

Frank Stanton Oral History Interview – 8/26/2002
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Biographical Note

Stanton was a broadcasting executive and president of CBS Television from 1946 to 1971. This interview focuses on television and radio during the 1960 campaign, President Kennedy's administration and assassination, specifically focusing on the Kennedy-Nixon televised debates, among other issues.

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FRANK STANTON

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Influence of radio and television pre-1960
2	Communications Act of 1934
3	Kennedy-Nixon debate
5	Broadcasting the religious issue
7	Stanton's relationship with Joseph P. Kennedy
8	Selection of Administration's staff
10	Evening news
11	Precedent for the debates
13	Johnson's decision not to debate
15	Coverage of the assassination
19	Civil Rights movement
20	John F. Kennedy's socks during the debate
20	Stanton's opinion of the John F. Kennedy Museum

Oral History Interview

with

FRANK STANTON

August 26, 2002
Boston, Massachusetts

by Vicki Daitch

For the John F. Kennedy Library

DAITCH: Let me just introduce the tapes by saying that my name is Vicki Daitch, and I'm interviewing Dr. Frank Stanton. We're in Boston. Our interest is obviously your recollections of JFK [John F. Kennedy]. But I thought maybe we could back up just a little bit and get a feel for your sense of what radio and television were like in politics before John F. Kennedy's presidency.

STANTON: Well, radio was very straightforward. It came into its own, really, in the thirties. It took quite some time for politicians to appreciate what radio could do. They gradually grew up to it, so to speak. The one who used it most effectively, I think, looking back on my recollection, was Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt], who did the Fireside Chats, radio was an enormous help to him. It took a while for the average candidate to appreciate what television could do. In fact, it took me, I guess, 30 years to get them to consider debates, for example.

DAITCH: Really!

STANTON: I published my first comments about it--I'm not sure when now, but I think I did a column in the *Herald Tribune*, a guest column, back in '52. Some candidates said they would like to have television. They could have had it, but they couldn't have it on an exclusive basis. Do you know anything about Section 315?

DAITCH: No, I don't.

STANTON: There's a section in the Communications Act of 1934 that says if you sell or give time to one candidate, you have to be prepared to give or sell to any other candidate for the same office. That meant that, for example, in one of the races for president, in the New York area you would have had to give time to 14 different candidates because they were all qualified candidates. The fact that one was running ahead in the polls had nothing to do with the FCC regulations.

So I became involved and, as far as politics was concerned, was opening up radio and television for debates, meaningful debates, not just little sidebars. I had great resistance on the part of the Congress to change the rules. That was why, I think, in the fifties every opportunity I had I spoke out for debates. That's when I first met Jack Kennedy, I was beating the drums for a change in the rules, having some success but resistance from, for example, Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]. He wanted no part of debates.

DAITCH: Really!

STANTON: In fact, I recall a meeting with Jack Kennedy in the fall of 1960. One or two of the prospective candidates said he didn't think he would support the change in the rule because what assurance did I have that people would really debate? I thought the best thing to do was to be prepared for that question, and I sought out then Vice President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], and he was very quick to say he'd be delighted to debate.

I went down the hall in the Senate Office Building and stopped in to see Lyndon Johnson. He was a long-time friend. I knew him before he was in Congress. We had a very good relationship. I also knew that he was opposed to it, but I thought I'd tell him what I was doing because I was sure he'd hear about it.

So as a courtesy I stopped in. And his secretary, "Oh, he's in there, but he's got somebody with him. Go on in." So I went in, and I could see someone was seated across from Johnson in a chair with a wing back. I couldn't see who it was. And Johnson shouts to me in his choice language, and said, "What the hell do you want?" Because we had that kind of a relationship. I said, "I'm just trying to drum up some trade for my proposal to change Section 315, and I want to see if candidates are willing to debate if you guys change the rules." He said, "Well, why don't you ask Jack?" And sitting across the desk was Jack Kennedy; he had his back to me.

I said that I was calling on Senator Pastore [John Pastore] and others to see whether they would support the change in the legislation. I said, without asking Johnson whether he would, I said to Senator Kennedy, "If we get debates officially approved, would you debate?" He smiled and said, "Oh, sure." So I had Nixon and Kennedy committed.

DAITCH: Now, that was after the convention? He had already been nominated?

STANTON: Oh, no, no.

DAITCH: No, this was way before.

STANTON: Very early on.

DAITCH: Okay.

STANTON: To the displeasure of my friend Senator Johnson I made a sale, and so I got out because I didn't want to hang around. In fact, the secretary shouldn't have sent me in, but I had a good relationship with that office. So I went

home saying to myself, well, I've got at least two of the three possible candidates. Johnson was not as certain of the nomination as I thought Jack Kennedy was, but I wanted to get him because he was an important person. And you know what happened. We had the conventions. In the meantime they changed the law.

We set up the first debate was in... I'm not sure when it was. It was in the fall of '60. It happened that the first debate was held in one of our studios in Chicago. Strangely enough, very few times in the past history had the two leading candidates been in the same town at the same time. Obvious reasons. When you're campaigning, you don't want the competition to be there.

But in November, not November, earlier than that, October of 1960, that's when they were, yes. It was arranged that both Johnson... Well, by that time the conventions had been held, and Johnson was not the nominee, Jack Kennedy was. And obviously the vice president was... The vice president, by the way, was very confident that he could handle the debate on television. The first debate, the first presidential debate, was held in our studios in Chicago, WBBM. Trying to recall anything special about it, except that it was in one of our studios in Chicago.

DAITCH: You were there?

STANTON: The building, if you know Chicago, is down in the... It was an old riding academy, which was on the lakefront. That was fortuitous as far as I was concerned because the candidates had to get from their hotels to the studio with a minimum amount of interference with crowds. The riding academy had entrances on two sides of the building, so you could drive right in with a car and no problem. Nixon arrived first and was greeted by some of my associates and the heads of the other network because it was a joint network program. The vice president went into the studio first, in getting out of the car--he was sitting in the front seat and getting out he banged his knee so bad he could hardly stand up.

DAITCH: Oh!

STANTON: We took him into the studio so he could make some sound level testing and so forth. A few minutes later Jack Kennedy arrived. Now, Nixon looked like warmed-over death. He'd been in the hospital, his color was bad, his collar was very big. You could put your fingers down inside it. He was not a well man. When Kennedy arrived, he was in a navy suit, tanned, quick on his feet, and so forth. When he came on into the studio, Nixon was sitting in a chair. In those days the mics were suspended over.... I'm trying to remember now what we called those. Anyway, the mic was suspended, and they could move the mic around by turning the support, and raise it or lower it....

DAITCH: Like a boom?

STANTON: Boom mike, yes. Nixon was sitting in a chair under the microphone giving some sound levels when he saw Senator Kennedy come in. So he jumped up to speak to him, and the microphone hit on his head and it sounded like somebody dropped a watermelon. It was terrible. After the debate, I was in the control room, and I wanted to go down on.... In those days, the control room was in the studio where the broadcast took place.

So when the program was closed, I wanted to go down on the floor and thank the two candidates for having participated. I went first to the vice president, or where the vice president had been sitting. From the time it took me to go out of the control room to the place where he was, he was gone. I looked and his briefcase was on the table, his coat was there. The Secret Service man said that he had already left. I said, "Well, there's his coat." He said, "He was in a hurry to get out. He was very quick to leave. "

I turned around then and went down the hall to a place where we had provided for the candidates to rest. And Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] was in the hallway, he motioned me in. Jack was obviously talking to someone close to him, maybe a member of the family. We had provided a small.... There was a light that hung from the ceiling over the desk. We shook hands, and he kept on talking. And I got up to go because it sounded to me like he might have talking to a member of the family. And he said, "No, no, sit down. " So I sat there and waited, a long conversation.

When it was over, I said that I appreciated the fact that he had participated. And he said, "Oh, you know Dick Daley [Richard J. Daley], don't you?" Or, "Do you know Dick Daley?" And I said, "Yes." I didn't see that Daley was in the room, in the shadows. And I did know him, so he came over, and I said, well, I was going back to my hotel. Daley said, "I'll take you into the city." This was now in the.... I can't recall the name of the building, but it was in Chicago.

So I went in with Daley, and Daley said, "What did you think of that young man?" And I said, "He did an excellent job." "Well," he said, "it's changed my mind about him." That's the reason I'm telling you this story because I think the debates had more to do with electing Jack Kennedy the first time he ran than anything else he did. He handled himself beautifully on camera. He looked good. He was articulate. And Daley was persuaded that he was going to really support him. He was committed to support him

obviously because they were Democrats. But I take it that he wasn't that enthusiastic about Jack.

So I had an interesting visit with Daley on the way in about Kennedy and the family. Daley seemed to know a lot about him. That was my first encounter with Jack after he was nominated. I don't think I saw him any time before that. I had seen him earlier. Does the name Phil Graham [Philip L. Graham] mean anything to you?

DAITCH: Mmmm hmmm.

STANTON: Phil and I were very good friends. Labor Day weekend Phil called me and asked me if I would join him on a weekend he was going to spend with Jack Kennedy. They were good friends. Now, as much as I would have loved to have spent the weekend with the two guys, I had to think of my position. And if Nixon knew that I was spending the weekend with the other candidate, even though nothing would have happened, he could have accused me of favoring Kennedy in our news broadcasts and so forth. So I begged off. Phil said, "Well, this is your chance." And I said, "That's just the problem.

DAITCH: Right.

STANTON: I had a run-in with Jack in the campaign. If the date is important, I can supply it. In that campaign the issue of religion came up, and it was getting warmer and warmer as an issue. I said to one of our news people, "Let's go into Wisconsin and pick counties that are pure--that we know they're for Kennedy, and let's pick counties that we know are for Nixon. And let's ask questions and see whether we can see any signs of religious preference."

Those counties that were Republican and Catholic were breaking away from the Republican side and going Democratic it was clear, there was no question about it. I think Elmo Koper [Elmo Koper] did the interviewing for us in Wisconsin. And Doug Edwards [Douglas Edwards], I think, was the man handling the remote from Chicago that day, or that evening, and he reported this. The next day at lunch one of my colleagues said, had I heard from Bobby Kennedy? And I said, "No, I haven't. I haven't been to my office." "Well," he said, "he's going to call you."

Later that afternoon I got a call, and there was some confusion, and it wasn't completed. So I thought, well, he's probably complaining about the fact something wasn't handled right in the arrangements for Chicago. Later that afternoon my secretary said that Jack Kennedy was on the phone. He was calling from someplace in Indiana. I obviously took it, and he was screaming at me. He said, "How dare CBS introduce the question of religion in this campaign?" And I couldn't believe that he was that naive. But he was very rough.

I said, "Jack, did you hear the broadcast?" No, he hadn't heard the broadcast, but his associates had told him about it. He thought it was awful that we were getting religion

into this campaign. And I said, "Have you looked at the newspapers?" The editorials all over the country were talking about it. "They've got nothing to do with it! They're not regulated by the FCC!" Well, that set my back up, and I screamed, and he screamed. And I finally said, "If I get a tape for you, will you look at it?" Because I had seen it, and it was as straightforward as it could be. He said, "Okay. " He was then living in Georgetown, and I said, "Are you going to be in Georgetown over the weekend?" He said he would be. I said, "I'll send the tape to you. "

I arranged for our Washington office to send a tape and a playback piece of equipment to the Georgetown residence. I expected to get a call from Jack saying, well, thanks, it wasn't that bad. The engineer that I'd sent with the tape said nobody even gave him a chance to say anything. They just opened the door, stuck their hand out and took it in.

I knew some of the people who were working on the campaign with Kennedy. One of them was Leonard Reinsch [J. Leonard Reinsch], an old friend from Atlanta. I called Leonard and said, "What happened?" "Well," he said, "we listened to it no problem." He said, "They're upset because they don't like anything that raises questions." That was, I think, on Tuesday morning I talked to Leonard.

At any rate, on Wednesday my secretary came into the office, and she had a piece of paper. She was carrying it like it was on fire. So she handed it to me. It was a letter from Jack saying that he had.... It was everything he said it was. Second paragraph in effect said, under our system of government and so forth, you had the right to do the broadcast. I think I've got a copy of that if you have any interest in it.

DAITCH: That is interesting.

STANTON: But at any rate, that was another experience I had with Jack.

DAITCH: The man who was part of his campaign, Leonard Reinsch?

STANTON: R-E-I-N-S-C-H. He handled all of the broadcasting relations for the Kennedys.

DAITCH: Oh, okay.

STANTON: He operated the Cox Broadcasting with headquarters in Atlanta. WSB was his station. He also had a Cox station in Dayton, Ohio. Later I think he had one in California. He was a professional and knew what he was doing.

And a long-time friend of mine. But very close to the Kennedys and very supportive of Kennedy.

DAITCH: So this was during the campaign. Did you have any additional run-ins with the other.... Anything interesting with the other debates?

STANTON: Oh, Bobby I had a lot of trouble with.

DAITCH: Did you? Why is that?

STANTON: Well, he didn't like anything we did, you know. But, no, I saw the president from time to time at the White House on official business. For a variety of reasons I was there, but nothing special about that. I was wondering if I knew any others. We [CBS] did a tour of the White House with Jackie [Jacqueline Kennedy Bouvier Onassis]. Later I was in the White House for something or in a group at the White House. The president came over to me and thanked me for having done the broadcast, and said.... I think he wanted.... He wanted a tape. In those days.... And I said I thought we'd already sent one to him, but I would be sure to get it.

He was very proud of the job that Jackie did, and she had done a very good job. In fact, the producer of that broadcast was Perry Wolff [S. Perry Wolff] out of Chicago, had been in Chicago. Wolf was one of our best documentary producers. He was up here last week, and I had a chance to visit with him. I had lunch with him, and he recalled the experience of doing that broadcast.

DAITCH: Now, is the WOLFE? Perry Wolff, is it--

STANTON: Perry. And then W-O-L-F-F, as far as I know.

DAITCH: FF, okay. Right.

STANTON: His real name is S. Perry. I call him "Skee" because....

DAITCH: Apparently the Kennedys had a big interest in sort of a cultural renaissance for the country. Was that part of the...? Not just Jackie's, but I guess both of them had this interest in it.

STANTON: That was more Jackie. I had a bad experience with his father.

DAITCH: Really!

STANTON: We had a policy in the campaign, in a presidential campaign, if we had a team of correspondents assigned to a candidate, they worked with the candidate, reporting everything that he could up to the halfway point and then switched over to the opposition, and then reversed it. It happened that the midpoint of the campaign in 1960, presidential campaign, at the midpoint I think Jack Kennedy and our crew--not only ours but everybody followed the president around--were in Chicago, I mean Minneapolis. It was a Sunday morning, and I had gotten home to have lunch, and my wife said, "The office says that Mr. Kennedy wants to talk to you."

I had a tie-line from my office to my house, and so it wasn't any problem. I picked it up and said could they get Kennedy back? Well, it turned out it wasn't Jack, it was his

father [Joseph P. Kennedy], and his father said, "I don't want you to take any of those correspondents off." He knew that we were doing it, and I obviously was the guy he called. I knew him. He said, "I want that team of reporters to stay with Jack for the rest of the campaign." I said, "Can't do it. That's a long-standing policy that we try to be fair." He didn't give a damn about that. He was very abusive. He soon discovered that I wasn't going to move, and he said, "I'll have your job." And I said, "You're welcome to it." He said, "I know people on your board, and they won't put up with this kind of stuff. "

I thought it was just an excited father. But the next day I got a call from one of the members of the board, a very good friend, and he said, "What in the hell did you do to Kennedy?" I told him about the policy. He said, "Well, you're absolutely right." He said, "I wouldn't get...." What's the father's name? I can't remember.

DAITCH: Joe. Joe Kennedy. Joseph Kennedy.

STANTON: That Joe was determined to cause me trouble. And I said, "He's welcome to it." And this man, Joe Iglehart [Joseph A.W. Iglehart], and Joe said, "Don't worry about it." He said, "He's doing what he always does. He's trying to push people around." But that's as close as I got to the family at that time. But I was in and out of the office on official things, nothing personal.

After he was elected, he lived in Georgetown for a short period between the time of the election and the inauguration, his secretary called and asked if I'd come down and see him, and was I going to be in Washington anytime? So I said I'd be glad to come by. What he wanted to talk about was he was looking for people, staff people, and he wanted a couple of our people from news to be on his staff. I had nothing to do with it except that.... Well, I had nothing to do with it. If a journalist wanted to leave and go to work for Kennedy, that was his business.

DAITCH: Would that be normal for a president to want news people, journalists?

STANTON: Somebody from the news, oh, yes, look at the staffing that Johnson and.... I'm not as familiar with what's going on now, but that was not unusual. If you go back through the *Congressional Directory* and look at the staff that's closest to the president and look at where they came from, you'll find that a lot of them came out of journalism. I don't blame them. These guys are articulate. They know what's going on, could be very helpful.

DAITCH: Did anyone from CBS go?

STANTON: Blair Clark, I think, might have gone. I'm not sure that he did. He was in our Paris Bureau. But Blair and Jack Kennedy were close in their college years. In fact, I think Kennedy tried to persuade Blair to take an ambassadorship, as I recall.

DAITCH: Did you help them with any other suggestions as far as staff?

STANTON: People?

DAITCH: Yes.

STANTON: Oh, I didn't make any suggestions. He asked me about.... He was interested in getting, at that time, Ed Murrow [Edward R. Murrow] to head the USIA. I could do nothing but applaud that because I had high respect for Murrow. This was in the.... My recollection is that this was when he was in Georgetown before he was in office, and I would certainly support the idea of getting Murrow. But I wouldn't do anything about urging Murrow to do it. You had to keep your hands off of these things, you know.

I'm trying to think. My contacts with the president were those when you'd go to White House dinners and things of that kind, but nothing as explosive as the one when he called me and took me to task about Catholicism.

DAITCH: Is that the only time he ever called you about a news-type issue?

STANTON: Oh, no! Either the president or his staff was on the phone.... Not daily but frequently.

DAITCH: Really!

STANTON: In fact, about seven-thirty in the evening, I'd get a call from the office, from the White House. We had the practice on the evening news with Cronkite [Walter Cronkite], and earlier with Doug Edwards where we would broadcast across the country at.... I think we fed it at six o'clock. But it was up to the station as to when they played it to the audience. In New York I think the feed was at six-thirty and the broadcast was at seven. I generally stayed at my desk until that broadcast was over, for two reasons at least. One because it was part of my job to know what was going on. But the other was that I was sure that I'd get a call complaining about something. So I wanted to not hide behind the fact that I hadn't heard it, but that I had heard it and how I felt about it.

One night I got home about.... That second feed was, I think, at six-thirty to seven, and then I would go up to my house on 92nd Street. The routine was that, if we weren't going to the theater or something, that my wife and I'd have a drink, and I'd sort of unwind and tell her all the problems I'd had that day. Occasionally the office phone would ring, and my wife would say, "Don't take it. We'll never get back to dinner." So, yes, to answer your question. Johnson was the worst on that. He would argue and fuss with me, and then he'd say, "What are you doing this weekend? Come on down to the ranch." So it's a crazy world.

DAITCH: Yes. You're friends, but you can still argue and debate and that sort of thing.

STANTON: Oh, sure.

DAITCH: What did Kennedy think about the.... I guess there's this episode where Cronkite took the news to the half hour, from 15 minutes to a half hour, and then the Kennedy interview was....

STANTON: He opened that.

DAITCH: Right. How did that go? Was Kennedy pleased with that and Cronkite? Because it was a new thing, right?

STANTON: Well, we were pleased because we thought it was important to give the evening news more than 15 minutes. So that took a bit of doing, not just with the people who participated, but in getting the stations across the country to agree to do that at the same time. The man who was responsible for that was a man who had been my assistant and who later was the head of CBS News, Richard Salant [Richard Salant], S-A-L-A-N-T. I think he was head of news for a total of sixteen years. So he was.... But he was the one who moved it to a half hour.

DAITCH: What was Cronkite's relationship with the president?

STANTON: Very good.

DAITCH: Was it?

STANTON: Yes. You have to understand that it's good for the journalist and it's good for the White House. Because the best way to reach people, I still feel, is with television in one form or another. At that period the use of television politically was just getting started. Teddy White [Theodore H. White], in one of his articles or one of his books, credited television with having an enormous impact on presidential campaigns. And I agree. There's no question about that. And that's why I was pushing the debates as hard as I was. That's the only way that the public can see both candidates on the screen at the same time and make direct comparisons.

DAITCH: Right. You know Kennedy is credited with a lot of that bringing television and being such a charismatic person on the screen. But Nixon was enthusiastic about television, too, wasn't he?

STANTON: No, never as effective as Kennedy.... That's another set of problems. Don't get me into that.

DAITCH: I know. I would love to talk to you about that, but it's not exactly our....

STANTON: I can't think of anything else that.... While I was waiting for you, I scribbled some notes.

DAITCH: Oh, good.

STANTON: Well, here is what I wrote Tour of the White House, Wisconsin, LBJ's office. I don't know what that was about. Mayor Daley, First Debate, JFK's father, Phil Graham [Philip Graham]. Oh, he talked to me a lot about getting people for not Cabinet members but administrative jobs, running agencies and things of that kind. I wasn't special. It's just that he knew that I'd had a lot of relations with people and that I might be helpful. He asked me to help him get somebody for USIA. Ed Murrow didn't want it. He did finally end up as head of USIA, but not for Kennedy. No, I can't think of anything else that had to do with Jack and my job....

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE2]

DAITCH: One of the questions that I had was about.... You told me a bit about the debates. I suppose there was some precedent for the debates locally? Did people....

STANTON: Sure. You can do a lot of things. The magnitude of the network, the dimensions of doing a presidential debate are entirely different. Yes, we had a station in Seattle, as I recall, who was very much opposed to us doing the debates.

DAITCH: At all?

STANTON: Yes. There could have been others that didn't surface that I didn't know about. From about 1946 on, every time there would be a meeting of broadcasters, that is, of our affiliates, I would mention the desirability in having debates and say that I was going to try to persuade Congress to change its rule. Technically, I don't know who did the first debate in radio on a station basis. But it had to have happened someplace much earlier. It's a natural, you know.

DAITCH: Right. Makes sense. Kennedy himself--you probably knew this at the time--Kennedy had written an article, that was apparently published in the *TV Guide* in 1959, about doing debates. Probably he'd been listening to

you or
he knew about what you were working on. But he said a couple of things that I wanted to run past you. One of them was that he talked about.... A couple of the drawbacks are the potential for demagoguery, and the other thing is the expense of buying television time for debates.

STANTON: I'll take the second one first. They got that free. There was never any charge for the debates. The cost was on the part of the stations that lost the income from other programs. But there was never any charge for debates. What was the first part of it?

DAITCH: The demagoguery, the potential?

STANTON: My answer to people who said that to me when we trying to line up votes in the House was that when you get to the office of the president, when you're a candidate for that office, you don't fool around with show business or anything else. It's a very serious matter. I never had any feeling that either candidate, or any candidate, for an important office fooled around when they got on television. It could happen, but it didn't happen.

DAITCH: Right. He seemed to think, in the article, that those were concerns, but that the benefits far outweighed the concerns. And he suggested that television was a medium where you could see a person's honesty, that a person would almost have to be honest.

STANTON: I haven't seen that article. But in the first debate, people on the national poll thought that Nixon did a better job than Kennedy did. If you want to see as much of a whole person as you can, television's better than radio. But, you know, in a personal interview the person being interviewed can create an impression that's favorable to him. But it's when you get someone else there who has a different viewpoint that you begin to get the reaction.

If somebody said to me, what's the most important thing you did when you were head of CBS, having nothing to do with entertainment but talking about public affairs, I would say the debates were the most important thing. I really believe that if there hadn't been the debates in 1960, Kennedy wouldn't have been elected.

DAITCH: You think that he would not have been elected without the debates, Kennedy?

STANTON: Yes.

DAITCH: You don't think he would have?

STANTON: No.

DAITCH: I read that people who listened to the debates on the radio thought that Nixon won.

STANTON: Sure.

DAITCH: But people who watched them on television thought that Kennedy won. So what was the difference there?

STANTON: Dick Nixon in that debate, I thought, was on top of his subject a little better than Jack Kennedy was. But from personal appearance, I'd have to say that Kennedy was more relaxed. He looked better. He acted.... His behavior on camera was better, I think, than Nixon's. And, in fact, in that first debate, Nixon got off to a very bad start for the reason that I already told you when he got hit on the head and he banged his knee. He was not as good as I had seen him before.

DAITCH: What about the subsequent debates?

STANTON: There were four debates.... I thought the third one was the more effective in terms of bringing information to the public and letting the public look at the candidates in terms of how they looked and talked and so forth. This is a footnote. There was an effort made on the part of somebody in the press to have the vice

presidents debate, and Lyndon Johnson was in either North Carolina or maybe, North Carolina, I think, the day that story broke. And he called me at home, and he said, "If you're behind this, I just want you to know I'm going to fight you. I don't want to debate, and I don't look upon this as a friendly thing."

We were not pressing for it. I would like to have done it, but four debates was about as much as we could handle. One was in California, one was in New York, one was in Chicago, and I forget where the fourth one.... I guess the fourth one.... I don't know where they originated. I think the second or third one came out of Washington.

DAITCH: Why didn't Johnson want to debate? Did he just not feel comfortable on the camera?

STANTON: He was never very good on the camera. I even put a camera in the Cabinet Room because they had a lot of meetings there, and I wanted him to see how he looked. And as soon as he knew that camera was on, he froze. He was very effective on a one-on-one or in small groups. But there was only once or twice on camera that I think he was the guy that he really was. Jack Kennedy....

Oh, I know one thing. I had a call one Sunday morning from either Lady Bird [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Taylor Johnson] or the president saying they were coming to New York for something, and they wanted to have a drink, and they wanted to talk with me about something. So we had a drink at a hotel on Park Avenue. What Lady Bird said was, where could Lyndon go and be trained to be relaxed in front of the camera?

DAITCH: Really!

STANTON: I said I thought the only thing that I could suggest was that he had to have more experience with the camera, and he ought to see what he looked like when he knows that he's on camera. From that suggestion, I said I would put a camera in the White House where he could see himself in meetings and get the feel of what it was like. Never did anything. We did it, but... I would have done it for anybody who wanted to get that feeling.

DAITCH: Sure. It's a great idea.

STANTON: I don't know how much experience you've had in front of the camera. But when you see yourself and feel the circumstances of when you did the recording as against you and I talking, it's a different experience. Some people can do it without blinking an eye, and others get uptight. Senator Pastore [John O. Pastore] called me one day, and he said, "Did you see the president this morning?" The president was doing some kind of a news conference. I didn't. He said, "You look at it and you tell him..." Of course Pastore was a Democrat..."You tell your friend Lyndon to look at it and see how good he was." In this informal thing. I think it's a [Inaudible]. I said, "John, you tell him." And it was a big joke.

In fact, I did arrange... Johnson called me, and he said, could he see the film? And I arranged for somebody to get it over to the White House. It's second nature now, but in those days it was a bit of a job to do that. But I never had any feeling of hesitation on the part of Jack in television. He took to it just as natural as anything could be.

DAITCH: His comment about honesty in that article, I wonder if for him, because it was easy for him to be on camera, maybe it felt honest, and he appeared natural. But for people who are awkward on camera, it didn't benefit them, and maybe they didn't appear to be honest even if they were.

STANTON: Just the reverse, sure.

DAITCH: I look at some of the old film of Kennedy, and he does appear to be honest. I mean he appears to be just totally straightforward.

STANTON: Yes. Quite a guy!

DAITCH: Did you get the feeling that he was pretty...? I mean obviously there were things where he had to dissemble on television. But by and large did he seem to be pretty forthcoming?

STANTON: Oh, sure. It's pretty tough to hide on the camera.

DAITCH: Must have been difficult with things like the Bay of Pigs.

STANTON: No, that wasn't. That wasn't a problem of television. That was a difficult one.

DAITCH: What about the Cuban Missile Crisis? There was considerable coverage of that, I guess. Cronkite had a special report.

STANTON: Oh, sure. Well, the public saw everything that we had because the candidates do have private meetings, and television isn't there. It's difficult to keep them out, but they do have.... And I don't blame them, and it's for them to do that, and it's for us to do what we do.

DAITCH: Right. Can you tell me a little bit about Dallas? I guess when President Kennedy was shot, it was such a shock to the nation. I've seen the footage of Cronkite on television, and it's just.... It's moving even now. When did you first find out that the president had...?

STANTON: What happened, I was having lunch with one of my senior officers in my private dining room. My secretary apprised me that there was a news bulletin. Now, I was there. In fact, I was called to the White House the day after the assassination because Johnson wanted help. He had the very sensitive job of taking Kennedy people out of key posts and putting his own people in, and that was a tough period.

Bobby Kennedy was very difficult. He wanted to maintain as much of the Kennedy machine as he could. And it was clear, had been clear to anybody who was close, that Bobby had no use for the vice president. The vice president knew that, and that's why he wanted help. But that has no bearing on television. That's just personalities, that's all.

DAITCH: But it's important. How did Johnson and Jack Kennedy get along?

STANTON: They were both politicians, and they knew they had to get along. I don't think there was any deep love and respect either way. Each, I think, recognized what the other could bring to the meeting. Bobby was different.

Bobby just wouldn't have any part of Johnson. It was a bare-knuckle kind of a life.

DAITCH: Must have been a difficult time for him personally, as well, for Bobby. I mean losing his brother and then trying to hold the political thing together.

STANTON: Oh, yes. That was a difficult period for everybody.

DAITCH: The decision to continue to run the news coverage live and with no commercials, was that yours? When Kennedy was shot?

STANTON: I took commercials off right away.

DAITCH: You did?

STANTON: Got a nasty call from Bob Kintner [Robert E. Kintner] who was head of NBC. He said, "You gave us no choice." Which was true. I didn't think of them, but when one did it you couldn't very well stay with it. I think that an important gesture on the part of broadcasters on September 11th was that there were no commercials. Local networks, everything. I haven't said this to only one other person, a very dear friend of mine, but it's no time to go public with it. I hope somebody in the industry has the idea of taking commercials out. Have an enormous sense of change if that happened. Did you read the story about the events that took place a week ago at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York?

DAITCH: No.

STANTON: I don't want to get into it, but.... Television is a powerful, powerful instrument. I was cited by three Congressional committees for contempt of Congress. It was really an experience to see how uptight Congressmen are, and Senators as well, about television because it can reveal so much. And these guys want you to know how they are the way they want you to know. It's our job to report exactly what the Cronkites and the Murrows and so forth.... And the fact that you have at least three network means that they don't all go in the same direction. And thank God they don't.

DAITCH: Right.

STANTON: But it was a fun job.

DAITCH: No doubt. Exciting job anyway.

STANTON: Oh, yes, it was.

DAITCH: There were so many people who did so much work behind the scenes, but for the rest of us, what we saw was Cronkite, and he was so central to the

whole period and, I think, to Americans' understanding of especially the sixties and the seventies.

STANTON: Sure.

DAITCH: We're hoping to talk to him in probably a couple of months. What kinds of things would you think that we should ask Cronkite about? Things that are important to hear maybe from his perspective.

STANTON: Well, anything that touches on the freedom of the press. The importance of giving a balanced picture, not only from an individual broadcaster, but by getting people on the other side to have a chance to make their point.

But I don't think, of anything.... There should be more news and public affairs than there are on the air today. And that's money, and that isn't anything that Walter can do anything about. He can support it, but it's very costly to run the news operation, in print as well as in radio and broadcasting.

But that's an obligation that I think you take on when you decide you're going to work in that area. We lost money as a network every year there was a national convention because so much of the convention coverage and the campaign and so forth were just out of pocket for us. And we weren't alone on that. NBC did the same thing.

But I felt that we were obligated to make sure that we got as much information to the public as we could. We fell short, but I think we did better than any. Certainly I think we're much more open as a society in the use of radio and television than any other country except perhaps England. The BBC has done a pretty good job.

DAITCH: It's interesting, one of the things that I have read about Kennedy was he found it.... I almost got the feeling that he found it difficult to wrap his mind around how there were so many stories in the American press that got back to the Soviets. And the Soviets didn't understand that the American press wasn't the arm of the government in the same way that the Soviet press was. And then that was something that Kennedy had to interpret and had to think about in terms of his....

STANTON: That's what he threw at me, you know.

DAITCH: He did?

STANTON: You're not regulated. Or what he was saying was you are regulated, and you've got to honor it. Every business leader, every political leader, and many of the church leaders, they want to be able to get their side of the story out and forget the other side.

DAITCH: Right, right. Everybody wants their own side out. You know, I guess we'll be talking to Don Hewitt, too, and I read something in his book, again, about the assassination and the coverage of that. I think he said that you came down to the studio where Cronkite was broadcasting. Does that sound right?

STANTON: Well, I came to the studio frequently, so....

DAITCH: Right. You probably would have if you were in town, I would imagine.

STANTON: This is in connection with what?

DAITCH: The assassination.

STANTON: Cronkite wasn't on the air at that time.

DAITCH: When Kennedy was assassinated?

STANTON: I guess Don was his producer at that time. I remember the lunch that I was having at the time of Kennedy's assassination. I walked from my dining room to my office and got hold of the head of the television network and the radio network, and said, "There's no way we, as a company, should have any commercials." Now, I don't know how much you know about how networks are organized. But we at CBS owned, at that time, I think, five television stations and, I believe, seven radio stations. I could make that decision. But if you were a broadcaster in San Diego, and you had the license for your own station, you didn't have to--you could do whatever you wanted to do about commercials. And that's what caused a problem with NBC, it was that they felt that by making the move that we had made, that we had effectively taken them out of control of their own decision. They would've done the same thing.

DAITCH: CBS was the first network to get that on the air, the story about the assassination?

STANTON: To get it on the air? I don't think so.

DAITCH: No?

STANTON: I think that came through on the wire services. I'm not sure. But I don't believe we were first. I don't know who was first. In fact, I don't think anybody was first. Because we had a crew in the party that was a part of the movement of the president in Dallas, and NBC did, ABC did, and I'm sure a lot of independent stations. So they all got it at the same time.

DAITCH: Right. Dan Rather was in Dallas at the time, right?

STANTON: He was a reporter for our affiliate in Houston, I think. The first time he was on the network was in connection with that.

DAITCH: Do you think that that had anything to do with his career, his subsequent career?

STANTON: Oh, sure. It's a long time ago.

DAITCH: It is a long time ago. You know, I was watching footage of Mr. Cronkite. We have it at the museum. And you can't help but stand there and be moved to tears, even though it was so long ago, as he was. And the only thing comparable that I can remember.... I was young, you know, a toddler when that happened. But the only comparable thing I can think of is the recent terrorist attacks. But, you know, for the American people to see Walter Cronkite on television obviously emotional about the president. He stayed on the air for some time that day, right, by himself?

STANTON: I think he was in the studio almost the whole time. It doesn't mean that he was on the air all that time. But he was there, yes. That's our job.

DAITCH: Right. Well, let me see if I have a few things that I need to talk to you about before I let you go. Cronkite did these specials on things like the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Were they during the crisis or afterwards as kind of an analytical thing?

STANTON: The hard news was during the crisis, but the documentaries, the think pieces, if you will, those were generally after the fact. I can't think of any example where a serious or the kind of analytical that you're talking about is done while the action is going on.

DAITCH: Right. I suppose it doesn't make much sense to do that before the facts are in anyway. Oh, we talked about some of the other things that were going on. But the civil rights movement, which was gathering steam during the Kennedy Administration, it was difficult for them dealing with all the foreign policy. But then things like the March on Washington, what type of coverage did CBS do for civil rights?

STANTON: I think the record will show we did more than anybody else, but I can't enumerate the broadcasts now.

DAITCH: Did you know Martin Luther King? Had you met him?

STANTON: Yes, yes. I knew his widow, too.

DAITCH: I read somewhere, when Kennedy was watching the "I Have a Dream" speech on television, that he had apparently never really seen anything more than a few sound bytes of King speaking. But he watched this entire speech, and he said, "He's good!" [Laughter]

STANTON: Sure. The real test of television isn't when it's a one-sided presentation. It's when you get the two sides in front of the camera at the same time, where you can see the interplay that takes place. That's the great thing that happened with the debates.

DAITCH: Those were wonderful. Just the other day I watched the first debate, and Nixon.... It's funny that you said that he hit knee, because I noticed that he was standing awkwardly, and I thought that he was just awkward.

STANTON: No, he was in bad shape. He had been in the hospital for several days before the debate. And he didn't have the good staff work, that's one thing. He had a light suit on instead of a dark suit. It doesn't make any difference today, but at that time it did. And people who were close to him just said he just didn't pay any attention to them.

This is a very, very small point. But in the opening period, in the warm-up, if you will, of making sure that the cameras are working, Jack Kennedy had socks on about this long [Stanton held his thumb and forefinger just a few inches apart], and he was sitting in the chair, and of course his trousers came up, and he had the bare legs. I was watching it on a closed circuit, and I said as a friendly thing, we ought to make sure that his people know. And they responded. They had one of the guys take his socks off and gave them to Jack. Because otherwise he'd have been naked there and it would have been a distraction. No question about that.

DAITCH: That is a small thing, but that is great. That is a great little story. It's such a gem. It's the kind of thing, if I were writing a book about Kennedy, I would love to put that in.

STANTON: Sure. The guy I got hold of was Leonard Reinsch, because he was handling their broadcasting. I didn't have the sense that he had. He got one of the junior people to take his socks off and give them to the president. I said,

"Can you get somebody at the hotel to bring out some long socks." And they solved it a different way, more effectively. But little things like that make a difference.

DAITCH: Absolutely. You have been to the museum recently?

STANTON: Oh, yes.

DAITCH: What is your feeling about the exhibits? Do you have favorites or ones that you thought could have been done better?

STANTON: I was being taken around, and I didn't have the chance to look critically. But I had a sense of confusion. But I haven't done.... This is a couple of years ago when I was there. Are the displays being changed at any time?

DAITCH: I think some of them are. I think some of them stay as they are. But then there are some that change.

STANTON: Well, you can't change history. You've got to keep it. But I had the feeling that some of the displays--and I can't tell you now which ones they were--needed a strong director's touch of making sure that there wasn't confusion in the way they were presented. But it's easy to do that.

DAITCH: I can mention that to Deborah [Deobrah Leff]. To tell you the truth, I actually got turned around in the museum the other day. As you know, I can get lost in a paper bag. But it does seem to me a little confusing just in the way that it's physically laid out.

STANTON: Who did the masterminding job?

DAITCH: I don't know. The director there now is new. She's only been there about a year. And I'm just connected with the oral history project, so I don't know that much about the history of the museum.

STANTON: Well, this is easy to say, but I think any show gets tired. And sometimes it's good to bring in a fresh, not as a fresh director, but just somebody to come in and look and make comments. Frequently, when I've done something like that, I find the people making the comments don't know why things were done the way they were. But occasionally you get help from a purely outside viewpoint.

DAITCH: Right.

STANTON: Have you come across a man by the name of Jay Winston?

DAITCH: I don't think so.

STANTON: He does a lot of stuff for Harvard, not in television. Well, in television,

yes. He thinks that more ought to be done about how people get to Columbia Point. And that they should come by boat because they could come by boat, and that would make it a much more exciting thing for the kids, not for the parents necessarily.

DAITCH: It's probably not a bad idea.

STANTON: Oh, no, I think it's a....

DAITCH: It could be a little outing. We need more creative ideas like that, I suppose. I don't know what it would take.

STANTON: Oh, I think you could at some parts of the year. That would be a family thing to do as a tourist. You know, it'd be terrific. I think it was Jay who suggested that.

DAITCH: We'll have to touch base with him and find out. You know, I'll bet they would welcome you to come back again and take a look with a critical eye at the exhibits.

STANTON: You're talking to a guy that's just on the edge of 95.

DAITCH: Congratulations!

STANTON: Well, I can't get around very well.

DAITCH: But you have a great memory.

STANTON: My wife didn't think so. [Laughter]

DAITCH: Maybe not about everyday stuff. But I really appreciate.... You know, I had all these questions that I was going to pester you with, and you answered pretty much all of them before I even had a chance to get started.

STANTON: Okay.

DAITCH: But I really appreciate your time.

[END OF INTERVIEW - JFK #1, 8/26/2002]

Frank Stanton Oral History Transcript
Name List

C

Clark, Blair, 9
Cronkite, Walter, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 19,
20

D

Daley, Richard J., 5

E

Edwards, Douglas, 6, 10

G

Graham, Philip, 11
Graham, Philip L., 5

H

Hewitt, Don, 19

I

Iglehart, Joseph A.W., 8

J

Johnson, Claudia Alta Taylor, 14
Johnson, Lyndon B., 2, 3, 9, 10, 11, 14,
15, 16

K

Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 7, 8
Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9,
10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18,
19, 21, 22
Kennedy, Joseph P., 8, 11
Kennedy, Robert F., 4, 6, 7, 16, 17
King, Coretta Scott, 21
King, Martin Luther, Jr., 21
Kintner, Robert E., 17
Koper, Elmo, 6

L

Leff, Deborah, 22

M

Murrow, Edward R., 9, 12, 17

N

Nixon, Richard M., 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 13,
14, 21

P

Pastore, John, 2, 15

R

Rather, Dan, 20
Reinsch, J. Leonard, 6, 7, 22
Roosevelt, Franklin Delano, 1

S

Salant, Richard, 11

W

White, Theodore H., 11
Winston, Jay, 23
Wolff, S. Perry, 7