

**Charles Bartlett Oral History Interview – JFK #2, 2/20/1965**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Charles Bartlett  
**Interviewer:** Fred Holborn  
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**Biographical Note**

Bartlett, Washington correspondent for the *Chattanooga Times* from 1948 to 1962, columnist for the *Chicago Daily News*, and personal friend of John F. Kennedy (JFK), discusses the 1962 Steel Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and JFK's personal life during the presidency, among other issues.

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**Transcript of Oral History Interview**

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HOLBORN: Well, we can turn then to the later part of this same year. Where, I guess, your testimony to history becomes particularly important was the debate that arose out of the article which you and Stewart Alsop wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post* subsequent to the Cuban crisis. Here again, it's probably better if you develop this your own way.

BARTLETT: Well, this is one of those amazing episodes that begins rather simply on the day that

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Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev] threw in the towel after the Cuban missile crisis. I had for some reason seen more than usual of the President during the week before. I think the pressure of this period made him desire more to have friends around. I think I was over there for dinner three times in the week, or something like that, or more for just small groups which he would break up about 9:30 and go back to the cables. But I think he did feel the need for a little bit of relief from the pressure of this thing. So I had seen a little of it from his viewpoint and had been struck by the coolness with which he sort of bore it.

I remember one night, it was after the.... As we had dinner, why, he had just gotten word from the Navy that the Russian ships were standing off, that they weren't trying to come through his blockade. And

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this looked like pretty good news, and I kept saying, "Why, I should think you'd feel like really celebrating." And he said, "Well, you don't want to celebrate in this game this early," he said, "because anything can happen." And as I was going to bed--we'd left the White House. I think we stopped at Bill Walton's for a night cap. And then I was getting into bed about 11:30, and the phone rang from the White House. The President said, "You'd be interested to know I got a cable from our friend, and he says that those ships (of course, he was referring to Khrushchev) are coming through, they're coming through tomorrow. So it was on that kind of a note that he had to go to sleep.

But I must say that the President's coolness and temper were never more evident than they were that week. He kept a very balanced.... He

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was enormous. I remember the first time that I was aware of the damned missile crisis, in retrospect, was coming back from New Haven on the preceding Wednesday. I'd been very impressed by something that.... I'd had lunch with Thomas Mann [Thomas Clifton Mann], who was then the Ambassador to Mexico, and he had some theory about dealing with the businessmen in Mexico City and he wanted the President's support. And he'd come to me.

So I was on this press plane. Well, I was on the President's plane. I was actually one of the pool reporters coming back from the campaign trip to Connecticut, and he had me come back into the compartment. And I was talking to the President. I guess Kenny and

O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and the group was there, the political group, Pierre [Pierre E.G. Salinger]. We talked for a while about the campaign and so forth, and then I said, "This Mann thing," I said, "I'd like very much to have you see this Ambassador

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Mann from Mexico while he's up here. He's got some very interesting ideas." And just the mention of Mexico--it was an amazing thing. The sort of buoyancy of having been out in the fresh air and campaigned with cheering crowds and all that, the buoyancy just left him and he almost--his shoulders sort of caved, his face took on lines and he said, "Boy, Charlie, do I have problems down in that region." And his whole face.... And that was, as I look back on it, of course that was the--he'd just learned that the day before...

HOLBORN:           That morning.

BARTLETT:           That morning I guess, yes. So, after this denouncement, I guess we all went over to a Rusk [Dean Rusk] press conference in the State Department. I was rather excited by this thing. And I ran into Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan]. And somewhere in my mind the idea of sort of doing this great chapter in the Kennedy Administration had already

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occurred; that this was a great story; it should be told, well, and the fact that I had seen a certain amount of the President during the week, and I had been following it awfully closely, and I'd seen Bobby and so forth. I thought that maybe I ought to do it. And Dungan sort of delayed(?) me. I said, "This wouldn't be a bad article to write." I said, "It would be a good magazine article because the President certainly looks good from everything I know." And he said, "Yes," he said, "I think somebody's already started." He said, "I think they've already decided they're going to give it to somebody." I didn't pay much attention to that. But then I talked to Stewart Alsop the next day, and he thought it was a good idea. And so we said we'd do it.

I was over there for dinner, I think that night, Monday or Tuesday night, and I said to the President that I was going to do

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this thing. He said, "Well, I understand there are some others also." And he said, very clearly intending to notify me that he had no intention of being a source for my article, he said, "My role, I've decided, in all these articles will be not to talk to the writers who are doing them."

He said, "After all, I would just be putting credit on myself." And I think that that was a.... He said, "There's no point in sitting around patting myself on the back." So from that point I never had any inclination to go to him on any point of the article. It seemed to me he's made it very clear he didn't want to be a part of my article or anybody else's.

But when we did run into this story about Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] having proposed to give up the Guantanamo Naval Base, plus the missiles in Turkey, plus the missiles in Italy, having proposed this at an NSC [National Security Council] meeting, or at least at a meeting of the

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Ex Comm [Executive Committee], why, I was fascinated by it. And we checked it out very quickly, and as you know, there were seventeen people. We first heard of it from somebody who was not in the meeting who had learned it from somebody who was. We checked it, and it checked out very quickly. There were sixteen people there. Most of them did not like Adlai Stevenson, and most of them were very happy to verify it. And I think that most of them had been rather shocked by the proposal as it came out.

So, I did, in the course of another dinner at the White House, with the President, say that this was one piece of information that we had picked up. I guess it was down in Middleburg. And he had that sort of wary look, you know, but he said, "Did you hear about that?" I said, "Yes, we got it." He said, "Are you going to put it in the

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article?" I said, "Yes." He sort of shook his head. That was the only real comment that he made. My own guess, knowing him well, would be that he was not too displeased that this had turned up. I don't think at that point that he or I had any idea that this thing would be linked to him or that it would be a gesture of rebuff to Adlai. I think, my impression was, that he had been rather shocked when Adlai had proposed this in the meeting and, you know, felt that it was a part of the history of the thing.

But anyway, the article was prepared, and I guess that when Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] came running into his office on the Saturday before the magazine came out with the article in his hand, I guess he was then aware that it was going to be a major contretemps. Because I was in New York--I was in Far Hills, New Jersey, on that Sunday night, and he telephoned me, and he said that

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he hoped that it wasn't going to be too rough. At this point he knew it was going to happen.

On that Sunday night before the article came out, I talked to the President. I guess he called me. I was up in New Jersey with my wife's [Josephine Martha Buck Bartlett] parents. And we were talking about the thing. He was obviously then aware that there was going to be some excitement. And later that evening I happened to talk to Joe Alsop, who was in Washington, on the telephone. And Joe told me that he was writing an article that would say that it had been the President's desire to get rid of Adlai and that this might be the occasion on which Adlai might go out of the Cabinet. I said that I didn't think that it was the President's desire to get rid of Adlai. And he said he was absolutely certain that it was, that he had never liked Adlai, and that he had had enough of him.

So I called the President to tell him that Joe was

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writing this article. He was really shocked because he really did not want to get rid of Adlai for many reasons. I don't think that he had anybody else he particularly wanted to send up to the United Nations; I think he had a respect for Adlai Stevenson; I think that with all the limitations that we know are part of Adlai, I think he was very unanxious to take on the wrath of all of Adlai's supporters. I think this probably left him very anxious to keep Adlai in the Cabinet until after the election.

So I kept calling back. And I'd called Joe, and I'd say, "Now, Joe, this isn't true. I can tell you with some assurance now, this isn't true. You really better not write it." And Joe kept getting furious at me and he'd say, "That's balderdash, Charlie. Don't give me that twaddle." So then I'd called the President and say, "Look, I can't do anything with him. You better give him

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somebody who's an official to get a hold of him." And I think later the President had McGeorge Bundy get hold of Joe and persuade him that the whole thing was not really a scheme to get rid of Adlai.

But it made me feel very sad, this thing, because it blew high. It would have been easy for me after we'd gotten this information about Adlai to take my name off the article. And, in retrospect, that is exactly what I would have done because I think that it created a very hot two weeks for the President, which, as he pointed out to me with some sardonic glee, this could have been the happiest two weeks of his life in the White House. I don't think it was because of this one thing. But I think that he then made an enormous effort over Adlai afterwards. I think he had Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] go up and spend some time with him at the United Nations. I think that relationship worked out all right. Before he

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died he told me that he expected Adlai to become his Ambassador in London after the election. And I think that might have been a good place for Adlai.

HOLBORN: But he never took you aside and said, "Look you've got this wrong or that wrong," or he never attempted to dispute the article in its content.

BARTLETT: No, I think his feeling was the article was accurate. I think he would have stood behind every aspect of the article.

HOLBORN: Because he did tend to do that even when he hadn't helped a person.

BARTLETT: Yes. No, like the rest of us, and certainly like me, I think he might have objected to the emphasis upon Adlai. I mean the whole picture

play and everything did suggest that the whole article was written to point out that Adlai had no backbone, which it really was not. And I always resented that.

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I thought the *Saturday Evening Post* did a very unfair job, treated me unfairly. In fact, I concluded then that I would not only never collaborate with anybody as long as President Kennedy was alive, but I would also never write an article for the *Saturday Evening Post* as long as Clay Blair [Clay Drewry Blair, Jr.] was editor because I thought it was very unfair.

HOLBORN: Well, a lot of it was the captioning right under the pictures.

BARTLETT: It was the way it was played and advertised and built up and that kind of thing. I was caught between a cross fire in the coming week because Stewart Alsop wanted me to go on--Stewart Alsop was out of the country, but he wanted us to answer back. He wanted to keep hitting back at Stevenson. And the President, of course, his best interest was to have me do nothing and say nothing. They put Stevenson on "Today," if you remember, and Stevenson bitterly attacked

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us both and said we were infants. So I had no choice except to refuse to go on "Today," and to say nothing. It was a very painful period even for me, I must say. There was no joy in it because it was particularly annoying to me as a newspaper man to have something that I knew was absolutely accurate and to be attacked for it. I must say that the fury of Adlai's supporters was keenly felt.

HOLBORN: Did you have a lot of visits, calls, letters? How did this all... I mean, from Adlai's side, what kind of representations were made to you?

BARTLETT: Well, nothing. It was all done in the press and the television and Adlai himself. Some of his friends down here would get very vehement when I saw them, and it had a lot of ramifications. I must say that it was an amazing sort cause celebre because it really blew out of

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nothing. And finally after a month it died very slowly. It seemed painfully slowly to me. But it finally died, and I was glad to see it gone.

HOLBORN: Were there any other periods at which you felt that you performed for the President either as a listening post or as an intermediary where he either asked you to convey information to somebody or asked you to obtain information of any character?