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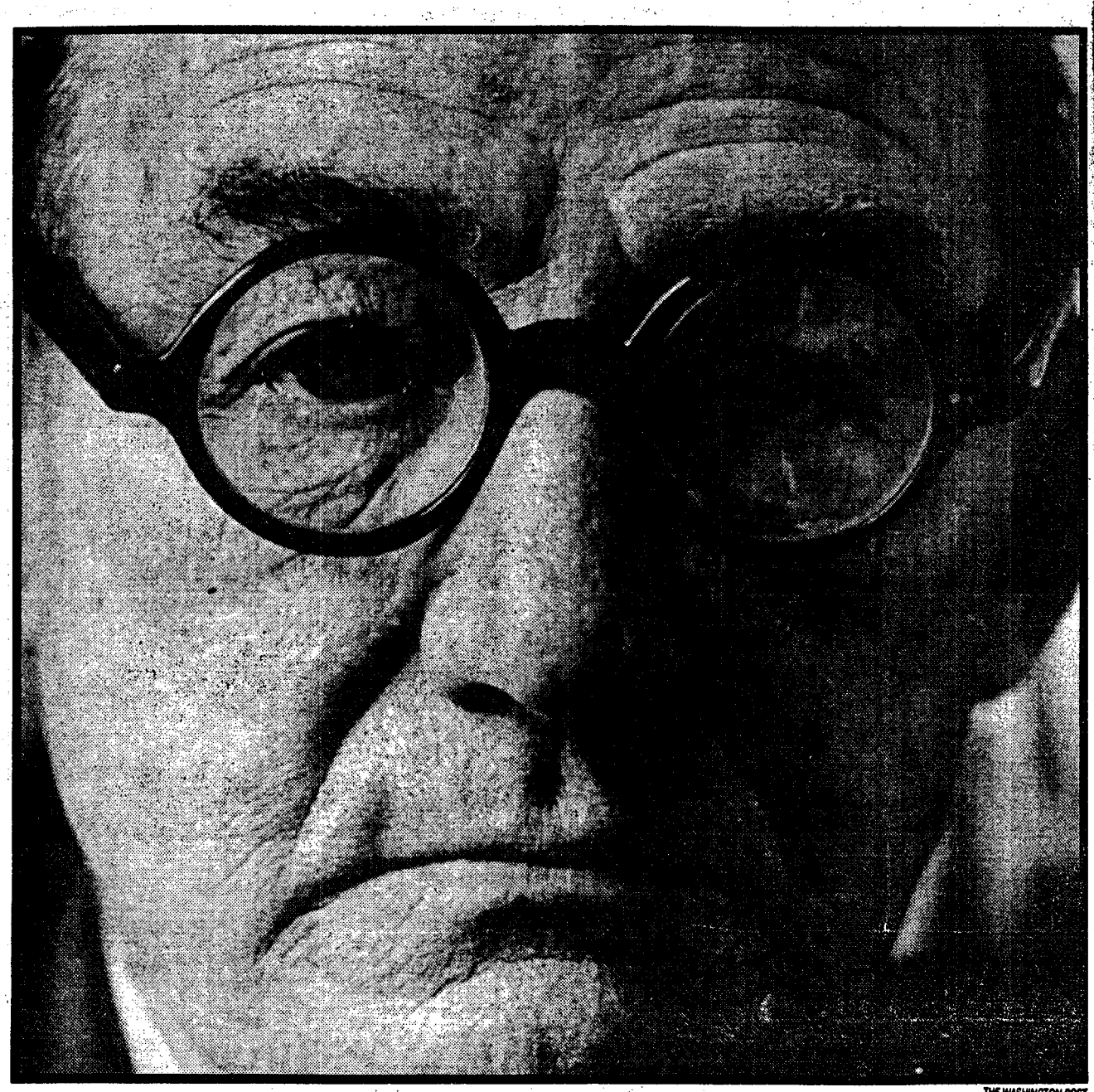

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Compromising photos of Joseph Alsop and the Washington Establishment's response to them may have said as much about the latter as the former.

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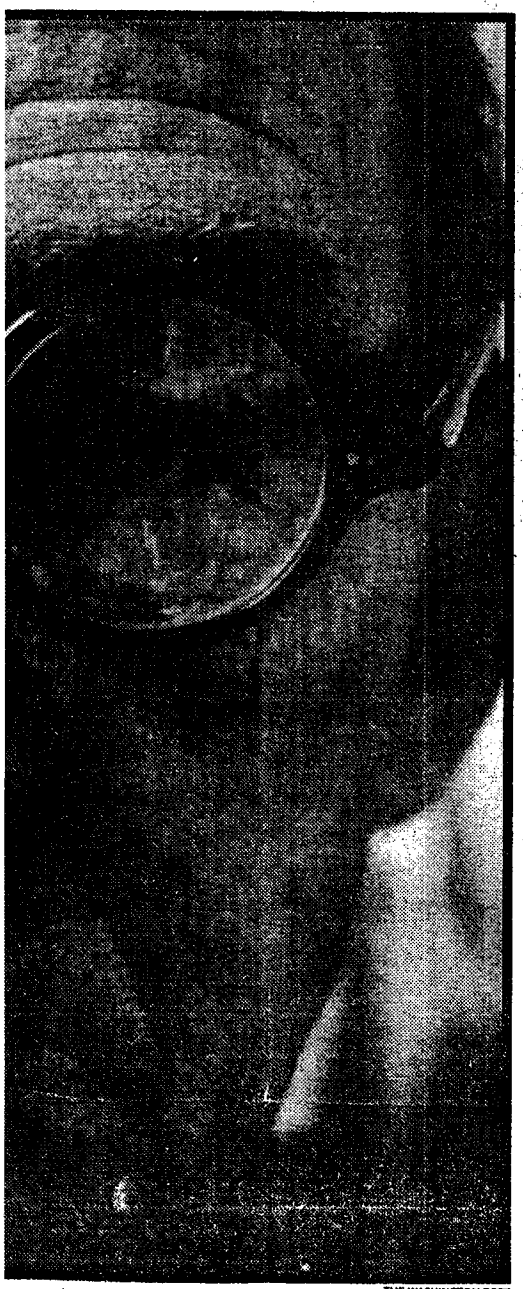

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THE HAWK AND THE VULTURES

Columnist Joe Alsop Had a Secret. Somehow, It Stayed That Way.

By David Streitfeld
Washington Post Staff Writer

In 1970, political columnist Joseph Alsop saw his worst fear come true. It wasn't just that his enemies learned his darkest secret. Much more painfully, some of his friends found out too.

Charles Bartlett, for example. A columnist here for the Field Syndicate, Bartlett opened his mail one day to find photos of a much younger Alsop and another man. Both were naked. Even now, talking publicly about the pictures for the first time, Bartlett declines to describe them precisely. "I owe that much to Joe," he says.

Around the same time, humor columnist Art Buchwald was unsettled to find himself the recipient of a similar package. "It scared the hell out of me," Buchwald says. "I'm not comfortable with getting photographs of people in compromising positions in the mail."

How many other Washingtonians got the same pictures remains a matter of conjecture, but if the mysterious sender expected publicity he must have been disappointed. No one wrote about the photos, even in a veiled way. Once again, Alsop had escaped exposure.

It had been 13 years since the columnist had committed the monumental blunder of letting himself be entrapped by the Soviet secret police in a homosexual tryst, and 13 years since he had heroically refused to be blackmailed. He had written more than a thousand columns in that time, many of them castigating the Soviets, always knowing he could be betrayed at any moment.

At first known only to a few, the basics of the 1957 incident gradually trickled out. By Alsop's death six years ago, it had reached the stage of cocktail party fodder, a gossipy footnote to the Cold War.

It was a story that drew attention to the ways Washington had—and had not—changed. Forty years ago, this was a much less forgiving town. If Alsop had been exposed as a homosexual, his career as a power broker would have been abruptly over.

But if Alsop was intensely vulnerable, the tight political world of those decades also offered a peculiar shield. Washington was then run by an elite group of middle-aged white men, a firmly entrenched Establishment. Alsop was part of it, and this gave him certain privileges. Its members would protect him.

Most of them, anyway. Two new books offer evidence that at least one member of the Establishment was eager to see the world more fully informed about Alsop's "propensities." And the Soviets, of course, weren't bound by any gentlemanly rules.

It's astonishing that Alsop's secret remained intact for decades. But as the 1970

See ALSOP, C2, Col. 1

ALSOP, From C1

photos prove, if he was never ruined, it wasn't because no one tried.

When Joseph Wright Alsop Jr. went on his fateful trip to Moscow, he was 46 and at the crest of his career. His column, "Matter of Fact," written then in alternation with his brother Stewart, appeared four times a week in more than 200 newspapers, including the New York Herald Tribune and The Washington Post.

Alsop was a vibrant social presence as well. With its fine wines, elegant furnishings and stellar guests, his Dumbarton Avenue home was one of Washington's A-list salons. On June 24, 1950, to take a routine example, his guests included assistant secretary of state Dean Rusk, Secretary of the Army Frank Pace, Undersecretary of the Air Force John McCone, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter and leading Soviet expert George Kennan—the first three of whom had to cut the evening short after learning that North Korea had just invaded South Korea.

If the columnist's work blended smoothly into his entertaining, his private life was kept obscured. Friends and colleagues interviewed for this story said they had few clues about the longtime bachelor's sex life. "I do not believe that Joe was a very active homosexual in Washington during those years," says Congressional Quarterly Executive Editor Robert Merry, who is working on a biography of the Alsop brothers. "His sexual inclinations came to the fore when he was traveling."

In those less prying times, questions of sexual identity weren't easily broached. With Alsop it would have been unthinkable: A distant relative of FDR and Teddy Roosevelt, the Groton- and Harvard-educated columnist had a mannered, patrician air accompanied by an abrasive style that, even his friends agreed, could be off-putting.

As a young man he reportedly set himself the goal of insulting at least one person by noon, and on many days probably succeeded. A celebrated anecdote has Alsop terminating an interview with Lewis Strauss, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, with the reproach, "Admiral, you have wasted half an hour of my time."

While a longtime critic of Joe McCarthy and his wild charges that the State Department was overrun with Reds, Alsop was also a committed anti-Communist who had been denounced by the Soviet Young Communist League. This makes his behavior in Moscow particularly inexplicable. He should have known they would be after him.

While many of the facts remain murky, what is known about the incident is summarized in a new book, "Joe Alsop's Cold War," by syndicated columnist Edwin Yoder Jr. "I wasn't eager to bring this episode in, but I realized it was an integral part of the story and had to be told," says Yoder, who teaches journalism at Washington and Lee University.

His treatment is circumspect and brief, saying only that Alsop met "an agent provocateur from the secret police," had sex with him in his hotel

Columnist Edwin Yoder Jr.: "I wasn't eager to bring this episode in, but I realized it . . . had to be told."

room, and "was soon confronted with the photographs and the threat of blackmail and was urged—unsuccessfully—to become an undercover agent."

By one account that Yoder heard, Alsop was "crushed and distraught" and contemplated suicide; by another, he reacted with "his usual bluster and bravado." In either case the U.S. ambassador, Alsop's old friend Chip Bohlen, quickly got the columnist out of the country.

Alsop would have been a prize catch for the Soviets. "They thought, 'If we can nail him, he'll be useful to us and tell us what's going on in Washington,' " says former CIA director Richard Helms. "Espionage is not just turning up deep dark secrets. It's also keeping informed about public things." And who better to keep you informed than the man who knew everyone in official Washington?

"It was standard operating procedure—any tourist was potentially vulnerable, any embassy staff employee or foreigner was targeted on some level," says Hayden Peake, a respected intelligence analyst. "Alsop wasn't the

first to have been caught, but he's certainly the best known."

(Alexander Mikhailov, spokesman for the Federal Counterintelligence Service, the successor to the KGB, checked the agency's files at the request of this newspaper. Mikhailov said he found nothing relating to Alsop.)

If the columnist considered suicide, the thought was evanescent. His columns from those weeks give no indication anything momentous had happened. His last Soviet dispatch, printed on Feb. 24 from the mining town of Kemerovo, is upbeat, noting, "I have enjoyed almost every moment of this Siberian journey." By March 1, he was back in Paris, calmly offering measured assessments of Khrushchev.

The same seems true of his work over the longer term. Yoder says he found no evidence that the columnist either hardened or weakened toward the Soviets. Leann Grabavoy Almquist, who wrote her doctoral thesis on "Joseph Alsop and American Foreign Policy," agrees.

"I would think that deep down inside [the blackmail attempt] had to have some impact on his ability to assess the Soviet Union, but I can't find it," Almquist says. "He was suspicious of them before he went there, and he was suspicious when he returned."

Still, it's impossible to measure the incident's ultimate effect. In "The Best and the Brightest," David Halberstam argues that Alsop masterfully baited President Johnson in late 1964 and '65 by asserting that if Johnson ducked the challenge in Vietnam he was less of a man than Jack Kennedy.

"Walter Lippmann would read those columns with a sick feeling and tell friends that if Johnson went to war in Vietnam, at least 50 percent of the responsibility would be Alsop's," Halberstam wrote.

Alsop confessed to his editors after the incident in Moscow, offering to give up his column. If they had taken him up on it, would the history of the war be any different? It's an intriguing notion, although ultimately unprovable.

"Joe Alsop may have made it easier for Lyndon Johnson to support American escalation in Vietnam, because Johnson had to know that Alsop would be there every step of the way, writing columns in support," says Almquist. "But you can't say that without Joe Alsop we wouldn't have gone to war in Vietnam."

Washington's Response

If Alsop managed to put to one side his unpleasant and humiliating experience, some of those who heard about it couldn't quite do the same.

After abruptly leaving Moscow, the columnist consulted with CIA higher-up Frank Wisner, another old friend. He prepared, as instructed, a detailed history of both the incident and his sex life. The CIA, following standard procedure, then forwarded the material onto FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

By March 29, 1957, only about a month after the blackmail attempt, the FBI had prepared an eight-page summary memo about the Alsop brothers, detailing previous investigations into the columnists' publication of supposedly classified information as well as various "allegations of homosexuality" involving Joe.

In his book, Yoder all but accuses Hoover of sleaze-mongering, writing that the director "quickly grasped the material's possibilities for ingratiating himself with members of the Eisenhower administration who had been repeatedly stung and irritated by Alsop's columns." If the old boy network was going to protect Alsop, Hoover would do his best to undermine it.

But a closer examination of what happened to Alsop suggests Hoover was more servant than scoundrel. He was really just doing his job.

Back then, homosexuality was the unpardonable sin. In 1950, Republican National Committee Chairman Guy Gabrielson said "sex perverts" in the government were perhaps just as bad as Communists. A year later, Hoover said he had uncovered 406 "sex deviates" in the government. When a routine FBI check of Arthur Vandenberg Jr.—slated for a senior White House post in the first Eisenhower administration—threatened to reveal he was homosexual, the aide hastily checked into the hospital and then declined the post for "health reasons."

It was against such a background that, two weeks after the FBI had prepared its summary memo on Alsop, an employee in the White House mail room solicited an undercover member of the D.C. Vice Squad and was arrested. He in turn implicated two other mail room employees, one of whom confessed to having seen the confidential FBI report on Alsop.

By this point, Hoover had evidence of a ring of homosexuals in the White House as well as a major security breach—reason enough to personally brief White House Chief of Staff Sherman Adams about Alsop. The heavy hitters in the administration soon knew exactly what had happened to one of their least favorite columnists.

From the vantage point of nearly 40 years, the few surviving members of the Eisenhower administration say more or less the same thing: *I didn't know about Alsop and, even if I had, it wouldn't have mattered. Gentlemen ran the world back then.*

Harold Stassen, special assistant to the president for disarmament, put it most forcefully: "We respected the right of people to write critical things. Eisenhower was not thin-skinned." Stassen was adamant that no one in the administration would have used Alsop's homosexuality against him: "Eisenhower never did engage in that kind of consideration or tactic."

Herbert Brownell, the attorney general in 1957, concurs: "All I heard was gossip. I did not verify it." Instead, he says, he dismissed it. As for Alsop's writing, "I think he was very supportive, in general, of Eisenhower's foreign policy."

It's a pretty picture, but another new book makes clear the situation was nowhere near this benign. "J. Edgar Hoover, Sex and Crime," by Marquette University historian Athan Theoharis, spends a few pages retracing the same material as Yoder, but comes to a different conclusion.

A crucial memo by Hoover, recently declassified, is used by both scholars. Yoder, unfortunately, misdates it to 1957, which allows him to further finger Hoover as the villain of this story. Theoharis puts the memo in the true context.

It's now 1959, two years after the blackmail attempt. The columnist is doggedly hammering away at the so-called missile gap (a term he coined) between the United States and the Soviet Union.

This issue, which was to continue into 1960 and help give Kennedy an edge to win the election, was one of Alsop's great crusades. "[W]hen our danger is so apparent, everything possible is still not being done," he complained in a March 4, 1959, column headlined "The Smug Risk-Takers." On March 22, Alsop asserted that the administration was "playing Russian roulette with the whole course of human history at stake."

In retrospect, Alsop was clearly wrong. The United States hadn't lost strategic superiority. What's more, the Eisenhower administration knew it, thanks to the secret U-2 flights.

It must have been maddening for administration officials to see themselves hammered for being weak on defense when they knew they weren't—but couldn't say how they knew. Eisenhow-

er's science adviser, George Kistiakowsky, related in a memoir how the president became "exceedingly angry" at one point during the height of the missile gap crisis, complaining that "Joseph Alsop is about the lowest form of animal life on earth."

Robert Donovan, then with the New York Herald Tribune, provides further evidence that the administration's policy toward Alsop wasn't the live-and-let-live of remembrance. Donovan remembers Eisenhower's press secretary, James Hagerty, telling him in late 1959, "We're going to lift Alsop's White House pass. The guy's a pansy. The FBI knows all about it."

Says Donovan: "They hated Joe for the stuff he was writing on Eisenhower."

Given this mood, a decision to try and neutralize Alsop was probably inevitable. It came from Attorney General William Rogers, who called Hoover on April 14 to say he was "amazed" to learn that the new secretary of defense, Neil McElroy, "did not know about the Joseph Alsop incident in Russia."

Rogers then told Hoover, according to a memo the FBI director wrote for his files that day, that "he thought he should get together what we have on Alsop as he believed very few people knew of this. . . . The Attorney General then commented that he was going to see that certain individuals were aware of Alsop's propensities . . . but he would not take the responsibility for such information going any further."

Theoharis writes that Rogers's purpose "was decidedly hostile." In an interview, the historian adds that "Rogers's strategy in 1959 was to discredit Alsop, and not simply in the minds of high-level Eisenhower administration officials. He wanted Alsop's homosexuality to be known beyond the administration."

Rogers, who went on to become Nixon's first secretary of state and now practices law here, was sent the relevant pages of both books by The Post with the request that he clarify his intentions with regard to Alsop. He declined to do so.

'A Sword Over His Head'

In 1961, Alsop married Susan Mary Patten, the widow of an old friend. Alsop was lonely, and so, as he wrote in his autobiography, "when the opportunity arose to slip into the role of companion and father to a family I had known intimately for so many years, I eagerly volunteered."

Among the couple's best friends was the new president. Indeed, Kennedy had stopped at Alsop's Georgetown home for a bowl of terrapin soup on the night of his inauguration—the only private residence he graced with a visit that evening. Alsop was more firmly than ever a member of the in-crowd.

This had definite advantages with regard to his secret. In 1962, KGB agent Yuri Nosenko offered his services to the CIA. Among the secrets Nosenko immediately revealed, his CIA handler told writer David Wise many years later, was that the Soviets "had the goods" on Alsop. "They have photos and if he gets out of line they can blackmail him if he doesn't write what they want."

As Nosenko put it: "There is a sword over his head."

A CIA higher-up ordered this piece of news to be cut out of the tape "because Alsop was a good friend of the president," Wise wrote in his 1992 book, "Molehunt."

Kennedy and his brother Bobby, the attorney general, both knew about the blackmail attempt anyway, which is another indication about how a secret spreads—along with how, if you know the right people, it doesn't spread too far.

The executive editor of The Post, Russell Wiggins, knew as well. "The climate was so completely different then," he says. "Rumors about certain individuals were discussed among newspapermen but never printed."

Sending out the photos in 1970 was obviously an attempt to force someone's hand. An accompanying note—unsigned, of course—said something to the effect of, "I thought you should know that Joe Alsop is under the control of Israeli intelligence, who took these pictures of him. That's why he's been defending Israel with such vigor."

Both of the known recipients immediately suspected the Soviets instead. For one thing, says Charles Bartlett, Alsop had just written a column excoriating "the black lies" of the Soviet ambassador, and the other man in the photo looked Russian.

Bartlett was a friend of Alsop's. Art Buchwald, on the other hand, may have seemed a likely choice to betray the columnist. The two were in a public feud, although the only strong feelings seem to have been on Alsop's side.

The spat arose out of Buchwald's "Sheep on the Runway," a play depicting a hawkish American columnist who foments a war between the United States and a small Asian country. Since Alsop was one of the few journalists who still believed in the war in Vietnam—and since Buchwald had already lampooned him in a column as "the famed hawk columnist Joseph Wallstrop"—the real-life model for "Joe Mayflower" was all too apparent. Friends of Alsop muttered the portrait was libelous.

It was the sort of donnybrook that made for good newspaper copy and presumably sold a few extra theater tickets, but that didn't mean Buchwald would deliver up an exposé. Instead, he called his friend Phil Geyelin, then the editorial page editor of The Post. They met for lunch at Sans Souci, that era's Establishment watering hole, and mulled over the proper response.

The main question was whether they should tell Alsop. Says Geyelin: "After the 'Sheep on the Runway' trouble, it would have been impossible for Art to take the photos around to Joe. And I couldn't have done it without bringing Art into it. So we didn't tell anyone."

As for the photos themselves, Buch-

wald had no doubts. "I dealt with them in the only way I wanted to deal with them, which was tear them up," he says. "I don't give a damn what a guy's sexual proclivities are, as long as they don't involve me."

Bartlett, meanwhile, told a source in the CIA about his set of photos, meanwhile mailing them anonymously to Alsop. "I thought you should have these," he wrote in a note. "I'm not signing this because I don't want it to be an embarrassment to us when we meet."

A couple of days later, Alsop called: "Did you send me those pictures?" he asked. When Bartlett admitted doing so, Alsop didn't say thank you, didn't explain, didn't say much of anything.

"The conversation sort of dribbled off," recalls Bartlett.

Beneath his cool demeanor, Alsop was angry and upset. He invited a friend, someone who knew all about the incident, to lunch. "Those bastards!" he said. Perhaps he should get them off his back by making a public confession. Once he did, no one would be able to threaten him again.

The friend says he counseled against such a tactic. "You have your wife and stepchildren to think about, as well as your brother and other close relatives," he reminded Alsop. "Consider the impact such a declaration would have on *them*."

A chastened Alsop agreed. He talked to a lawyer, left town for a while. Whoever was mailing out the photos—presumably the Soviets, although there's no direct evidence of this—finally quit.

Part of History

Joe and Susan Mary Alsop separated in 1972; three years later, he gave up his column. Those who were close to him eventually began to detect a trace of mellowness.

Robert Merry, the biographer of the Alsop brothers, says that "at the end he was pretty open [about his homosexuality], particularly to his younger friends. Those who were a generation behind him, he felt, could understand it more readily."

By this time, too, the Moscow incident had assumed a life of its own as a high-level tidbit at the most exclusive Washington parties. Adam Platt, a freelance writer who helped Alsop finish his autobiography, " 'I've Seen the Best of It,' " recalls that in the late '80s, "people would tell me about the story who were journalists or socialites. They certainly weren't Eisenhower administration officials."

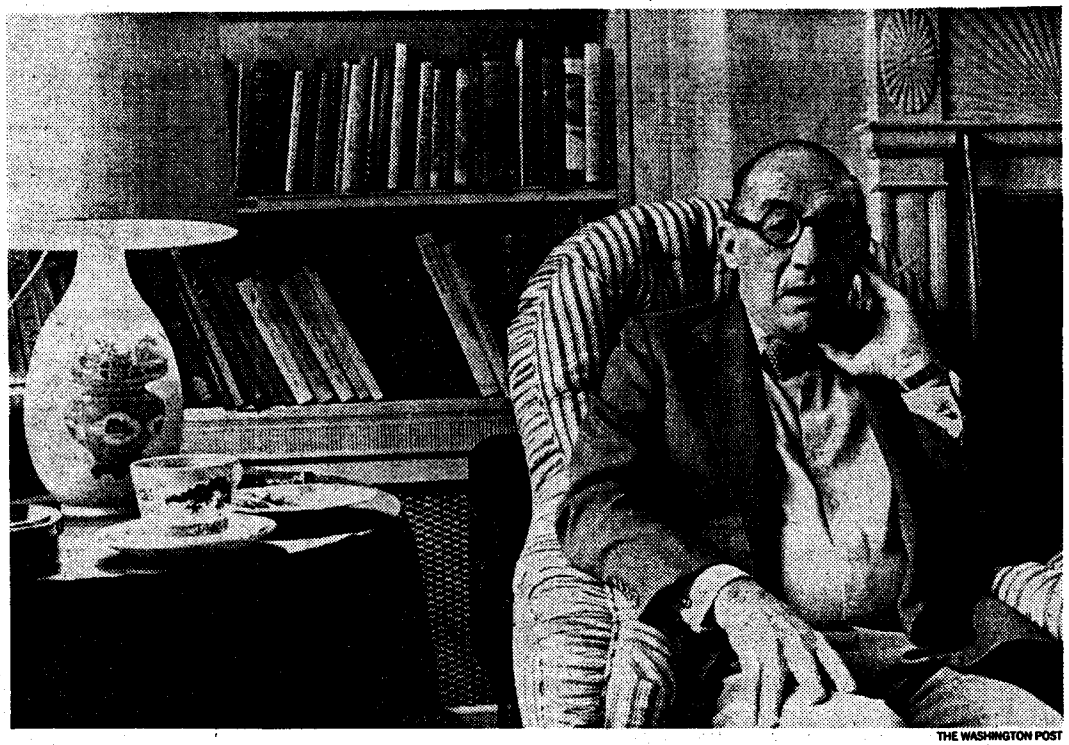
It inched out in print as well. Alsop was rather callously "outed" in 1990, the year after his death, in a book of portraits by Brendan Gill. The next year, a footnote in Michael Beschloss's "The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960-1963" referred to Attorney General Robert Kennedy being warned that "a prominent journalist and friend of the president's had been 'compromised' " during a visit to Moscow.

Then came David Wise's "Molehunt," which named Alsop and detailed the story in two succinct paragraphs and two footnotes. "I debated whether this was legitimate news, and decided it was, because of the involvement of Soviet intelligence. It was part of the history of the Cold War," says Wise. Unfortunately, no one noticed his scoop. "It dropped like a stone, like so many things one writes."

Late last year, Jack Nelson of the Los Angeles Times got a manuscript of Yoder's book and wrote a story. Suddenly, the incident was "news." A brief version of the story ran in The Post and other newspapers.

Susan Mary Alsop was naturally distressed, but has reconciled herself to this being public. "I think the thing to do is emphasize how brave Joe was," she says. "He was a very unself-pitying man. Instead of being sorry for himself, he went on and did his work."

She didn't want to say anything more.



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Joseph Alsop never shied away from attacking the Soviets, even when he knew they had compromising photos of him.