put into abeyance and it was at that time I revealed that there were 6 million of the pamphlets. The President burst into laughter when he heard that there were 6 million of them sitting around. They were eventually burned down at Ft. Bragg.

GREENFIELD: Well, you saw the President as a potential candidate, then as a candidate and then as President. What changes did you notice, if any, during those days?

WILSON: Well, I must say he was certainly a more light hearted man before he became President than he was during the last year or so of his Presidency. He was still delightful and witty and all that, but the burdens of the office showed and there was, I thought, less casual banter than there used to be; he showed the burdens of the office at the end, I thought.

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GREENFIELD: How did the President spend his free time -- what kind of recreations did he pursue after he became President? I think it would be interesting for people to know how he spent some of his social evenings.

WILSON: Well, I attended a few things. There was one very interesting evening held at the White House -- it was a session of the Hickory Hill Seminar, the group of people organized by the Attorney General and named after the Attorney General's house in McLean, Virginia, where the first session was held. It was a group of about fifteen people who met every two or three weeks and had an

eminent speaker in a particular field come and talk to us about his speciality, be it science or painting or whatever. The group consisted of Secretary of Defense McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], British Ambassador David Ormsby-Gore, Arthur Schlesinger -- who really did a lot of the organizing for it -- Mrs. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the Shrivvers, the Udalls, Bill Walton [William E. Walton], the Douglas Dillons, and a number of others. But anyway, one night while the Attorney General was away on a trip -- I think he was on his round-the-world-trip -- the meeting was held at the White House in the Oval Room -- and the guest was a Princeton professor of history, David Donald -- whose specialty was the Reconstruction Era following the Civil War. He had just won an

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important prize for history, and he was a very good man - very articulate and very interesting - and he spoke on the Reconstruction period. And after he had finished talking the President asked him quite a few questions, mainly about Abraham Lincoln. The President was very interested in the Princeton professor's opinion of whether Abraham Lincoln would have gone down in history as such an illustrious figure if he had not been assassinated. I think the professor was of the opinion that he would have, but President Kennedy pursued this question at some length -- in fact, he was fascinated with Lincoln's place in history. He then asked questions about where the professor placed all the other American Presidents as far as greatness was concerned, and there was quite a discussion about that. President Kennedy didn't reveal his own choices, although this was at a time when letters had been circulated to all the prominent American historians asking them to rank the American Presidents in terms of the great, mediocre, etc. His interest in Lincoln and his position and what effect the assassination had on his position in history was very much on President Kennedy's mind that night.

GREENFIELD: Don, you have children who went to the White House school. I wonder if you could muse upon that school a little bit -- about some of the people who attended it.

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WILSON: Well, the Kennedys had a problem about where to send Caroline [Caroline B. Kennedy] to school and they finally decided to try and organize a school at the White House. It started out initially with about 10 pupils, although it grew to 20 pupils. My wife was charged with a good deal of the organization of the thing, and she hired a teacher from New York named Alice Grimes and a teacher from Washington. Miss Grimes was the head of the school and she was a very good teacher from the Brearley School in New York. And she set up a regular curriculum for -- well, first I guess it was for kindergarten and then for first grade -- and about ten children went there and they met on the top floor of the White House. I thought it was a good school -- and I thought they got good training there and it was a congenial bunch of children....

GREENFIELD: Who were they, who did they represent, who were their parents, do you remember?

WILSON: Actually none of the parents were particularly important people in the Administration. In fact, most of them were Republicans and most of them weren't friends of the Kennedys -- they actually were people who my wife and some of her friends had known and they sort of got together and had little preschool groups and that's how they all got involved in this.

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GREENFIELD: Did Andy Hatcher's....

WILSON: Andy Hatcher's boy was in the school. Very frankly, there was a problem of having a school without a negro child in it and this seemed to be a good solution. Andy Hatcher has a very attractive little boy named Avery and so he was included in the school. The President was interested in the school -- he used to go up there fairly frequently and they used to visit him in his office fairly frequently and then often when they were out playing in the backyard of the White House where they had set up a lot of swings and a little treehouse and stuff, why he used to come out and watch them.

GREENFIELD: You probably know Bobby Kennedy, the Attorney General as well as anyone else. I wonder if you could just muse upon his relationship with his brother, what influence he had on his brother and his whole relationship with his brother.

WILSON: He had a very great influence on his brother. His brother regarded Bob Kennedy and his judgment very highly and of course they knew each other so intimately that they thought the same and Bob Kennedy was his alter ego in many ways. He was able to do a lot of the jobs that the President could not do himself because there are only so many hours in the day and he was in the unique kind of

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position to be able to do many of these things without having to check back with the President. He knew what the President wanted and what the President didn't want. The relationship was as close a one as I can imagine any two human beings having. They were absolutely on the same wavelength and, of course, they consulted frequently by phone all day long.

GREENFIELD: Would you think, then, that the description you sometimes hear of - or have heard of Bobby Kennedy in those days -- that he was the second most important man in the United States Government -- was true?

WILSON: Oh, there was no question about it. And of course as the years went on he got into all kinds of fields outside the Justice Department and in the last year of the Presidency he certainly spent a great deal less time in strict Justice Department work than he had done earlier. He got involved in a number of domestic affairs and in the foreign policy field.

GREENFIELD: And they met regularly, and saw each other regularly, did they?

WILSON: They saw each other regularly and they talked even more regularly on the telephone. I doubt if there were many days that went by when they were both in Washington that they did not talk at least

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several times during the day. And I guess the same was really true when they were out of town.

GREENFIELD: What about Teddy Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy]? Was he a "junior brother" or did he have a special role to play in those days?

WILSON: Oh, I'd say he was pretty much of a junior brother. He was the younger brother and they wanted to bring him along, but I don't think he had any particular role of adviser or anything like that.

I'm just wondering if there isn't more I should give - more I might give on the Cuban Missile Crisis. It's been so completely covered. I might just give my impressions of Sunday morning, October 28, because it remains most vividly in my mind -- the Sunday morning following the Monday speech. It was Sunday morning that Khrushchev's message came in, in which he announced that he was going to withdraw the missiles. I remember it as a beautiful day and we met in the Cabinet Room at 10 o'clock -- we met twice a day -- and this was the regular 10 o'clock meeting. There was an exhilarating atmosphere that morning -- I think every man in that room felt exactly the same -- that the curtains had lifted -- because only 24 hours before it looked so dark -- one of our men had been shot down over Cuba, and I don't think anyone in that room, as well as a lot of people outside

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that room, had not at least thought about the fact that war was perhaps almost upon us. I know I thought about it. I thought about it in terms of my family. I went home most of those nights about 1 or 2 o'clock and had about 4 or 5 hours sleep, and I remember on Friday and Saturday nights at home I literally wondered whether I'd come home the next night -- and then suddenly it all resolved itself, or became resolved on that Saturday morning, and the attitude was lighthearted in that room. I mean, all of a sudden this huge burden was lifted and

I felt like laughing or yelling or dancing -- I was the youngest man there and I'm not saying anyone else felt like dancing, but that's the way I felt.

GREENFIELD: Do you remember how the President felt?

WILSON: Yes, he was in great form -- he was in GREAT form. He was smiling and he was full of humor and he, too, had obviously felt a great burden lift. There was still a lot to do -- the meetings went on for quite some time after that -- but that was the turning point and it was a marvelous morning. I'll never forget it as long as I live.

GREENFIELD: Are there any particular anecdotes that stick in your mind, or any particular instances when you saw the President that remain in your mind that you'd like to record?

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WILSON: I remember one night having dinner at the White House -- just upstairs with the President and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] and Edward R. Murrow and Mrs. Murrow [Janet Huntington Brewster] and my wife, when we talked at some length about USIA and foreign policy -- nothing terribly significant -- and then the President suddenly switched the conversation to the Senate race in New York State -- this was in 1962 -- and he told Ed Murrow that he had taken some polls in New York State and Ed Murrow was one of the best known men in New York and would have one of the best chances of being elected as the Democratic senator against Javits. And this really caught Murrow by complete surprise -- it was the last thing he thought would be discussed. The President told him this and it was one of the few times I've seen Ed totally at a loss for words. He didn't really say anything so the matter was dropped. I was informally asked by Bob Kennedy a few days later whether I thought Murrow would be interested or not and I said I did not, because he had told me very frankly that he didn't have any interest in it, and that was the end of it. But it was typical of President Kennedy to suddenly switch the topic from foreign affairs and throw out this fascinating bit of information. Ed Murrow and Ralph Bunche were the two best known Democrats in the state at the time, he told him. He didn't tell him what the percentage figures

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were or anything but he obviously was trying Ed out to see if he might be interested.

GREENFIELD: What do you think the President's feeling was about USIA itself?

WILSON: I think the President was very interested in the mechanics of USIA. I think he wanted to give USIA a more significant and fixed role in the

U.S. Government than it had ever had before -- in fact he gave it to USIA. I think he had confidence in Ed Murrow; on the other hand, I don't think he wanted to elevate USIA too far. He wanted to maintain the supremacy, certainly, of the Department of State -- something I don't think he ever felt he was very successful at. I think President Kennedy was a man who perhaps better than any other President in our history, understood how foreign opinion worked, was molded it, was shaped it and how to shape it. And therefore he was interested in USIA and interested in getting the maximum out of USIA. And he used to call up quite a lot and make sure that we were pushing themes or subjects that he felt should be pushed. He knew exactly what we were saying and that sort of thing, he stayed *au courant* with USIA. I think it's very significant that he made USIA a permanent member and of EXCOM during

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the Cuban Missile Crisis -- something he had not done, as I pointed out, during the Bay of Pigs. I think he felt it was important. And actually during his Administration a USIA member was always included in the most important meetings on major foreign policy topics. This started in the summer of 1961 and continued up to the time of his death.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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