Elie Abel Oral History Interview – JFK #1, 3/18/1970
Administrative Information

Creator: Elie Abel
Interviewer: Dennis O'Brien
Date of Interview: March 18, 1970
Length: 16 pp.

Biographical Note
Abel, a foreign and domestic news correspondent, discusses his relationship with President Kennedy and his administration, and talks about the role the media played during the presidency, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation
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of Elie Abel

to the

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1. Researchers shall not be granted access to the following portions of the transcript until July 1, 1977:

page 15 line 10 through page 16 line 1
page 17 line 21 through page 18 line 4
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Elie Abel
Elie Abel

June 3, 1975
Month, Day, Year

James E. O'Neill
acting Archivist of the United States

June 23, 1975
Month, Day, Year

APPENDIX TO THE GIFT OF PERSONAL STATEMENT

OF ELIE ABEL

The following passages are closed for research until July 1, 1985:

page 13 line 42 to page 14 line 6

page 18 line 29 to page 19 line 15

page 32 line 3 to line 35

Elie Abel

Elie Abel

acting Archivist of the United States

James E. O'Neill

June 3, 1975

Month, Day, Year

June 23, 1975

Month, Day, Year

Columbia University in the City of New York | New York, N.Y. 10027

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM
Office of the Dean

Journalism Building

June 3, 1975

Mr. John F. Stuart
Assistant Director of Archives
The John F. Kennedy Library
380 Trapelo Road
Waltham, Massachusetts 02154

Dear Mr. Stuart:

My thanks for the Oral History Interview.

I have signed the releases you asked for. In the case of page 13 line 42 to page 14 42 line 6; page 18 line 29 to page 19 line 15 and page 32 line 3 to line 35 I have, on second thought, decided that July 1, 1977 is a little early to be opening those passages to the public.

I have taken the liberty, therefore, of altering the effective date to July 1, 1985, roughly ten years from now.

As for Colonel Wright's diary, it is not in fact in my possession. I believe it was deposited at the Boston University Library. But I will have to check this and get back to you. Much the same applies to what you describe as the file of the MacNamara-Anderson incident. I will get in touch with my friends at BU to see what can be done about that.

Sincerely,

Elie Abel

Elie Abel
Dean

EA/mm
Enc.

ELIE ABEL
JFK #1

Table of Contents

Page	Topic
1	First meeting with Senator Kennedy
1	Situation in India
2	Kennedy begins seeking higher public office
2	Book project
3	Media coverage of the 1960 campaign
4	Kennedy-Nixon debates
5	Handling the press
6	Press coverage of foreign policy
7	First meeting with Dean Rusk
10	Arthur Sylvester's appointment
11	Press coverage of international events
13	Leaks to the press
14	Investigation of reporters
15	Tet Offensive

Oral History Interview

With

ELIE ABEL

March 18, 1970
New York, New York

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Oh, I think that would be a good place to begin as a--perhaps with your first meeting with JFK.

ABEL: All right. I first got to know Jack Kennedy as a senator before the 1960 Election; in fact, it was in 1959. I had just returned to Washington from a period of service in India and South Asia as a correspondent for the *New York Times*, and to my surprise one day a mutual friend said, "Jack Kennedy wants to meet you. Could you make lunch one day?" So I did.

It was one of those mutual discovery occasions. I was curious as to why he had summoned me. It turned out that about the time I was in India, writing for the *Times* about India's problems, he had begun, as a senator, to get very interested in India's problems. As you've heard from many others, he was an avid newspaper reader and he remembered where every correspondent had been and whom he knew and so forth.

Essentially this was a kind of personal debriefing on the situation as I saw it emerging in India: What was likely to happen after Nehru [Jawaharlal Nehru]? What were the forces within the Congress party [All-India National Congress] and within the country? I did much of the talking. He listened and asked very sharp, perceptive questions. I had a feeling--I never documented it later--that he had not been vitally interested in India until John Sherman Cooper came back to the Senate, having been ambassador to India. Cooper was one of his close friends and, I think, sold him on the notion that the survival of India as a free

democratic republic was, and ought to be, an important goal for the United States to support. So he was trying to pull together whatever information he could.

Well, as I say, we got to know each other in those circumstances, having lunch over his desk. He had this old family retainer known as “Muggsy” [John O’Leary]. Muggsy brought lunch down in a wicker basket and then laid a tablecloth over the senator’s desk. He and I and this mutual friend sat together and ate fish, it being a Friday, and we talked about India.

Well, very soon after that I began to sense that he might run for president. I saw quite a bit of him and then went campaigning with him in the primaries. I think there was between us a certain bond. We were roughly the same age--he was, I think, four years older, but we’d been to college at roughly the same period--and we’d been in the same war, and we had some of the same interests, and we discovered that we agreed on lots of things. And so among the memories that were important to me were a number of private conversations I had with the candidate, then with the president-elect and finally with the president. Some of them I was unable to write about at the time for obvious reasons. When a working reporter is, in effect the president’s personal guest he doesn’t write anything unless the president is willing to have it written, and in most cases he was not. So there were a number of meetings of that kind.

One sticks in my memory, which I have mentioned since his death once or twice in public. After I’d written my book, *The Missile Crisis*, I was asked by many people why I’d thought of doing this particular book. Of course, a fellow in my line of work doesn’t need any very fancy reasons for trying to do a rounded and hopefully definitive account of an important incident of that kind. But there was something in my mind all along, and it goes back to a conversation I had with him in his bedroom in the living quarters of the White House in September of ‘61.

Now the climate, you will remember, was very unhappy. There had been the Bay of Pigs, which he acknowledged as a disaster and took full responsibility for. There had been the meeting with Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] in Vienna which shook him up quite badly. There had been the Berlin ultimatum and the decision then in Washington to beef up the defense budget and speed the emplacement of Minuteman missiles, and all the rest of it. But by the time I got to see him he still wasn’t very confident that we weren’t in for serious trouble.

What prompted this visit was an approach from a New York publisher about whether I’d be willing to undertake a book on the first term, the major decisions of the first term. Obviously that meant making arrangements with the White House so that over the next several years I would have access to people and their recollections and so forth. After weeks of waiting, the Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] channel not having worked very well, I ran into Kenny O’Donnell [Kenneth P. O’Donnell] one day and said, “I’ve been trying to see the president. What’s the problem?” And he said, “Do you want to see him today?” I said, “I’d love to. I’ve been waiting for several weeks.” Then, sure enough, he called me that afternoon and in his own fashion, as I recall it, said, “Get your ass over here.” I got over there and I was ushered up-stairs into the living quarters. It was a Friday afternoon and the president was about to leave for Hyannisport. In fact, the chopper was turning over under the window. He was alone in the bedroom, aides coming and going, and I was asked to wait. It seemed half the cabinet was out in the corridor, wanting to get him to sign this paper or approve that

appointment before he went away. So I waited for quite a while. Dave Powers [David F. Powers] came in and made me a bloody marry and then he made a second bloody marry. The time seemed to drag. Finally the president asked me to come in. I came in and sat for a while while he dealt with other matters. I had a chance to look over the room, which was quite plain. I remember there was a little snapshot of Caroline [Caroline B. Kennedy], not in any way a professional photograph, which was stuck in a mirror over his chest of drawers and the window was open and it was fluttering in the breeze. On the chest was a souvenir of the campaign. It was a gilded golf ball, and on the box was inscribed, "Get out of the rough with Kennedy." And here he was "in the rough," hacking away, unhappy, terribly worried about Berlin, worrying about what the Russians might make of his failure to support the Bay of Pigs thing or to go through with it in a way where it might have a chance, distrustful of professional military advice.

He finally turned to me and said, "What's on your mind?" I told him about this book project. He seemed to have trouble grasping the idea. He said, "Well, I haven't been in office long enough." I said, "I'm not thinking of now. I'm thinking of a 1964 book, but obviously it has to be compiled over a period of some years and I need your help. I'd like to know to what degree you're prepared to cooperate." Well, his initial reaction was negative, very introspective. He said, "Why would anyone write a book about an administration that has nothing to show for itself but a string of disasters?"

So we wound up getting into quite a discussion about that. He, at one point, shouted to O'Donnell, "Tell him to turn off that thing; I'm not leaving yet." Suddenly there was quiet; the chopper stopped turning over. We sat there for a while in the odd position where I, a private citizen, was busy assuring the president of the United States that his administration would not turn out to be a string of disasters, and that as he got hold of the job he and I and all his friends would be proud of his administration, that he would do great things. Well, the missile crisis, in a sense was, for me, one of his great moments, and so I felt I rather owed it to him, and to his memory, to put the story together as faithfully as I could.

O'BRIEN: Well, going back to those days before the election of 1960 when you were traveling with the candidate, as you look back on the writing and reporting that was done by both the press and TV at that time, in your evaluation, who was doing some of the good reporting, some of the better people, more incisive?

ABEL: Well, there were a fair number of them. I must try to think back. Let's exclude myself and Arthur Sylvester, who was my friend and traveling companion and later wound up in the administration. Our newspapers--I was, then, with the *Detroit News* and he with the *Newark News*--for thirty odd years had shared office space and shared a ticker in Washington. So when I went to work for the *News*, Arthur was my neighbor and we kind of got interested in Kennedy about the same time. The president always thought of us as a twosome. I think the fellows on the *Times* who were covering Kennedy started, by and large with a certain skepticism. I remember Russell Baker [Russell W. Baker], for example, who was not yet a full-time funny man, being rather skeptical of the charisma stuff and the jumpers and the leapers and so forth. But after spending a couple of days with us, I remember Baker saying, "I know what you fellows mean. This is really a phenomenon." This was, I think, in Pittsburgh or some place in Pennsylvania. He had a very

mixed bag of reporters traveling with him: Mary McGrory writing her own special kind of thing. Mary is at her best when she's in love with the people she's writing about. And I think she was with Jack Kennedy at that point. A fellow like Art Hoppe[Arthur W. Hoppe], the very funny, funny man from the *San Francisco Chronicle*--I remember him vividly. But you know, everybody came along at one point or another. Mary used to say that she would never know how to go on a campaign trip without Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop] and me because we used to carry her typewriter and lead her into the bus and save seats for her. I never had any great problem covering the campaign. Salinger was very much the man on the spot and if I had to criticize him--and I'd criticize him to his face--it was that at that period he had a tendency sometimes to do too little homework and to finesse a little bit when he was asked a question to which he didn't know the answer, instead of saying, "I'll find out and get back to you." But on the whole it was, I think, a very well run campaign. I was not aware of any great press problem. I worked for a Republican paper, or rather the ownership of the paper was Republican.

I remember on one occasion our managing editor getting a little upset because I had done a piece comparing Kennedy's reception in a particular city with Nixon's [Richard M. Nixon] reception. I had switched between the two candidates. And Kennedy had indeed aroused a great deal more enthusiasm, more evident enthusiasm in the streets. The managing editor, calling me, said, "Well, I know it's true, but Jesus Christ, the publisher's upset about it." I had a similar business over the debates, above all the first debate in Chicago. It was in the evening, 9:30 to 10:00, or something like that. If you remember the climate, everybody assumed that Nixon would mop the floor with Kennedy. I mean that was the conventional wisdom; after all he had debated Khrushchev and stuck his finger in Khrushchev's chest and so forth. I had no fixed idea about it, but it seemed to me that if Kennedy merely survived the debate, he would have to be considered the winner because the prevailing assumption had been that he was too immature and too rich and too flabby to go up against this tough fellow Nixon. Well, it was perfectly clear, I think, to everybody in that room--including some of Nixon's own campaign handlers--that Kennedy had come out ahead in that first debate.

And I think that changed the whole flavor of the campaign. That became reasonably self-evident several days later. My misfortune with my paper was that I wrote a piece that very night--for use the next day making some of the points I've made to you about how Kennedy was off to a flying start thanks to that first debate. They printed it, to their credit, but the Republican party in Michigan was up in arms. Here was the leading paper in the state front paging a story of this kind. Subsequently, I had some reproaches from Gerald Ford [Gerald R. Ford], among others. However, most of them were honest enough to tell me after the election was over that, of course, I'd been right, and that they too felt that Kennedy had seized the initiative and run away with it.

O'BRIEN: Well, who are some of the reporters that have a kind of close special relationship with Kennedy at that point?

ABEL: Well, there were some who were not then functioning as reporters: Joe Kraft [Joseph Kraft], for example, who was then a speech writer, Charles Bartlett, Mary McGrory, Joe Alsop, Sylvester and myself, Hugh Sidey [Hugh S. Sidey], Sander Vanocur, There must have been more but those are the ones that come to mind

readily. Also, Bob Healy [Robert L. Healy] of the *Boston Globe*. But some of us were in and out. I, for one, rotated between Nixon and Kennedy during the campaign. So I missed one or two of the big speeches.

O'BRIEN: Well now, looking at it in a comparative way then, the Nixon camp and the Kennedy camp here and the handling of the press--what was the difference?

ABEL: Well, there was this enormous difference: Nixon was totally unavailable to the press. He obviously did not feel comfortable with the press, less so then than now. So we were always kept at a distance, and the number of people who actually had access to him, even just to pass the time of day, was very limited. I certainly never did. It wasn't till the last weekend before election day that he agreed to have not a press conference, but a background session in a Chicago television station after he'd done a statewide or a regional telecast. He came down and asked for a beer. There wasn't any beer, so he had to settle for coffee. For the first time he threw himself open to questions, but you couldn't quote him. I think this was a totally different approach. Kennedy, when he had a spare moment on the plane, was always walking back and forth, talking to people or inviting you to sit down beside him. I remember one memorable conversation in which he didn't utter a word. It was his first western swing in September. He had lost his voice when we got to Los Angeles after that long whistlestop tour down through the Central Valley of California. We arrived in L.A. and he couldn't speak. They brought in a vocal coach or something from Boston to work with him over the weekend, try to bring his voice back. He stayed at the home of his sister, Mrs. Lawford [Patricia Kennedy Lawford] in Santa Monica.

After that weekend break, he did cancel one or two meetings because he couldn't speak. We had to fly to St. Louis for a speech at a labor convention. The doctor or the voice coach or whatever he was--he was a fellow from Boston whose name I now don't remember, an Irish name, Sullivan, something like that-had forbidden him to speak over the roar of the engines. We were in an Electra. So at a certain point he motioned to me to sit down beside him and we had a bizarre conversation in which I asked questions and he would reply on a Western Union blank, writing in that indecipherable scrawl of his. To my regret I later discovered that I'd lost those Western Union sheets. They would have been of enormous historic value, I think, and of sentimental value to me. But he was always, in that sense, available. He was ready to discuss almost anything with you, to ask your opinion of a speech. "Did you think that was good or bad? Did it go over?" Some times I felt free to tell him that no, "I thought the speech was a bomb." And he would take it. He didn't get terribly upset. Sometimes he'd argue with you and say, "Well, hell, you can't make a great speech every day. I'm doing too many speeches. You guys are too critical."

O'BRIEN: There's an entirely different kind of cast to the way the press is handled then in both camps?

ABEL: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Another thing I was rather interested in, a little later.... We were talking a little earlier about some of the disasters that did take place, particularly in

foreign policy. How does the press respond, for example, when the president--I believe it was to the American Association of Newspaper Publisher's group right after the Bay of Pigs--suggests the press, for example, might...

ABEL: Police itself….

O'BRIEN: ...reexamine their attitudes towards reporting the matters of national security?

ABEL: Well, this, as you know, is now a live topic again in 1970, thanks in part to Mr. Agnew [Spiro T. Agnew] and his complaints about not just broadcast journalism but the *Times* and the *Washington Post* and so forth. The press is, in many ways, the least introspective profession around. It tends to take its own liberties and its own way of functioning for granted. It is only now, I think, under the challenge of a new generation that is very skeptical about the press as a part of the establishment, that the press is beginning to think in terms of innovations or perhaps of re-examining some of its tried and true formulae. I think the natural tendency of journalists in those days was to resent and resist this kind of thing; but I don't think that all the editors were blind to the point he was trying to make, which is that there are moments when national security is genuinely at stake.

On the other hand, since then, we've all heard about these exchanges with the *New York Times* on the matter of the Bay of Pigs. He started out asking them to suppress what they knew about the Bay of Pigs invasion then in preparation. And he wound up, I believe, telling either the late Orvil Dryfoos, who was then the publisher, or Clifton Daniel [Elbert Clifton Daniel, Jr.], that he wished now the *Times* had gone ahead and published what it knew because he then would not have gone ahead with what turned out to be a disastrous operation. So here's one man talking out of both sides of the mouth, if you will, and I think being sincere both times.

O'BRIEN: Sure. Well, how about yourself? Were there ever any incidents in which you did not report something, or you, in a sense, held back on something?

ABEL: No, I can't think of any. I was not one of those who had advance knowledge about the Bay of Pigs. I think I was preoccupied with domestic matters at that time, something like federal aid to education or something on the Hill. I ran a very small bureau. There were only two or three reporters in it, and we couldn't be covering everything at the same time. I got involved in some of the post mortems on the Bay of Pigs, but by that time there was no secret. On the missile crisis I was one of perhaps a half dozen around the State Department who smelled that something was up but I didn't have enough information to come out with a story, a hard and fast story so that--well, I did by I guess noon on the twenty-second know that we were going to announce a blockade, but I also knew that the president was going on the air to announce it right after the Huntley [Chester R. Huntley]-Brinkley [David R. Brinkley] show at 7:00. So I went on Huntley-Brinkley live that night from the White House with Sander Vanocur. Each of us did a piece kind of hinting that something of this kind was in the works, but, if you will, on that occasion

responding to a caution that we ought not to steal the president's thunder. I don't think anybody could that night.

O'BRIEN: All right. Well, we'll switch to the State Department for a moment. When do you first meet Rusk [David Dean Rusk], encounter Rusk?

ABEL: I guess I first met Rusk at Palm Beach. Well, wait a minute. I had known him slightly years before in the Truman [Harry S. Truman] Administration at the UN when he was assistant secretary of state, deputy under secretary or something of that kind. I knew him slightly then. Then I was in Palm Beach with a group of reporters covering the pre-inaugural period, when the Cabinet was being chosen. At a certain point Rusk showed up and held a press conference. That was the first time that I'd talked to him in many years. I knew other people in the State Department of the new administration rather better at the beginning. I'd known George Ball [George W. Ball] for a good many years and Chester Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] and Averell Harriman [W. Averell Harriman]. So Rusk was, in a sense, the new element in the equation for me.

O'BRIEN: But I understand at one time you were at least under consideration for the public affairs job, wasn't it?

ABEL: Yes, yes. I can tell you that story. It's more complicated I think than Salinger made it appear in his book. I was first approached, not by the president, but by Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] whom I had never met, or I was pretty sure I'd never met him. He swears to this day that he knew me in Detroit when he was comptroller of the Ford Motor Company or assistant comptroller and I was the regional correspondent of the *New York Times*--this goes back to 1950. I don't remember it, but he was at that time in a rather junior position, just beginning to make his way up in the company. What happened apparently was that after I broke the story that he was under consideration for the Defense job, which was a story of appreciable interest in Detroit, as you might imagine, because he'd been president of Ford for all of a week or two at that time, I had a telephone call from McNamara, a very informal call, "Hello, Elie. This is Bob McNamara. I've been talking to the president and I'd like to talk to you. Can you come up to Washington?" I said no, I couldn't, because I'd been assigned to cover this pre-inaugural period with the president-elect in Florida but what was it all about. So he said, "Well, I'll have to do it on the telephone. I'd like you to come and work for me as assistant secretary." Well, I said, "Does the president know about this?" And he said, "Yes. He certainly does, and he thinks it's going to be hard to get you, but he thinks I ought to try." So we had a long talk and I promised to think about it. He said, "You may be hearing from Senator Kennedy directly."

Sure enough, the next morning Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] called and said would I come over to Joe Kennedy's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] house and talk to the senator, as we all called him at that time. So I did at the appointed hour leave the Palm Beach Towers Hotel to go out there. There was some need for keeping it quiet, clearly, because there was so much gossip in the papers about people and jobs. It would have been particularly difficult for me, as a member of the working press, to have other working newsmen speculating about

what I was going to do. I should add that in the conversation with McNamara I had said to him, “Does the paper know anything about this?” He said, “Oh, yes. I called them first. I called Martin Hayden”--Hayden was my boss, the editor of the news--”and told him that I wanted to take you away from him.” I said, “What was his reaction?” And he said, “Well, he was very upset about it, you know, because he seemed to think they needed you more than I did,” but he added, “I reminded them that when I was mulling over the president’s offer, they had run an editorial saying, ‘No man has the right to say no to the President of the United States.’ So I quoted it right back at them.”

Well, when I was waiting for a cab at the hotel to go out to the Kennedy house, a tall, bespectacled, professorial type appeared and said he was going to the same place, couldn’t we share a cab? It turned out to be Walter Heller [Walter W. Heller], whom I didn’t know. I had read somewhere that he was in the picture for chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers. We got to know each other in the taxi on the way out, just a little bit. We were ushered into the drawing room of the Kennedy house together. No sign of Jack. I remember Caroline saying, “I suppose you’ve come to see my Daddy.” And we said yes. She said, “Well, he isn’t dressed yet.” So we waited some more. Jackie Kennedy [Jacqueline B. Kennedy] came in wearing pink trousers and looking a little baffled by all the comings and goings. She didn’t know either one of us. We shook hands and then she went out to feed Caroline or something. Eventually Jack Kennedy appeared. By this time--I didn’t notice it at first, on the patio outside the president’s living room, a press conference had formed up. There were perhaps thirty correspondents, sitting in deck chairs and waiting for the president to come out and announce Walter Heller’s appointment. So the president asked me to wait. He wanted to get rid of the press first and present Heller to them. I said all right; They started out, and after about a minute he came back and said, “It just occurred to me. You’re supposed to be working. Why don’t you come out and cover the press conference?” I said, “Look, I don’t know what you want to talk to me about. I can guess, but I think the last thing in the world I need at this point is to be seen emerging through the French doors from your drawing room while the rest of the press is out there. They will immediately suspect that something is up. I think I’d better stay right here in hiding.” So I did.

He eventually came back and we had a discussion about this job and he said he wanted me to take it. I said that I’d think about it and I did. My wife arrived that day with the children. It was just before Christmas. We spent a very prayerful and, for her, a somewhat teary weekend, trying to decide whether I should do this or not. In the end I decided to say no, essentially out of two motives. One was that I had, like most newspapermen, barely made a living most of my life, and I was finally in a job in which I was making a living, had been in it for something like fifteen months and was being asked to take a cut in pay in order to serve my country and my friend Jack Kennedy, I really didn’t see how I could do it. I had various family obligations that wouldn’t have gone very well on an assistant secretary’s salary--it was much less in those days than it is now. The other was that I really wanted to stay in journalism and I was afraid I would burn my bridges by becoming the mouthpiece for any administration, regardless of political coloration. Well, in the end I explained all this to the president and he accepted it. But at one point he said, “Is there something in particular about this job that you don’t like?” I said, “Yes. Whatever I said in general applies to any government appointment. But of all the appointments that could have been offered I think the

Pentagon is the one that appeals to me least because I used to work over there years ago for the *Times* and...."

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

ABEL: I suspect I wouldn't do you any good in that job because I'd lose my temper with General X or Admiral Y and you'd have to take the consequences."

Well, in the end he accepted my decision although he said, "I think you're wrong. I think you can go back to the press. Roscoe Drummond [James Roscoe Drummond]did." He had all sort of detailed information about people at his fingertips. Roscoe Drummond had once run public relations for the Marshall Plan in Paris and had then gone back to the *Christian Science Monitor*. So he had that as an argument. But he did in the end accept it. But the thing hadn't ended there. I had no sooner got back to the hotel than I ran into Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver] and Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien]. Sarge tipped me a wink and said they'd just been having a patronage meeting to clear people for various appointments. He said, "I think you ought to know that you've been cleared for assistant secretary of state or defense." And I said, "Well, (a) state hasn't been offered to me, and (b) I just turned down defense, so I think you're a little late." Well, with state there was a problem.

The problem was that I didn't really know Dean Rusk well enough to feel that I wanted to work with him or to expect him to want to work with me. He, I think, would have preferred Douglass Cater. Pierre Salinger was more or less committed to Roger Tubby [Roger W. Tubby], because Tubby had given up his private affairs during the campaign to work as one of Salinger's aides in charge of the Washington office. I didn't want the job anyhow. At any rate Tubby eventually got it. Tubby lasted not much more than a year, at which point I was called in again, this time by Ralph Dungan in behalf of the president, Ralph asked whether I would now take it because now Rusk did know me and the president wanted me and so forth. Then I was really in a box because in the interim--this was autumn of '61--I had just signed a four year contract with NBC [National Broadcasting Company] upon leaving the *Detroit News*. I said, "Look, it's really awkward at this moment. I'm just starting a new career. It's the wrong time." Dungan, a good friend of mine, pressed me pretty hard and said, "You've got to come up with a name. You've got to help us find the right guy." So I said I didn't have anybody in mind right off hand but I'd think about it. I went home and that night leafing through the *New York Times* which I didn't have time to read earlier in the day, came upon a little story saying Robert Manning had resigned as Sunday editor of the *Herald Tribune*. Bob was an old friend of mine from the days when we started out in this business as kids. So I called him up in New York and asked Bob, "Would you be unhappy if I put your name forward?" He said, no, he wouldn't be, although his wife would be pretty angry because they'd just sold their house in Washington and moved to New York. Well, I did put his name forward and he was appointed, after a period of similar uncertainty as to where he stood with Dean Rusk. He didn't know whether to take it or not. Finally George Ball who had known him well in the Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] campaign--when they were both speech writers--persuaded him.

O'BRIEN: Did you have a hand in Sylvester's appointment?

ABEL: No, not directly. The Sylvester thing came about in another way. As I told you, the president thought of us as kind of a twosome. When I turned him down for the Pentagon thing, as I was turning to go out, he said, "Well, if you won't take it, how about 'Ahthah?'" And I said, "I don't know about 'Ahthah."' Arthur, of course, was older than I and in a rather different financial situation. His children were grown. I said, "I suspect he's better able to deal with this, but I think, if I have your permission, I'd like to warn him before hand. I don't want this sprung on him."

So I called Arthur in Washington. I said, "Don't be too surprised if McNamara calls you on the phone with the president's full approval." And he said, "Hell, I don't want to go to work for the government." And I said, "Now wait a minute. Calm down. Think about it. Think of your present situation. I know McNamara now a little bit and I know that when he calls you he will want an answer, in very short order. So you had better think it through. And he did. Sure enough McNamara did come after him. Well, you know the rest.

O'BRIEN: Right. How do you explain a guy like Sylvester--you know him as a friend.... Of course, he gets into that position and very soon he's in trouble with the press.

ABEL: I think part of this is a deep personality trait of Arthur's. Arthur is rather excitable. He tends very frequently when he's excited to overstate the proposition. Now, if he had said that there are situations in which a government sometimes has to tell less than the whole truth nobody would have argued with him. But he overstated it and tried to make it appear a natural law that it is somehow the sacred duty of governments to lie. I'm not quoting him precisely, but that was the point of it. That, of course, gets everybody's backs up; I still love him. He's a very close friend. We had lunch last week at the Princeton Club. But I think he does have a tendency to fly off the handle sometimes in this peculiar way, of over-asserting his position and in the process losing the nuances and qualifications that are so necessary to maintain credibility. He'd been over there just a few weeks when he decided that the press was stupid. He told me so on several occasions. Well, that seemed to me too abrupt a turnabout. If he had said some reporters are stupid or some don't see the forest for the trees, nobody could have argued with him.

O'BRIEN: Was there that much of a wall between, let's say, an office like assistant secretary for public affairs in either state or defense and the working press? I mean are their purposes diametrically opposed?

ABEL: Well, there is a built-in adversary relationship. It seems to me there has to be because news management does exist; it's not something that's practiced uniquely in the government or in the Kennedy Administration. Every business company, every trade union--you look at the mine worker's union [United Mine Workers of America] now hiring a public relations firm for the first time because they're in trouble with the public over the Joseph Yablonski affair. Everybody tries to put out his own version of each event and make it seem that, you know, everything he's done is correct, and this is what

in part the assistant secretary's office does. Now as to the degree of contact and whether there is a wall or isn't a wall, everything depends on the individual in the job. When Bob Manning and Jim Greenfield [James L. Greenfield] were at state there was no wall and those of us who were regularly covering the department could and did see them three, four, five times a week. Now they didn't in every case answer every question with facts arid figures, but when they didn't you had reason to feel that they at least had tried and that, in the circumstances, maybe this was a question that couldn't be answered right this minute. They were very useful in steering you away from the phony story--and there were lots of those always in the international area--where for guidance, you know, not for attribution, they would say, "Look, if I were you, I'd do this," or, "The slant on this is wrong." Well, this is of enormous value, not only in protecting the reputation of the reporter, but in not misleading the American public.

On the whole though, this is done, or in those days was done, more at State than at Defense. Defense, of course, has all these minions, uniformed and otherwise, who believe that when in doubt you classify just about everything. So that there you do set up a barrier. Now I think Arthur did try to fight that, but it's a fight that's never won, and the fight is still going on today with Dan Henkin [Daniel Z. Henkin] in that job. A great deal depends on the assistant secretary's access to the top. Manning in the beginning had his doubts about whether he could strike the right kind of personal relationship with Rusk. He took the job essentially on the personal assurance of George Ball that he as under secretary had the same problem, and that even if Bob couldn't at times get through to Rusk, he could at least get through to Ball and Ball would see to it that he was kept informed of the things he needed to know about. It did work out quite well. In the end he and Rusk became quite good friends. But Rusk is a hard man to know; it takes a little while. Arthur had access to McNamara and Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] and Cy Vance [Cyrus R. Vance] and so forth, pretty much whenever he wanted it, but I think he tended at times to overlook the fact that he had an obligation to keep the country informed through the correspondents covering the Pentagon. [This I'd like to put a restriction on the use of.

I don't want it published for a good many years, but Arthur did have this tendency.] I remember when the word first reached a mutual friend that he was being considered for this job. A friend called me and said, "Jesus Christ, don't let him go ahead with it. He'll blow his cool the very first day." It turned out he was right.]

O'BRIEN: Well, as a working reporter going after a story in the international area, just how would you do it, let's say 1961-62?

ABEL: Well, a great deal depends on who you are and how many people you know. I had covered the department off and on over a six or seven year period before Kennedy came in. So I had two kinds of potential sources: those of the new administration and those on the career side whom I'd known years back either in the department or in overseas assignments. So there's no fixed method. Fairly clearly if you get an idea for a story, and very often the idea is suggested by a conversation you've had--over lunch or at a cocktail party with a foreign diplomat or sometimes an American official. You then set out to try to put flesh on the bones: first to check the accuracy of the surmise or

whatever it is; and, if it is accurate, then to put flesh on the bones. This sometimes you can do by dropping in on somebody you know, somebody who has reason to believe that you're a responsible reporter, to discuss the situation with him, you know: what are we thinking of doing about the Congo? or why did we misread certain signs having to do with Cuba at the time of the Bay of Pigs? I'm just citing examples of the kind that did occur during that period: why have we taken so long to reply to the original Russian ultimatum on Berlin? These are all legitimate questions which lead to a kind of exploration. I knew enough people in the department so I could go around from one to the other and ask questions. I didn't always get answers. Sometimes you'd get a fairly clear implication that they were under wraps and were not to talk about topic A or B or C. Then you might try other sources such as the embassies of friendly countries, which any experienced diplomatic reporter knows are kept informed of secret matters in which they're interested, and some of them are more willing to talk than the American government. Sometimes you'd go over to the White House and try to see Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] or Rostow [Walt W. Rostow] or someone working directly for the president in this area. Sometimes you'd put your head together with your colleague at the Pentagon and see if he couldn't try to search out some parts of the story there and then put them together. There is no single, prefabricated way of breaking the story. You try whatever device is possible.

O'BRIEN: Did you find the public affairs office helpful in this as a place to begin?

ABEL: I found them much more helpful in the Manning-Greenfield era than they had been when Tubby was in charge. The reason for that is not that Tubby wanted to be less helpful but that Tubby didn't know, much of the time. He was being kept at arm's length by the working level people at the department. Certain basic communications between our government and allied governments which Manning insisted on seeing--said he couldn't do the job unless he knew what was going on--Tubby sometimes didn't know about. That kind of filtered down and it became time for a rather useless operation.

O'BRIEN: Is this the basic problem with Tubby then, and the reason that Tubby goes is that...

ABEL: No. There was general unhappiness with Tubby, but it somehow came to a head at the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] meeting in December of '61, which was Rusk's first full ministerial meeting as secretary of state. Those of us, like myself, Don Cook [Donald P. Cook], Drew Middleton and others were rather more familiar with NATO problems and strategy and so forth than Tubby was. Some of us had been to six or eight or ten NATO meetings before this. When we arrived we found out very quickly that Tubby (a) didn't know everything that was going on, and (b) was refusing to brief the American press even on what the American delegation was saying. A group of us went to him and said, "Roger, you're not going to get away with this. There's a kind of gamesmanship that goes on at these fifteen nation conferences; and if you create a vacuum of information on the American side it will be filled, we can safely predict with information supplied by the Canadians, the Greeks, the French, the British and others. The American

press will report this story as seen through the eyes of foreigners, who have a rather different approach to some of these problems, and all you're going to do is hurt yourself." Well, he said he agreed that what we said made a certain amount of sense, but Dean Rusk didn't want the American delegation to be accused of leaking anything. Rusk didn't seem to understand the distinction between a leak and a normal briefing. Every delegation briefs its own correspondents. He was proposing not to brief the Americans who were the largest element in NATO and the largest group of correspondents there. Well, we were getting nowhere with Tubby. And at that point Ed Murrow [Edward R. Murrow] showed up. I think Don Cook and I, it may have been Don; I know I was one--met Ed in the bar of the Crillon Hotel and told him that we were in trouble and we thought the administration was in trouble. As head of the USIA [United States Information Agency] he went to the mat with Tubby to make the point that this was stupid; that you couldn't operate this way. Tubby told him he couldn't do anything with Rusk, that Rusk was refusing to.... At any rate Murrow went back to Washington and saw the president and told him that the Paris meeting had been a disaster, that Tubby was responsible, that you needed a guy who would fight the secretary of state if necessary in order to get the basic information out. Not long after that that Tubby was sent off to Geneva. So it was Murrow who was, I think, the efficacious source.

O'BRIEN: Well, this follows actually a pattern in 1961 as I understand it, when the president, of course, gets very concerned about this question of leaks did this effect the way you people were working in going after stories, let's say, in contacts with defense and state people?

ABEL: Well, that question carries me back. One reason the president thought of me for one or two of these information jobs, or Sylvester, was that on occasion during the campaign or in an airplane or maybe sitting in the snows of New Hampshire in a motel--he would talk to us about these problems. We'd both been at the summit conference in Paris in 1960, the II-2 one. We brake off from the campaign to go to Paris and had then come back to pick up the campaign coverage. We told him about it, and in general, got into a discussion about now inept American spokesmen tend to be sometimes and how the British and the French and others could play the American press like violins and get their point of view across to the American people at a time when the American government didn't seem to know how to do it. I think I once made the further point that you had an enormous potential asset in Washington in the presence of correspondents from a great many countries, not all of them friendly to the United States. But many of the correspondents had become personally involved with the United States, with American society. Far more effective than bombarding those countries with broadcast propaganda, which was or was not listened to, was perhaps the matter of learning to play the game through these correspondents, by informing .them, not keeping them at a distance. Fairly clearly, a Yugoslav or a Pole or a Japanese who had direct access to news would then write a story on his own authority over his own signature in his own language to his own audience. This was roughly a thousand tames more effective than our official Voice of America trying to get the same point across and being suspect because it was foreign. He'd apparently not thought of these things before, and so, I think he made a mental note that Sylvester and I had an idea about how this ought to be done better and that's what led up to it. I'm not sure that's

responsive to your question directly, but it's something that suggests itself, because the minute he was elected Sylvester and I had a call from Ken O'Donnell saying the president wanted Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] to talk to us, to get some of our ideas. I, as it happened, had to go out of the country or way out of town. So I missed that meeting but Sylvester went in behalf of both of us. You know when a future president asks your advice, you're certainly happy to give it. And we did give some advice in this area, not getting into names or personalities, but simply suggesting that this job could be done a hell of a lot better than it had been in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration. I think it was therefore not unnatural that when he had information jobs to fill he thought of Sylvester and me, because he had listened to our ideas on it and evidently agreed with them.

O'BRIEN: Right. Going back to--well, let's say, a guy like Chester Bowles. There is the, at least the accusation was made and the president apparently believed Bowles had done a great deal of talking after the Bay of Pigs crisis. Were you one of the people that Bowles talked to? Let's put it that way.

ABEL: I think I did talk to him. I don't now remember all the details. But it became fairly clear, I think, from what he said to me--what he said, I think, to Scotty Reston [James B. Reston] on a similar occasion that he wanted us to leave there with the impression that he had opposed this from the very beginning--that he thought the Bay of Pigs was a prescription for disaster. Some others in the official family, I must say, took a rather different line. I can remember a session with Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] after the disaster was behind us in which he did not try to shrug off his own share of responsibility here. He said something like, "I think it was a disaster, but it was a disaster that I did not then identify as a disaster, and I went along and played a part in it. And I was wrong." Bowles was not in that situation.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever see any of that direct pressure in regard to news leaks and the attempts on the part of the president or one of the departments to search out.... Well, that's happened in many administrations. Usually the opening step was to call the assistant secretary of the department and have him check all possible sources, official sources within the department. Very often a reporter did not know he was going to be checked up. But there were some cases that I know about on a secondhand basis at the Pentagon in which there was a military and, I think and FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] investigation of a particular reporter who had broken a particular story. A guy who can tell you much more about that is one of the people involved--a man called Lloyd Norman [Lloyd H. Norman].

ABEL: ?

O'BRIEN: And he was the reporter?

ABEL: He was, in the one case I know about, investigated and called by the FBI. Ironically now in retrospect, the present secretary of state was then the lawyer

for the Washington Post and Newsweek, Bill Rogers [William P. Rogers]. Rogers was detailed by Mrs. Graham [Katherine L. Graham] to advise Lloyd on how to conduct himself vis-à-vis the FBI. I can't remember the details: it was some kind of a military plan involving Vietnam or Laos or something over which McNamara had got very worked up. I don't know how much the president cared about it. In the end, I gathered--Lloyd can tell you more about this--Rogers's advice was, in fact, to "tell the FBI to go to hell." He did and they dropped it. They demanded sources, you know. How did he get a certain document, that kind of thing.

O'BRIEN: Did you find Secretary Rusk's Friday afternoon back--so called back-grounders...

ABEL: Deep background. That was his term, deep background.

O'BRIEN: Were they deep?

ABEL: No. Somebody said to me the other day, "The odd thing about Dean Rusk is that he says the same thing in exactly the same way whether he's speaking in public or in private." But there were moments in which Rusk--we're now speaking of the Kennedy period--was to a degree helpful, and the missile crisis was one of them. He--at a number of crucial points in the missile crisis--had very often, not on a Friday afternoon, but on say, a Saturday morning, a group of us in and kind of gave us the line. A crucial point I remember was the Sunday when the crisis was defused, to everyone's enormous relief and the surprise of many. I mention this in the book. He appealed to us, "When you're writing about this, don't make this appear to be a great capitulation on the part of the Russians. You must recognize that Mr. Khrushchev is a man of politics. He lived long enough to be criticized and opposed within the Russian leadership for having put the missiles there in the first place. He will now probably be damned by many for pulling them out under pressure. We have no wish to make this situation more difficult than it is already by crowing." That kind of thing. Most often, however, what you got from him was a point of view and occasional insight, very few facts. The facts were relayed at a lower level.

O'BRIEN: Well, in your relationship with Rusk in those years, in a sense, did you ever feel that you really got underneath the surface and got beyond the thing that you...

ABEL: Well, the one time I saw him lose control of himself--and he admitted it subsequently; he can get very angry--was in the Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] era on the rather celebrated occasion shortly after the Tet offensive when he had one of these Friday afternoon things and was giving us the official line on the Tet offensive on the whole being no worse than a bad cold and maybe it was a victory for our side. You know, by this time McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] was running and the Democratic party was falling apart, and nobody believed him. We started pressing Rusk a little bit to at least admit that there might have been an intelligence failure on the part of our military leadership in Vietnam, a total failure to grasp that Tet was... [Interruption]. John Scali [John Alfred Scali] of ABC [American Broadcasting Company] was pressing him very hard and saying,

“Mr. Secretary, you wouldn’t have us believe that there wasn’t an intelligence failure?” And he blew his cool completely and said, “John, whose side are you on? Are you for the United States or against it?” Rusk delivered a great sermon about how even if the United States had made mistakes it ought not to be the duty of the American press to point them out. He said, “Your freedom and the freedom of your employer is at stake in Vietnam.” Well, this needless to say didn’t go over very well and it leaked. One or two versions of it appeared in the papers. He was very unhappy about it. I think he would now admit.... I’ve seen him since privately, sitting in his white old sweater in his living room, drinking coffee. I think if he had to do it all over again he’d handle that differently in the future. If you have any other....

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

A

Agnew, Spiro T., 6
Alsop, Joseph W., 4

B

Baker, Russell W., 3
Ball, George W., 7, 9, 11
Bartlett, Charles L., 4
Bowles, Chester B., 7, 14
Brinkley, David R., 6
Bundy, McGeorge, 12

C

Cater, Douglass, 9
Cook, Donald P., 12
Cooper, John Sherman, 1

D

Daniel, Elbert Clifton Jr., 6, 11
Dean, Arthur H., 7, 9, 13
Drummond, James Roscoe, 9
Dryfoos, Orvil E., 6
Dungan, Ralph A., 9

F

Ford, Gerald R., 4, 7

G

Gilpatric, Roswell L., 11
Greenfield, James L., 11, 12

H

Harriman, William Averell, 7
Healy, Robert, 5
Heller, Walter W., 8
Henkin, Daniel Zwie, 11
Hoppe, Arthur W., 4
Huntley, Chester R., 6

J

Johnson, Lyndon B., 15

K

Kennedy, Caroline B., 3, 8
Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 8
Kennedy, John F., 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 15
Kennedy, Joseph P. Sr., 7, 8
Kennedy, Robert F., 14
Khrushchev, Nikita S., 2, 4, 15
Kraft, Joseph, 4

L

Lawford, Patricia Kennedy, 5
Lawrence, William H., 9
Lincoln, Evelyn N., 7

M

Manning, Robert J., 9, 11, 12
McCarthy, Eugene J., 15
McGrory, Mary, 4
McNamara, Robert S., 7, 8, 10, 11, 15
Middleton, Drew, 12
Murrow, Edward R., 13

N

Nehru, Shri Jawaharlal, 1
Nixon, Richard M., 4, 5
Norman, Lloyd H, 14

O

O'Leary, John J., 2

P

Powers, David F., 3

R

Reston, James B., 14
Robert, Chalmers M., 5, 7, 9
Rogers, William P., 15
Rostow, Walt W., 12
Rusk, David Dean, 7, 9, 11, 12, 15

S

Salinger, Pierre E.G., 2, 4, 7, 9
Scali, John Alfred, 15
Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr., 14
Shriver, R. Sargent, 9
Sidey, Hugh Swanson, 4
Stevenson, Adlai E., 9
Sullivan, William H., 5
Sylvester, Arthur, 3, 4, 10, 13

T

Truman, Harry S., 7
Tubby, Roger Wellington, 9, 12

V

Vance, Cyrus R., 11
Vanocur, Sander, 4, 6