

An Oral History Interview

with

CLIFF ROBERTSON (part 3)

conducted by
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Cliff Robertson

Cliff Robertson grew up in La Jolla, California. After attending Antioch College, he worked briefly as a journalist before beginning what would become a life-long career in acting, directing, and screenwriting.

In 1963 Robertson became the first actor to portray a living American president after being personally selected to play John F. Kennedy in "PT 109." In 1968 he won the Academy Award for his starring role in the movie "Charly." His career took a turn for the worse, however, after he blew the whistle on became known as Hollywoodgate, an embezzlement scandal involving Columbia Pictures executive David Begelman.

Robertson became friends with Congressman Morris Udall during Udall's campaign for the 1976 democratic presidential nomination.

JF: This is Tape 31, a continuation with Cliff Robertson. Go ahead.

CR: When David McClintock wrote the book, *Indecent Exposure*, which was about my blowing the whistle on this whole Columbia Pictures-David Begelman scandal...

JF: What year was that written, do you know?

CR: I guess it was probably 1980, 1981. He said, "Are you willing to cooperate?" I said, "Of course! I'm not going to hide from the truth." So he wrote a very good book and he made a lot of money. I'm glad for him. But all the characters, with the exception of me, ended up making a lot of money. Begelman got, ended up he got a severance thing and a lot of money. And all the other people did too. But one of the figures in the book evidently--and it's pretty obvious--said to McClintock, or made an agreement with McClintock--and I never confronted David on this, but in a way I have, but I never would embarrass him--that he would tell David who said what in the board room, because he was on the board, with this one other guy--who said what, but he wanted his half whitened a little bit, so David kind of made him look like kind of almost a victim, but he wasn't a victim, he ended up with a lot of money too. This is not an actor, this is another one of these big shots. So you see what had happened.

Well, then I got a call from Lucien.... I want to say Wainscott [Truscott]. A good writer. He was writing an article for *The New York Times*, to raise a lot of hell. It was [for the] Sunday supplement, and it was going to be called "The ... something of Hollywood" [editor's note: "Hollywood's Wall Street Connection"]. It was about the Allen brothers, Charlie Allen. That was not the original name, but they have a company called Allen--Herbert Allen and Charlie Allen. Now, this Herbert Allen, Jr., you've probably heard about him, he was a big wheel, he was the head of--he sold Columbia to Sony and he's the son of Herbert Allen. They move in a fast track. They were very powerful, very rich. Now, the more old respectable brokerage firms, my friends tell me, that the Allen brothers are considered smart, but they choose not to do business with them because they've had a lot of ties with organized crime. They started as bucket brokers in the twenties. Do you know what a bucket broker is?

JF: No, I don't.

CR: Bucket broker was the term--see, anybody and everybody--filling station operators were selling stocks in those days. My former wife's father, who didn't even graduate from high school, had to quit school at fourteen, he ended up a stock broker--a lot of people did--anybody and everyone. Well, the Allen brothers were these brothers--I don't know what their original name was, Jewish name--but they started a brokerage firm. And they were known in those days as bucket brokers. A bucket broker was a guy that was taking all these orders on a phone, and then after he'd get the order, he'd just throw it in the bucket.

There've been a lot of questions, but they've never been to jail. Very powerful in New York. At any rate, Ray Stark, who was power without portfolio because he had

done "Funny Girl," and he was very powerful at Columbia and did some other pictures and had been very successful. And I knew Ray, he's a smart little guy. You'd see him up there, used to go up there with his wife, skiing, from New Jersey. Deceptively kind of a funny little guy--funny always kind of, but could be not a guy to have as an enemy.

JF: Yes, not someone to mess with.

CR: Right. They say that he is one of the guys, along with Charlie Allen and Herbert Allen....

Lucien Truscott! He's the guy! Lucien called me one time and said, "Cliff, they didn't go back far enough." I said, "Who?" He said, "Newsweek and all these people talking about Hollywoodgate. It goes back further than that." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "It goes back to pre-Castro in Cuba." I said, "Lucien, what's that got to do with it?" He said, "Before Castro took over Cuba, there was big gambling in Cuba, in Havana, and the head of it was a charmer who had been arrested forty times and never served in jail, named Myer Lansky." Myer Lansky was a big, big organized crime figure, never served a day in jail. He was Jewish, but he was the top guy in the Italian mafia, but he was the brains. He was in charge of the gambling. When Castro took over, he kicked the gamblers out. Myer set up another gambling syndicate in the Bahamas, and among his partners were Carroll Rosenblum, who died very mysteriously off of Palm Beach water, witnessed by a Canadian visitor, a guy in a scuba suit, and he used to go swimming every morning. Carroll Rosenblum was the owner of the L.A. Rams. His wife is now the owner. Now they've moved to St. Louis, I guess. Carroll Rosenblum; Elliott Hyman [phonetic spelling]; Ray Stark, partner of Elliott Hyman; and a guy named--another big Canadian gambling figure. I'll think of it right before it's over. But these guys were all in partners with Myer Lansky.

Now, when Ray Stark and the Columbia boys, according to Lucien Truscott, the master plan was, they knew they were going to make a lot of money with a picture called "[Close] Encounters of a Third Kind," about aliens. And the master plan, according to Lucien Truscott--and Lucien Truscott is a very good writer, his father was a big hero in World War II--you know, West Point and all this stuff. When they knew that Encounters of the Third Kind was going to be successful, according to Lucien--he told me on the phone--the master plan was to puff up the stock and, right at the height, sell it to United Artists. He said they stood to make sixty additional million dollars. "So when you blew the whistle on these people, you were not being very friendly. And therefore, it's no surprise if you're not working, but it may not be no surprise if something happens to you."

Now, they printed it. "The Godfather of Hollywood," they called it. Charlie Allen, they showed him [in twenty-one, they called him?]. Well, he is powerful, and he got, Abe Rosenthal, who was the editor then, of the Times, then to do a little kind of an apology the following week. It wasn't much. He was trying to say, "Well, there's no direct evidence." In other words, the pressures were there on The New York Times.

So the thing is, Mo recognized the powers that [I was up against.] Somebody said, "Never get in an argument...." Anybody who buys ink by the barrel--that's an old thing about "don't ever take on a newspaper or anything like that."

JF: This lasted for three years?

CR: Yes, three-and-a-half years I didn't work. I did a movie, some guys came to me and asked me to do a rewrite on a script, and then they asked me to end up directing and being in it. But it was a little film, and I was not working.

JF: Do you feel like that has still dogged you?

CR: Oh! oh! of course! To this day it dogs me.

JF: Do people bring it up ever?

CR: No, because....

JF: Or is it subtle?

CR: It's subtle. But if you were working.... I'll give you an example. Jane Fonda. I know Jane, we did a movie together called "Sunday in New York." And Jane has always been very, you know....

JF: Militant?

CR: Militant. But in the middle of this, I saw Jane in a commissary at the MGM thing. She saw me. I used to go eat where all the regular people were [unclear]. And she saw me, she said, "Hi, Cliff." I said, "Oh, hi, Jane." As I walked over, she reached for her dark glasses and put them on. I'll never forget that. I'm going to use that in a movie sometime. Kind of a subliminal thing--she couldn't look me in the eye. And now she's married to Turner, and I know Ted. And I saw them, they wanted me to go down, they had a thing in Atlanta a year ago for unwed mothers, so I went down and I saw her. She didn't put on dark glasses then, but I could....

I wrote an article in The New York Times, on the op ed page, and it was all about the firmament of fear in Hollywood." Right around that time. And I said, in effect, that whether you're first-generation American or eighth-generation American, most of our ancestors came over here out of a sense of moral outrage--with the exception of the blacks, who were forced to come here. So the moral outrage, whether it was [King] George III or a czar, dictator, military government, inability to worship the way you wanted--whatever it was--with two cents, if we had it, and great guts and gumption, our ancestors came over here, and in a remarkable 205 or whatever years it is, they've carved this remarkable country. Remarkable country. My grandmother made me learn, I think it was Ella Wheeler Wilcox, a poem called "Speak Up and Express Yourself." Whether you agree or disagree, take advantage of the fact that you live in a country that allows

free speech. Speak up and express yourself! Don't sit and suck your thumb. Pet the dog and say, "Mother loved me but she died." Don't feel sorry for yourself!

JF: Sounds to me like this whole experience of yours would make a wonderful movie.

CR: Yes! but nobody would release it! (laughter)

JF: That's a problem, isn't it?

CR: I've had people calling me from England. They said, "Wow! what a movie!" But these guys would see to it--they'd buy it, put it on the shelf, and it'd never come out. And I said in this article in The New York Times, "Hollywood, rightly so, takes great pride in the fact that they point a finger of judgment at a lot of evils and ills in this country and abroad--governments and bad things--and that's to their credit. But the interesting thing that's not to their credit is they're very reluctant to turn that finger of admonition 180 degrees back at themselves. To me, the strength of a party, an individual, or a company, or an industry, is the ability to turn around and look at themselves."

JF: Well, and we're seeing that now being something that they're saying is true of doctors and lawyers or any profession, is self-policing.

CR: We're seeing it in Washington.

JF: We're definitely seeing it in Washington.

CR: Inability to accept the responsibility.

JF: Yes, self-policing and total.... Yes, it's a problem in the country, on an individual basis.

CR: Anyway, when Doug Trumbull hired me in the picture--Natalie Wood's last picture--"Brainstorm"--then that kind of broke it, then people started hiring me again. But I still feel it. You've got a lot of newer guys there, but a lot of them are connected to the older guys--a lot of them were family. And, you know, you become known as a guy that blows the whistle, you're not a team player. And teams don't always play correctly.

JF: And yet the Screen Writers' Guild still....

CR: Yes. The Directors' Guild, I got a special commendation from the Screen Actors' Guild for my stand--and from all kinds of people outside. But in Hollywood....

JF: Yes. Well, as they say, "That's Hollywood."

CR: Yes. But the bottom line is we're here for twenty minutes, Julie, if we're lucky. "What's it all about, Alfie?" You have to look at your kids without dark glasses.

I had this guy phone me—just have to tell you, and then I'll let you go--he called up and I said finally, after he was kind of putting this gentle persuasion, but it wasn't so gentle. The whole effect was, "Hey, you want to work in this town? Play the game." So I finally said to this guy--I was in New York--I said, "There are two things you people out there don't understand. One is the word 'no,' because you buy 'yes,' 365 days a year. You buy bodies, you buy jobs, you buy integrity, you buy press. You think anything and everything can be bought. And everyone--and you're wrong. And the second thing you don't understand is the phrase, 'You don't scare me.' Because with all your ill-gotten money, and all the incipient power that goes with it, all that leverage, all those connections, and the houses on the hill and the lobbyists in Washington, the politicians in your pocket--all that power, you think anybody that says 'you don't scare me' must be nuts!" I leaned into the cradle of the phone and I said, "Hey, pal, (whispers ominously) I'm nuts!" (pantomimes hanging up phone abruptly) (laughter)

JF: That's wonderful.

CR: The FBI told me later that's the one thing they can't handle. They go back and say, "The guy is nuts!" So God bless the nuts. (laughter)

JF: That's right! Amen. Well, thank you very much for your time.

CR: Thanks, Julie. (tape turned off and on)

JF: We're going to add a sort of addendum, another poem.

CR: This was written November 10 and delivered at Tucson, back at the Udall Center.

"Everyone has one--or did at one time--that idol, that hero, that individual who stands out from the crowd, the commonplace, the ordinary. That uncommon person on which we gauge our highest marks. That figure of high esteem, yet oftentimes low profile. That one who seeks the truth, not the gain--the good, not the gold. That rare and wonderful human being who enriched our lives, nourishes our soul, and inspires us to reach higher, further, to hold closer our fellow man; to distance ourselves from malice, to reject prejudice, to accept our differences, to recognize that we are brothers all, that we share this frail blue marble for such a short time, that to give it life and to give life meaning, we should, we must, share our love. Everyone has one, or did at one time--that idol, that hero, that individual who stands out from the crowd, the commonplace, the ordinary--that uncommon person. I did. I still have that hero. He is my friend. His name is Mo Udall."

JF: Thank you.