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Oral History Interview

With

CLAYTON FRITCHEY

October 25, 1978
Washington, D.C.

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Why don’t we begin with the background of your appointment to the position at the UN [United Nations]. Just how that came about…. 

FRITCHEY: Well, I had been with Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] before in a number of capacities over the years, beginning with the 1952 presidential campaign when I was one of the campaign managers along with Wilson Wyatt [Wilson W. Wyatt] who was the chief campaign manager. Then I was down at the White House and President Truman [Harry S. Truman] gave me a leave of absence. And Dave Bell [David E. Bell] who was then the budget manager and I were shanghaied out of the White House one afternoon when Truman had Stevenson for lunch about a week or so after the convention. And Stevenson said in effect, “Now look, you got me into this. You got to get me out.” And the President said,
“Well, what do you want?” And he said, “Well, I want to rob your staff. I mean, I’ve been out there in Illinois as governor for four years and have been devoting myself to more or less provincial matters.”

So he asked for Dave Bell and me. We got on the airplane that afternoon for Springfield to stay there during the rest of that campaign. And then, after the election, Stevenson and Truman felt there had to be a voice for the Democratic Party because of the extent of the one-party press at that time. And so they reorganized the Democratic National Committee and made me vice-chairman. And I started the Democratic Digest to provide some voice for the party outside of Texas congressmen. [Laughter] Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] and Sam Rayburn were awfully good fellows but there were a number of democrats that did not do away with the idea of Wall Street, the liberal movement of our party. Then in 1956 he asked me to take a leave of absence and be his press secretary which I did. And so, and then I went back into the newspaper business and became publisher of the Northern Virginia Sun. But we kept in touch all during those years and, as you know, there was a Stevenson presidential flare-up in 1960. And I don’t think it’s any secret that he had

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aspired to be secretary of state and no doubt would have been if he had chosen to make the nominating speech for John F. Kennedy at Los Angeles.

STERN: Do you believe that was the determining factor? That he didn’t come out for Kennedy before the nomination?

FRITCHEY: Well, I can assure you that in the last couple of days out there before the voting began they would have given almost anything to have had Stevenson be the principal spokesman for Kennedy. Because, after all, Stevenson was the only then Democrat that had a great public following of his own. Perhaps not big enough to get the nomination but, as everyone knew, he had a special attraction for the California delegation. All kinds of political candidates later on, after they were nominated, would think, well, our fear was excessive. But the only threat to them whatsoever was the potential threat of Stevenson. Especially when he got that huge ovation out there. So we’re dealing in subjective considerations here. It was my opinion that if he had responded to several overtures he undoubtedly would have been secretary of state, because, as you now know, at that point Kennedy had not made up his mind who he wanted for secretary of state. This would have been no real problem.

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I think on the whole he would prefer to have had someone more like Rusk [Dean Rusk] who was not a figure in his own right.

STERN: Sure. An activist president.
FRITCHEY: Just like Woodrow Wilson found William Jennings Bryan somewhat of a trial. But he couldn’t have got the nomination without Bryan. Bryan was a considerable pain in the neck to him thereafter, as you know. And so I think we can safely conclude that Stevenson was not overjoyed at being offered the ambassadorship to the United Nations but took it.

STERN: Did he ask your opinion about taking it?

FRITCHEY: Oh, in a round about way, sure. And we, all of us realized by that time that it was either that or reserve for himself a private role. And, oddly enough, Stevenson did not relish that. And so he took it…

STERN: Apparently he set some fairly strict conditions at the beginning. He gave Kennedy a list of about ten points in terms of appointing his own staff, and being consulted, and sitting in the cabinet, and all those kinds of things.

FRITCHEY: He got practically carte blanche.

STERN: He did. And he got his own staff pretty much as he had intended.


STERN: Sure.

FRITCHEY: Jack Bingham [Jonathon Brewster Bingham], Marietta Tree [Marietta Endicott Peabody Tree], Jane Dick.

STERN: All Stevenson people.

FRITCHEY: Me. All of us. Totally. One hundred percent.

STERN: That’s the one subject….

FRITCHEY: He inherited Dick Pedersen [Richard Foote Pedersen] who was kind of a, who was not in a prominent position at the mission at that time. He’d come up…he had never been in the State Department. He had been a UN man, a US mission man from the beginning but had gradually made himself invaluable because he was… he had written – it has never been published to the best of my knowledge – but I discovered shortly after I got there that he had done a book on parliamentary diplomacy as exercised at the UN. I
considered it then and still do as probably the most authoritative examination of that peculiar kind of diplomacy. I don’t think Stevenson ever read it but I recited an awful lot of it to him. [Laughter] And so he found Pedersen very useful. But he inherited him. He didn’t know even who he was. There was another one who was counsel. I’ve forgotten now, but you ought to see him too.

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STERN: Gardner? [Richard Newton Gardner]

FRITCHEY: No. No. Gardner was never in the mission. He was assistant to Harlan Cleveland [James Harlan Cleveland]. Have you talked to Harlan Cleveland?

STERN: Not yet. Although he has agreed to do it.

FRITCHEY: This is perhaps the single best one. He was responsible for Harlan. That’s how far his writ ran in accepting this job. He really had about as much carte blanche as a man can have.

STERN: It’s clear that Kennedy....

FRITCHEY: He was also able to establish some other friends in some very good spots. Like Bill Wirtz [W. Willard Wirtz] for instance, who became a member of the cabinet. Carl McGowan on the circuit.

STERN: Judge. Right.

FRITCHEY: United States Circuit Court of Appeals here. Nearly all the friends and supporters who wanted something were taken care of. He brought Klutznick [Phillip M. Klutznick] in. So it was a totally Stevenson operation, no doubt about that. I’ve never seen....

STERN: And yet, many people who have written on it argue that he quickly became kind of unhappy in that he felt that he wasn’t being consulted enough, that it was physically too far to just keep going back to Washington. He felt apparently reluctant to speak up. Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.]

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says that he was reluctant to offer advice to Kennedy unless Kennedy asked for it. And Kennedy didn’t ask him that often.

FRITCHEY: I think that’s a fair, fair summary of it. You have to remember things got started on a very, very dubious wicket because of the Bay of Pigs.
STERN: I was about to ask you about that. Right.

FRITCHEY: You see, that occurred within about a month after we began getting up there. We came up in some time in February, I think, we moved up.

STERN: Right. It was in April.

FRITCHEY: Right. And April 16th, I believe, was Bay of Pigs day.

STERN: Were you at that, there was a luncheon meeting at which a CIA representative, whose name eludes me at the moment.

FRITCHEY: Tracy Barnes.

STERN: Tracy Barnes, that’s right, came to brief Stevenson and gave him that phony story.

FRITCHEY: Yes. It’s not quite fair to put it that way. This is a part that I will probably black out a little later on because I want to go into it in considerable detail now. It so happened, through my own journalistic contacts, that I’d been getting a sniff of the Bay of Pigs somewhere around two or three weeks before it occurred. And I didn’t want to go to Stevenson with it because it was hard for me to believe at first. But I made some very quiet inquiries over a period of several days and became convinced that something was afoot. I had never been officially informed of it. And so, on a weekend.... Stevenson and I had many mutual friends so we often saw each other outside of the office without any planning. And this weekend we spent the same weekend at the same place in the country. And so, I thought that if there was anything on his mind it would have come out then in these informal circumstances.

So, finally, on the Sunday morning, I said to him, “Look, Gov, are you holding out on me?” “What are you talking about?” I said, “Well, look, I know there are times when there can be only ‘eyes only’ between you and the President and vice versa and there is no resentment on my part. I don’t feel left out, if this ever happened. I know you take me into your confidence generally. But if you’re sworn to secrecy by the secretary of state, of course I’ll understand.” And he said, “Clayton, I don’t.... What are you talking about?” And I said, “Have you gotten no intimations that we may be moving into Cuba?” I could see at once his [amazement or amusement]. So then I told him the extent of the information I had which was thinnish, but nevertheless convincing to me. And all I wanted was a signal from him if he didn’t know about it
to pursue it and see, with his permission. That’s all I wanted. So he said by all means. So that’s when I called Schlesinger. As you probably know by now, from talking to the others, the White House connection was largely maintained because Stevenson trusted Arthur and so did the President.

STERN: Right. He was a mutual friend.

FRITCHEY: And the same thing, Kennedy trusted me because of old friendship. Even though he knew I was loyal to Stevenson, I was loyal to him. So often came this informal go-between between Arthur and myself. And I called Arthur. And to this day – I should have asked him by this time – whether he knew anything about it then or not. I just saw him the other night and this reminds me to check that out with him some time.

In any case, without going into it all, he said, “I’ll get back to you.” And I’m inclined to mention in passing that I am, why I’m in still several minds about this is that it was very, very peculiar that Schlesinger should know about this but Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] not. And it must have been one of the great shocks of Sorensen’s life to discover that he had not been taken into Kennedy’s confidence on the Bay of Pigs because he had every reason to believe that he was closer to the President than anybody including Jackie [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis]. And I think this is an extraordinary exception in that relationship. But I’m sure it was upsetting, probably upsetting to this day to Sorensen to find a guy who had just been brought into the White House a couple of weeks before knew about this and even went to the final conference on it with the Joint Chiefs [Joint Chiefs of Staff] and Rusk. Only one outsider beside Arthur and that was Fulbright [J. William Fulbright].

So there was a possibility that the President didn’t intend to tell either one of them and that I may have tipped Schlesinger into this, you see. And then, when he went to pursue it, that’s when he discovered. Now, I don’t know whether this is true or not – I’ve never, I intend to do it some day – whether he stumbled into it this way or whether the President chose to bring him in. In any case, that led to Barnes and Schlesinger both coming up to our mission, which was then on Park, 2 Park Avenue. It was a late Saturday morning. Nobody in the mission except Stevenson – I can’t remember whether Plimpton was there or not. I think he was but I’m not sure – myself, Tracy Barnes and Arthur. And we had a meeting for an hour or so and then we went to the Century Club for lunch. And, since I had more or less instigated this, I did a lot of the questioning. And I would have to say that neither Barnes nor Schlesinger actually lied. What we can say is that they did not volunteer any more than necessary. There was no doubt after we
talked to them that the United States was involved in this. But they did not reveal the incredible extent of it, nor enough to protect Stevenson from peddling that false story a week later.

STERN: Then the photographs, of course, that didn’t come, that was a later addition...

FRITCHEY: Yes.

STERN: ...during the UN discussion itself. Right.

FRITCHEY: Well, we can’t blame either one of the men. They were under certain orders. I think if you had a transcript of it – there is no transcript to the best of my knowledge – you would find that they did not lie in so many words. But they did not disclose any more than was necessary. And we were not in a position to ask any more penetrating questions than we did.

So the upshot of it was – all this comes back to our saying, you were asking about Stevenson’s apparent unhappiness and, at times, being uncomfortable at the UN. And that’s because he got started very badly in the first month or six weeks because he was given this false story to tell. And he felt instantly that he had been compromised worldwide. That he was admired from one end of the world for a man whose word you could believe, and the reason for it was that you could believe his word. He was extraordinarily a man of his word, for a politician. Perhaps too much so for a politician. And this was a matter of the greatest distress.

STERN: After the incident with the photos, did you talk to him? Did you see visually how upset he was?

FRITCHEY: Oh, of course. Everybody could see. And a number of friends came to him and wanted him to resign. And some of them came and said, “Well, of course, you will resign.” And they said, “You must take your stand right now.” Well, this is, instances like this of greater or lesser degree occurred not regularly but from time to time under him and Johnson both. His view was – and it’s hard not to give same respect to it – in one conversation with me he said, “Now, look, Clay, if every time a cabinet member doesn’t get his way and he is going to resign because he doesn’t, then all you’ll have is anarchy in government. Plus the fact from time to time the President may be right. [Laughter] So,” he said, “It seems to me that when you join an administration, it’s a little bit like joining a marriage. You do it for better or for worse and you know there’ll be times of worse. And no matter how positive you are of your opinion, you may be wrong. And the President may have information from other sources that he doesn’t want to totally disclose.
You have to give the President the benefit of the doubt.” He had a natural distaste for prima donnas. He knew he was in a position to be a prima donna because he was the only member of the cabinet who had a political following of his own. Who ever heard of Dean Rusk, for God’s sake? Or any of the other members of the cabinet? They could have come and gone and no one would have known the difference. There was... You can remember?... It’s hard even to remember their names now.

STERN: Were there times that you saw Stevenson and Kennedy together? How did they relate?

FRITCHEY: Always. I never saw anything unpleasant. Always easy going. Of course, both were gents. And there is something to be said for the world of civility. That you do learn to grow up in that world. You do learn that if you’re not born with a nice nature that manners help, you know. [Laughter] And manners do help in many ways. They help in marriages, they help in politics. They tide you over immediate angers and senses of vindictiveness. And later on you see that you have magnified this and made a spectacle of yourself. He detested that, and so his inclination was always to give any president, including Kennedy, the benefit of the doubt. He was a man of remarkable modesty in many ways. And this was what fetched many people. Hardly ever when.... He would always be, next to the pres-

ident the center figure of any group he was in not only because it was a romantic position. And he was a member, he was fourth ranking member of the cabinet, you know.

STERN: Right.

FRITCHEY: And he had every reason to believe that he would have direct communication with the President and I’m sure the President didn’t disabuse him on this at the time he wanted him to take on the job. I’m sure he gilded it to the ceilings just like Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] did with Cabot Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge]. Cabot Lodge wanted to be secretary of state. But when Eisenhower got through describing the UN job to Cabot, it was going to be bigger than anything. He was going to be a member of the cabinet, number four ranking in the cabinet. He was the first one to be a cabinet member. Then he’s have a direct line to the President. He would be running practically a State Department of his own up there and what not. And he’d be on television all the time. And you figure, well, it was easy to make that an alluring job and I’m sure Jack did it to the nth degree. Can’t blame him. He wanted him in the administration. If I were the president, I would have wanted him in much . . . . I would much rather have him in than out! [Laughter]
STERN: Do you agree with – I don’t know it you have seen the second volume of John Bartlow Martin’s biography of Stevenson.

FRITCHEY: Yes.

STERN: Yes. He says that although they were cordial and respected each other that there was a certain discomfort that was always clear between them.

FRITCHEY: That’s a little too strong. There was .... They treated each other with some care, let’s put it that way. There was a visible politeness.

STERN: Do you mean by that an artificial politeness?

FRITCHEY: Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say studied. Something less than studied. But it was not just the natural give and take. Both of them fortunately had the same kind of humor. Both of them had the self-deprecating humor. Both of them hated cant. And this did help things when they got to talking. And the President – not only with Stevenson but with others – his most appealing and effective approach was to speak candidly with his colleagues and those who worked for him, was it the cabinet members, cabinet member, or a member of the White House team. He didn’t ask you to accept political reasons for doing it. If there was a political reason for doing it, he simply came out and said so. That’s all. I remember we were discussing in that first year what we wanted to do about letting China into the United Nations. Kennedy told me and I’m sure others, that he thought our long time policy on the People’s Republic of China was irrational and I thought so.

STERN: And that’s what Stevenson thought too?

FRITCHEY: What?

STERN: And Stevenson thought so too?

FRITCHEY: Oh, sure, sure. Absolutely. And so did I! He did .... I don’t know whether he ever told Stevenson that in so many words but he told me that and I told Stevenson that. So we had every reason to believe that we could offer that policy come the General Assembly in the fall of sixty-one. When that time came, however, the President was not prepared to move. And instead of trying to con Stevenson or me – I was with him – with a number of synthetic reasons for putting off the decision, to say the least, he simply said, “Well, we’ve had the Bay of Pigs and this ferocious encounter with Khrushchev
[Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev] at Vienna. We’ve got the Berlin Wall and,” he said, “If we add China on top of this, we’ll both be run out of town, Adlai.” You know. He was very disarming. And that was frequently his approach, to be candid, and not

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to .... And men can respect that. Because it doesn’t put you in the position of accepting what you know is antiquated belief and it demeans you to do it. So, in that sense he understood how to respect Stevenson’s dignity. He never, ever again repeated the mistake of the Bay of Pigs.

STERN: Yes. And of course there was that additional grave controversy after the Cuban Missile Crisis. I know you had a considerable role in that.

FRITCHEY: Yes. And the whole truth of that story, you know. This was a very serious one. There’s no .... Much more serious than the public understands.

STERN: Did Stevenson believe that it was the President who had leaked that material to Bartlett [Charles L. Bartlett] and Alsop [Stewart Alsop]?

FRITCHEY: I think at first glance he was inclined to believe that. As it became more and more apparent, and as Kennedy himself said, as he said, “I would have been crazy to have inspired anything like this.” “Stevenson, by this time,” as he said – and it was true – “is one of the enhancements of this administration. Why do I put myself in this position and torpedo the thing which is an attractive thing to do, in the first place. And

secondly

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inspire his resignation and then have this man with this tremendous political following on the outside.” I must say, logically, it’s an irrefutable argument.

STERN: Yes, it is.

FRITCHEY: Well, whether it’s true or not, because men do think of foolish things once in a while. My own view now is – Charlie Bartlett and Stewart Alsop are very good friends of mine and we’ve talked about it from time to time – my own view now is that the President did not inspire this but he knew more about it than was known at the time and didn’t do very much to stop it.

STERN: Do you think he didn’t realize how far it would go?

FRITCHEY: What really made this go off like a bomb was the way that editor who had taken over the Saturday Evening Post. You remember he had made quite a
splash while he was editor of *Time* magazine, and was making the reputation of a muckraker? I can’t remember his name for a second. I’ll think of it again. They took a whole page – as you read the article, there are only about two paragraphs, two or three at the most about Stevenson – they took a whole page and they had Stevenson sucking his thumb and his finger in his mouth, “Can’t make up mind.” That’s exactly the phrase. And then they

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had ‘Munich’ over it, the headline on it, you see. Adlai’s Munich. Well, of course, no one could have dreamed that the article had been hyped like this. And, of course, the authors themselves were shocked out of their pants when they saw this. I mean they thought that it was kind of an innocent little thing that added a little perk to this story. But the editor saw the possibilities. He didn’t tamper with it either. He just took those two paragraphs and quoted them in type about this high, and then put that Munich headline on it. And it took one whole page picture of Stevenson. And Stevenson was only one of twenty or thirty guys mentioned in that story.

STERN: But didn’t you try and get the White House notes from Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and he wouldn’t give them to you?

FRITCHEY: There is no transcript. They were .... A guy named Bromley Smith [Bromley K. Smith] I believe his name was....

STERN: Secretary of the cabinet. Right.

FRITCHEY: Secretary of the cabinet, made notes. And I’ve found over my time that such notes are very undependable. And they indicated very little one way or another. They were not conclusive to the best of my recollection. I can’t remember all the details now.

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STERN: It hit Stevenson very hard though, didn’t it?

FRITCHEY: Oh, it did indeed. It certainly did.

STERN: Did he come close to resigning over that?

FRITCHEY: There was this pattern which this followed, of Chet Bowles [Chester B. Bowles].

STERN: Bowles, Right. Sure. And it immediately suggested that Bowles get . . . .
FRITCHEY: And Charlie Bartlett’s known intimacy with the President. And, from the circumstantial evidence you could hardly blame Stevenson for not being pretty damned suspicious.

STERN: Sure.

FRITCHEY: Well, the President went to such lengths to make amends and to write practically testimonials to him every other day to put things back to the time when .... If you get by the first week or so on these things they begin to shrink and business gets back to usual. And this makes the President for quite a long time thereafter go out of his way with everybody to praise and push Stevenson, kowtow to him and what not. So it’s been my experience in government life that if you get by the first twenty-four hours, hang on for the next forty-eight, seventy-two and so on and then things begin to go back in place. I really don’t know but I suspect Stevenson went to his grave having some questions about this but they were not provable.

STERN: Sure.

FRITCHEY: I must say that I have a great regard for the late Stewart Alsop and he did feel that they had a green light from the President. And he intimated to me that the President had seen the article. Whether he saw it in a final form, I don’t know.

STERN: Seen it with the picture and the whole ....

FRITCHEY: Oh, no, no, no.

STERN: No, without the picture.

FRITCHEY: Hell, Bartlett and Alsop themselves had no idea. After all, no writer asks the magazine what the headline’s going to be or how you’re going to illustrate it. That’s up entirely to the editor. They haven’t .... You must give them more credit than that. They were shocked because both of them rather liked Stevenson. Stevenson didn’t like brother Joe Alsop but he liked Stewart and Stewart was no hatchet man, nor was Bartlett. If you read the article, independent of the headlines and the illustrations, and especially that one huge picture of Stevenson with his finger in his mouth wondering, “Shall I go to the bathroom or not?” you can wonder why all the stink was. That’s .... Clay Blair [Clay Drewry Blair, Jr.] was the editor. So that didn’t do relations any good. I can’t remember .... What year was that?

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STERN: ‘62. It was just after the Cuban Missile Crisis. November of ‘62.

FRFTCHEY: It was from, it was late fall of ‘62 as I recall it. The article came out, what, a month or so .... It must have come out in October or November or December, didn’t it?

STERN: I think it came out in the first week of December. Just before Christmas the whole thing blew up. I wonder if we could jump – I know we don’t have a great deal of time – I wonder if we could jump up an additional year. I’d be curious about your perception of the difference between Stevenson’s relationship with Kennedy as opposed to his relationship with Johnson.

Apparently when Johnson took over there was in Stevenson some sort of renewed hope that he would now become more central to the administration. And there are those who feel that Johnson manipulated and used him rather cruelly, perhaps would be the word, and that Stevenson later was very disappointed. I wonder how you would respond to that.

FRITCHEY: I think it’s fair to say that it was second nature for Johnson to manipulate everybody. Without exception, everybody. Relatives, White House staff, press secretaries, you mention it. That was his whole life. I always had quite good relations with Lyndon because I never expected anything else from him. I used to see a lot of him when I was deputy chairman of the Democratic National Committee and he was the majority leader. And we were turning the Democratic Digest into the voice of the party. And naturally he had a chip on his shoulder about it and Sam Rayburn, the speaker, was getting old then – he was in his eighties – and so he more and more deferred to Lyndon. So Lyndon really had the writ to be the leader on the Hill.

Well, I made a point of keeping in touch with him. Never asking his permission or consent to anything we published but always keeping him advised in advance of what we were going to publish so if he wanted, if he thought it was unfair or if he felt it was not representative of the mainstream of thought in the party, he had the chance to say so. I think he appreciated that. So, the less established .... [Interruption] When he came to power, in his natural way, he did butter up Stevenson no end.

STERN: There seems to be evidence that he almost re-aroused in Stevenson the hope of becoming secretary of state. And he even dangled the vice presidency before him in ‘64.

FRITCHEY: Well, he didn’t quite. What he did with Stevenson is not very much different than what he did with everybody else. He wanted to keep all the aura of
the Kennedy crowd around him in that first year, or longer if necessary. But in my opinion, in his mind he was saying, “I’ll keep ‘em around as long as I have to,” because he had no real love for any of them in my opinion.

STERN: Certainly, before he was reelected. That was the critical point.

FRITCHEY: Right. So he lay low and everything Kennedy had ever wanted was right from heaven and what not. And all of his people. And I think he may have sensed that Stevenson was susceptible to some of this because he must have guessed – Lyndon had a terrific political instinct in the primitive sense – and he must have smelled that relations were not ideal and that Stevenson’s persona could stand a little expanding and he did it. And, it is true that he interfered very little. But the truth is that Kennedy interfered very little except when he wanted to do something on his own and he didn’t always consult Stevenson possibly degree that Stevenson wanted. On the other hand, Stevenson himself is to blame, as Arthur says. He could always pick up that telephone and – believe me – Kennedy would have always listened. Kennedy was a .... the elevator boy could talk with Kennedy. If you had an idea, he’d listened to you. The same way with Stevenson. Hell, he’d listen to a taxi driver who wanted to discuss foreign policy. He’d listen to him. Anybody. They both were, they were both immensely open minded men. He always liked Stevenson, who had had everything pretty much with a silver spoon, always coaxed into doing everything he ever did. Virtually everything, you know. Truman had to coax him into the….

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STERN: That’s true. That’s quite true.

FRITCHEY: And so, he wanted to be coaxed by Kennedy.

STERN: He never aggressively went after anything.

FRITCHEY: Yes, yes. Well, Kennedy didn’t feel like coaxing him. I think he was quite delighted to make up his own mind. He knew if he asked Stevenson he might be told something he didn’t want to hear. But if Stevenson had initiated it, he certainly would have had an audience and a fair hearing. So, some of this has to be put back on Adlai himself.

In the case of Johnson, I think for the first few months he laid it on very thick. But again, Stevenson did not follow up. He didn’t go to Washington often enough. He had immense friends on the Hill who looked upon him as a real hero, especially on the Foreign Relations Committee [Senate Committee on Foreign Relations]. The Fulbrights were with him all at once. They had known him before they had known Kennedy. You know, Kennedy, when he was in the senate, had no great reputation with the other senators.
STERN: Yes. I am fully aware of that. Sure.

FRITCHEY: But it is true and in our time, with the exception of William Jennings Bryan, he is the only defeated Democratic nominee who remained the leader of the party just on the sheer power of his personal prestige. He really, truly was, for eight years, the leader of the party without exception simply because there was this widespread admiration and respect and regard for him as the voice of reason and sensible. And he always made politicians realize that he was sensible, reasonable, understood a man’s politics, the whole intellectual world and what not. But you see how fast since then .... Take McGovern [George S. McGovern], he just disappeared as a party leader. And this is true all the way back, the losers . . . . He was one of the very few.

Well, he never abused as – when he was at the UN – he never abused his personal political standing. He took very little advantage of it, if any. In my own view, no where near enough. He could have been more influential if he’d made a point of keeping, going to Washington more frequently, going to more cabinet meetings, going to see the President personally every time. Even though the President didn’t want to see you, was

bored and what not. But that’s the way you get things done. But after having been the leader of the party, and never having, he couldn’t, never in his life did he have to carry his hat in his hand. He had been terribly spoiled in that respect.

STERN: Do you think that that had some ...?

FRITCHEY: And once you get into a cabinet, you’ve got – and there is a fellow known as the President who’s the chief – if you want to get things done, you’ve got to put your hat in your hand from time to time because they won’t call you very often.

STERN: Of course, there’s inevitable the intriguing issue of Johnson and Vietnam and there is a lot of controversy now after Martin’s book particularly that Stevenson differed substantially with Johnson and was in great agony over it, and didn’t know what to do and, in a sense, was rescued from the problem by death. Did you perceive that he differed in a substantial way?

FRITCHEY: Now, this is my perception of it.

STERN: Okay. Well, that’s exactly what I want. Right.
FRITCHEY: People were always trying to talk to him about this and he did not welcome it. This, mind you, this was the spring of ‘65 and the fall of ‘64.

STERN: Right.

FRITCHEY: And you recall that Lyndon ran against Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] as trigger-happy. The kind of man who would bomb North Vietnam.

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STERN: Yes. I remember it well.

FRITCHEY: And he enjoined, embraced the Eisenhower dictum “Let Asians fight Asians”. So it was very hard, and Stevenson took that seriously. I did too, because it seemed to me awfully good politics as well as the right policy. And then he wins in an avalanche. And I can promise you none of us really knew that he was secretly looking into the possibility of moving into Vietnam. I later came to the conclusion that Lyndon had such a gigantic capacity for self deception that he himself was not quite aware he was doing it.

Well, but like the born politician, he was keeping all the options open and so forth. And events, in a way, overtook Lyndon Johnson in the spring of ‘65. You know, he was full of machismo. And he even made up stories about the Alamo and his grandfather fighting in the Alamo. So, he would say, “Boys, that’s enough.” Is that your plane there, Mr. President?” “Son, all those planes are my planes!” Now that’s pure Lyndon. “And we’re going to bring back that skin off the wall.” That’s pure . . . . [Interruption]

So now we come to a few months before Stevenson died. In the spring, the late spring, and with the end .... No one knew we were sending in troops until around the middle of that spring, as you know, the first soldiers went in. And so, the New York intellectual crowd didn’t catch on much before that either and then they began stirring themselves and wondering what it was all about. And then, some of this reached Stevenson. But I think most people perceived that he didn’t want to discuss it because you couldn’t discuss it frankly without making you do one of two things: defending the President to the hilt, or publicly disagreeing with the position of the president. In my bid, he was not prepared in his own mind to do either one.

STERN: That’s a very interesting point.

FRITCHEY: Now ....
STERN: Did he ever talk to you ...?

FRITCHEY: Even I did not have a true thrashing out, knock down. I made it clear how I felt from the very beginning. I would even – it’s very difficult to look back thirteen years and remember exactly what you were saying and so forth. Fortunately, I began writing my column in ‘65 and the very first column I wrote was against Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam. So I have those records but exactly what I was saying in the spring. I, of course, probably not as being all out against it as I later was. I just can’t remember. But in any case, there was no question that he knew that I had a dim view of this. But then, as you know, all of it got diverted by the Dominican Republic, you see.

STERN: Yes. Right.

FRITCHEY: And that occupied all our attention at that time, you see. And that, he did have misgivings about.

STERN: Did he ever go to Johnson and tell him?

FRITCHEY: Yes. Oh, yes.

STERN: He did.

FRITCHEY: Oh, yes. So his position on that was no problem. But the Vietnam thing, I think that he hoped that Lyndon would put on some kind of a political show and show the flag a bit and what not. But not get seriously involved as he later did after Adlai died. Because there were only, by the time Adlai died, only about fifteen, twenty thousand guys. It was something like that.

STERN: Right. It was just beginning. Sure.

FRITCHEY: I’m sure he wanted to believe this. His instinct was to be loyal to the President, I’ve told you before. He ... [Interruption] culminated with Stevenson’s life. Lord knows what, if he had lived, what the ultimate culmination would have been. But the culmination after his death was about as follows. A couple of months before he went to Europe on that trip where he died – let’s see, I’d say it must have been around April or May something like that, maybe even June – many of the leading in-

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by the Dominican Republic, you see.

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tellectuals and the liberals of New York again got really troubled and a couple of them came to me and said they would like to talk to Stevenson. And I arranged it.

STERN: This was the Paul Goodman, Kay Ball group?

FRITCHEY: Paul and Kay, that’s right and about half a dozen others came along with them on that day. I’ve got the notes somewhere on that. And so, I stayed long enough. He didn’t know some of them and I brought them up and introduced him around and I sat in for about five or ten minutes and then I had his secretary by prearrangement call me and say I was needed somewhere else. This was to give him a chance to talk any way he wanted to without my being there, without being embarrassed by previous things he may have said to me or what not. Or if he wanted to bring in some nuances which would have been difficult for him to do because of me or what not. Because our relationship was by then a very personal one. And I think he cared a great deal about what I thought of him and vice versa. We were very close friends and so forth.

So from time to time I’d pop back in just to see if there was anything I could do for him. This lasted for over an hour or so and he was his charming self. I think they, when they left, they felt they had had an inconclusive meeting. There was no doubt it was. I think the most they could say was that they had had a respectful, sympathetic hearing but without any commitment from him or any overt criticism of the President. And at some, while I was in the room he even, in his rather gracious way, lectured them a little bit for being a little too dogmatic, for being a little too certain, and for not knowing all the factors. There were some things and there weren’t other things that they didn’t know, or anybody knew at that time. This always happens with the cables and inside information much of which I have personally come to hold in considerable contempt. But it can’t always be dismissed. And when there are many men and women of great repute and wisdom and experience who take one position or another, they are not lightly to be dismissed. And this was some of the pitch of the ambassador to this group. And, as always, they were all taken by his manner, and his charm and his wit.

It ended up in Goodman being authorized or taking it upon himself to write a very, very long letter which was brought to me and I .... And just before Stevenson went on this trip he gave me a potential answer. And his instructions to me were to study it carefully and then to circulate it to certain people in the State Department, Czayo [George M. Czayo], Harlan Cleveland, and then – if there was general agreement on it or if we thought with some modifications – why I was authorized to release
it. Well, after taking another look at it I came to the conclusion that this should not be released because the effect of it was, if I’d been writing the headline, was that he was suggesting that we draw a line in Asia as well as in Europe. That is to say that for headline purposes, if you are a newspaper man, and writing a hard lead on it, it was far more subtle than that. And we may have made more nuances but that to me was the reading of it. Others did not totally agree with me on this. They thought I was .... and so forth. In any case, we just sat on it. He died without reading it and the State Department had a copy and to make sure….

The letter, of course, was in effect a justification for the Lyndon Johnson policy and I knew damn well that Johnson would be tipped off about this letter and they’d rush into print with it. So I was just starting my column, so I wrote my very first column about it to make sure that they couldn’t construe this as one hundred

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percent Stevenson support.

STERN: Did his son eventually release it?

FRTCHEY: What?

STERN: Did Adlai III [Adlai E. Stevenson III] eventually release it?

FRTCHEY: Simultaneously with the column. I made an appeal to Adlai. So, now I’ve got to, I really have to go to this . . . .

STERN: I see.

END OF TAPE I

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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Clayton Fritchey Oral History Transcript – JFK #1

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