

Joseph W. Alsop Oral History Interview – RFK #1, 6/10/1971
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Biographical Note

Alsop, a journalist, author, Kennedy friend and associate, discusses his relationship with Robert F. Kennedy, the appointment of vice president after President Kennedy's assassination, and Robert Kennedy's relationship with President Johnson, among other issues.

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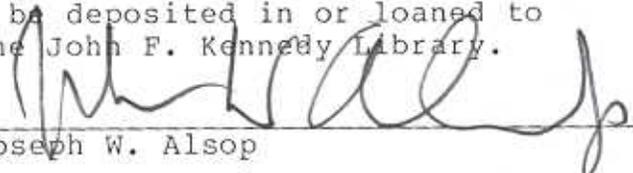
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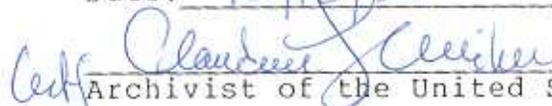
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JOSEPH W. ALSOP
RFK #1

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Oral History Interview

With

JOSEPH W. ALSOP

June 10, 1971
Washington, D.C.

By Roberta W. Greene

For the Robert Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library

GREENE: I might as well begin by asking you how much you saw of Robert Kennedy in the weeks following the assassination in 1963?

ALSOP: Well, not a great deal, I don't think. I saw him the way everybody else did in town, in the sort of little.... It was a very intimate and not very big group, the people who were really close to the president [John F. Kennedy] and close to the one another, and so, of course, we did see one another, but I don't remember where or when or how, at all.

GREENE: Do you have much of a feeling for what he was thinking in those days in terms of his own future? Could you discuss that?

ALSOP: Yes. In a kind of way we used to argue about it. Because I thought, and I still think, that his heartbreak over his brother's loss, which was very true and very moving and very real, should not have been allowed by him to carry over into the kind of resentment of President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] that he plainly felt from the first, although he was still the new president's attorney general.

He said to me rather early on in an angry way--I'm referring to the.... There was a time when Phil Graham [Philip L. Graham] and I went to urge the president to nominate Johnson as his vice president--"Now you've made that damn fellow president of the United States."

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There's nothing to reply to that except that along such language, I wouldn't be able to... I couldn't really like that aspect of his response to this tragedy.

I remember my cousin Eleanor [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] when President Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] died. I wrote her, naturally. I was serving in China overseas at the time. By that time I had come to admire President Roosevelt rather deeply, and was completely heartbroken. I wrote her a letter, in effect saying that the pygmies had inherited it. She wrote me there, although she answered almost none of her letters of condolence; she instantly wrote me a very beautiful letter saying that I was quite wrong; she was sure that Mr. Truman [Harry S. Truman] was going to be a good president; in any case, as Americans we always had to back up the president, however much we might regret the one who had just been taken from us. I thought it so wonderful--I wish I had the copy of it still--that I had it copied and circulated in the staff of the air force in which I was serving. It seemed to me that that was the sort of stylish response on the public side.

GREENE: Were his feelings about Johnson as obvious before the assassination as after it, to you?

ALSOP: No, they weren't. Although I never thought he... President Kennedy himself always treated his vice president with great distinction, in just the right way; brought him into everything. You know.

GREENE: Then you think it was more a reaction to his own grief?

ALSOP: But I think Bobby.... There was a kind of a chemical thing. Then if you were an old-fashioned sort of an American, as I was, I couldn't help but be even a little shocked by the sense of prerogative that they all had, actually. It was as though a ruling family had been displaced by unjust fortune. In America we don't have ruling families, and I hope we never do.

GREENE: Did you ever level that criticism at him?

ALSOP: No, it was not worth arguing. You know, I had, in those last years, a very funny relationship with Bobby, with the senator, because I'd not known him very well until his brother's campaign for the presidency. In the time of his association with the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] committee [Permanent Investigations Subcommittee of the Senate Government Operations Committee], without really knowing what he was doing, I had rather disapproved of him.

It also, I suppose, ought to be remembered that he was very much closer to his father than President Kennedy ever was. His

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father and I had had a fearful quarrel and had not been on speaking terms since the Hitler [Adolph Hitler] time because, as ambassador, it has to be faced, Joe Kennedy [Joseph P.

Kennedy] was all for isolationism and appeasement. When he was, in effect, dismissed by Mr. Roosevelt, he came back to this country to make appeasement-isolationist propaganda; went so far in Hollywood, where he had lots of connections, as to say the British were every bit as anti-Semitic as Hitler was, which was exaggerated. [Interruption] As people like that always do, he thought he could get away with it. Bob Kintner [Robert E. Kintner], who was my partner in those days, and I blew the gaff on him, and it upset him terribly. There was a terrible personal row, not a direct personal row, but all sorts of enraged messages came to Kintner and me--I didn't pay any notice to them; never much liked him anyway. He was a friend of Bob Kintner. We never spoke from that day really, until his stroke. I think that must have influenced Bobby a bit.

Then you have to bear in mind that, very unlike the president, Bobby was much more likely to be put off by my peculiar accent, some superficial thing. So we weren't really close friends until the president's campaign for election. [Interruption] Then we became I think it's fair to say, really close friends. On my side, at any rate, I came to have enormous admiration for his qualities of character, his courage, his generosity of thought, particularly his vitality, and his power of real affection. I came to admire Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] as much as any woman I knew. She's a genuine original, one of the strangest kind. Never known anyone like her in my whole life. Goodness knows, I wish there were dozens more. Then the world would be a nicer and more entertaining place.

So that was where we started, and I think he was genuinely fond of me, and I think probably initially thought that I had a very good judgment--I sometimes suspect because his brother and I had never really disagreed about anything of any importance whatever. The little minor thing, having to do essentially with a kind of style that I mentioned earlier, that sense of prerogative.... It really would have been a great deal more stylish, if you want, and also in the long run I think it would have been a bit more practical politics, for Bobby to respond to the terrible tragedy that he had undergone, and to the new president who was installed by it, in the way my cousin Eleanor did. I have to say that, in fact, that was a matter of style.

If you want to get down to substance, it was for me, at any rate--I don't think it mattered very much for him, although he wanted to keep me on his side--really quite soon a matter of being pulled very much two ways. Because, the fact has to be faced that Bobby progressively abandoned a whole series of principles that his brother, and indeed he, had stood for.

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To give you a very small example, he--as everyone on that side now likes to forget--had taken the lead in organizing the whole counterinsurgency effort, including the Green Berets. The president had put him in charge of it; he was deeply enthusiastic about it. He was very proud of it, as he had every reason to be because he did a first-class job. I can remember Ethel the night that Guevara [Ernesto Che Guevara] was killed. I had suspected from the first that Guevara was a total phony. If you read the *New York Times* or indeed, most of the fashionable publications before he was killed, you might have supposed that he was at the head of a surging human sea of loyal guerrillas. In fact, he was nothing of the kind, as the diaries have revealed. Why, in God's name, everyone makes a hero of him, I don't know. It's beyond my simple mind. Ethel was really saddened by his death. Well, in point of fact, the

counterinsurgency methods and apparatus that Bobby had created had a considerable amount to do with the efficiency with which Guevara in fact was dealt with. It was on the tip of my tongue...

GREENE: You wouldn't say so?

ALSOP: ...to say so to Ethel but I didn't want to.... I'm so deeply attached to her as a person that, what's the use?

In the case of Bobby, I think it's fair to say that in the whole area of foreign and defense policy, which I principally care about, you have to put it first because these are very dangerous times we live in, and our survival is by no means guaranteed. It's so much different from when I was your age. So I give it priority. In this area he progressively abandoned everything that President Kennedy had stood for, or just about everything that President Kennedy had stood for, and furthermore, he never admitted that he was abandoning it.

GREENE: I was going to ask you if you...

ALSOP: As far as I could see, none of them did. But I couldn't get angry with Bobby, simply because you can't get angry with people that you genuinely do love, and I loved him in a kind of way. I mean, it's not a word you use nowadays, but I was really deeply attached to him as a human being: he was quite unlike anybody else I had ever known, just as the president was. Infinitely more admirable, whatever you thought of his particular views at the moment, than most people on the scene, or anybody on the scene. So, as I say, you were always pulled two ways.

But I think that it will be held by historians, if my pessimistic views prove to be correct--in parenthesis I should add, I was the only newspaperman in Washington that goes to bed every night praying

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that he's dead wrong--that Bobby did a great disservice by, in effect, leading the parade of all the other people who then abandoned the principles and view of the world that President Kennedy had always held and stood for. Because his line had a most profound effect, I think, on the sort of establishment liberals, most of whom were such goddamn fools it would be a waste of powder to blow them to hell, and also, much more important, on the young people.

It's very hard for me to talk about it now because, as I say, I'm always pulled two ways, by the deep regret I feel that he's not still around, by the absence of his tremendously courageous, tremendously alive, tremendously genuine, tremendously warm and caring person; and by my own cold-blooded judgment, on the other hand, of what I conceive to have been the historical role that he played after his brother died. It was just as though, you know, a whole new chapter began, oh really, almost immediately.

GREENE: How would he respond if you did put it to him the way you just have to me?

ALSOP: But, my dear, I never did, is the answer to that, nor would I have done. He

used to call on me for advice, which he never took. He knew what I thought. Sometimes I would ask if I could see him in order to argue with him, really. I never expected it to do very much good. I've reached an age in which I don't get angry with people for not taking my advice, providing I'm attached to them. And there it was. I mean it wasn't a thing that I can say to Bobby, that he's throwing up his brother, who was my closest younger friend and...

GREENE: But you did say...

ALSOP: ...whose friendship was the best piece of luck that I had had in my life, and he cared about more than anyone else with the possible exception of Ethel. I couldn't throw his brother in his teeth. I really couldn't. It would have been...

GREENE: But you did say it several times in your column. I noticed that, in reading over them. I don't remember so much your speaking of Robert Kennedy, but of the president's advisors as having deserted his principles. Would he react to that kind of a column? Would he call you on it?

ALSOP: No.

GREENE: But it didn't seem to dampen his affection?

ALSOP: Well, I think what he probably thought was that it was, given my view, a sign of affection, as indeed it was on my part, in that I used the phrase "president's advisors" instead of saying Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

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GREENE: In a couple of places, I think you actually do say, or at least imply, that he was the head of.... Or at least that he was being led down the....

ALSOP: And so I thought he was, and so he knew. I mean, I told him so. In his final terrible weeks, it was a tremendous kind of internal tug of war for me, but you've read my last columns that I wrote when I was out and left the campaign trail with him just before he was shot. They were, I think it's fair to say, waiting rather nervously. I don't want to exaggerate; I think it's always ridiculous to suppose that newspapermen have any influence--but they were waiting with some concern to see what I'd say about it. I thought about it very seriously, and I concluded, possibly foolishly, possibly being misled by affection, that if he were elected president and had to face the responsibilities, he would go about nine-tenths of the way back to where his brother had been. So, I gave myself that bit of possibly artificial balm, and in effect supported him.

GREENE: Let me back up a little bit to 1964 again. Did you discuss with him what he should do? I know you wrote a column in the beginning of January saying that he had decided to stay on at Justice at least through the election. Was this firsthand information?

ALSOP: Yes. He had told me he'd done it. If he'd been named vice president by Johnson, sweet God alone knows what would have happened. Now that I know how Johnson treated poor Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], he would never have dared to treat Bobby in that way. At any rate, it was very clear to me that he had wanted to be named vice president by Johnson. It was very clear to me that there were many good practical reasons for Johnson naming him vice president. The way to have attained that was by no means the course that he ultimately took.

GREENE: I'm not sure I follow what you're referring to.

ALSOP: Well, this feeling that he had about Johnson became more and more open. I think he would have had to be a sort of loyal attorney general. I don't think that it's honest to say that he was quite that, if you see what I mean.

GREENE: Well, in a general way. What do you think it had to do with?

ALSOP: Listen, I don't really know what happened. Johnson was a fool in the way he handled the situation.

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GREENE: Do you think that Johnson--I don't know how much contact you had with one another at that time--but do you think...?

ALSOP: I had a great deal.

GREENE: Well, did Johnson have any intention ever, do you think, of naming Kennedy, even if it had been Romney [George Romney] or Scranton [William W. Scranton] rather, than Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater]?

ALSOP: I think he must have given very serious thought to the idea early on, you know, my dear; but by the time the parting occurred, Bobby had offended the president so bitterly in so many ways. So many things that Bobby had said had been repeated back to Johnson. You know what this town is like.

GREENE: Right. Right.

ALSOP: So many things that Bobby's admirers had said had been spread all around.

GREENE: And then taken for his?

ALSOP: And taken for his--and some would agree with justice, that I suppose what Johnson mainly wanted was just plain old revenge.

GREENE: So you think even if he was thinking originally, it was for political reasons

rather than because he ever would have really wanted Kennedy, or that he thought it would have helped him?

ALSOP: Well, there was something almost like a chemical antipathy between the two men. He'd never have wanted Kennedy, but then Johnson never wanted another politician except to serve his own purposes. Most politicians don't. It's no criticism of Johnson to say that.

GREENE: No. That's right.

ALSOP: It's very hard to judge a man like Johnson. I knew him, indeed I do know him very well, and I admire him and always did admire him. There's something rather monstrous about him. Well, there was, in another way, about Bobby. I mean he was not like other people. Sometimes in wonderfully admirable ways, while more often than Johnson in wonderfully admirable ways; sometimes, as I've suggested to you, wasted much of the time.

GREENE: Was he concerned when he did talk to you about staying on at Justice, about what it would be like working within Johnson's cabinet? Was that something that was worrying him?

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ALSOP: Well, if I recall the conversation at all correctly, I was rather concerned. I'm not sure I didn't give him the same advice I gave Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] the day or so after the president died. I'd worked in my lifetime for a monster, my old general, C. L. Chennault [Claire Lee Chennault], really rather a monstrous man in many respects but a great, great genius in what he was good at; that's all that mattered under the circumstances. I told Mac that if you were working for a monster, the thing to remember was whether he was a beneficent monster. If he was a beneficent monster, the rest of it didn't matter. I rather think that I repeated that conversation to Bobby when we talked about it.

GREENE: Did he see it that way?

ALSOP: I would think not, now. I don't know.

GREENE: Did he discuss with you at all about how people had changed towards him after the assassination, and once his power had diminished? The sense of fair-weather friendship?

ALSOP: My dear, he didn't. I'm quite certain he didn't feel I had changed.

GREENE: Oh no, no.

ALSOP: [Laughter]

GREENE: I meant really people within the government that he had depended on and felt close to.

ALSOP: That I would imagine must have happened. I'm certain, knowing him, that it must have hurt him very much, and been another complicating factor in what was already a very complicated situation. But I'm quite certain that he didn't feel that I had behaved as a fair-weather friend.

GREENE: No. No. Really, the people I'm thinking of are people within the government.

ALSOP: Who, for example?

GREENE: Well, I don't even really know names. People have said that he was very hurt by certain people within the government that he thought were loyal and close to him, and then who went where the power did after the assassination; that he realized how few people he could truly trust; that they'll just follow the power.

ALSOP: It would be awfully hard for me to identify any persons of consequence who followed that course. In fact, one of the things that he did that I thought was quite wrong was to sort

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of have a Kennedy government inside the Johnson government.

GREENE: People who he felt more for should stay with him?

ALSOP: I thought that was improper.

GREENE: Did President Johnson complain about that?

ALSOP: He didn't complain to me, but I'm sure he knew about it and I'm sure it made him very cross.

GREENE: What possibilities did he discuss with you, things he was considering doing? I know there was talk about being ambassador to Vietnam and discussions of going abroad, and...

ALSOP: He offered Johnson to take that job.

GREENE: Did he talk to you about that?

ALSOP: Yes. He told me that he had done it, but I think only after he had made the offer to the president and it was refused. This sounds awful pompous, but I think the basic thing in this first period that you're talking about was that he

had not thought through what really amounted to the issues of constitutional propriety. If he'd asked me about going as ambassador to Vietnam, I'd have replied immediately, "But Bobby, you must realize that if you're going to do that, you go as the agent of the policy of the president of the United States. You're not an independent buccaneer in the sort of late seventeenth century style, in charge of Java for the Netherlands East Indies Company. You're the U. S. ambassador in Vietnam and therefore the personal agent of the president of the United States. Now, would you be prepared to deal with the job in that manner?"

GREENE: You don't think that's the way he was thinking?

ALSOP: I don't think he thought that way about it at all, no.

GREENE: He thought he would be making policy?

ALSOP: Well, he thought he could just take the whole show over and make it his own way. I'm not sure on balance that it wouldn't have been a good idea for Johnson to send him. That's another question. I think it perhaps probably would have been. But the way the thing was conceived was, in my way of thinking, inherently improper, if I read his real purpose correctly. You see what I mean?

GREENE: Oh yes.

ALSOP: You see, it all goes along with not calling presidents by their first names, and you sort of start with that and end by a very clear idea of what a president's authority and

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prerogatives are. No one has any obligation to stay around as attorney general, or go to Vietnam as ambassador if he doesn't like operating within the limits of that authority and those prerogatives.

GREENE: Right.

ALSOP: But if you are going to do it, you have to operate that way, or there's a measure of impropriety in the.... It's an awful pompous word to use but it still is the word.

GREENE: I agree with that.

ALSOP: I mean, just like me calling President Kennedy "Jack" after he was elected president, only on a much bigger scale. I had to rebuke my cousin Franklin Roosevelt [Jr.] for doing just that. Whereas, in contrast, his mother, whom I've already cited for you, he told me a marvelous story about. She was, of course, against him, she was a sort of "Ma" to Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson]. After the inauguration, he asked her to the White House. Big occasion. And they got along. They were, I think,

lunching upstairs. Anyway, they were in the oval sitting room. When they got up to go into lunch he, naturally, motioned her to go through the door first, and she turned to him in that funny way she has, and said, "But now you go first, Mr. President." [Laughter] Which is true! Even with a very distinguished older woman, although a sensible president will let the distinguished older woman remind him of it before he does it.

In all of those things, I don't know, I always wonder whether I'm being stuffy and old-fashioned. I don't think I am, though, because all of those things, and particularly the big things like recognizing the president's authority and prerogatives in his own shop--the rest of it is just symbols--I think are very important in our peculiar system of government.

GREENE: Of course, the Kennedys were most meticulous about these things when the president was president.

ALSOP: Yes, but they were rather scornful of them after.

GREENE: Yes.

ALSOP: Initially I must say, he was rather hurt because I insisted on calling him "Mr. President". And so was Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]. I had to write her a letter about it.

GREENE: And yet even the family to this day, when they speak of him it is the president.

ALSOP: Well, to this day, I always thought of him as President Kennedy.

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GREENE: I suppose these things vary when emotions are involved.

ALSOP: I don't think they ought to, you know.

GREENE: That's another question.

ALSOP: I don't think they ought to, I mean, if you don't like a guy, you always have the option of just going away. I mean we've had a fair number of pretty unlikable presidents, and no one was compelled to serve in their administration or be their ambassador anywhere, or do any of those other things.

GREENE: I don't know if anybody really knows, and I don't know how much Robert Kennedy thought deeply about it. It might have been an impulsive thing, but it would be interesting to know how his thinking went on that subject, how he viewed that aspect.

ALSOP: Well, I'll tell you this, my dear, I'm sure if he'd ever been elected president--I doubt he would have been, you know--he would have taken a stronger view of those matters than his brother ever did. Although in his brother's case, in a

funny way, that's because I'd take a very strong view of him, I got sort of bread upon the water. That's because other people didn't; they wanted it all to go on being exactly the same; it couldn't go on being exactly the same; it never can go on being exactly the same when you're president of the United States. It's worse than when Caesar was made Flamen Dialis [a priest of Jupiter] at the age of seventeen and couldn't wear any buttons on his clothes because he was a sacred object.

GREENE: I never knew that.

ALSOP: That was very, very odd. It was an extreme rule of primitive Roman religion. He had a very, very, very odd looking hat, and his clothes all had to be tied with strings, something having to do with the darkest depths of Roman primitive religion. It's not a bad comparison.

My wife and I were rewarded, in fact, for being old fashioned about it precisely because we observed what I conceived to be all the rules. Ours was the very last private house in Washington by a period of over a year that President and Mrs. Kennedy came to. They came nearly once a month, causing great envy of my colleagues and giving me very great pleasure.

GREENE: I should think.

ALSOP: The reason for that was: a) we didn't ask rich Aunt Agatha--wish I had one--to make use of the president of the United States, which everybody else did; b) we always treated him as

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the president of the United States, and we always tried to get people that would amuse him and take him out of himself.

GREENE: So he did continue to come quite frequently.

ALSOP: Oh yes, he came very often, I mean, given the fact that he was president. I should think I averaged once every six weeks.

GREENE: Very flattering.

ALSOP: I guess it was very flattering. I was deeply proud of it. I never understood all that side of Bobby, and I never talked to him about it.

GREENE: When he spoke to you about the vice presidency, I assume it was directly. Is that right?

ALSOP: No. He didn't talk to me very much about it.

GREENE: You wrote I know, in your January 29th column, right after he came back

from Indonesia that he probably had little interest in it, but then later on you imply that he actually was interested but felt that it was politically unrealistic. Is that correct?

ALSOP: I think now that he always was interested in it. I think I was wrong. I think I was partly misled because I thought that.... He did ask for my advice about it, now that I think of it. I pointed out to him that given their relations, it would be really a grinding chore to be a proper vice president under Lyndon Johnson. But then, I don't think he wanted to be a proper vice president.

GREENE: Do you think he saw it primarily as a political stepping stone?

ALSOP: Yes, I think so. Again, it's a matter of, sort of, constitutional propriety. There is no reason for a vice president to take what Hubert Humphrey took from Lyndon Johnson. He took it voluntarily because he thought it would improve his chance of getting what he finally got, namely Johnson's support in 1968. He was really thinking of 1972, I suppose, until the very last minute. But Johnson who, curiously enough, had a very clear idea of the rules about these matters, in fact used to annoy President Kennedy because, unless they were alone--you know, at a large meeting, at which policy was being discussed--he habitually simply said, when asked to give his opinion, "I agree with the president." I know he didn't do that when the president called him in privately. He didn't want anyone to hear him disagree with the president.

GREENE: Did Robert Kennedy ever acknowledge what a loyal vice president Johnson was? Was that pointed out to him?

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ALSOP: I never heard him do so, and I don't think he felt it.

GREENE: Not many people said it but....

ALSOP: You have to admit, you have to face the fact that, with all his generous heartedness and largeness, Bobby was just an awful hater, and he wasn't at all generous to people he disliked. The whole thing was sort of out of control.

To start with, any practical, political person ought to have known that President Kennedy could not have been elected without Johnson. He had to have the extra that Johnson gave the ticket. I don't know any sensible politician or analyst in my trade that doesn't agree on that. It wasn't all one way. President Kennedy didn't, out of the generosity and grace of his character, give the vice presidency to Johnson. I mean, it was a two-way business.

I think, as vice president, with all his curious characteristics--and he certainly does have some very, very odd ones--Lyndon Johnson behaved as vice president really impeccably, just as President Kennedy as president behaved perfectly impeccably to Johnson. Much more so than he did, for example, to Adlai Stevenson whom he loved to tease and held really in contempt. He didn't have any contempt for Johnson. He greatly admired him. He told me over and over again during the campaign that if he couldn't get it, Johnson

was the only man in the Democratic party who really deserved to be president of the United States.

GREENE: I remember at the time of the assassination so many people saying that the president said over and over that the vice president was supposed to be able to take over the country.

ALSOP: Well, he had said that sort of thing. But Bobby seemed to see Johnson only as a kind of wicked supplanter. That's it. It was the most curious...

GREENE: Do you think a lot of the people that he was close to actually thought the way you do?

ALSOP: No. I don't think so at all. And I think he had a very, very bad way of choosing advisors. Some of them, like Tom Johnston [Thomas M. C. Johnston] in New York, who was his sort of satrap of New York, were really first class. Some of them were very clever, like Adam Walinsky who I'm fond of. President Kennedy wouldn't have stood for five minutes for a whole series of staff members and advisors who were grinding their own axes instead of grinding his, President Kennedy's, axes. He wouldn't have stood for being given advice because, for quite extraneous reasons the advisor in question, wanted him to do X or Y. He could smell that across that room if he was being given advice for the benefit of anyone except the interests or best course of John F. Kennedy.

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GREENE: Yes. I was thinking more in terms of the older group of advisors. If they....

ALSOP: I don't think that Bobby had the knack of sorting out who was disinterestedly for him and I think I can honestly say, although it was very seldom taken that I never gave him a word of advice without thinking only of his interests, as I saw them. Now, I have a particular view, but about his interests, I don't think he ever suspected me of doing anything like that. Otherwise, with the fact that the advice was also unpalatable, he wouldn't have listened to it at all. [Laughter]

But he had a funny way of hiring these awful, letting these people attach themselves to him, and there were a very large number of them who were very far from disinterested.

GREENE: Who are you thinking of?

AISOP: You would have to have looked at the goddamn political landscape as littered with miserable corpses. They sometimes reminded me of intestinal worms. Without Kennedy to live off, they die. You can count almost on the fingers of one hand, in the sort of groups of the type that I'm thinking of, the people who have genuinely made new, quite independent lives for themselves, like Tom Johnston and Pierre Salinger [Pierre E. G. Salinger].

GREENE: Who were you thinking of, primarily though, as the ones that you felt were the most parasitic?

ALSOP: Well, it wasn't exactly parasitic. They were desperately eager for political power, often for ideological reasons. They had no knack of getting it themselves and so they lived through the Kennedys.

GREENE: Well, you could almost say that about some people surrounding the president, also, although perhaps not as many.

ALSOP: President Kennedy. Yes, indeed you could. I mean, it was just the same. But President Kennedy's were different from Bobby's in the sense that the first rule was that they thought first of the interests of John F. Kennedy; and a long way second, of their own prejudices, conveniences and ambitions. That was darn different from being an advisor who thought, first, of his particular ideological brand of yard goods and, second, of how to persuade Bobby to buy it.

If you take Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin], who's a man I know and very much dislike, simply because of his track record, President Kennedy spotted very early on what Goodwin was like. I heard him say, myself, not very long after the inauguration, "I want that man out of this house!"

[-14-]

GREENE: Meaning the White House?

ALSOP: Goodwin had worked hard in the campaign. He wasn't dropped. He was pushed into the State Department, and was sort of dropping down the ladder rung by rung, so that by the time President Kennedy was shot, Goodwin was suing for the job of political advisor to the Peace Corps, not a very eminent position.

President Johnson, wrongly in my opinion, felt he had to have someone who could produce Kennedyesque prose. Then Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] walked out, which he did pretty early. He fished up Goodwin and installed him. Goodwin's national position, which is considerable--he is a very, very clever man--was entirely made in those early Johnson years. You can't say that a great sense of gratitude for something major done for him has imbued his subsequent behavior. [Laughter] In fact, the rule is, "No hand that feeds him not bitten off to the elbow." [Laughter] Most of them weren't like that. And then there was.... I don't know. It's all beyond me; I'm too old-fashioned to understand it all.

GREENE: Do you have anything you could add to what we already know about his meeting with President Johnson on July 27th when he told him that he would not be considered for vice president? Did you see him after that?

ALSOP: I did see him after that, and he gave me an account of it which he gave to a lot of other people. It was apparent to me that President Johnson, who likes doing that kind of thing, wished to humiliate him and then succeeded in making him very, very angry, which was an exceedingly stupid thing for President Johnson to do.

GREENE: Do you think he had actively sought the vice presidency up till that late date?

ALSOP: You know, my dear, there's no earthly way of figuring out that kind of thing.

GREENE: I mean, was part of the angle...

ALSOP: On balance, Johnson owed Bobby Kennedy a good big grudge. And he's a man that bears grudges. He owed him much more of a grudge, in my judgment than Bobby owed Johnson a grudge, because, as I remarked earlier, Johnson had done something pretty important for his brother by taking the vice presidency, as the results show. It wasn't a sure thing, that election, by any means. I thought it would be myself. I was wrong. And President Kennedy never did think it would be.

[-15-]

[END OF INTERVIEW – RFK #1, 6/10/71]

Joseph W. Alsop RFK Oral History Interview
Name List

President Johnson	Johnson, Lyndon B.
Phil Graham	Graham, Philip L.
Eleanor	Roosevelt, Eleanor R.
President Roosevelt	Roosevelt, Franklin D.
Mr. Truman	Truman, Harry S.
Bobby	Kennedy, Robert F.
McCarthy	McCarthy, Joseph R.
Joe Kennedy	Kennedy, Joseph P.
Bob Kintner	Kintner, Robert E.
Ethel	Kennedy, Ethel Skakel
Guevara	Guevara, Ernesto Che
Hubert Humphrey	Humphrey, Hubert H.
Mac Bundy	Bundy, McGeorge
C.L. Chennault	Chennault, Claire Lee
Franklin Roosevelt	Roosevelt, Franklin Jr.
Adlai Stevenson	Stevenson, Adlai E.
Jackie	Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier
Tom Johnston	Johnston, Thomas M.C.
Pierre Salinger	Salinger, Pierre E.G.
Goodwin	Goodwin, Richard N.
Ted Sorensen	Sorensen, Theodore C.
Teddy	Kennedy, Edward M.
Norris	Norris, George C.
La Follette	La Follette, Robert M.
Senator Taft	Taft, Robert A.
Congressman Mills	Mills, Wilbur D.
Adam	Walinsky, Adam
Frank Mankiewicz	Mankiewicz, Frank F.
Peter Edelman	Edelman, Peter B.
Joe Dolan	Dolan, Joseph F.
Kenny O'Donnell	O'Donnell, Kenneth P.
Huevel	vanden Heuvel, William J.
Guthman	Guthman, Edwin O.
Barthelmes	Barthelmes, A. Wesley
Silverman	Silverman, Samuel J.
Senator Saltonstall	Saltonstall, Leverett
Kosygin	Kosygin, Alexei N.
John Dean	Dean, John G.
Schlesinger	Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr.
Galbraith	Galbraith, John K.
Mr. Clark Clifford	Clifford, Clark M.
Justice Fortas	Forats, Abe

General Thanh	Thanh, Nguyen Chi
Oberdorfer	Oberdorfer, Donald Jr.
Mr. Nixon	Nixon, Richard M.
Westmoreland	Westmoreland, William C.
Charley Mohr	Mohr, Charles
Diem	Diem, Ngo Dinh
McCarthy	McCarthy, Eugene J.
Abbey	McCarthy, Abigail
Senator Gary	Gary, Theodore
McGee	McGee, Gale W.
Daley	Daley, Richard J.
Martin Luther King	King, Martin Luther Jr.
Hoover	Hoover, J. Edgar
Philby	Philby, Kim
Maclean	Maclean, Donald
Burgess	Burgess, Guy
Senator Eastland	Eastland, James O.
Governor Adams	Adams, Sherman
Eisenhower	Eisenhower, Dwight D.
Goldfine	Goldfine, Bernard
Lee Radziwill	Radziwill, Lee Bouvier
Joe Kraft	Kraft, Joe
Mr. Tom Wicker	Wicker, Tomas G.
Mr. Philip Geyelin	Geyelin, Mr. Philip
Miss Joan Baez	Baez, Joan C.
Bob McNamara	McNamara, Robert S.
Miss Hickock	Hickock, Lorena