

Fletcher Knebel Oral History Interview – 8/1/1977
Administrative Information

Creator: Fletcher Knebel
Interviewer: Sheldon Stern
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Biographical Note

Knebel, a journalist for Cowles Publications and *Look* magazine (1950-1964), discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) 1956 vice presidential candidacy, JFK's shrewdness as a politician, various rumors about JFK during the 1960 presidential campaign, and the public fascination with JFK, among other issues.

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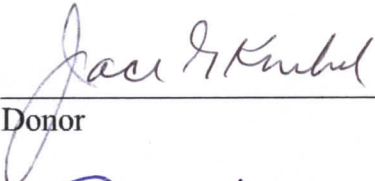
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Interviewed by: Sheldon M. Stern

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Oral History Interview

With

Fletcher Knebel

August 1, 1977
Princeton, New Jersey

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: The way I'd like to begin this is by referring to the article you wrote a year after the assassination, "The Unknown JFK" [*Look*, November 17, 1964, pp. 46-50]. I think in '64, given the fact that it was only a year after the assassination, you raised some really extremely important issues, many of which have....

KNEBEL: Are you sure of that? I don't even remember such an article.

STERN: November '64, called "The Unknown JFK," it was in the memorial edition.

KNEBEL: Oh, okay. I think that was distrib'd from one that I did, a similar story just as he was being inaugurated. That is, it was done right after the

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election and came out about the time he was inaugurated.

STERN: I think the thing about the article that was very striking to me was that you anticipated a lot of what's happened in the last thirteen or fourteen years, the extent to which he has become, in many ways, an unreal figure. He's been romanticized, sentimentalized. People tend not to talk about him in a very specific way. I

think that by saying he was a politician, a very real, a very earthy, a very, in some ways, cynical politician, that, I think gets in many ways to the crux of what he was all about.

I would like to begin in a sense by talking about that whole side of him. Some of the things, for example, you mentioned.... You say, for example, that he held some famous grudges but that most of them eroded before reason. I realize a lot of time has passed, but if you have any recollection of specifics. For example, where he held grudges....

KNEBEL: Could I do this a little differently?

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STERN: Any way that's good for you.

KNEBEL: I have all these chronological lines. I'd rather go through from when I first started covering him and highlights then, okay?

STERN: Great. Sure. Go right ahead.

KNEBEL: I first saw him in the House. I was a reporter in Washington for some twenty-seven years, but I, outside of talking to him occasionally when he was a House member, I had nothing much to do with him. Then in the mid-fifties it became apparent that I was doing more work for *Look* magazine than I was for the newspapers. The Cowles newspapers were in Minneapolis [Minneapolis, Minnesota] and Des Moines [Des Moines, Iowa] and we had a combined bureau. So he was just good copy, that's all—with the money and the flashiness and the beautiful wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] and the whole thing, you know? He was magazine copy. Also, I felt strongly that he was going someplace, so I just began hanging around his office.

STERN: I'm just interested. If I can ask you about that. You said you felt strongly that he was going someplace, but since he was already in the Senate

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you must mean you thought he would be president?

KNEBEL: No, not necessarily that, but I felt that for many years this guy was going, unless he quit politics, was going to be a leader in the Democratic Party. He might be a majority leader or he might be an ambassador to the UN [United Nations].

STERN: Okay, I see.

KNEBEL: But sure, president and vice president were always in it. Anyway I began hanging around his office and getting to know his staff. I'd say, in the fall of

'55. Early in '56 I was just chewing the rag with him one day and he just kind of casually says, "You know, you guys have got this Catholic thing all wrong." He says, "I think a Catholic would run better for vice president, maybe not president. He would run better for vice president than a Protestant would on the Democratic ticket." I said, "Oh, is that right, do you have the figures?" "No." But he said, "Let's get some up. Let's research it." So he called Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] in and Ted said, "well, I think so, too. Look at all these Catholic

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congressmen in the northeast particularly and out in California and scattered around. So, Ted, with very rudimentary implements—including the Congressional Directory and a couple of old U.S.... He didn't have very much. He got up this list. So then the three of us huddled and I said, "Jesus, you know, it would make a good *Look* story. Why don't we do a *Look* story, the burden of which a Catholic would run real good for president. But you'd comment on it. You'd be quoted." "Sure." So we did that. I don't think Sorensen worked on it four or five days all together on his figures. It wasn't hard to do. But when it came out, John O'Donnell [John P. O'Donnell] of the *New York Daily News* [sic; *New York News*].... He hated the Kennedys for some reason. I guess he thought they were defecting Irish or something. But at any rate O'Donnell, who is very Irish and drunk half the time, he wrote this column right out of his head in which he said that Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] had paid more than \$50,000 for this survey which was used in *Look* magazine. So I called up Ted and I said, "Jesus, we ought to get some of that 50,000." I don't know, it was only a few afternoons. At any rate, the story got a hell of a lot of attention.

STERN: So then the drive for vice president in '56 was not the kind of last minute....

KNEBEL: No, no, he was thinking about it. Although as you well know from politics there isn't much you can do to run for vice president because the top guy's going to pick him. He thought. More or less Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson]

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changed that. But he wanted to be considered. What you do, you get your name around like this, and you act attractively, and you answer all the speaking invitations around the country, which he did. Speaking like hell all the time.

Well, okay, then we shifted to the convention and all of a sudden Stevenson after his second nomination in '56, with Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] going strong, and Kennedy, and some others. The convention was kind of unruly because he had been nominated and there was some resentment to him so he threw the convention open.

STERN: Essentially because they thought he was going to be a loser, I think.

KNEBEL: Yeah, that's it.

STERN: Who was going to beat Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower].

KNEBEL: Yeah, right. Could they turn.... It was a mood of frustration. A little bit of ugliness here and there. At any rate, he did throw it open. My recollection is it was quite late at night because I remember our bureau.... We all worked like hell and threw together a very fast story between about ten o'clock and one in the morning, I think it was.

Just before that I remember at the Blackstone Hotel [Sheraton-Blackstone Hotel] they had a bar down in the basement—I think it was about a day before—and I walked in there and Kennedy was leaning against the bar—this was around noontime—at the end of the bar. He said something that reminded me—I've been reminded of it over and over again how fast his mind was on connecting disparate people with disparate things, you know. He just picked them out like this. It was incredible. He could keep a thousand of those things in his mind. At any

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rate, the minute he saw me the light bulb went on all over, the story about vice president. So he says, "Hey, Fletch, the question is no longer can a Catholic be elected vice president, but can he be nominated?" This was the day before and he was all relaxed; he had no idea this was coming. There were a lot of reasons why he didn't think Stevenson was going to ask him, although he was there.

About a year after that, let's say in '57, when he began to gear up to run for president, then I was around the office quite a bit. Now I want to pick out some of these things that stick in my mind. One thing that sticks in my mind was I had never seen this guy in this kind of position before. I was up in his office talking about God knows what and he says.... All of a sudden the phone rings and he was jawing with somebody in Boston and I started to go out of the office and then I have never heard anything so cruel and cold and calculated. He had blond eyelashes so that when his eyes narrowed, you know, when he was really putting the pressure on somebody, they really looked like snake' eyes to me. Because there wasn't any black eyelash there, you know. I couldn't get what this was about, but then I realized what was happening was that a guy up in the Massachusetts legislature, a Democrat who had done some freelance support for Kennedy, who was running for some cruddy job like doorkeeper, let's say that's what it was, Democratic doorkeeper for the Democratic majority, and he wanted Kennedy's backing. Kennedy said, "Listen, you son of a bitch, I'm running for president." He said, "What kind of a deal do you think it'd be, you

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[don't] get elected for doorkeeper and the media to make fun of me all around the country 'Kennedy's man loses for doorkeeper.'" He says, "Jesus, God, I should lose the presidency for something like this? Well, I don't believe you. All right, you get a list of 'em. Take the night train down and you come and see me in the morning and I want a list of all those guys." I've forgotten the man's name and all about it, but to see him lay down the law and to be tough as hell, I had just never seen him like that. I had seen him operate in very delicate

situations where a lot of charm was on the surface but this time it was all gone. He was raising hell up there.

Another one that sticks in my mind a lot, I had done a story for a book called *Candidates 1960*.

STERN: Sevareid's [Eric Sevareid] Book?

KNEBEL: Did he do that?

STERN: I think so.

KNEBEL: Bob Spivak [Robert G. Spivak], a Washington columnist, got us together and those of us who knew that he knew that could write fairly well and knew certain candidates especially well were picked to do it. So he asked me if I'd do Kennedy. I did it and had a lot of fun on that. It was the longest thing I had ever written up to that time: 15,000 words. So then I spent a great deal more time around him. But when I.... What I couldn't get anything on was how much money he was worth. I knew damn well that it was a lot. I mean if somebody said if....

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The story always was, you'll find it in every reference, that each of the boys inherited a million dollars. Jesus, the way they go they have more than that, their income is bigger than that. But maybe not. But at any rate, I couldn't find out. They were not very helpful and I didn't want to press it because I needed him for my newspaper work, too.

So I thought, well, I'll throw a figure into the story and then ask him if he wouldn't read over the story, which I normally never would do. I put a figure in there, I think it was one hundred thousand dollars annual income from his trust fund. He let that go, which told me that it was probably a hell of a lot more than that. He didn't say anything about it. But what he did do and he wrote me a letter about that thing and I remember a phrase—I think that letter is in my papers in Boston—I remember a phrase in it where he said he kind of liked the story but it had kind of a *jeunesse dorée* [gilded youth] feeling to it. I got to thinking any American politician who would ever use a phrase like that *jeunesse dorée*, you know. Oh man, he was different.

At any rate, the same day I get the letter, he calls up. He says, "Say, I want you to come up and see me about that piece, will you. There's something in there that troubles me." So I say, "Okay." Now let me see if I can find it here because this was rather... [Interruption] Let me just read from this article, or this thing, in *Candidates 1960*. "One

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financial aspect of the campaign"—that was his campaign for the Senate in 1952 against Lodge, Henry Cabot Lodge—"One financial aspect of the campaign revealed six years later before a house investigating committee caused a flurry of gossip in the political community. John Fox, owner of the *Boston Post*, now defunct, had supported Lodge but then switched

editorial backing to Kennedy. He testified in '58 that he felt Lodge 'had been soft on communism' and he made the switch 'without any knowledge of anybody in the Kennedy family.' Fox said that the night after the endorsement Joe Kennedy called on him. Later, after the election, Kennedy loaned Fox five hundred thousand dollars. Joseph P. Kennedy's New York office issued a statement on June 27, '58 declaring that no loan was discussed before the endorsement. 'The loan as mentioned,' said the statement, 'was made after the election as a purely commercial transaction. For sixty days, with full collateral, at full interest and was fully repaid on time and was simply one of the many commercial transactions in which this office has participated.'"

Now that paragraph.... When I got up there, that paragraph was not in my original text. He started to carp about one little thing or another in there and I said, "Look, if it's not an error of fact, I'm not going to change it. I don't want you to be in the business of censoring, I just can't do that." He said, "No

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but you want to be fair, don't you?" I said, "Sure, I want to be fair." He said, "Now look at this. The way you write this, about that '52 election and the *Boston Post*, any reader would think that we had bought that paper for the editorial support. Now wouldn't they?" And he read it over for me. I said, "Yes, that would be the implication." I said, "Frankly, that's the implication I want to leave because I think that's what happened and that's what your friends say and they laugh about it." He said, "Well, Goddamn it, that isn't it." And he got very.... "That isn't fair now," he says, "You've got to get the other side." He said, "If I get Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] on the phone up there in the New York office and let him read you that statement will you carry just a sentence from it?" I said, "Sure, okay." I didn't want to lose a big source over something like that. So I said, "Sure." Okay, the guy reads it to me and I take notes and he says, "You're going to use that, are you?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "We got a deal?" and I said, "Yes." I talked to him some more and he walked to the door with me—and this was a trait about Kennedy that reporters just loved, it just killed them—he said, "You know, I'm glad you're going to use that thing in there. For your own reputation as a journalist you have to be fair." He said, "You know we had to buy that fucking paper or I would have lost the election." [Laughter]

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I laughed all the way down the hall. How shrewd that guy was, you know. In the same situation...

STERN: So he got you to put in a more balanced account and at the same time admitted to you that you had been right in the beginning.

KNEBEL: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah. Then he me sews me up, you know, and gets me on his side. This guy is so clever. I remember one night Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]—it was in some damn campaign, I think it was the presidential campaign....

STERN: '60?

KNEBEL: Yeah, beefing to some of us sitting around about how Kennedy got better press. Well, he certainly did and that's why. Because he knew how to do it. Nixon would have, in the same situation Nixon would have done something crude, or cumbersome, Kennedy was just so deft, you know, beautiful.

One I didn't like so well, it was something like that, though. We used to have off-the-record sessions in Washington, they still have them. So Ted Sorensen asked me one time—this was about early '58 I would say—"There are quite a few reporters around town that Jack doesn't know, so would you mind hosting one of those off-the-record things?" I said, "No." So I got—we all paid our own way to them—a member of the staff and I had Eddie Folliard [Edward T. Folliard] of the *Post* [*Washington Post*]—and I can't remember the list—Bob Donovan [Robert J. Donovan] of the *New York Herald Tribune*, about twelve I would say. The emphasis was on people that he didn't know too well. After that the ground rules were that

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the guys could write anything they wanted but they couldn't quote him. Kennedy had said then that at that particular point being a Catholic was not of a tremendous help to him because there were so many Catholic governors that they were afraid of running in their own state of having too much Catholic. And so Eddie Folliard in the piece that he did made that the lead and the *Post* had some wire, syndicate wire, so it was picked up around the country when the story played. Some of these governors began calling Kennedy and raising hell. So he gets me on the phone and he wanted me to send out a telegram. I forgot... Well, first he wanted me to say that this never happened. I said, "Gee, I can't do that, Senator. I mean you did say it and Eddie was within the ground rules there." He said, "Goddamn it, I've got to get off the hook." So we figured out some language that didn't quite, wasn't quite a lie and wasn't the truth. I agreed to send out the wire and he paid for it. I wish I hadn't done that. Again, I was thinking, do I want to lose this great big news source?

By then I was pretty convinced he was, personally, was going to be president. I stuck my neck out with our publishers who used to come to Washington, John Cowles [John Cowles, Sr.] from Minneapolis and Mike Cowles [Gardner A. Cowles, Jr.] from New York and they'd go around the bureau to each man you know, and ask a question, like, "Is the budget going to be balanced?" "What's the deficit going to be?" "Who's going to be killed?" all that crap.

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Publishers are just insane sometimes. But always they'd say, "Who's going to get nominated?" John Cowles would write it down in his little book. Three years before, "Who's going to be nominated?" So I just keep saying Kennedy. Most of the other guys from there were not.... At any rate, I knew he was going to be a big source for a newsman.

Another incident that really became very famous sticks in my mind. It happened this way. Bob Donovan, then of the *New York Herald Tribune*, now of the *Los Angeles Times*,

and myself and Earl Mazo and our wives [Marian Park Davis (wife of Fletcher Knebel); Martha Fisher (wife of Robert J. Donovan); Rita Vane Mazo]—Earl Mazo was with the *New York Herald Tribune*—all went dancing at the Shoreham Hotel celebrating Earl Mazo's sale to *Look*, through my help, of his book about Nixon. Dancing up a storm there on the outdoor part of the Shoreham was Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], this now only a couple of years after his heart attack. I'd say this was probably the summer of '58, maybe the summer of '59, in there somewhere. So we had all got talking about health. And all of a sudden and Bob said, "You know, have you guys heard? I picked up a rumor that Kennedy's got Addison's disease." I said, "Jesus, that is funny, Bob, because I just got a telephone call this afternoon from my editor from New York, Dan Mich [Daniel Danforth Mich], and he said he had heard it." I said, "Why don't we go up and see Kennedy together. A touchy thing like this, it's best

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to have two of us." He said, "Okay." Earl wasn't interested. So Donovan and I went up the next day and Kennedy was kind of distraught by us bringing this up and he denied it. He said he didn't have it. He said he had a little glandular trouble but it was all settled. My recollection is that he said he was talking no medication at that time.

STERN: I don't believe that was true.

KNEBEL: No, it wasn't. I'm convinced he lied all the way through. At any rate as we were walking out I said, "Bob, what are you going to do?" He said, "I'm not going to do anything. If it had come up somewhere, that would be different. I don't feel justified in just raising it myself and nobody has stated it publicly." Well, I didn't feel that way about it because Kennedy said that Gore Vidal had called—Gore Vidal is related to Jackie—had called him from New York a couple of days before and said this story was kicking around New York. So I figured, oh, if it's that big I want to in touch with somebody. So I got back to the office and I phoned Kennedy and said, "Senator, I've got to write something about this." And I said, "It's a lot better for you to have the first thing that comes out about this." I said, "If there's that much talk, we're going to have some stories and some of them will probably be very dirty. Best to have you deny it right off. A.P. [Associated Press] will pick it up out of Minneapolis and Des

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Moines and it might kill it for you." "Well," he said, "What do you want?" I said, "What you told us this afternoon." So I said, "Here's what I've written," and I read it to him. He said, "Well, let me have somebody take it down and I'm going up to Boston and I'll see you at the airport at four-thirty"—where he's taking the plane. When I got out there I remember that fellow Archie Cox [Archibald Cox] was with him, you know, who was to become solicitor general of the United States. Then Kennedy said, "Jesus, I don't want to do this." He said, "But, man, you're getting me into something." I said, "No, I'm not." We argued all over again. He said, "All right, then do it. Here's what I'm willing to say," and he handed me

these things. So that night I put it on the wire and A.P. did pick it up out of Minneapolis and Des Moines. I think that was around the summer of '59.

Fourteen months later—let's say it was the summer of '59—fourteen months later in the campaign of '60, I had been covering Nixon and I shifted to Kennedy. I picked him up—the campaign—at the O'Hare Inn in Chicago. He got a very early start. I remember it was a crisp fall morning about seven a.m., and he was standing by his car and those of us who were going to ride with him kind of clustered around and chatted for a little bit. All of a sudden he saw me and said, "Hey, Fletch, what are you doing here? It must be because we're going through Addison today." I don't know whether it was

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Addison County or Addison Township or what it was, but somewhere in the suburban area was an Addison. I thought, "Oh, man, that guy's really got the thing on his mind." The curious thing... But there again, you know, it was how his mind worked with the guy, the person and the particular issue of the day.

When I got back to the hotel that night, by golly the publisher, *Look's* publisher Mike Cowles was on the phone. He wanted me to leave the campaign and go up to Boston—he heard this rumor now all over again—and go up to Boston and he had a lead with the Leahy Clinic, I think, somebody up there. And wanted me to spend a couple of weeks working on this. I argued him out of it. I was very selfish about it. I did not think that *Look* magazine ought to be in this. I thought this guy was going to be elected. I always like to see the truth come out, I just didn't want to see it come out through me. Because I thought for four years I know this guy and I'm not going to get in the White House. They're not going let me in the goddamn place. In retrospect, now I wish I hadn't done that. I wish I had gone through with it. Right after the election I remember Paul Martin [Paul L. Martin] of Gannett newspapers did a whole series on Addison's disease and there wasn't any question that Kennedy was taking medication at the time, and that he did have it. How seriously, well, was a matter of dispute.

STERN: Do you remember any other specifics from the '60 campaign and things he might have said about Nixon or anything along those lines?

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KNEBEL: No, I remember writing....

STERN: The relationship with Johnson, for example, during the campaign? Anything?

KNEBEL: No, I don't think during the campaign that I ever.... I talked to him when other guys were around. I don't think that I ever had a sole session with him. Oh, wait a minute. Two weeks before he was nominated.... Have you heard from any other source a story about Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] pushing guys in the pool? Or pushing Clark Mollenhoff [Clark R. Mollenhoff] with a broken neck?

STERN: There are some general rumors about it, yeah.

KNEBEL: More than rumor because I saw it. At any rate, what happened was, two weeks before the Democratic convention, Bobby Kennedy—he was the campaign manager—had a big party at Hickory Hill, mostly for the press, maybe that was all. The press and his staff, let's say. He said it was in honor of Clark Mollenhoff who had worked very closely with him, and Clark was in our bureau and had won a Pulitzer Prize for Bobby Kennedy's investigation of the Teamsters [International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehouse men and Helpers of America]. Bobby and Clark worked hand-in-hand, so they were very close. This is now the summer of '60.

In the fall of '59 Clark had broken his neck in a car accident and he had just gotten out of this huge cast that he had worn for about eight months and was now wearing a brace which was used to protect the neck. I was in his office the day before the party when Bobby called up and said, was he in shape to swim? Clark said no, he didn't think that

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he should. Bob said, "Okay." So the pool there was down kind of on ground that sloped down from the house. The pool was at the back end of Bobby Kennedy's property. I came down there, walking with my then-wife, and Clark and his wife [Georgia Mollenhoff] was right ahead of me. No, wait a minute, Clark lagged behind to talk to me and his wife went around. The bar was on the other side of the pool, and across the pool was a gang plank. Clark, an enormous man, about six feet four, and more courage than sense a lot of the time, starts walking across it to take a short cut to this bar, rather than going around, goes across this board with a big rubber tire under it. He gets about halfway out and out of nowhere came this form in swimming trunks with the spray all over him, like a young god coming out of the water and pushes him. Rises out of the water and gives Clark a push. Clark takes one big step trying to get to the side of the pool, misses, catches his foot in the trough, rolls right over on his neck. Boom! Like that, with his feet up. I said, "Oh, shit." First thing that went through my mind was—Clark was a good friend of mine—one, he's dead and two, Kennedy has lost the nomination. I hadn't seen him yet, but I knew it was Bobby because it had to be him.

Very few people were there yet but I remember very well that Ruth Montgomery [Ruth Shick Montgomery], the head of the Hearst papers, was out there at the pool and I could see her face like that. Georgia

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Mollenhoff, Clark's wife, was over there by the bar, she was just drained. Kennedy kind of slumped back in the pool and was grinning and hanging off the side of the pool. I rushed around the pool and by the time I got there Clark had brushed himself off and he was all right. I said, "Jesus." He said, "No, no, no, I feel fine." Then he started a lot of macho stuff, insulting, kidding with Kennedy. That night at home Ruth Montgomery called me up and she said, "Are you going to print that story?" I said, "Jesus, I think we should, it's liable to cost Jack the nomination but people are skeptical of the Kennedys anyway around the country.

That just confirms the ruthlessness of Bobby and all that. He's not only ruthless, he's idiotic." This is his good friend with a broken neck. I don't understand it to this day.

STERN: It is hard to figure out; what possible reason there would be to do it.

KNEBEL: He did childish things. I said, "I'm going to write it if it's okay with Clark." By this time it was late Saturday night. So Sunday morning I called Clark and he said, "Hell no. Same old story, let's not do that. Let's not have the Kennedys forevermore say, 'well....' Say, 'well....'" I said, "It happened to you, okay." Why Ruth didn't print it, I don't know. But she never did. Nobody printed that and it just shows you how people were about the Kennedys. Had it been Nixon.... Nixon was absolutely right.

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If Nixon's brother had jumped out of the pool like that it would have been headlined everywhere. There again I felt bad, now, in retrospect, that I didn't write the story. The tag on that was that it was on a Saturday. On Monday I had had a long time date, ten days or so, with Jack Kennedy to see him that week, and the agreement was that I was to have an interview at least an hour in length and to be printed only if he were nominated. If he were not nominated, nothing would be printed. That kind of intrigued him, you know, he always liked something new like that. So he said, "Okay, let's do it today. He was going to Maryland to see Governor Tawes [John Millard Tawes] about getting the Maryland delegation. We rode in his black—my recollection is—convertible with Kennedy driving.

STERN: There are many stories about him as a driver.

KNEBEL: Man, are they true. We were not out of Washington yet, we were on the eastern side of it, and he was already going well over sixty on city streets when this cop comes up and pulls him aside. The guy looked at him, "Oh, Senator Kennedy. Listen, take it a little easy will you, I don't want to have...." "Okay, thanks, officer." On we go. Right away up there traveling eighty-five on this narrow road. It would scare you to death. He's talking all the time. The interview would have been much better but I was

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so scared. The same thing all the way back.

STERN: What do you make of that? Why do you think he did that?

KNEBEL: Why does he drive like that? It fits in with other stuff about him. I thought that he and Bobby, particularly him because of his illnesses, were immensely careless with his own body. Tremendously so. I wondered if it had something to do with this kind of macho competitiveness of the boys. I don't know. I think maybe it did. It certainly could.

STERN: Do you think it had anything to do perhaps with the sense that, so what if I'm stopped by a policeman, it doesn't matter. In that sense, also, there's another side to him.

KNEBEL: That part of it, yes. Oh, yeah. He took every advantage of his position and wealth and played it to.... Like a lot of rich kids, you know. That's the way he was. But I'm thinking now of...

STERN: I was thinking of more of a personal dimension as to why.

KNEBEL: Why didn't he fear for his own body? Have a little prudence about it? Along the same line in that story I told you...

STERN: Not to mention the fact that you were with him.

KNEBEL: Yeah, right. I sure didn't like it. But the story that I did right after the election that was printed about the time of the inauguration on all of the little stuff about Kennedy that I didn't think the voters knew.

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I harped a lot on that: on the fast driving and on walking on the tops—on the hoods—of moving cars. Now here's a guy with a bad back, you know, had this terrible back operation and he.... I remember one particularly that I used in that story. There's a bridge going between Illinois and Iowa over the Mississippi, so the politicians of the Illinois county were withdrawing and turning Kennedy over to the politicians of the Iowa county in the middle of the bridge. Kennedy just got out the convertible he was riding in and stepped over the windshield, walked from one hood to another hood. While the cars were still moving. Moving towards each other. What kind of a president is this? Who ever saw a thing like that? He did other things like that. The way he handled himself in crowds, too. I didn't think he was prudent.

Let's see.... Get back to the.... On that interview, he was nominated and I did print it. It caused quite a stir because there was a lot of stuff in there, but I forgot at this point what I put in and what I left out. But I remember he characterized a lot of people. He started laughing about Johnson. To a lot of people around Washington at that time Johnson was, while a powerful figure, was a laughable figure. He was funny in some of the things he did. I remember Kennedy got laughing. He said, "That goddamned river boat gambler." That's what he called him.

STERN: He apparently admired that quality.

KNEBEL: He wasn't denigrating him.

STERN: That's my point.

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KNEBEL: He was kind of admiring him. I remember one thing that I did not have, was that we came near the end of the route, we were driving back to the Capitol grounds and we were coming up to the Senate. There was a chaplain of the Senate at the time, I've forgotten his name, a Protestant who at some time had made some passing comment to somebody about Kennedy's Catholicism. It just burned him up. I had never heard such rough language as he said, "That cocksucker..." Stuff like that with this poor chaplain. I said, if he gets elected that chaplain better go to the House. I can't remember specific individuals now, but I do recall, let's say, a dozen people like that, that every time Kennedy would mention them his voice would get sharp, rough, his eyes would narrow and you could tell that the big-time grudge was still on as far as he was concerned.

STERN: Some people have written of him although he was certainly capable of tremendous...

[END OF TAPE 1]

KNEBEL: ... in the spring of '59, it could have been the spring of '58, but at any rate he was a big time candidate and Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] had gotten after him about his father for the way he was trying to buy the election. I remember he started his speech to the Gridiron Club very early reading this "important telegram" from his father. Joe Kennedy said something to the effect, "Don't pay for another single delegate,

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I can't afford it." A great idea. Kennedy got one hell of a hand. That kind of a crack he used right after the election about the reason he appointed his brother attorney general was because he needed a little training before he started to practice law. That way he had of meeting major criticism head on with disarming jokes. He was so good at that. He did it all the time.

To get back to the Gridiron thing, unlike a lot of guys, Kennedy took that Gridiron speech very seriously. He knew that the guest list was a prominent one, a lot of publishers, wealthy businessmen, some who might bankroll him. At any rate, he thought it was worthwhile making a big impression. He took a lot of time with his speech and he got suggested cracks from a lot of people. I remember I gave him some, and Clark Clifford [Clark M. Clifford] and I went up one afternoon, that's right, and worked with him one afternoon on the speech. Then Clark did some more, and then he got some Hollywood people on it; he had input from everybody. [Inaudible] he had a lot of people contributing to it. Then he practiced it before his brothers for timing.

STERN: He rehearsed it, really?

KNEBEL: He rehearsed it, yeah, for timing because he was told that the timing was essential. It was just a beautiful speech. I thought it was pure Gridiron formula. This is, to start out kidding himself, then kid his own party, then kid the opposition. By that time you practice it....

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Taken by the audience, which is kind of a mellow one anyway, and then get serious for two or three minutes before you can [inaudible] one and then go back and wind up with a good crack at yourself again. It's a perfect Gridiron routine.

I remember one time when he wasn't present but it told something about him. To prepare for that article about "The Unknown Kennedy." I don't remember the title of it, but it was printed at the time of the inauguration. Right after the election I started gathering material for it and I was to see his good friend LeMoyne Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings], but at Kennedy's Georgetown house. Kennedy was in Palm Beach. The President-elect was now down there. But his wife was in the Georgetown house. I had submitted to Jackie about ten questions on a big yellow sheet of paper. Billings and I.... He had called me and said, "Come down to Kennedy's house; we'll talk briefly, I'm staying there for a couple of days." After we were talking a while, in the middle of it, Jackie comes downstairs pregnant as hell with, I guess it would be John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] and she had this big yellow sheet of paper and one of my questions was, "Does he do any work around the house?" She said, "What a dreary thought." But I thought, Jesus, this is strange. This is not the middle-class way of living that I know. The guy goes off to Palm Beach with his cronies leaving his pregnant wife at home with one of

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his good friends. Why is he not there or she down there?

STERN: Billings was saying this?

KNEBEL: No, I was saying this to myself. Billings took it all as a matter of course. I interviewed him [JFK] a couple of times alone when he was president, but I remember one time I went into see him on a story about his fight with the Catholic bishops.

STERN: The education bill?

KNEBEL: Over the education bill. He talked and we had a very pleasant talk. I was about to go.... I had a novel that I had written with another guy [Charles W. Bailey, II] called *Seven Days in May*. It was a big hit that year. It had come out in the fall of '62 and just sold like wildfire and this was three or four months later. But there was another book out called *Fail-Safe* by—wasn't it the guy that just died, the West Coast professor...

STERN: I know who you mean but I just can't think of it offhand.

KNEBEL: I can't either. That was also written by two men [Eugene Burdick; Harvey Wheeler]. But Kennedy, it was late in the afternoon, he was going out through his doors to the Rose Garden and he turned around and he said, "Oh, say, by the way, how's your book *Fail-Safe* doing?" I said, "Oh, Mr. President, that's a hell of a thing to say. That's not...." He said, "*Fail-Safe, Seven Days in May*, who knows the difference?" But that was his way of.... What does that do? It at once fires you that he knows about it, and tweaks you, kids you at the same time.

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Once again that very personal touch that he had. He knew very well which one it was because his good friend Red Fay [Paul B. Fay, Jr.] had told him. He had read an early copy of it. He and Kennedy had two of them. He and Kennedy had talked about it one weekend in Hyannisport.

STERN: Didn't he, as I recall, read someplace that he had thought about people who might fit the characters. I seem to remember reading that someplace. Sort of naming generals and saying, yes, I bet he would try that. That kind of thing.

KNEBEL: Yeah, I think Fay did say that. I don't know. That's about all I can come up with.

STERN: Did you have any particular trouble with him after you wrote that article "JFK and the Press"? I know that caused quite a stir in the White House.

KNEBEL: Yeah, he didn't like it very well.

STERN: Did he say anything to you about it? Or did Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger], did everybody? I mean did they make their discontent known to you personally?

KNEBEL: Yes, but I can't remember.

STERN: That's too bad.

KNEBEL: I can't remember. But I do remember that.... What was the timing on that, between that and the story about his secret marriage, do you know?

STERN: I don't remember exactly. No, I don't remember

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exactly.

KNEBEL: If it were.... If the secret marriage thing came up afterwards, which I think it did, it would make sense because Dan Mich our editor went to see Kennedy—the editor of *Look* magazine—on something. Kennedy said to him, he said, “I understand that Knebel and some of the other people who work for you at *Look* there are digging into a silly report that I was secretly married once. I just want to tell you Mr. Mich that if you all...” And then he gave him a very nice smile and said, “... if you all print that, I’ll sue you and wind up owning *Look* magazine.” But there was no doubt in his mind that—in Dan’s mind—that he was not kidding. He was as mad as hell that he might sue him. I had been over to see Bobby on that. What have you all come up with on that thing?

STERN: The whole question of the marriage? I think probably the most carefully researched job on it is that, is the Blairs [Clay Drewry Blair, Jr.; Joan Blair].

KNEBEL: What does he say?

STERN: They say that there wasn’t a marriage.

KNEBEL: My feeling is that there was not. The principals in it acted so strange. Maybe they started out kidding about it.

STERN: There’s a chapter on that in the Blairs’ book. They pretty much trace how the rumor began, and it was a record in a genealogy...

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KNEBEL: Yes, it was. D.A.R. [Daughters of the American Revolution] genealogy.

STERN: ...but apparently it was an error. Right. Let’s put it this way, the Blairs would have been delighted to find out that it was true and they were really kind of sorry that it wasn’t. As a matter of fact they had been advertising their book on the radio in Boston and one of the ads I heard recently said, “Get the real story on JFK. Read the *Search for JFK* and find out about the first marriage.” Which is somewhat dishonest when you consider when you read about it they say there was no first marriage. But they know there’s interest in it, of course.

KNEBEL: You know, two things that happened, that guy had, as you well know, had a tremendous effect on many, many people’s lives. I remember talking to some guy I can’t—I think it was Bob Donovan; he and I used to be fairly close—about how many people had made one hell of a lot of money on this guy Kennedy. I did. Donovan did, he wrote *PT 109* [*PT 109: John F. Kennedy in World War II*], made a couple of a hundred thousand out of that. There were just scads of people, and it’s still going on. It’s an industry practically. For and against, and all.

That strange, whimsical, almost magical quality that that guy had about him; he did have it. It wasn’t something that was painted on by the press or that was manufactured. It

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was real. Two incidents that happened to me, a long time later, confirmed it in my mind at least. One is that I was in Africa in '65, doing a thing for Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] for the government for the Peace Corps evaluation. He sent people to each country and you evaluate the thing. Private report for Shriver and the executives. At any rate, I was way up in the bush country in Liberia and riding with his Peace Corps kid in a truck. He said, "I want you to see something." We went down this jungle road. I swear you couldn't go more than four miles an hour on it. All of a sudden there was a clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a kind of a rude, wooden shape of a man and he said, "That's done by the tribesmen of this little village we're coming to and he just thought one hell of a lot of Kennedy and he thought he ought to have a memorial garden for him." He said, "It must have taken two months to chop all that stuff out of the jungle." That's all he did, chopped it all down. Then I saw the same thing down in Mexico, in the Yucatan, a couple of years later, another little clearing. A little JFK memorial garden, you know. By very humble people who glimpsed something in this guy that they....

STERN: It's a very, very hard thing to figure out.

KNEBEL: Yeah, it is.

STERN: As I was telling your wife [Laura Knebel], I've read hundreds of the oral history interviews at the library

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and that quality is still elusive. It's very hard to know really and understand. And, of course, to know him personally why he struck people that way. And yet it seems to be largely a very personal quality because, I mean, it was not necessarily translated into his public, political. I mean, let's face it, he won the election by.... I mean it couldn't have been any closer. It was essentially a tie in terms of popular votes. So he certainly didn't overwhelm the American people, not in that sense. But with people who knew him he evoked a great loyalty, affection. There was reason, in a sense, I think, for Nixon to be very jealous of that.

KNEBEL: Damn right.

STERN: He never had it, never could touch it. Nor did Johnson, really. Not in the same way.

KNEBEL: You know, I think a part of it probably was, Kennedy in campaigns during his political schedule was always late. But if you look at why he was late, he was late because he'd see you. If he hadn't seen you, "Hey, how are you doing? How's the girl? How's this, and how's the job?" He was as curious as hell, and he'd just

hang around. That's immensely attractive to everyone. Someone else personally interested in you. Is it not? Especially a public figure. [Interruption] ...was touring with Kennedy in the campaign of '60 in New York City. We took a Staten Island ferry over to Staten Island and when we got there

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and he got up from this little platform where he was and he looked down—he always looked down to the press—and here was Murray Kempton, the columnist from the *New York Post*. I guess having tried to be a writer, Kennedy admired anybody who could write well and, of course, Murray can. He said, “Hi...”—here he is with politicians around, a crowd, about ready to make a speech and he's totally interested—“...say that column of yours yesterday, you know, I think so and so...”

STERN: This was in public and people were...

KNEBEL: In a normal conversational voice he picked up on some column Kempton had done a day or two before. Immensely gratifying to Murray. He did that all the time.

STERN: You wrote a piece on his relationship with Johnson, or Johnson as vice president. Is there anything you can recall specifically about the way the two of them related while they were in that president/vice president situation? Clearly Johnson was not happy in that. There is nothing new in saying that, obviously.

KNEBEL: No, he sure wasn't. He felt that he was not treated well and brought in on everything like, apparently, Mondale [Walter F. Mondale] is now. But I don't know. That stuff goes on all the time with

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presidents and vice presidents. Whether he was much different I don't know. I mean, he was such an actor. God, I remember Johnson at one of those huge Washington parties. A thousand stags wandering around with glasses in their hands and lobbyists and politicians and all that. It was at one of those and I came over to one of the portable bars and the only guy there was the Vice President. He really looked like Uriah Heep, you know. So humble, and all faith; he had the biggest ego. He was so lonely, and nobody paying any attention to him.

STERN: You never saw, for example, any evidence of the kind of people said that Bobby Kennedy treated him very badly. And specifics on that?

KNEBEL: No. You know, that's gone from my mind but there was a time when I think I remember fairly well that day.... I remember a fair amount about when they were picking Johnson for vice president.

STERN: You can't recall anything about that afternoon?

KNEBEL: No, not any more.

STERN: That's one of the most intriguing. There's a tremendous amount written about it and nobody really knows exactly how and why it happened.

KNEBEL: No, that's right.

STERN: In many ways the accounts conflict. Especially, of course, as to why LBJ said, yes. That was the big shock. I hope to God I get to talk to Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson] about that.

KNEBEL: But the fact that all.... Jack Knight [John Shivley Knight] who always loved at any convention, he loves, about three days before the

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vice president was picked—on the first or second day of the convention—to name the ticket. I remember, I think it was on Tuesday in Los Angeles he said the ticket would be Kennedy and Johnson. Well, Knight, part was his valuable sources, I suppose, and part was just what he thinks is logical. A lot of people thought it was logical, you know. Politicians often do the logical thing.

STERN: Well, it made sense strategically, sure it did, from Kennedy's point of view. Whether it made sense from Johnson's point of view was another thing. That is apparently where all the doubts were.

KNEBEL: That scene with Rayburn [Sam Rayburn] and all that. Rayburn told him not to do it or something like that.

STERN: Apparently Mrs. Johnson was opposed to it, too. You weren't in Dallas, were you, in November?

KNEBEL: No, I was in Omaha with the governors' conference, covering that. I'm just about out, so if you have some questions.

STERN: Okay, well, I just wonder if after fourteen years, thirteen years since you wrote this, whether your own sense of it has changes? Or how new evidence or whatever when you wrote the article on the "Unknown JFK" you described him as "a lover of poetry, sailor, historian, writer, wit, consumer of fish chowder, frolicking father, speed reader, companion of the

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arts, fastidious dresser, champion of excellence, amateur painter, patron of the intellectuals, a man who revered courage and bore pain and a radiant knight with Camelot.” I was just curious if, how you feel about that less now and whether you think things that have come to light since would change your mind about anything or.... Do you see what I’m driving at?

KNEBEL: No, I don’t think so. No, I would say no. The things that.... I’m not quite sure what got him into trouble except perhaps that thing that was noticeable throughout his career, a kind of imprudence with himself and with other people. Both of the boys, both Kennedy—I don’t know about Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] so much because I don’t know him. It was not true of Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.]. I knew him in the navy briefly at Norfolk. He seemed to me to be a, as I recall it, to be a much less impulsive guy than these two were. I think they often, “Gee, let’s do something.” They were men of action. That got them into trouble. I don’t think a thoughtful man would have gotten into the Bay of Pigs.

STERN: There are even people now who are raising strong criticism even of the way he handles the Cuban Missile Crisis. Arguing, for example, that before he put Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev] on the spot publicly, went on national television and said, “Okay, you got to take the missiles out or else, he should have tried private

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diplomacy. He should have called him up or whatever and said, okay, I know what you’ve done and you got to get them out of there or otherwise I’m going to call you before the whole world, with possibly disastrous consequences. That, of course, would have given Khrushchev the chance to back down without being humiliated. It’s a powerful point. Why didn’t he do that? Why did he go public and thus make it very difficult for Khrushchev to back down? Although he did, but he might not have.

KNEBEL: In all of these encomia to Kennedy you don’t hear wisdom trotted around too much. I don’t think he was a wise man. I think he was a great kind to have as president, and I wish we could have another like that. Because at least up to this time, apparently the country is strong enough to stand the mistakes of guys like that. But what he made up for it in.... I just love a charismatic leader. I like charisma in anybody but especially in somebody that’s.... Politicians tend to, so many of them tend to be as though they’re ground out of a mill for railway clerks somewhere. I guess Laura [Laura Knebel] told you that that writer Philip—how do you pronounce his last name—Noble, Nobile [Philip Nobile]...

STERN: Yes, she mentioned it, right.

KNEBEL: ...came around and asked us a lot about Kennedy’s sex life, about which I remember absolutely nothing. I don’t even remember a hell of a lot of gossip

at that time. Oh, there was some, of course. I remember working

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one story about there was some woman about the time Kennedy began to run for president, visiting all of the newspaper offices with pictures she claims were taken at dusk or even at night with a flash, of Kennedy visiting a gal who worked in his office, Pam Turnure [Pamela Turnure], I think it was. This lady claimed he was having a love affair and it was an immoral thing. I don't know, I never paid any attention to it. I didn't care if he was screwing her or not. I just assumed he did his share of it but saw little of her. I mean, I wasn't his social friend, like say, Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee], those guys.

[Interruption] ...and we were riding in that—what was the name of that Kennedy plane, the *Caroline*, wasn't it—there were the usual press service guys there, Merriman Smith, and I don't know who the A.P. man was, but I was the pool man for the rest of them and I was just riding on this one leg in Vermont on the last day of the campaign and Kennedy came back and chatted with us a little. This was about two o'clock in the afternoon, voting was going to start at seven the next morning. I think it was Smitty who said, "How do you feel about it right now?" Kennedy said, "I feel that I'm going to win but I don't feel as confident as I did. We've had some polls that show the other fellow coming up and it's going to be close as hell."

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Then somebody else said, "How do you think you'll take it if you lose?" and then he had a great big grin and he said, "I'll tell you one thing, I won't take as near as hard as Nixon will." Then he got kind of philosophical about it and I don't want to put words in his mouth at this late date because I don't remember what he said but I remember the sense of it was, that he felt that Nixon didn't have much inner resource and that if he weren't elected it would just be a terrible blow to him. Where as he, Kennedy, had a lot of interests in life, a lot of other things going, and it would by no means cripple him. That was the jist of it. But he said it in a very trenchant way.

[END OF TAPE; END OF INTERVIEW]

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