Conversation with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.: The Use of Oral History

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THIS CONVERSATION ON THE USE OF ORAL HISTORY by historians was conducted on 9 May 1979 in Schlesinger's office at the City University of New York where he has been the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities, at the Graduate School, since 1966. Born in 1917 to parents whose lives centered around the study, teaching, and publishing of history, he was graduated from Harvard University, where he taught from 1946 to 1961. For the next four years, he was special assistant to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

The month before our conversation, Schlesinger had won the National Book Award in the category of biography-autobiography for *Robert Kennedy and His Times.* He had received the same award in 1966 for *A Thousand Days,* an account of the presidency of John F. Kennedy. For both books he used oral history interviews, both his own and those conducted by archivists. He also was an organizer and interviewer for the Oral History Project at the John F. Kennedy Library.

Upon entering his office, I met a warm, straightforward, and accommodating man who presented himself as a humble professor lost in a sea of books. And indeed he was—books on every surface and every chair, piled precariously. Finally, by clearing the couch a bit, we found two seats and a location for the tape recorder and microphone.

For more than two hours he patiently answered my questions on the historians' view and use of oral history, his personal experience as an interviewer, his own use of interviews done by archivists, and the value of oral history. In addition, he asked many questions about release forms, access, interviewer reports, local history projects, and other topics relating to the process of oral history. His questions and my replies have been edited from these pages.

I would like to thank the following people for their help in suggesting topics to cover in this conversation: Ann Morgan Campbell, Deborah Frangquist, Wilbur R. Jacobs, Philip P. Mason, Virginia Purdy, and John F. Stewart. Also, I thank the staffs of the San Francisco Public Library and the St. Johnsbury (Vermont) Athenaeum for their help.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In the record of the conversation below, Lynn A. Bonfield (LAB) and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (AMS) are referred to by their initials.

LAB To get some perspective of how historians have looked at oral history through the years, let us start with this question: What do you think your father[1] would have thought about oral history?

AMS My father, in fact, *did* very much approve of oral history. He died in 1965, by which time the Columbia project was well underway. He thought that interviewing provided a valuable means of rescuing testimony that otherwise would perish so far as the historical record is concerned. There had been precedents, such as the WPA narratives of people who were born in slavery. My father thought such things extremely useful, as supplementary evidence perhaps, rather than as primary evidence, and, of course, subject to the reservations and discounts that the frailty of memory requires.

LAB Why do you think historians did not use oral history for many years?

AMS I think the great thing that made oral history possible was the invention of easy means of transcription. In one sense, oral history is quite old. I suppose the first and greatest historian, Thucydides, did a great deal of interviewing. He was writing about events which took place in his own time, and he describes in his *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* the effort he made to verify facts through interviews. So historians, particularly and above all historians writing about contemporaneous events, have always used interviews as a technique. Now the tape recorder gives the interview fidelity and permanence.

I got very much interested in the idea of oral history, as a result of working in the Jackson period. James Parton, in the preface to his biography of Jackson, explains how he began writing the biography by immersion in documents.[2] He read pamphlets, speeches, campaign biographies, pro and con, and all the rest; and at the end found himself in total confusion. If he had been asked to sum up the view of Jackson emerging from the documentation, he would have had to say, "Andrew Jackson is a hero and a monster, Andrew Jackson is a patriot and a traitor," and so on. He was left with a chaos of contradictions. Then he spent several months going around and talking to people, a great number of people. He said, "I talked to politicians of the last generation who no longer had any interest in concealing the truth," and so on. In the three volumes of his biography he quotes quite a lot from these interviews. I thought, "My God, what a great thing to have done!" and at the same time, "What a shame that he did not ask the kind of questions that I, as a young historian working in 1940–42 on *The Age of Jackson,*[3] wished he'd asked." And then I thought, "What an opportunity exists for an historian of the New Deal, with so many New Dealers still around!"

LAB We think in California that had Bancroft[4] had a tape recorder, his interviews would have been much more valuable.

AMS I think historians have always used the interview technique when they thought it would be helpful. But we have no exact record of the interviews, we only have the historian's notes and his interpretations. The autonomous transcripts of the interviews would be more useful.

LAB So, when you considered undertaking the Roosevelt books, you thought more seriously about using oral history?

AMS Yes. When I embarked on *The Age of Roosevelt,*[5] I also heard about the establishment of the Oral History Project at Columbia, the result of the imagination and energy

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[1] Arthur Meier Schlesinger (1888–1965), noted American historian and the Francis Lee Higginson Professor at Harvard University from 1939 until his retirement in 1954.

[2] James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson,* 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1887–88, originally published, 1860).

[3] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1945).

[4] Hubert Howe Bancroft (1832–1918), historian of the Pacific states and Rocky Mountain area, who, in about 1880, began collecting dictation narratives of prominent pioneers.

[5] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt,* 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957–60).

of Allan Nevins, and I welcomed that. I did quite a lot of interviewing for the three volumes of the Roosevelt book, and I wish I had done more because I'm returning to the Roosevelt series now. I did not, however, use a recorder. I took notes. I don't suppose that technology really became manageable for a totally non-technological person until the last ten years or so. It's only with the small cassette recorder that I've been able to master the art; and by this time I no longer believe in transcribing entire interviews, because once you've put something on tape, you have to hire someone to copytype it. Then you have to take notes on that. So I prefer to take notes as I go on the salient things, and then to check exact quotations back with the source. That's what I did with the Robert Kennedy book. I interviewed quite a number of people, took notes on interviews, and cleared the quotations with the interviewees.

LAB Are these interviews going to be available at the Kennedy Library?

AMS Eventually I'll deposit notes on all the interviews in the Kennedy Library. I filed whatever is relevant from the notes for *The Age of Roosevelt,* and I have continued doing that through the years. In the course of my time in government, I saw a lot of people who were in government in Roosevelt's time. During the Kennedy years those persons might recall some experience in the Roosevelt administration, and I would note down what they remembered about it. So I have an accumulation of material of that sort.

LAB Now, I would not call that oral history.

AMS No, I would not call it oral history, because I think oral history, as I say, is an expression of technology, and oral history would be a systematic interview generating an autonomous record of the interview.

LAB You seem to indicate that historians have accepted oral history from the beginning of its time, say the last twenty years. However, one of the reasons I wanted to interview you is that I think you are one of the first historians to realize fully the value of it and to use it extensively. You have used interviews done by archivists and have helped encourage the acceptance of oral history. For years, in the beginning, the interviews in the Columbia Project were not used very much.

AMS Was this an ideological resistance?

LAB That's what I'm going to ask you.

AMS I don't recall that any of my books—which have been challenged on many grounds—have been challenged on the grounds of the use of oral history. I just don't know what the answer to that is. Of course, for the moment oral history is of use only if you're writing contemporary history. Increasingly, contemporary history will become recent history, and a century from now we will have oral history going back for several generations. Historians will use it for the remote as well as the recent past. It may be simply the passage of time that legitimized the period and the technology.

LAB Do historians have problems with using someone else's interviews, particularly interviews in an archival collection? Do you hear historians say, "How I wish they had asked such and such?"

AMS Well, yes. One often wishes that oneself. And sometimes I imagine that, if the interviewee is alive, you could remedy that deficiency. But you're stuck with the limitations of the evidence that you have. One always wishes oral interviewers had asked the questions you would have asked had you been the interviewer. I don't think that complaint is a disqualification of the material that they did ask.

LAB Several historians have observed that the use of oral history in foreign policy history will be most important, since the primary sources are so often restricted.

AMS Yes, I think it will be of considerable importance. Indeed the Kennedy Library, Eisenhower Library, and the Dean Acheson Oral History Project at Princeton are now being used by historians. I would think it would be harder to use oral history for social history. You can get the sort of reminiscence that you [LAB] are getting about people growing up at the turn of the century; but you have to do quite a lot of it, and you have to ask patterned questions, I suppose, to produce good material. It requires more patience

and time than some oral history projects would have. The Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College is interviewing older black women on their experience. That too is a kind of collective project which will produce very valuable results.

LAB I would like to get your opinion on some of the collections you have used, including those at Columbia and the Kennedy Library. Which interviews did you like, what did you think should have been asked that would have been helpful to you?

AMS Well, I'll do my best; but I don't have a very detailed memory of particular interviews. In general, the interviews in the Robert Kennedy Project[6] persuade me there is a great advantage in having a large number of interviews done by the same person. The interviews by Roberta Greene and Larry Hackman did benefit from the fact that together they did something like sixty interviews. That meant that they were themselves deeply immersed in the field and could cross-reference questions in their own minds, and so on. I think that's valuable.

The crash oral history project at the Kennedy Library after Dallas was more uneven because much of the interviewing was done on a volunteer basis. Some people prepared themselves carefully, or knew the area very well, or asked searching and useful questions. Others were doing it as a kind of mission, wishing to be helpful, but were not so well prepared and didn't know the critical issues. There's an argument for professionalism.

But there is also an argument for an interviewer who has the confidence of the interviewee. I think that the interview, for example, that Carl Kaysen did with Ted Sorensen is much richer than some unknown professional interviewer might have done. Kaysen was master of all the issues, and also a close friend of Sorensen, making Sorensen feel inclined to talk frankly. There are occasions when there's a strong argument for using friends.

LAB Would you tell me about your role in organizing the oral history project at the Kennedy Library?

AMS As I recall, it was much on my mind after Dallas and also on Robert Kennedy's mind that this library should have an oral history program.

LAB You had thought of it before Dallas, then?

AMS Well, I guess we had in a sort of general way. But after Dallas it became a matter of urgency. Also I think Robert Kennedy was desperate to find something to occupy his mind. Herman Kahn, in the National Archives, a great friend of mine from Roosevelt Library days, played an invaluable role. So the project was organized. Fred Dutton was the man who ran it. I probably helped in suggesting people as interviewers, and so on; but Fred Dutton really did the job of the basic organization.

LAB You did interviewing?

AMS Yes, I did interviewing. I did Averell Harriman, Charles Bohlen, Amíntore Fanfani, Couve de Murville, some others. I did Jacqueline Kennedy, Robert Kennedy—several people did Robert Kennedy, but I had one long one with him. I guess Jacqueline Kennedy was my major project.

LAB Tell me how that one went.

AMS Well, it was in the spring of 1964, and it was fine. She was very candid in her response. From time to time she would ask me to turn off the machine so that she could say what she wanted to say and then ask, "Should I say that on the recorder?"

LAB Did you do that?

AMS Sometimes, yes; sometimes, no. In general, what I would say was, "Why don't you say it, and you have control over the transcript."

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[6] Letter, John F. Stewart, assistant director, John F. Kennedy Library, to LAB, 12 March 1980: "A series of interviews on the career of Robert F. Kennedy was conducted by the Kennedy Library Oral History Project from 1968 to 1979. These interviews are available as a part of the Library's oral history collection."

LAB Did you think of those interviews when you read Theodore White's oral history on his own life, including his experience of interviewing Jacqueline Kennedy soon after the assassination?

AMS Yes, he wrote that *Life* article.[7] That's where the term *Camelot* came into circulation. But that, of course, was an interview in the older sense. I doubt whether he transcribed it on tape, but rather took notes.

LAB Was her response different? I'm trying to find the differences between being interviewed immediately after an event and being interviewed later.

AMS Yes, I think when Teddy White interviewed her in Hyannis Port two weeks after the murder, that she was enveloped by grief and was much concerned with trying to fix an impression of the Kennedy years. It was rather a romantic impression. She is a very realistic, intelligent woman. And by the time I interviewed her some months later, that was not so pervading. I mean, it was part of her, but her interview was more in the style of honest remembering.

LAB When you interviewed, what were the advantages of having been an insider of the Kennedy Administration?

AMS In the cases of Chip Bohlen and Averell Harriman, both had been friends of mine for many years. That probably has advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that, because we'd been old friends, they were willing to talk more frankly. The disadvantage may have been that there were questions which someone else would have asked—of a preliminary sort—that might have been useful to ask, that I didn't ask because I knew the answers already.

LAB Do you really think people are more frank to someone whom they know and who participated in the events?

AMS Well, not necessarily. I think they often may be more guarded. I may delude myself. I think in the particular cases of Harriman and Bohlen, because our friendships had gone back so many years, and because also they were interested in establishing the historical record, and perhaps in establishing themselves on that record, that they were very frank. That's why it's so hard to make generalizations about oral history. I mean, it may well be that, just as people may talk more frankly to people they meet on shipboard, much more than they would to someone they had known very well, some people may open up to an unknown, professional, neutral, oral history interviewer. The particular chemistry between two individuals is unpredictable. Therefore I don't think that you can make generalizations about the professional always being better than the pal. In general, my prejudice is for the professional, because I think the more you do it, the better you do it.

LAB I would like to hear more about the value and limitations of oral history.

AMS I think the value is self-evident; that is, that you rescue a great mass of material that would not otherwise be available to historians. The preservation of any form of historical evidence is important; the preservation of the testimony of eye witnesses is peculiarly important. One has only to imagine how much our knowledge of the past would be enriched had there been oral history projects on the fall of the Roman Republic, for example, or the Peloponnesian wars, or the impact of William Shakespeare on the London theater. There is absolutely no question about it. It's of immense value.

The limitations of oral history are limitations of human memory; those are very considerable limitations. Memory shapes things to make the past more attractive to us, or more dramatic, or a better story. I remember one day I had lunch with Dean Acheson in 1965

[7] Theodore H. White, "For President Kennedy an Epilogue," *Life*, 6 December 1963, pp. 158–59; and *In Search of History: A Personal Adventure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

or 1966. He was then working on *Present at the Creation.*[8] He came to lunch in a rage, and said, "I'm really furious." And I said, "What happened?" and he said, "You know my secretary, Mrs. Douglass, is a very efficient woman. For years I have told the story about the events in 1941 when we were considering the freezing of Japanese assets. I can remember the meeting in FDR's office. I can see FDR sitting there behind his desk, cigarette holder and so on. I can see Cordell Hull sitting over there, and Herbert Feis sitting there, and I was sitting there, and we had this discussion. And that's when the decision was made. I told that story a thousand times. I wrote it, and my goddam secretary checked the records and discovered that at the time the meeting was held, Cordell Hull was away from Washington. He'd been sick and was away for three weeks recuperating." Acheson said, "I can't believe it. I can see Hull sitting over there." But that is what you do. I mean, one does it oneself. I have kept an intermittent journal for many years. When I was working on the Robert Kennedy book, I went through the journal. I was astonished and chagrined to discover not only how many things I had forgotten, but also how many things I have misremembered. As you think about it, or talk about it, or tell it, the past subtly and imperceptibly changes shape.

LAB That's one of the problems. How do historians look at oral history in relationship to the other primary sources?

AMS That's why it seems to me oral history is valuable essentially as supplementary evidence. What it is good at is to give a sense of the relations among people—who worked with whom, who liked whom, who influenced whom. One question is what you do with remembered dialogue. I had an explanatory note in the Robert Kennedy book:

> We all know that interviews can be no better than a person's memory and that little is more treacherous than that. Yet historians have rarely hesitated to draw on written reminiscences, which are no less self-promoting; nor have they hesitated, in order to impart immediacy to narrative, to quote conversations as recalled in diaries, letters, and memoirs, when the content of the conversation is plausibly supported by context or other evidence. I have extended this tolerance to oral history and employed the literary convention with the same critical caution I hope illustrious predecessors have applied to written documents. It remains a convention. The recollected material cannot pretend to the exactitude of, say, the White House tapes of the Nixon years.[9]

Historians, as a literary convention, do quote dialogue from memoirs and letters and diaries. Using the same caution, I would be prepared to do that from oral history if the dialogue, as remembered, plausibly represents what other evidence tells us took place at the time. But I think the reader should be warned that this is a literary convention and not a tape recording.

LAB With the Robert Kennedy book, you not only supplemented interviews with your own journals but with additional conversations with people interviewed earlier. Were you checking details or was it more general?

AMS Well, I can't remember any specific case. It may have been that there was something I wanted to go into further, if some question had arisen; or that I just happened to have been having lunch with them and we talked about something additional. Of course I tried to verify all exact quotations.

LAB Was Rose Kennedy ever interviewed?

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[8] Dean G. Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969).

[9] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times,* 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), 1:xv.

AMS I did not systematically interview Rose Kennedy. However, when she comes to New York we ordinarily have dinner with her at her daughter's house, and she often would reminisce and I would take notes later on those reminiscences. When it says, "Interview with Rose Kennedy," it represents talks on evenings of that sort, rather than a formal interview.

LAB You mentioned having the interviewee check your quotes before you use them.

AMS I think it's only fair that when you talk to people, you should give them the same kind of control over an interview as they have over an oral history transcript.

LAB Now of course it's very clear that the person who speaks the words owns them and that they cannot be used at all, without a signed release.

AMS That's the way it should be.

LAB When you do interviews with people, you don't transcribe?

AMS If I should tape it, I would transcribe it. But I usually don't tape. I did tape an interview again with Jacqueline Kennedy, on Robert Kennedy, which I will deposit in the Kennedy Library. But apart from that, if I am doing an interview, I rarely use a tape. I just take notes.

LAB I am concerned about the value of the tapes themselves because I think they're more authentic than the transcript. The spirit of the times and the personal relations often is clearer when you hear it being said rather than looking at the words in a transcript.

AMS I suppose that's so. On the other hand, *listening* to tapes takes such a long time. The work I've done in oral history, I've done entirely with transcripts. Still, if I were doing a biography of someone who'd been interviewed extensively on tape, I think it would be essential to listen to the voice on the tape. You're absolutely right, there is a kind of nuance that is lost in the transcript. Particularly statements that are intended as ironic may come out ambiguously in the transcript.

LAB Have you listened to your father's interview, or was the tape destroyed?

AMS Saul Benison did that interview, and I don't know if the tape was destroyed.[10]

LAB Let us move on to the problem of retrieval of information from the taped interview. Indexing, or any kind of description, is expensive. In the wake of Proposition 13, archives budgets are being cut drastically. My question then is: for the historian, is it more valuable for an archivist to spend time acquiring personal papers and organizational archives, or is it valuable to continue with oral history projects?

AMS Well, I think you can't give a general answer to that. It's better to acquire the papers of a distinguished statesman, or a great scientist, or a great writer than it is to do an oral history with the head of the local chamber of commerce. I think it depends on the people involved or the events involved. Obviously one should try to do both.

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[10] Letter, Elizabeth B. Mason, associate director, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, to LAB, 18 February 1980: "Professor Schlesinger wrote his own introduction to the oral history memoir, and in it he explained that the transcripts of the oral history interviews were so bulky and discursive that he decided to 'greatly condense' the conversations he had had over a two-year span with Saul Benison. Internal evidence indicates that the interviews took place from early 1957 to 1959; Professor Schlesinger edited the resulting transcripts during 1959, and the preface which he wrote for deposit of the memoir in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University is dated January 1, 1960.

"The editing process eliminated the individual interviews and their dates, and turned the Q and A of the interview into a first-person narrative, divided into ten chapters. The resulting memoir consists of 241 pages of text, with ten appendices—mainly letters supplementary to the various chapters. The letters are voluminous, and the whole runs to 1,266 pages. The edited oral history memoir became the first draft of *In Retrospect: The History of a Historian* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963).

"Because of Professor Schlesinger's decision to use the material in this way, no taped segments or original transcripts were preserved. (Ordinarily we do keep reel-to-reel tapes and original transcripts.)"

LAB It seemed to me that you made a change in your thought toward oral history in the period between writing the John Kennedy story and the Robert Kennedy biography. In the early book, *A Thousand Days,*[11] you talked about respecting the confidentiality of the people with whom you talked. You said in the introduction that you were not going to release who said what at that time, adding that eventually the information would go with your papers to the Kennedy Library. Later, in Robert Kennedy's book, you're very *detailed* in your footnotes on who said what; and in your introduction to the book you applaud the use of oral history.

AMS The first book was published a year or so after the events. It was a personal memoir rather than a footnoted piece of technical history. The Robert Kennedy book was published ten years after the death of the subject. It seemed to me that after ten years most problems of confidentiality had been dissolved.

LAB So it was strictly a matter of timing, rather than any change in your thinking?

AMS That's right.

LAB Did you find that people wanted to know personal facts about the Kennedy family, which you may have gleaned through oral history?

AMS I don't recall a great deal of personal material in the oral histories that I looked at. I would think the Kennedy oral histories would be more valuable from the point of view of the history of public policy. On the other hand, anyone who is working on a biography of John Kennedy or Robert Kennedy would also have to go through the oral histories to find material in addition to the public policy. But the public policy evidence seems to me more valuable. I mean public policy in the larger sense, including the personal relationships among the people making public policy decisions. The oral histories make it clear, for example, who in the State Department John Kennedy had more confidence in, and more contact with, and which of the assistant attorneys general in the Justice Department Robert Kennedy worked with best—that kind of thing. I would count that all within the realm of public policy. By personal things, I suppose I had in mind one's relationships with one's wife, children—primary relationships and then personal financial questions—that kind of thing.

LAB Don't you think that some people are reading your book because they want to know more about the personal life of the Kennedys?

AMS Well, it may be. I suppose that, if they are looking for gossip, they're going to be disappointed, because there isn't a hell of a lot. There's quite a lot about Robert Kennedy as a person, but it's essentially a history of the *public* man. Still, you can't understand the public man without understanding the private man, so there's a good deal about the private man too.

LAB Did you know of private stories that you didn't include in the book because you made a choice that they were too private?

AMS Well, the book is so long in the first place. I think probably I did an injustice to Ethel Kennedy; she was much more important than I've recorded. She comes in from time to time in the book, but she was such a continuing influence that she should have probably been in more continuously than she was; but I felt this is the kind of thing that is easier to document in relation to particular incidents than a continuing thing. But, as I say, the book was so long anyway. I had to cut seventy-five thousand words to get it down to this length.

LAB What stake do you think historians have in the whole process of oral history?

AMS I think they have a stake of sufficient importance to induce them to pay more attention than many of them do, in order to try to improve the quality of the interviewing

[11] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965).

and the professionalism of the process. Fortunately, there is, as far as I can see, a first class, professional core of oral historians; but what you say about high-school kids doing it, and so on, raises questions.

LAB The value for them is not only what they get on the tape, but also what they learn about history and older people—the process.

AMS I think that historians will become more aware of the importance of oral history, the farther back oral history reaches for them. As time passes and historians begin to use oral histories from another generation, they will become more interested in oral history and give it more support. As I say, the stake of the historian in oral history can most simply be suggested by considering how we would treasure an oral history by Pericles.

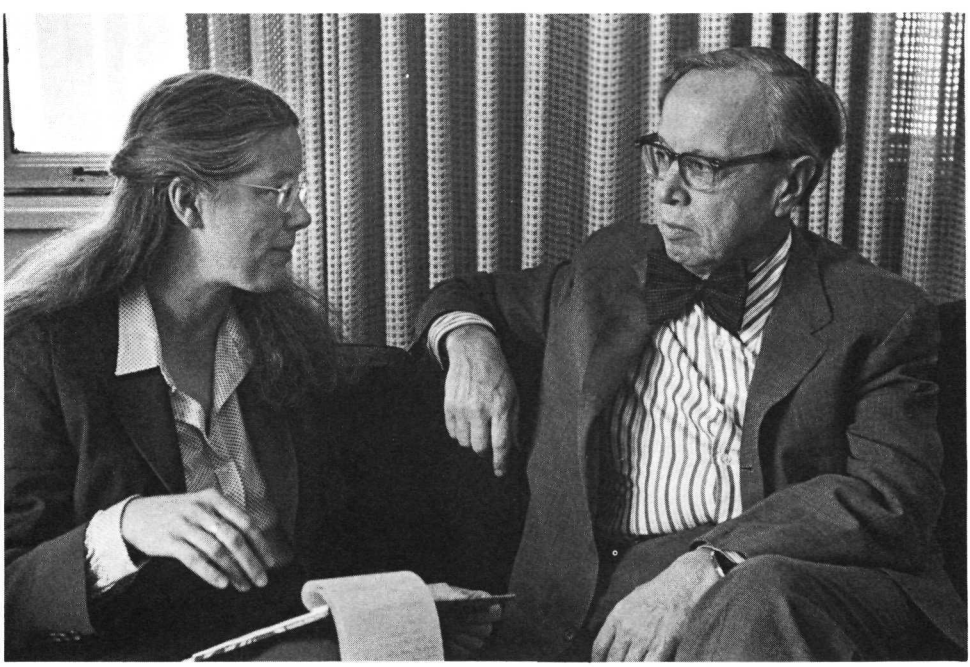
LAB Earlier, we began talking about certain individual collections you have used. Were there any regulations or problems with access in using collections, that you think could be changed?

AMS A number of the oral histories I used have been declared open by the interviewee. Others required the interviewee's permission for access and, in some cases, for subsequent quotation; that seems to me a perfectly defensible condition. If someone gives an oral history interview, I see no reason why he should not both close it as long as he wants to and require specific permission for each quotation used from it. One regrets those conditions, but otherwise one wouldn't get the interview at all. Historians don't have to have everything this minute. Obviously it would be nice if everything were open from the start. But realistically, it's more important to get it on the record and have it open sometime.

LAB In most cases, archivists and oral historians do not like to do an interview that will be closed longer than five years.

AMS Well, I think that's a mistake. I think it's much better to have a good, candid interview which may not be open for twenty-five years than to have a poor, guarded, wary interview which is open in five years. The important thing is a rich record rather than instant access.

LAB I'd like to talk about influencing recall and how to stimulate people's memories. Do you have any hints on that?



Photograph by SCHECTER M. LEE

AMS Well no, except, obviously, interviewers who are well prepared are in a much better situation to do that than those who aren't. Interviewers who are able to go through the files of the interviewee and produce documents to refresh the memory get much better results.

LAB I'd like to talk a little bit about judging the honesty of a speaker. Have you interviewed people who you knew weren't telling you the whole story?

AMS Well, some of the foreign statesmen, so called, that I talked to concerning President Kennedy, clearly weren't leveling, but I understood why they weren't: because they didn't really understand what oral history was all about. They felt they were required to say nice things, and they did. I've never interviewed anyone whom I felt to be deliberately lying to me, but I'm sure there are examples in oral history interviews of more or less deliberate lies, as there are certainly many examples of misleading statements or distortions.

LAB Some archivists have decided that it is not their job to point out that someone has said a deliberate lie. They think it is up to the historians who use the material, just as it is for historians who use diaries and letters to judge the facts.

AMS Yes, I think that's right. On the other hand, I think also there should be an opportunity for people to file with interviews statements of dissent. For example, there's an interview in the Kennedy Library with Ambassador G. Frederick Reinhardt, who was ambassador to Italy in the Kennedy years, containing some comment on my alleged meddling in Italian affairs when he was the ambassador. His comments were not lies, or anything like that—not in that category—but they did represent, it seemed to me, a misconception of what was going on—though an understandable misconception, perhaps, from his viewpoint. So I have filed a statement which is made available to researchers with the Reinhardt interview, giving my side of these events. And I think people should be encouraged to do that.

LAB You weren't the interview*er*?

AMS I was not the interview*er*. I was sideswiped by the interview. But I think the more you can enrich the evidence by getting other views on some of these controversies, the better.

LAB That is an excellent point.

AMS Whether it's part of the archivists' duty to solicit replies is open to question. In the Reinhardt case someone perhaps wrote an article quoting *him* on my role, and then I got hold of the full text of the interview and thereafter filed my dissent.

LAB Do you think oral history interviews are often misquoted? I've seen a lot of quotes taken from oral history that are not in the context of the interview. Is this the same as taking a quote from a letter or diary?

AMS Because letters and diaries are somewhat more tightly written than oral history conversations, it may be easier to pull something out of context in oral history. But the same basic problem exists in the use of all documents. Perhaps oral history lends itself especially to that abuse. In any event, the only answer is exposure.

LAB There is a controversy about who does the interviewing. Do Blacks have to interview Blacks? Do women have to interview women? What do you think?

AMS It seems to me there's no general answer to that. A sympathetic man or a sympathetic white will do better than an unsympathetic, condescending, Black or woman.

LAB Do you think it's important for the interviewer and interviewee to share some kind of philosophy?

AMS No.

LAB I think of you and Robert Kennedy sharing a philosophy.

AMS I don't know why I said "no" so hastily there. I was thinking that, in the case of a professional interviewer, the interviewee is not likely to know what the professional interviewer thinks. So I don't think it's important that a sense of common philosophy exists; but it obviously doesn't do any harm.

LAB The new field is videotaped interviews. What are your impressions of that?

AMS Well, again I think if we had videotaped interviews of Emerson, Socrates, Charlemagne, it would be marvelous. On the other hand, videotaping compounds all the problems of expense, storage, dilapidation, and so on. Obviously it would have to be used selectively. But, for commanding figures, particularly those who haven't been amply documented on television, it would be particularly useful. Eric Sevareid's interviewing Walter Lippman, for example, would be invaluable to historians a hundred years from now wondering what Lippman was like. But only an unusual case would justify the expense. There are not that many Walter Lippmans.

LAB What can we do to improve oral history?

AMS I don't know that I have anything very arresting to say about that. Obviously you want to increase the professionalism; to increase the standards of interviewing; and to regularize access, handling, and processing of material. I don't know whether there's going to be any revolutionary change in technology.

LAB Are there any events you think oral historians might consider now—events from the past few years with few primary sources?

AMS I suppose something like the history of the energy crisis would be worth doing—going back at least to the Paley Commission.[12] I don't know to what extent Bill Paley's memoirs cover the commission, but its work defined many of the problems we're trying to come to terms with today. A history of *what happened* would be valuable, with the insights and arguments and propositions which took place. That might be one topic of interest.

LAB If you were doing that, would you interview common people too?

AMS I don't suppose particularly.

LAB You're seeing this entirely as an administrative public policy program?

AMS The energy project—yes. But the problem of the counter-culture of the 60s is a different matter. There's quite a lot written about that, but I think it might be interesting for an oral history project. I think there has been quite a lot of oral history done on the Civil Rights movement.

LAB There are people who take short quotes from a lot of interviews such as Alvin Schwartz did for *When I Grew Up Long Ago.*[13] He has interviewed 150 people and put short quotes into chapters. Do you have any thoughts on the value of this?

AMS It all depends on the subject. The snippet approach has to be done very well. I did think that it was done quite well by George Plimpton and Jean Stein in their book on Robert Kennedy.[14] That was artfully composed, created an atmosphere, and built to climaxes.

LAB In your first book you say something I want to quote because it seems important at this time: "The measure of what is historically important is set by the generation that writes the history, not by the one that makes it."[15] That statement interests me because as an archivist it seems to me that history is going to be set more and more by what the archivist saves and what the oral historians asks. I'm still interested in the relationship between the archivist and the oral historian and the writer of history. Without that balanced relationship we are not going to have the real picture.

AMS What the person who writes history is going to be interested in is governed by the preoccupations of his time. Women always had a role in history, so did Blacks, so did

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[12] William S. Paley, Chairman, The President's Materials Policy Commission, *Resources for Freedom: A Report to the President* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952).

[13] Alvin Schwartz, *When I Grew Up Long Ago* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1978).

[14] Jean Stein, interviews, George Plimpton, ed., *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1970).

[15] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Orestes A. Brownson: A Pilgrim's Progress* (1939; reprinted., New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1963), p. 3.

Indians; but it took the raising of consciousness created in our own time by the women's liberation movement, by the racial justice efforts, and so on, to make historians recognize that role, to make them realize that all these things *were* in fact there in the past, and belatedly to bring them forward. So, I still defend my original statement. As Oscar Wilde said, "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it." What the archivists and the oral historians can do is to make sure that a much wider range of evidence is available, so that when the flickering spotlight of the historian searches the darkness of the past, it will find things to illuminate. For a long time the historian just picked out a few things over here—now they're under the influence of Women's Liberation, and the spotlight goes over there and discovers women; but God knows what is left which is yet to be discovered. What the archivists and the oral historians can do is to make sure that, when the spotlight moves, there'll be some evidence to nourish the writer of history.

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