

Joseph W. Alsop Oral History Interview – RFK #3, 10/29/1979
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Biographical Note

Alsop, a journalist, author, Kennedy friend and associate, discusses his relationship with Robert F. Kennedy, the Civil Rights movement, counterintelligence, and Vietnam, among other issues.

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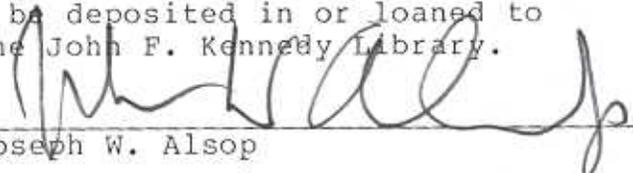
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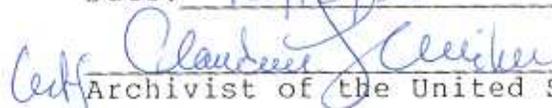
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JOSEPH W. ALSOP
RFK #3

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Third Oral History Interview

With

JOSEPH W. ALSOP

October 29, 1979
Washington, D.C.

By Roberta W. Greene

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library

GREENE: This is the third oral history interview with Joseph Alsop. The date is October 30, 1979 and the place is his home at 2806 N. Street in Washington [D.C.]. Okay.

ALSOP: After rereading the tape, I think it's a little unbalanced in a way that has something to do with the time when the tape was made. I don't mean that I, for one second, that I didn't care just as much about Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] as I said I did on the tape. Since then, I have to say, there's been a good deal of rewriting of history, and I don't approve of rewriting history either in the United States or the Soviet Union. So what I have to do is add a little bit to the tape to represent what were really my opinions and my knowledge when the tape was made; but there were opinions and knowledge that I was not very eager to talk about then on account of being truly heartbroken, as I still am.

First of all, about the Justice Department: I think Bobby was a first-rate attorney general, but anyone who supposes he wasn't a very tough one is a perfect damn fool. Take the business about Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] and the surveillance of him. Bobby knew perfectly well that the surveillance was going on, because he talked to me about it. He talked to me about it at some length, because he felt that King had some very odd customers around him; in fact he believed that one of them was an active member of the Communist party or someone of that sort. And he asked me what he thought up--what I thought he ought to do about it. Now, he couldn't have talked in that way to me unless he was fully informed that surveillance was in fact being carried on.

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GREENE: Did he say that specifically, or you surmised it?

ALSOP: Well, he said that Hoover [J. Edgar Hoover] was keeping watch. I didn't ask him how it was being done. I happen to believe in a strong counter intelligence, and I greatly deplore the fact that we haven't got any counterintelligence. And there wasn't anything shocking about it to me if Martin Luther King, much as I admired him, was being used; or if he had Soviet agents trying to use him, it was desirable to know, because no matter where Soviet agents are, it's desirable to know about them. And he knew I felt that way, and I'm sure at that time Bobby thought that way.

GREENE: Do you think that he believed in--at the moment the man's name is escaping me, but we both know who we're talking about, the gentleman that you're referring to--do you think Kennedy himself believed that he was, he had Communist connections, or was it that Hoover was trying to tell him that?

ALSOP: No, he plainly believed that he did, because his question to me was, "We know", (we know--he didn't say there was any question about it) "that King has at least one very wrong associate, and thought that he oughtn't to have, and what do I do about it? Do I warn him off, or what do I do?" He didn't think that King himself was anything but at most misguided.

GREENE: What was your advice to him at the time?

ALSOP: I think I said that I was incompetent to advise, as I didn't really know King. And you can't advise about a thing like that unless you know the parties concerned. I don't think he even--he didn't even tell me the name of the guy in question, so I don't have any way of knowing whether the F.B.I. [Federal Bureau of Investigation] was right or wrong about it. I suspect that they were right, because now it's the fashion to say, "Oh, this is all a lot of nightmare and not true." But you wait and see: if we ever do have a counterintelligence, we're going to be in for some very unpleasant surprises all over the bloody lot. [Laughter] Real shock. And it's just foolish to suppose that we're not. I mean, we're infinitely more important to the Soviets than the British were before the second war [World War II]. And all you have to do is think about Philby [Kim Philby] and Maclean [Donald Maclean] and Burgess [Guy Burgess], and you can see that it stands to reason that there are some very bad apples in some barrels around here, huh? And I wouldn't be a bit surprised to find that they were in rather key barrels.

GREENE: So you would tend to dismiss the version that you

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hear so often, that Kennedy went along with the surveillance, to get Hoover

off his back (a), and (b) perhaps to have it disproved--to have the Communist affiliation disproved--that doesn't make sense to you?

ALSOP: That's just historical revision, it doesn't fit at all the question that he asked me. The kind of discussion that we had--it was--I lunched with him as I recall, and he raised the question spontaneously. He didn't suggest for one instant that he thought that there was any doubt about the information that he was receiving from the F.B.I. It's totally inconsistent with what he said.

GREENE: Did you get any clear impression from that or other conversations about how he regarded Martin Luther King, himself, other than that he...

ALSOP: Well, if one is to be absolutely honest, I don't think that the Kennedys, including President Kennedy, were either ready for or altogether welcomed the civil liberties movement. They were on the right side, but it represented the beginning of a major change for which, thank God, in the American political pattern in which they'd lived very comfortably for a good long time, it was bound to make terrible trouble between the Kennedys and the people in the South. You have to remember that the South was still very important to the Democratic party, huh?

GREENE: Sure, it is.

ALSOP: President Kennedy was very close to, and very warmly admired, a whole series of the southern leaders of Congress. Bobby adored and was adored by Senator Eastland [James O. Eastland]. It was rather an odd love affair, but still there you are. [Laughter]

GREENE: That's very true.

ALSOP: And it wasn't certainly a band wagon that they started: and I dare say if they'd been told to get into a closet and make a trace about whether to get it going right then, they probably would have chosen not to, huh?

GREENE: It would have been much simpler.

ALSOP: [Laughter] And it would have been very unlike them to feel differently. Because when his brother was alive--and this is the period I'm talking about--Bobby never diverged for one instant from his brother's views, nor did he ever really consider anything except his brother's interest. And.... So that the kind

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of--President Kennedy was not at all the kind of man to feel the kind of concerns that Bobby later came to express. And....

GREENE: Well, I don't know if you've said this anywhere else in the interview, but what

were some of your observations in that last year when the civil rights movement was really erupting and the president reacted very strongly? Do you remember conversations?

ALSOP: I think he did what his duty was. He did the right thing. Once they were faced with it, they responded to it correctly and even nobly.

GREENE: Was there a personal turnaround in this period, do you think, that the president's...

ALSOP: I'm just saying that, in the first place, the president's didn't throb, the way it used to be thought correct, to throb. He was anything but what used to be called a "bleeding heart". He was a humane, decent man with a very high sense of duty as a citizen and a human being. And not being a bleeding heart, in my opinion, is more a compliment than a denigration. And because bleeding hearts make fools of themselves. And I thought Bobby made a fool of himself about his favorite American Indians. In the first place, he didn't know a damn thing about them. [Laughter] Secondly, in that particular case the trace for a very long time has been theirs, not ours; you can't rescue people who don't want to be rescued. And the American Indians--why, I cannot imagine--suffer from this incurable two-way stretch between the Indian culture and the American culture which surrounds them. And they don't have the kind of school difficulties that the blacks have, for example. Many of them have done very well in the schools and universities. But the chances are when they do very well, they go back to the reservation--they're sort of uprooted from the reservation by their education--and they take to drink and commit suicide. I remember talking about this with Adam Walinsky on Bobby's last tour. And I don't think I've ever seen a man so shocked in my life; I enjoyed it vastly. Because I know quite a lot about the American Indian, and I've done a great deal of work on minorities--and who's a thief and who doesn't and why and...

GREENE: Did you ever say anything along those lines to Robert Kennedy himself?

ALSOP: No. It's not worth arguing with a dear friend about American Indians, but I was really teasing Adam, which was irresistible. And--because if ever there was a bleeding heart, it was Adam. And I said, "You know, you're so foolish, because the real solution to the Indian problem is to organize two or three divisions in our

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army like the British Gurkhas. And if you had--they're very good fighting men--and if you had a couple of divisions that would offer their young men an honorable career with full opportunities for promotion, of course, and in organizations--military units, rather--that had been planned like the Gurkha. British Gurkha regiments, so that their own culture remained unimpaired within the framework of the unit, then they would succeed. But this ridiculous foolishness of trying to make them into successful realtors and happy undertakers--morticians--and virtuous Chamber of Commerce members, is just bound to fail. [Laughter]

It's been tried again and again and it always has failed. And Adam was so shocked by the idea of American Gurkha divisions, you can imagine.

GREENE: I can imagine, knowing Adam as well as I do.

ALSOP: He turned bright green with horror. [Laughter] I'm sure he won't remember, but it is a true story.

GREENE: Oh, I bet he does remember it. He has an incredible memory.

ALSOP: And then there's another Justice Department episode that I would like to put on the record, simply because I think it ought to be on the record, and I strongly suspect the documents have been destroyed. It has to do with Governor Adams [Sherman Adams], that dreadful old whited sepulcher.

GREENE: You mean Sherman Adams?

ALSOP: Sherman Adams. And as you may recall, he was fired by Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] because he wasn't clean as a hound's tooth. And at the time that he was fired, his secretary was a crazy old doll with a very funny name-- I'll remember it in a minute--Miss Mildred Paperman: Miss Mildred Paperman testified, or told the F.B.I., or told--I can't remember exactly how, who were the people investigating the case--that Adams had in fact been receiving \$15,000 in cash per month from Goldfine [Bernard Goldfine], practically from the day that he went to the White House; and that he, Goldfine, had begun making the payments because Adams said that he needed money to help cleaning up, quote "clean up the mess in Washington" unquote. And they were never suspended until Adams was fired, or rather until Goldfine got into trouble.

GREENE: So the coat looks smooth in comparison.

ALSOP: And it wasn't--in other words, it was not just a vicuna coat and a Persian rug; it was a great deal more and a great deal more unpleasant, too.

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And it must have added up to about five hundred thousand by the time he got--five hundred thousand dollars in bribes by the time he got tired. And I can't really remember how the thing came up, but again Bobby volunteered it. I wouldn't at all have known about it. But I told you earlier that if you're a sensible newspaperman, people will take you into their confidence and not expect you to put it all over the front page, even however tempting it may be. In this case it was very tempting. [Laughter]

GREENE: I can imagine.

ALSOP: And what had happened was that Adams was a real stinker: he really made himself hated by everyone he could, and enjoyed making himself hated by

everyone he could make himself hated by. And among other people who hated him was his landlady, to whom he'd been particularly rude and unpleasant. Then she not only hated him, she thought it was a little bit odd that she was invariably paid in cashier's checks. In other words, she didn't get a check from Adams, she got a check from a bank here or a bank there for the amount of the rent. And.... Do you know what a cashier's check is?

GREENE: Yes, sure.

ALSOP: You go and buy one, like buying a piece of currency, and as long as the bank doesn't fail.... And she had kept the dates and issuing bank of the cashier's checks for a considerable period, once she began to dislike Adams so horribly, because she smelled a rat, I suppose. But at any rate, when President Kennedy was elected, she toddled around to the Justice Department and handed in this record. And Bobby sent the F.B.I. fanning out and verified that Adams had bought these cashier's checks in banks in quite diverse places, but had also bought other cashier's checks on the same occasions. And they followed up the investigation from that lead. And what they discovered was that the old son of a bitch, every time he was out of Washington--he never bought checks in Washington because that would have led to trouble he feared, I suppose--he went to every goddamn bank in town and bought cashier's checks, never in an amount of more than five hundred dollars. [Laughter] And by taking around photographs of Adams and showing him to bank tellers and suggesting possible dates--because normally he went out of town when Eisenhower was out of town or was on vacation, and he didn't have to go--he normally went along with Eisenhower--they succeeded in running down proved purchases by Adams of, I think it was three hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars worth of cashier's checks. And Bobby then had, I suppose it must have been the I.R.S. [Internal Revenue Service], write the old son of a bitch, saying, "How about all this? It looks to us mighty like unreported income." [Laughter] He

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sent back a letter which Bobby showed me. I read the letter signed by Sherman Adams, which he claimed he'd written on his own without any consultation with a lawyer; it was the goddamnedest barrel of balderdash I ever heard of in my life.

GREENE: By way of trying to explain?

ALSOP: Yes. The explanation was that he had not reported his income because endless people whose names he did not know rushed up to him in railroad stations and airports and pushed rolls of bills amounting sometimes to as much as ten thousand dollars into his pocket, saying, "Now go ahead and clean up the mess in Washington; we want to help." Which was, of course, the pretext that he had used originally with Goldfine. Well, here was Miss Paperman's story fully verified. They had not because, partly because, President Eisenhower was president; but also because Miss Paperman by herself--she was a very nutty old girl, and she really could not have stood up in court as a sole witness--but she was now completely and independently verified. And Bobby reported this to the president, in the presence, in fact, of Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis]

and of Lee Radziwill [Lee Bouvier Radziwill], who happened to be there, with both of whom I have talked about it. And President Kennedy did not share the current morality in any degree. He was naturally reluctant to prosecute the old man who had already had his life finished; and the amount of money didn't matter very much; I mean it wasn't even public money, it was just a fool's money. Goldfine, in fact, had this lunatic habit of buying politicians--as a hobby--of buying politicians; there were half a dozen that were, during the Goldfine case, going crazy with nerves, such as Styles Bridges, who was also on the payroll.

GREENE: Right, I remember that, right.

ALSOP: And frightened to death. And so the question was to prosecute or not prosecute. Well, President Kennedy instantly made himself open to a prosecution for compounding a felony--which is what the crime was--by saying, "Don't prosecute." But that really wasn't the end of the story, unless I'm very mistaken. This part of it is a reconstruction, but I'm perfectly certain it's true. Bobby did say that President Eisenhower had been consulted about this and agreed with the president's decision. And I know how he was consulted, because I'm not a fool. Somebody like Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien]--maybe Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]--went up to Gettysburg with a very, very long face and said that President Kennedy had been very much upset by the discovery of this new evidence against President Eisenhower's former chief of staff, and that President Kennedy's inclination was

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not to prosecute because of his deep feeling about the presidency and because of his deep respect for General Eisenhower and the warm memory of his great public services, but that President Kennedy felt that as the man who had been betrayed was nobody else but President Eisenhower, President Eisenhower must have the final say. And so President Eisenhower, who never gave a goddamn about anything of a goddamn image--I hate that word--said, "Don't prosecute." And after that he was in a cleft stick; I'm sure he was blackmailable. And this, I'm in turn quite certain, had a great, great, great deal to do with the fact that President Eisenhower, who loathed President Kennedy, really hated him. "Damned jumped-up young jack-o'-knives"--that sort of language was used. I'm an unusual old man in the sense that I like the young even if I disapprove of them. [Laughter]

GREENE: That's a nice way to put it.

ALSOP: Eisenhower loathed Kennedy, and yet, if you recall, every time President Kennedy got into a bind on defense and foreign policy, Eisenhower came clattering up like an old-fashioned fire wagon with splendid white horses, always reliable as though it's at the fire, ready to help. [Laughter]

GREENE: I have never heard the story in that detail, particularly what evidence they actually had, but I knew about the *quid pro quo*.

ALSOP: That was the evidence they had, and he showed me--Bobby showed me--

Adams's letter, and they could have put the old son of a bitch in jail, and they were guilty of compounding a felony for not doing it. And furthermore, I think they were dead right not to prosecute. Furthermore, being a practical man, I think they were dead right to get what they could of it out of Eisenhower; but of course that isn't current morality. And if President Nixon [Richard Milhouse Nixon] had done something similar, the *Washington Post* would take a very dark view. So would the *New York Times*. And I say that--to this day I think they were dead right on both counts.

GREENE: It's interesting that it was kept so successfully suppressed for so long, because there were a lot of people who were knowledgeable about that.

ALSOP: Well, this isn't the only thing that was kept successfully suppressed, my dear, but we won't go into that.

GREENE: No, but that particular story, there were a lot of people at I.R.S. and at F.B.I. who knew about that, and apparently it never...

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ALSOP: But people loved the president, and people used to be loyal to the presidency, and most of them actually thought President Kennedy was dead right. And I should think probably all of them. I don't suppose the people at the I.R.S. or F.B.I. knew about the political use that had been made of it, but I'm perfectly certain that political use was made out of it, huh? And Bobby did say that President Eisenhower had been consulted.

GREENE: What did he actually do? He showed you the letter and...

ALSOP: He showed me Adams's letter; he was rather proud of it, pleased by it.

GREENE: Amused?

ALSOP: Yes, he thought it was very funny. It was a madman's...

GREENE: And by then had the whole thing...

ALSOP: ...it was a madman's letter.

GREENE: By then had the whole thing been resolved?

ALSOP: It was a madman's letter. I can't remember. No one who'd consulted a lawyer could conceivably have put his signature on such a letter. It was a rather long, rather pompous letter. And, I mean, if you'd showed it to a jury, they'd have sent him to jail for ten years in the next half minute, huh?

GREENE: By then the whole thing had been resolved and they'd decided not to do

anything yet.

ALSOP: But it was over, yes. Yes, and I'm perfectly certain of that.

GREENE: Did he tell you himself that they had taken--that they had gone to Eisenhower, or you surmised that?

ALSOP: No, what he told me was that, naturally, that they had not nol-prossed--I believe the word is--the case without consulting Eisenhower because, after all, it was his ox who'd been gored, huh? And....

GREENE: Did he show you this just as a friend, and just something that happened?

ALSOP: Yes, it was a piece of juicy gossip. [Laughter] The Kennedys loved gossip. My wife never managed very well with President Kennedy because she always wanted to talk to him about large issues instead of

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who was going to bed with whom. I never could persuade her that even presidents much prefer that form of conversation to high-level chat. And.... She was very fond of him and he was very fond of her. It wasn't quite as spicy as he preferred a lady to be.

GREENE: Did you talk to Robert Kennedy to any extent, both during the administration and after, about his relationship with Hoover?

ALSOP: With Hoover?

GREENE: J. Edgar?

ALSOP: No, never. I've always detested him, all my life. I've thought he was an incompetent, over-inflated, nasty old monster--and incompetent above all.

GREENE: But he never spoke to you about problems with him?

ALSOP: No, it wouldn't have come up. I'm sure that...

GREENE: Well, even in the context of, let's say, the Martin Luther King...

ALSOP: I'm sure that he and Hoover disliked one another heartily, but Bobby didn't any more disapprove of surveillance than--I mean, he approved of it, much more than I do. I believe in counterintelligence, but beyond that I don't approve of surveillance. I think--I should be very much surprised to discover--that there was not political surveillance as well under the Kennedy administration.

GREENE: But that's more speculative than...

ALSOP: Well, I don't know anything about it, and why should I? He didn't tell me about it. He wouldn't have and I wouldn't have asked. [Laughter] Why, people are mad, people are such fools now in my business. They're so pompous. Joe Kraft [Joseph Kraft] carrying on like a banshee about having his telephone tapped once. I had about eight F.B.I investigations as I recall the count. And between the end of the second war and...

GREENE: The Kennedy administration, prior to that?

ALSOP: I wouldn't be surprised if I had one under the Kennedy administration. It wouldn't surprise me in the least. I think I did, but that's all right.

GREENE: Do you include wire taps in that?

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ALSOP: I haven't any doubt, never doubted for an instant that they tapped my wire. Not for one instant. Why shouldn't they? These are all--all had to do with alleged breaches of security. I mean, how you define security is a very arguable thing.

GREENE: A very arbitrary thing also sometimes.

ALSOP: But you have to trust the president of the United States to define what security is, and you have to trust him to take care of it. And if you go and elect a lemon like Dick Nixon--against whom I voted, unlike Mr. Tom Wicker [Thomas G. Wicker] of the *New York Times* and Mr. Philip Geyelin [Philip L. Geyelin] of the *Washington Post*, as well as a good.... And Mr. Kraft--you get what you paid for. The whole left of the Democratic party voted for, actually voted for Nixon, or stayed at home, and they were solely responsible for his election. Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] would have been in like Flynn if it hadn't been for the behavior of the left wing of the Democratic party. They make me sick at my stomach because they never take the blame for what they do. Look at them now about Cambodia; it's enough to turn your stomach. I mean, this thought of Teddy Kennedy (Edward M. Kennedy) going around to.... After the role he played in the war, going around to cocktail parties given by Miss Joan Baez [Joan C. Baez] in honor of the "boat people." Why do they have "boat people?" Because of people like Miss Baez and Senator Kennedy; that's why they're there. Ellsworth Bunker [Ellsworth Bunker] said, and I said, and a few other people said, that a great, great, great, great many people would suffer horribly if the North Vietnamese were allowed to occupy South Vietnam. I knew they would also invade Cambodia, they had invaded Cambodia. The only way that Cambodia and South Vietnam could be saved was for us to win. And the blood of these wretched people in that part of the world is on their hands. [Laughter] And none of them admit it. Now they go around piously giving cocktail parties in honor of the boat people; it's enough to make you vomit. [Laughter] And, huh? Puke is the word.

And the other thing I did want also to talk about, Roberta, is the matter of Bobby's complete change of heart. To my knowledge, at no time during the development of President Kennedy's Vietnamese policy did Bobby ever say, "Watch out." He went along with it 100 percent. He believed, judging by the way he talked, 100 percent in the balance-of-power policy that President Kennedy maintained, which was the right policy in my judgment. He went along 100 percent with the great defense increase under President Kennedy; he went along 100 percent with the mobilization after the Vienna meeting; he was entirely on that side, which was my side, to be sure. And I cannot exaggerate to you how.... Well, nothing ever surprises me and nothing

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ever shocks me, but I cannot exaggerate how distressed I was to see him, as I saw it, stultifying himself by completely changing his coat overnight. And nobody says that he did, but he did. And if any of your goddamned pseudo-historians pretend that he didn't, they're liars. [Laughter] I think that strange, obsessive feeling he had about Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] had, I'm afraid, a great deal more to do with it than I was really prepared to come right out and say, when we did the last interview, and that was the one thing that was dishonest with me. As a matter of fact, I've always--I've never had any doubt about it. He was.... It was not frightfully stylish, either, because these were great international interests, and you don't just change your mind about great national interests because someone's got the responsibility whom you happen to hate.

GREENE: Well, of course, the nature of the thing had changed in that it had escalated well beyond what it ever was during President Kennedy...

ALSOP: The nature of it had escalated very far in President Kennedy's time, and you must remember that we had people in combat before he died.

GREENE: But the scale was very different from what it became.

ALSOP: Scale is nothing my dear, you don't risk peoples lives at all. You don't risk Americans' lives at all. The president that risks Americans' lives, in any way--except for a great principle--is a criminal president. Scale has nothing to do with it. What has to do with it is the problem. Unless the president considered that the problem could not permissibly be solved by a North Vietnamese victory, what he did was criminal. There's no palliation in talking about scale. The scale was bound to increase.

GREENE: I don't remember if I ever asked...

ALSOP: And, of course, his decision--and it was his decision, although I didn't share in it, to my shame. I didn't foresee how bad the consequences were--his decision to remove, shall we say, the American guard from Nguyen Diem had a very large share in increasing the scale. Because what happened after Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] died hasn't been properly understood. This is the worst managed war we've ever had, mostly under the worst war leader; it transformed Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] from the

best minister of defense the western world has seen since Louvois into the worst war minister the western world has seen since Lord George Germain. [Laughter] And Johnson was ten times worse. But.... And then, as for my colleagues, I've never seen such dishonesty in my life. It

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made me ashamed of the newspaper business, and still does. Anyway, going back to Diem ...

GREENE: Before you go back, let me switch this and we won't have to stop.

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 3]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 3]

GREENE: Okay.

ALSOP: Going back to Diem. When I talked with the president about it--and we talked at great length--I did not foresee, and I don't think he foresaw, the consequences of removing the guard from Diem. The actual consequence was a vacuum. This is a highly transitional society, which Diem alone held together in some kind of way. It was getting harder and harder; and his brother--mainly because of the *New York Times*, which was, happened to have gone mad--and he saw the rest of the world through the eyes of his brother. But anyway, that's by the way. Once Diem was assassinated--and that was not our doing, as I said in a previous tape, but we made it...

GREENE: We made it possible?

ALSOP: He wouldn't have been assassinated if we hadn't removed the guard, but you couldn't cease to support him without removing the guard. Do you see what I mean? Once Diem was assassinated, you had a chaos and a vacuum, and this was what made it possible for the Viet Cong to pour in everywhere and occupy the vacuum. And that was the time when they really implanted themselves in most of the provinces of South Vietnam. And that was the time when there was a perfectly genuine domestic insurgency; by the end of the war there wasn't any. We had the war won; North Vietnam was the whole problem. Really, North Vietnam was not the whole problem; the whole problem was the American left.

GREENE: Did you speak to President Kennedy in that period between the death of Diem and...

ALSOP: No, because you see he was--as you pointed out to me in the last tape--he was killed very shortly after Diem was assassinated. And I did not go back to Vietnam, I should think, for another six months; I had just come from there.

GREENE: Did you ever ask--and I may have asked you this directly in the other

interview, I don't remember--did you ever ask Robert Kennedy in perhaps a somewhat less direct way than you've said it here, how he explained or could justify his turnaround? You never did?

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ALSOP: No, my dear, he'd done it. I had my own strong views about why he'd done it. I knew he had done it. And as between friends--and friends were what we were, dear friends; I was devotedly attached to Bobby, and I intended to vote for him because I thought he wouldn't want to lose. Kennedys don't like losing much. And if he'd been nominated--which I don't think he would have been--and if he'd been elected--which was even more doubtful--I think he'd have gone in and won. It was perfectly possible to do, not at all hard. And I still think that. And we'd be living in a very different world today, because 80 percent of our troubles in the world today stem from the fact that defeat is not very good for national--nations'--credit, just as bank runs aren't very good for banks' credit. [Laughter] And so it's had endless repercussions in Soviet policy and the degree of risks the Soviets find acceptable; and the behavior of the Arabs, who are very sensitive to who's winning and who's losing--in everything like that.

GREENE: That's very interesting.

ALSOP: And the notion that you can, that a nation can be defeated, or that a bank can have a run on it, without suffering very seriously, seems to me in my old-fashioned way, very chilly. [Laughter] But I did want to emphasize it, that point again, because I think I was historically a little untruthful about it. Bobby just made a 180-degree turn which I could not respect, no matter what the kids were saying, which--I hate the goddamned word anyway--or what the *New York Times* was saying, because on great questions of national interest you don't change your principles to follow the fashion. And if you do, it is not a very strong testimony to your political morality. And...

GREENE: I would like to have heard that discussion if you'd ever had it.

ALSOP: I would never have had it. I don't understand the way people deal with one another nowadays; I don't understand the way newspapermen deal with their--with public men.

GREENE: In what way?

ALSOP: Well, on the one hand, they're enormously partisan. I mean, you dig up the account that a couple of those frightful bitches on the *Washington Post* wrote of Henry Kissinger's book party, and then you dig up one of the comparable people's account of those frightful occasions at Hickory Hill, and you'll see what I mean, huh? And that runs right straight through from the front page to the style section, huh?

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GREENE: Yes.

ALSOP: And I think it's disgraceful; we didn't use to do business that way. And dividing everyone into the good and the bad, and thinking that it's your job as a reporter, mind you, to kick whom you conceive to be bad--well below the belt at all times--while overlooking any possible sins or nonsense in those you conceive to be good, this doesn't seem to me to be good newspaper work to go to an American war and completely misrepresent the facts, which was what was done. I'd actually forgotten--my memory is so bad--I'd forgotten that we'd talked a lot about Vietnam, because that was very much in my mind when you came to see me.

GREENE: Yes, the war was still very much--it was '71 or '72.

ALSOP: It was very long, and I did know a great deal about it, if I do say so; I spent a great deal of time there, two and a half years of my life. God knows I didn't enjoy it.

GREEN: I'll bet.

ALSOP: You know, they were not the most enjoyable years I've ever had. [Laughter] And I went there because I thought it was my duty as a newspaperman. And I feel so angry. It makes me so angry now that it makes me boil like an old tea kettle. And we'll pay for it. And God knows if we don't.... The next election is our last chance to avoid paying for it in a really very unpleasant way, I fear.

GREENE: What is the solution in the next election?

ALSOP: Well, you've got to have a different kind of leadership; you've got to go back to the old way, or we're done for.

GREENE: Who will take us back to the old way? Whom do you suggest?

ALSOP: Oh, Christ, I don't care who it is. If it's Connelly, [John B. Connelly Jr.] I don't mind. He's a frightful shit.

GREENE: Yes, frightful.

ALSOP: They all are. [Laughter] The first thing you have to realize about politicians is that almost all politicians are shits, and all good politicians are shits. And any.... My father used to tell me,

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“Alsop's first rule of politics, Joe--and I hope you'll remember it when you get to Washington--is when anyone is regularly called Honest John, either examine his head or audit his accounts. I don't know which, he's either a fool or a crook or both.” And I have an

old-fashioned--very old-fashioned it is now--distaste for moral prating. And I like my own country to win, which is also old-fashioned. And I don't believe that the rules of history have been suspended in favor of the United States and the *New York Times*, huh? [Laughter] So there you are.

GREENE: Is there anything else that...?

ALSOP: No, I was just so.... When I reread the thing, I was surprised; I thought it was a dreadful hash. I guess I read it on a very bad, very bad day; but when I reread it, I thought it was quite entertaining, and that nobody could ever...

GREENE: No. You did very well. I really enjoyed the history in it, the historical allusions...

ALSOP: Nobody, nobody, I think, could have any doubt that I was deeply fond of Bobby, and I was deeply fond of him.

GREENE: I think that's very clear. That's very clear.

ALSOP: And that I care a great deal about. And now that everything gets revised and glozed over, and they all pretend it isn't the way it was, it makes me cross, because I was there and I know. And their reasons for doing all this, engaging in all this pretense, are strictly interested in partisan reason. My dear friend Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] wailing about Cousin Eleanor's letters to Miss Hickock [Lorena Hickock] all just delightful feminine friendship. Hell and damnation! I've known about that since I was eighteen, and it wasn't just a delightful feminine friendship. Lorena Hickock was incapable of ever having a delightful feminine friendship, for Christ sake; she looked like a rhinoceros. [Laughter]

GREENE: She was not a very attractive or alluring figure, judging by her pictures.

ALSOP: Well, some ladies like rhinoceroses. And...

GREENE: I think that after...

ALSOP: Not perhaps a word that you've seen a great deal of. God knows I've seen little enough of it, but we had little bits of it here and there in my own family, and I... What was her name? Eva LeGallienne. I

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still remember when I was.... She was a great heroine of that set.

GREENE: It's such a familiar name, but I can't...

ALSOP: She was an actress. And she was tremendous heroine of that set. And I

remember once when I was a very young reporter, about thirty, in 1933 I guess it was, going to her sort of theater--she had her own theater, very boring plays; she was a very vain woman and a bad actress. And the.... I went behind the scenes because I was going to see the great Miss LeGallienne, the lovely Miss LeGallienne. And the flies, if that's the right word for it...

GREENE: Wings.

ALSOP: ...the wings of the--behind the scenes--absolutely full of these enormous rhinoceros-like women, not exactly dressed like men--but they would have looked better if they had--going [Blustering laughter]. Undiluted blasts. And with very large bags, with which they could bop you over the head, I suppose; I daresay they carried window weights in them. [Laughter]

GREENE: I wondered when I read that whether Schlesinger was just coming to the defense of someone he... Or if he believed. It seemed so naive because we have the copies of the correspondence in the archives, and it's so clear, if you look at it, that it would be almost impossible to interpret it innocently.

ALSOP: Well, of course he was. Of course he was. Not any possibility. In fact, in my own family, everybody knew that there was this relationship, and nothing very surprising about it. And, as you know, nobody ever talked about those things, or only very much, I mean, privately.

GREENE: On the QT, right?

ALSOP: On the QT; I never mention it to a living soul outside my own family.

GREENE: It is kind of unfortunate to have it dragged out across the front page.

ALSOP: Well, I think it's awful, I think it's perfectly awful.

GREENE: Unnecessary, it serves absolutely no purpose.

ALSOP: I mean, President Kennedy had an extremely complicated love life, and I don't want to hear

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about it on the front page.

GREENE: Well, you have, though.

ALSOP: Oh, no, I haven't, my dear. [Laughter] That is quite incorrect.

GREENE: Well, some of it.

ALSOP: No, no.

GREENE: Is that right?

ALSOP: Oh, no. You haven't even begun to scratch that surface. And not even scratch it. And I'm not going to talk about it, either, for this damn tape recorder. So there we are. Now I think we might have a drink and forget about it. And I'm going to go and take a nap.

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[END OF INTERVIEW - RFK #3, 10/29/79]

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