

**William J. Hopkins Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 11/28/1978**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** William J. Hopkins

**Interviewer:** Sheldon Stern

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**Biographical Note**

William F. Hopkins was the Executive Clerk of the White House Office from 1943 to 1966. This interview focuses on the duties and organization of the White House staff during the Kennedy administration and the transition in the White House between presidents, among other topics.

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## William J. Hopkins– JFK #2

### Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Division of staff during the Hoover administration
2	Duties of the executive clerk
3	Effect of creation of executive office
4	Presidential proclamations
6	Specialization of mail
7	John F. Kennedy [JFK] receiving mail from children
9	Centralization of the White House staff
10	Staff transitioning between administrations
12	Effect of scandals on White House staff
13	Location of original signed documents from the Kennedy administration
16	Changes in the White House over the years
17	Developing a new White House filing system
18	Interactions between different members of the staff
19	Formation of JFK's schedule
20	Use of auto-pens
21	Sorting through JFK's papers after the assassination
23	Missing reading copies of JFK's speeches

Oral History Interview  
with  
William J. Hopkins

November 28, 1978  
John F. Kennedy Library, Waltham, Massachusetts

By Sheldon Stern  
Also Present: William Moss and Megan Desnoyers

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: I know you were first assigned to the White House in 1931, at that time there were about I think, as you said, about 45 people on the official rolls. Could you describe, at least briefly, how the staff was run in that early period, how were duties assigned and divided, and how much direct impact did the president have on the staff's operation when it was small?

HOPKINS: Well as I recall, there were three secretaries to the president. President Hoover was the first man in modern times to have more than one secretary. In other words his predecessors had only one. He had three. Lawrence Richey was the man in overall charge of the office and probably the senior secretary in point of importance. He had been with President Hoover when President Hoover was secretary of commerce and, I believe, originally had been a secret service man. The other two secretaries when I came there were Theodore Joslin [Theodore G. Joslin], who was the press secretary, and Walter Newton [Walter H. Newton], who was a former congressman, and his duties mainly, I would say, were in the area of liaison with the Congress. There was one other presidential appointee at the time, as I remember, a gentleman named French Strother who was a writer and wrote some of President Hoover's messages. But he seemed to specialize in the area of letters of greeting, cornerstone layings, and things of that nature, not things of a policy nature. President Truman . . . President Hoover, I meant to say, did a lot of his own writing. If he had a message to Congress, the material would be assembled and many times he would prepare the first draft in longhand. In those days I was working in the correspondence section and someone from the correspondence section would be assigned to sit outside the president's room over in the executive mansion to transcribe, or to put in type, his longhand. So many a night we would sit over there until one or two o'clock in the morning as he was working in the other room, and he would bring the papers out or call us to come in, and type out what he had written in longhand. And, of course, that would go on time after time as different drafts were prepared. In those days when he sent a message to Congress, ordinarily the message that went to the Hill was printed at the printing office. That system was changed in the Roosevelt days and messages went up in type form. The operating units were relatively small. The mail room was one

man. The file room was about six people, as I recall. What we now call the records office was one man and he used, part-time, a girl from the correspondence section. The correspondence section was roughly ten people. The telephone and telegraph room were then combined and there were, I believe, four men operated that. There were no women on that staff. The messenger room was physically located in the same room as the correspondence section, and they had maybe a half a dozen people on the messenger force. Outside of that and the president's private secretary as well as the two executive clerks and the girls in the presidential appointees' office that was about it. It was housed in the west wing. That was the west wing before it was renovated in 1934, so there were only two floors, the ground floor and the first floor. The top floor was used basically for storage.

STERN: Did you have a chance in that early period to observe the functions particularly of the executive clerk, because I'm just curious about the changes in that job from that time to the time that you held it? I know, for example, the appointment's secretary, what was later done by an appointment's secretary was largely within the function of the executive clerk in the early period. How did that change?

HOPKINS: Well, FDR was the first to have an appointments secretary, basically was the same over the years. It tended to change somewhat as the staff got larger. Fewer and fewer things were done in the executive clerk's immediate area. All that time, the executive clerk was the liaison, the go-between between the Presidential staff offices, and the so-called operating units. In other words the executive clerk was in charge of the operating units, the file room, mail room, correspondence section, telephone and telegraph, records office, messengers. And that didn't change much over the years. The basic change as far as I recall in the duties of the executive clerk came with the institution of the staff secretary. The staff secretary was first in the White House office under President Eisenhower. For all practical purposes in that administration the executive clerk was an assistant to the staff secretary, and some of the work that was done by the executive clerk moved up through the staff secretary rather than directly to the President. The staff secretary was reinstated in the Nixon administration and I understand they have it now. So that is true. That tends to dilute the area of responsibility of the executive clerk onto the staff secretary.

STERN: What about the creation of the executive office of the president in 1939? Did that, in a formal way, change it?

HOPKINS: That didn't change the duties, I would say, of the executive clerk. It tended to formalize to a certain

extent the handling of certain documents. For instance, prior to that if a piece of legislation came down from the Hill an enrolled bill, it was customary to refer the enrolled bill out to what appeared to be the department or agency most interested. In other words if it was a matter of dealing with agriculture, the enrolled bill would be physically sent to the Department of Agriculture by the executive clerk with a request that they make their recommendations to the president. On the basis of that recommendation the president would take action. With the transfer of budgetary duties to the Executive office of the President and the creation of the Bureau of the Budget--it's duties had been with the Treasury Department before that--a change was instituted and the Bureau of the Budget did the coordinating in this area for the White House. When a piece of legislation came in the executive clerk notified the director of the Bureau of the Budget that the legislation was there and asked for reports and recommendations. Under the constitution, of course, the president has ten days in which to act. That does not count the day on which he received the bill, but the bill. . . .Ten days starts tolling the following day. So the Bureau would fan out to the interested departments and agencies requests for reports and recommendations, and here is where the better coordinating system developed. In other words, rather than asking Agriculture they might ask the Tariff Commission, they might ask the Department of Justice if there are any legal problems involved, they might ask Treasury if there are any economic problems involved so they would get reports and recommendations from several departments and agencies, and they would also make their own recommendation after they had coordinated these replies. That would come back to the president and on the basis of that, he would take action. Well, shortly after the creation of the Bureau of the Budget there were some instances in which a bill or two became lost in this fanning out process, and it is very difficult to get a new bill when you lose one. For instance, time is working against you on the ten day proposition, and the president has to formally ask Congress for another enrolled copy, which means going in and telling the president you can't find the bill, will you please sign this message to the presiding officer of the house in which it originated.

STERN: Very embarrassing.

HOPKINS: So it was decided to retain all the enrolled bills in the White House office, and that has been the procedure all the time I was there, after that, and I assume it still is. So the bill was retained in the executive clerk's office. The Bureau of the Budget is notified and asked for reports and recommendations, and they make an effort to get those reports back in roughly five days so that the president will have at least five days to take action. Now that always doesn't. Sometimes they get there on the ninth day in which case it is not unusual for the president to ask some penetrating questions as to

why he only gets twenty-four hours to make up his mind on this particular bill.

STERN: Do you recall any examples of that happening?

HOPKINS: Nothing specific, but it happened many times in different administrations. I think the president was fully justified and the Bureau of the Budget would then revise their circular and redistribute it to the departments and agencies about how to proceed on handling reports and recommendations. Of course, some of the departments would develop a practice of saying we have no objection. They wouldn't recommend one way or the other. Well, that wasn't very satisfactory either. So they had to be jacked up from time to time by the bureau, to say we want a recommendation either for or against, so that the president would have something to act on, and something to back up his decision in the file if there was any questions about it later.

STERN: On things like, for example, a proclamation by a president, let's take for example one from the Kennedy administration, not a one that's particularly important, the proclamation on the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Just how exactly is a proclamation formulated, who writes it, how does it come to the president and what role did you play in that whole process?

HOPKINS: Well, most proclamations. . . .There's two kinds of proclamations. One, of course, which Congress has authorized and requested that the president issues, and the other in which he, on his own initiative, issues one because either some group is pressuring him to do it or circumstances call for him to do it. And the procedure has been, or was while I was there, depending on the nature of the proclamation, for instance the hundredth anniversary. In all probability the State Department would draft that in view of the expertise of the historical division over there. There again if we were told that the president wanted to issue such a proclamation, we would probably call up the proper office in the Bureau of the Budget and ask them to see that one was prepared, knowing that they would go first to the Department of State. When that draft got back to Budget they would look at it themselves and they would work it over some. They would in all cases send it to the Department of Justice for approval as a form of legality, and if necessary send it to other departments and agencies for their comment. It would come over to the White House and in former days there was very little done to that type of thing after it got to the White House. But as the staff grew there was more and more of a tendency for somebody on the White house staff to edit it, which sometimes meant rewriting it. Many times the end result wasn't as good as the one that came from the department. But, as I say that grew, a tendency grew from administration to



administration. I always felt it was a mistake because I had an honest feeling that it reached the point where the department men who were very expert in their field would say now, "I'm not preparing a file copy, I'm preparing a draft. Why should I exert myself too much. I'll just send something over." As a result the product that the White House got diminished in quality.

STERN: Now once it reached that final point did you carry it to the president for his signature?

HOPKINS: Depending on the administration. I would have in President Truman's time. I probably would have in President Eisenhower's time. There again after it got to the White House depending on the nature of it again if it was just a recognition of some observance that was it. If it was something of some moment, policy matter, it would undoubtedly go to the counsel's office for them to sign off on, and in probability unless it was something they wanted to talk about to the president about they would send it back to me to carry in. In the Kennedy administration most of that type of thing went through Ken [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]. But Ken was cooperative. Many times with things of that nature time is of the essence, in other words you're working toward a date and people who want to take some advantage from the standpoint of publicity want these proclamations out well ahead of time. Well if you're getting up close, to within a week or a few days before, they start pressuring you, "Where's that proclamation?" Well, we could always go to Ken and say "Here you've got a proclamation on your desk that the president ought to sign if he's going to." And he'd pull it out and the next time there was a gap in the appointments schedule he'd take it in. We did have one problem with Ken and it wasn't his fault, it was just the way things operated. He would hold this stuff for signature on one side of his, about right here. And that pile would sometimes look like that, because the president was pressured for time or wasn't in his office or something. And then at night Ken would ordinarily put this material in the bottom desk drawer. And as it worked out what was on top today got on the bottom tomorrow, and you always had to keep pushing this important stuff to the top of the pile. But Pauline Fleet [Pauline T. Fleet] and others were very cooperative, and we talked to her to get the right things on top of the pile from time to time, so it worked out all right.

STERN: What happened for example once he signed the proclamation? What happened to it physically?

HOPKINS: He would take it back and bring it out to my desk and we would then show it to the press office and nine times out of ten it was some it was something they would want to give to the press boys. So we would then stencil it and give several hundred copies, or however many they needed to the press, they would hand it out, and when it was handed out we

would then send it down to archives for permanent custody of government records. In the old days, rather before the creation of archives [National Archives and Records Service], those were filed with the Department of State.

STERN: You mentioned some things about the volume of mail in your original interview. I was struck briefly by your observation that mail--although it makes sense--would increase, mail increased depending on specific events, for example when Truman [Harry S. Truman] fired MacArthur [Douglas MacArthur] there was a great increase in mail. What sort of events in the Kennedy administration led to great upsurges in mail at the White House?

HOPKINS: Well, after the fifteen years nothing comes to mind at the moment, but I do know that when President Kennedy came in, there was a great upsurge in the volume, the day-to-day volume. There had been a great upsurge when President Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] came in and that held relatively stable I would say up until the Kennedy days. There were the peaks and the valleys, ups and downs, but over a period of a year if you totaled up how many you got in a year it was in the same ball park. But when President Kennedy came in, there was a tremendous upsurge. It, I'd say, doubled, and we were just not in a very good position to handle that much.

STERN: How long did that. . . .did it continue that way?

HOPKINS: It continued, it continued, it never did fall back to the old level. It may have dropped back a little bit, but it continued. And in addition there was a great volume of mail brought in by the preinaugural mail that the group the preinaugural group hadn't been able to handle. They just piled it up. So we had to fan a lot of that out to the Department of State, the Defense Department and others just to open it and read it and sort, categorize, so our people could handle it.

STERN: How specialized was the handling of mail? I know, for example, I talked to General McHugh, Godfrey McHugh [Godfrey T. McHugh], who was telling me about the kinds of things that he handled, letters from military people like ? requests for travel with the president, things of that sort. Just how many categories, how specialized did this get?

HOPKINS: Well, there again it got more specialized as the staff got bigger. We tried to operate on the theory--in other words the mail that comes to the president covers the whole panorama of government. We tried to operate on the theory, if this is a matter for the appointments secretary, say they wanted an appointment with the president--send everything to the appointment secretary's office. Don't try to make a decision on a lower level: this is somebody the president should see, this is

somebody he should not see. Send everything there. Let them go through it and anything they don't want turn back to us. In which case then the correspondence section could handle it as a turn down. They saw the whole picture. The same way with requests related to the press office. The same way with the requests of a military nature. And that was the effort in all cases. If there was a man dealing with economics, if someone dealt with minorities, etc. There was a man on the staff that dealt with minorities, Lee White [Lee C. White]. He had so much mail in his office one time he practically had to move out.

STERN: Did he work on the civil rights bill?

HOPKINS: Yeah, civil rights, yeah. But there again if they didn't want it, someone would say so, "Don't send me all this stuff." In which case we tried to handle it the best we could. One of the duties of the correspondence section was to handle or respond to the miscellaneous residue.

STERN: Did President Kennedy get more mail from children, were there any major changes in that area? Some people have suggested that he did. That there was an upsurge.

HOPKINS: Yes, I would say he got a lot of mail from children. I used to say, and I'm not sure this was limited entirely to the Kennedy administration, but he got a lot. In fact he got so much that he eventually got a children's booklet; but the idea behind that got started in the Eisenhower days. We figured that normally the president received 17, 18 percent of his mail from children, high school age on down. And in certain times of the year it might jump up to 25 percent, but over a whole year period it was 17, 18 percent. And in the Eisenhower days, after Governor Adams [Sherman Adams] left, General Persons [Wilton B. Persons] was chief of staff, and he was very interested in the mail. And would want to see a lot of the mail addressed to children. It would be sent in to him and we might have written a two paragraph letter to a child that wasn't too responsive. And he'd send it back out to Art Minnick [Arthur Minnick] who was the assistant staff secretary and say, "Write this child a responsive letter." Well, poor Art would sit there and work a half day on a three page letter maybe, to be responsive. Well, that just took too much time. So we got one of the young fellows who was on the staff to start working on a children's booklet which would contain answers to many of the questions that were asked, would have probably a covering letter from the president, pictures that would be of interest. In other words it would be a keepsake for the child, maybe not really to answering his specific question but it would be responsive to the vast number of questions children ask. But that never really got off the ground in the Eisenhower days and never completely got off the ground in the Kennedy days; it was early in the Johnson days that we finally got a children's booklet. But that was an

effort to do that. I heard recently that the amount of children's mail is way down. Now why that is I don't know, it kind of bothers me. I'm wondering if children are as interested in their chief executive as they used to be, I don't know.

STERN: That raises an interesting point. As a matter of fact, I meant to ask you whether you were able to have any insight into whether the content of the mail changed over the years. Now did it reflect a--well whether it's less interest in the chief executive or a sort of disillusionment or.

HOPKINS: No, I just don't know.

STERN: You mentioned in your original interview as well that occasionally you would take a specific letter into a president. You mentioned one in Kennedy's case concerning a black family being evicted in I think it was Michigan. It struck me that--that you did that kind of thing with other presidents as well. If you could possibly remember an example of that kind of thing with other administrations, it would tend to suggest something about the way you perceived each of these presidents; in other words, what sort of thing interested them.

HOPKINS: Well I don't know, I can't remember any specific cases. It was done in other administrations. Now in the Kennedy administration as I remember, when Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton] was there, he was interested in that type of thing. Other times we'd taken such letters to the press office maybe, in other words this is something, it's a compassionate case, it's something that maybe something can be done about it. It's something that if it's given a little publicity, even maybe not through the press office but somebody else arrange on the other end for it to be released to the press, it would give the president some good mileage. And there were numerous cases, and most of them were of a compassionate nature, in other words, a child that's very sick, needs transport by a plane to some hospital, or something of that nature.

STERN: But you can't remember any other incidents.

HOPKINS: I don't remember specifically, no.

STERN: I was wondering also about the nature of the White House routine, the extent to which the routine for those on the permanent staff was affected by the president's routine? For example, the hours that they kept, which according to your original interview differed substantially, for example, from Truman to Kennedy, as two cases. Did you pretty much have to adapt your hours to the president's hours?

HOPKINS: We did in those days and we did up until President Johnson's time. In President Johnson's time it would take two men to adapt, because he worked two days. He would come to the office fairly early in the morning, maybe work until two o'clock or something, come back at five or six and stay till midnight. So you just couldn't do it. But even in the Kennedy days, it was always just understood that certain offices stayed there until the president went to the house. So that meant in President Kennedy's time as I remember he usually goes seven, seven-thirty, eight o'clock, something like that, it would vary, but we always covered. And the same thing was true of the correspondence section, the file room, they had light coverage in the correspondence section as long as the president was in his office, light coverage in the file room as long as he was in his office, the messengers' room was covered until the president went to bed at night. In latter days that has changed, the correspondence section for instance, now when I left there it was covered two shifts, now it's covered around the clock. And there were various differences.

STERN: How different was the operation of the White House under centralized as opposed to decentralized staff, for example under Sherman Adams? I guess we could call that a centralized, a very centralized operation, with a genuine chief of staff, and a more decentralized situation. How would that affect your duties?

HOPKINS: Well I don't think it affected 'em a great deal one way or the other. Governor Adams for instance was deeply involved in policy matters, the executive clerks' work for him related to the preparation of proper personnel documents area and to a certain lesser degree in the document area in the handling of certain miscellaneous documents. Many times something would move to him through one of his staff people and he would sign off on it and rather than spending his time taking it in to the president, he would say, "come by my desk and drop it off and tell me to get it signed the next time I went in there." In personnel matters early in the administration at least, he was very much involved in that, in filling government jobs through his assistant Charlie Willis [ ]. And many times he would be on the phone and he'd have a question about a certain commission, who's eligible to be appointed, what's their salary, what's their term, who's on there now, and he would say, "Wait a minute," and come into our office and expect an instantaneous answer. And in most cases we were able to give it to him because during the latter days of the Truman administration we had gone through all the United States Code and pulled out of there all the information relating to the presidential appointments and had these in a set of books. So in most instances we were able to satisfy him and it was one of those situations that you couldn't make a mistake. It was either black or white, it wasn't grey. In other words, if he was on the phone and dickering with somebody

about accepting a job and he gave them the wrong salary information, then we couldn't run in there five minutes later and say, "I made a mistake," because he'd already resolved this matter on the phone. But that was basically our areas. I do think that under Governor Adams there were probably less staff people who went in to see the president. More of them would go to Governor Adams in certain instances but they all had access to the president--I mean the top echelon, the ones that really needed it--they had access to him. Maybe a little less so than under the Kennedy administration or under the Truman or Roosevelt administration.

STERN: How did transitions affect the operation of the permanent group in the White House? I imagine some of those could have been very difficult as opposed to others being relatively easy.

HOPKINS: Well they varied from time to time, of course my first transition was when President Roosevelt came in and I was not involved in that one really because I was still up in the correspondence section. I was down at the executive clerk's desk, in other words I was a junior executive clerk when President Roosevelt died. And that was a case of the king is dead, long live the king. We got this word of his death and I remember going back to the office that night and we were deluged with telegrams from all over the world expressing condolence. They were either addressed to President Truman or to the widow. And the main thing that we did in the first twenty-four hours, I think, was to shuttle those back and forth to the State Department, get them translated and get them to the press securing for release through the press office. Responses to Heads of State were drafted in most instances by the Department of State. As far as working papers on unincluded (?) desks were concerned, all that is the staff offices and in the operating units and on the correspondence clerk's desk etc. was just picked up, put in boxes. We got some big transport boxes from the Treasury Department--the kind in which paper for the Bureau of Printing and Engraving is received. And the papers were boxed up and moved down to Archives, and that happened in a matter of forty-eight hours and we were in business and the files were cleared out and we were in business for the new president.

STERN: What about the transition from one party to the other, for example, from Eisenhower to Kennedy?

HOPKINS: Well now that is a little more difficult I think. When President Eisenhower came in, the Republicans had been out of office for twenty years, they well knew that practically everybody working in the office had come there under a Democratic administration and probably assumed had Democratic contacts, although that wasn't true, with those of us in the operating units. In addition to that as far as the operating

units were concerned everybody with the exception of a small contingent in the mail room from the Post Office Department had been placed on the rolls of the White House office as opposed to being detailed from the departments and agencies early in the Truman administration. That meant that if the Eisenhower administration cleaned out the office as the newspapers predicted they would, that many of these people would be out of jobs and would be penalized for having been assigned to the White House. Most of them had come there not because they wanted to, or were even asked to, they were told to come and we had a very strong feeling that they shouldn't be penalized for working over there. So we appealed to Don Dawson [Donald Dawson] who was the personnel man for President Truman and he reached an understanding with the Eisenhower people in the person, I believe, of General Persons--I'm not too sure of that--that any of the White House clerical help that the Eisenhower administration decided not to keep would have jobs found for them in the departments and agencies if they wished to go back to the departments and agencies. That, I would say, as a general thing worked out very well, and it was a practice that was followed in each transition afterwards during the time I was there. Of course, the first six months I would say was a little difficult. You always had a feeling as was natural that maybe the incoming people didn't have confidence in you and that takes time to develop, but all you can do is to go to work every morning and do your best and try to make them feel that if you've got any suggestions or recommendations you make them in the president's best interests and I think they seem to get that feeling.

STERN: Were there any significant transition problems for example from Johnson to Nixon? Again in changing party?

HOPKINS: Not too bad as from our standpoint. But one of the reasons for that was that some of the people that came in with Mr. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] had been there with President Eisenhower. There was Bryce Harlow [Bryce N. Harlow], and people of that nature, and we knew them and they knew us and I think put in a good word for us so we didn't have too many problems in that area. Of course there's one thing that you have to remember in a transition too. During the period between the election and the inauguration, you really have to be careful who you're working for. You can't make the outgoing group feel like well, here, you've had it, we're getting ready for the new group and we haven't got time for you. And the new group is making many demands: they're worried about office space, they're worried about money, they're calling up wanting use of White House cars which they shouldn't have before the inauguration and a few things like that. So you walk a tight rope for a while. But that pays off. In other words if we had given the Eisenhower group the bums rush, so to speak, at the end of the Eisenhower administration, they would have remembered that at the beginning of the Nixon administration and we'd pay for it.

STERN: How, I wonder, how isolated is the White House from, well let's call it the outside world? You were no longer there at the time of Watergate but you were there during some other crises, for example, Governor Adams' problem which led to his resignation, and of course President Hoover's [Herbert C. Hoover] problems. Does the White House actually change when it's under siege that way, when the press is really after it. Can you see that in the way people operate? Or is it pretty much. . .

HOPKINS: I don't think so, I don't think so. You read it in the paper, same as everybody else does and you form your own opinions and you probably keep your opinions to yourself, but outside of that I don't see much difference. Of course in the, when Governor Adams had his problems all the staff was very sympathetic. Personally I always felt that it was something that shouldn't have happened and I always felt that what happened to Matt Connelly [Mathew J. Connelly] in the Truman administration had something to do with what happened to Governor Adams in the Eisenhower administration. Sort of tit for tat.

STERN: Let's see, I want to get down to some very specific questions about the Kennedy administration in a moment, but there are one or two other, just some brief things, to sort of clean up. Can you remember for example any representative anecdotes about any of the presidents under whom you served that would illustrate something about them as people or the kinds of the things that you say that would not generally be public knowledge. Have you ever seen a president get very angry for example? At you?

HOPKINS: No, not at me particularly no. I did have an interesting experience in the Johnson days. In fact it was just before Christmas in 1963. President Johnson was very interested in his mail. If he got a letter today he wanted it answered by tomorrow. And this was one of the evenings that he was working late as usual, it was about ten o'clock at night and I was sitting at my desk working away and Walter Jenkins had just gone into the president's office with a batch or presidential mail, in other words, prepared for the president's signature. And apparently the president had looked through it and saw that some of the dates were maybe ten days old or something. Well the next thing I knew, here was Walter Jenkins at the president's door doing this to come in. So the president gave us both a going over and I'd never, never come up against anything like this before.

STERN: Just what did he do?

HOPKINS: He said he wanted his mail acknowledged within forty-eight hours, no ifs, ands, and buts about it. All we had to do, roughly in his words, was to decide how many



letters we had, get enough typewriters, get some girls, parcel them out a hundred letters apiece, when they finished that hundred letters, they could go home, if they were in the middle of the day, at the end of the day, they were through for the day, that was their job. But he wanted that done and he wanted it done right now. And he also wanted a memorandum prepared showing how we could accomplish it, and it was my job to prepare the memorandum. Well, anyway, I think it was a little demonstration, as I'm sure Walter Jenkins felt it was. But we weathered that crisis and went on from there.

STERN: Did you actually adopt the system that he'd demanded?

HOPKINS: No. That was impossible, impossible. We did the best we could.

STERN: He didn't follow up on it?

HOPKINS: No.

STERN: Were you aware at all of the systems in the White House for taping conversations, whether in the Kennedy, Johnson or Nixon administrations? Did you have anything to do with that at all?

HOPKINS: No, nothing at all.

STERN: Were you aware of their existence? While you were there?

HOPKINS: Occasionally, but very much on the peripheral edge. I didn't know for instance about the Nixon tapes. I did know that there was facilities some time if the president wanted, either wanted his secretary to get on the phone or something special done, but I had no specific knowledge of it.

STERN: I see.

HOPKINS: That was done through the--well in the Kennedy days it was done through that, Ken O'Donnel and also the Secret Service.

STERN: I'd like to get to some specific questions about the Kennedy administration that relate especially to the holdings here and to some gaps [interruption] Excuse me . . . and to some gaps in the holdings. Who kept the White House record copy of documents signed by the president in the Kennedy administration?

HOPKINS: Well now what do you mean by record copy? In other words the . . .

STERN: Well the copy he actually signed.

HOPKINS: Actually signed?

STERN: By the president.

HOPKINS: Well none of those were kept in the White House; in other words they would all go out the--if it was a letter it would go out to the recipient, if it was a piece of legislation it would go to archives, if it was an executive order or a proclamation it would go to archives, if it was a commission it would go to the recipient, if it was a nomination it would go to Congress, if it was a message to Congress the original would go to Congress.

STERN: I see.

HOPKINS: About the only thing that comes to mind that the president acted on that we would keep at the White House, and then turn that over to the proper people at the end of the administration, would be a pocket veto.

STERN: I see, you mean special involved in that, right.

HOPKINS: Yeah.

STERN: For example, the library here has some real gaps in its holdings on original signed documents. Do you have any idea why that's the case? Where were they kept and why don't we have them?

HOPKINS: Well, the only thing I can say is that if you haven't got them--your copies of documents now you're talking about--that. . .

STERN: Right.

HOPKINS: . . .they're probably in some staff office files someplace and never came to central files. If they came to central files you've got 'em. Now I assume that you have approached the central files from the standpoint of the manual, in other words, if you had a particular message to Congress, it would probably be under a subject file. . . .

MOSS: That's correct.

HOPKINS: . . .but for instance, all the State Department stuff did not, during the Kennedy administration--earlier it did, in earlier administrations, in some administrations it did--but during the Kennedy administration it was all handled in the special system for national security affairs, so it was kept separate and distinct from our central

file room, so none of that would be in there.

STERN: I see, do you have any idea why the chronological White House, the white copy file that we have, is incomplete?

HOPKINS: Well, I was talking to Mr. Moss [William W. Moss] about that, and I talked to Frank Matthews[ ] about that a few days ago. They adopted the practice of everything that came to central files signed by the president, a copy got in this chron file, and that's probably the chron file you have. I don't know what other chron file you'd have, unless you've got a partial one from some staff office. Now if that document never moved through central files or copies were never sent to central files, they wouldn't be there. If Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] got a letter signed and kept the copy in his file it wouldn't be there, or Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] got some letters signed to members of Congress and it stayed in his file, it wouldn't be there.

STERN: I see. For example, another, well another case is. . . involves letters from foreign heads of state. Some of them are in Evelyn Lincoln's [Evelyn N. Lincoln] files, some in McGeorge Bundy's, but then again the file that's here is extremely incomplete. Do you have any idea of why that's the case?

HOPKINS: No. As I say our central files would not have had their hands on that at all. We wouldn't have. . . most of that type of thing was carried in personally to the president through McGeorge Bundy, or somebody, and we wouldn't have any occasion to see that at all. Now as I told Mr. Moss, many times the State Department would recommend that the president send a certain message to a head of state, and it would come over in the form of a cable. And the president would merely initial it, or in some way indicate his approval and that would go back to the department and all you would have in the White House files. . .

BEGIN TAPE II

HOPKINS: . . . recommendations to the president. He would indicate approval on the face of it, and if that moved through Central File, you would find an original, or a copy of that in the Central File and you should have a copy in the chron file. The original goes back to the department, so you would have no record of the original from the department or agency.

STERN: I see. Are you, anything you'd like to add on that, Bill?

MOSS: Not on that particular subject.

STERN: Did you have any relationship at all with Bromley Smith [Bromley K. Smith] as the, in terms of the NSC [National Security Council] and its flow of documents, or was that completely aside from your responsibility?

HOPKINS: That was completely aside from our responsibilities. Occasionally we would get together and compare notes and sort of sympathize with each other.

STERN: Well, I have one final question which is more general. Concerning the whole nature of the White House as a more activist role for the White House, in terms of drafting legislation and the size of its staff and such, from your experience, what's the critical time, in terms of this change in the White House? There are those who suggest that a major change took place in the Johnson administration, particularly when special assistants began to have their own assistants, suggesting something about the nature of the White House.

HOPKINS: Well it's pretty hard to pinpoint that, at least from my standpoint. I think this was a gradual development over the years. And it seemed to me that in each administration they stepped forward a little further that way than the previous administration. That was the tendency and it may have jumped forward a little more in the Johnson administration than some of the others but the tendency was there before his time.

STERN: Do you have any feelings or opinion about the whole question of presidential papers? The new presidential records act [Presidential Records Act of 1978], for example, in light of the whole Nixon experience? Do you feel that this is a wise way to go, making them, taking them out of the hands of the individual president? What has been your own experience on that?

HOPKINS: Well I don't know, I sat in on a meeting one time with this advisory group, I didn't sit on it, really it was sort of a symposium and I, my feeling was sort of the contrary, leave it where it was. In other words, this is one, this had happened one time in two hundred years, that's not too bad a record. Now I'm not just sure how this new system is going to work. But you always have the feeling, and I still have the feeling, that the end result of this is going to be less and less put on paper. More done by word of mouth; in other words the record is not going to be as good as it was. Everybody's going to say, here, now somebody else is going to look at this in my lifetime, or maybe next year, or maybe next month after I get out, so I better be a little careful. And from that standpoint I don't, I am not sure it's a step forward.

STERN: Does anyone have anything to add?

MOSS: I've got half a dozen odds and ends of things here. You and Wayne Grover [Wayne C. Grover] essentially brainstormed the present White House filing system, is that correct? Or was it Pearlman's [Isidor Perlman] work or. . .at least you guys had the idea.

HOPKINS: We had the ideas; it was basically his work.

MOSS: Will you describe how that came to be?

HOPKINS: Well, the system that we had up until that new manual was developed, that was the same system that had been in existence I guess since the turn of the century. When I first went to the White House a man named Clarence Ingling was chief of files, and he had been there, since either President McKinley [William McKinley] or President Theodore Roosevelt, I'm not sure which, I think President McKinley. And it was one of those things that just developed. In other words, they had a name file and what they called a PPF file, which meant President's Personal File, and that President's Personal File was used for everything except the name file, in other words all the subject material and everything so that it was really a misnomer. And there was no specific guidelines for what you put in this PPF file, or where you put it. And the volume was such that the file room continued to grow in size and we were just on the edge of things all the time, so that it seemed that we just had to do something. I talked to Wayne Grover about this down in the White House lunch one of these days and he said we've got some experts over there, why not send them over and talk to them and see what they can do. So his man came over and we talked about it and he spent months at the White House developing this manual. And then had sort of a training session for file people and we were ready to go with this. In other words the only time you could adopt this was at the change of an administration. If the president was in for eight years you couldn't adopt it for the last four years and have the two systems so we had to have it ready at the end of an administration. So it was ready when President Kennedy came in and that's when we started using it. As I say it was new to everybody then but it seemed to work and they've refined it some since but basically it was very good.

MOSS: But you evidently had difficulty in getting the various staff members to comply with it fully.

HOPKINS: Well, they, they, I don't know what the system is, how it is now, but I understand there's an effort to, but that's practically an impossible job. For instance, you have to sit down and study the thing a little bit to be able to use it and most of the girls in staff offices, they're secretarially oriented, they don't like to file for one thing,

and I don't blame them much. But the only time we were able to really apply it into any of the staff offices was when they would get so far behind they would yell for help. And then on occasion we would send somebody, if we could spare them from the file room, up to give them a hand and, on occasion, we were able to make a little progress then, but in most of the offices they just weren't interested.

MOSS: There are three areas in which it seems to me your function overlapped with the staff people, Evelyn Lincoln, Ken O'Donnell and the Fred Dutton-Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon] area. Could you describe the interface there? What you did that they didn't do, and how you supported them? How you interacted with them? Those three people in particular.

HOPKINS: Well, we were there basically to do anything they wanted us to do. For Evelyn Lincoln we worked as closely with her as we could, quite a bit of the mail from children and certain other personal types that didn't require presidential signature was made for her signature. Sometimes she would have instructions from the president that she would relay through us, so we worked fairly closely with Evelyn Lincoln. Fred Dutton, for most of the time he was at the White House, was right in the next office from where I sat and he, his girls were in the same office that I was in, Nancy Hogan and I forget the other girl's name. Ted Reardon of course was involved in, to the extent they had a cabinet secretariat in the Roosevelt, rather, in the Kennedy administration, he was it. It was nothing like the one they had in the Eisenhower days--that was very formalized--but to the extent they had one, Ted Reardon was it. So as I say, we worked together and cooperated and I don't know as there was any overlapping as such.

MOSS: What about O'Donnell?

HOPKINS: Well, O'Donnell, he was the man we looked to for instruction and help when we needed it. In other words, most of the official documents moved in through Ken O'Donnell--our office was right next to his--and he was always very cooperative and helpful and, as I say, if there was something that time was of the essence, either through him directly or through one of his girls, we could get papers moving. That always seemed to me rather important. In other words if a department gets the impression that the White House is very inefficient, that doesn't do the president any good. And if they have a document that to them is very important, time is of the essence and they're getting all kinds of pressures and they call over at the White House and can't get any answers as to when a certain document's going to be acted on, it gives the White House a bad name. So if, when the request was justified, we always felt free to go into Ken and say, "See here, this department needs

this document, can you do something about it?". And he was always very cooperative. Another time I remember he was helpful to us, somebody on the staff, I don't know who it was, turned over to the Democratic National Committee a list of all White House employees. That's something we tried to avoid like the plague over the years, knowing that for several reasons why it shouldn't be done, in other words, we didn't want to become political animals, because you never knew what the next administration was going to be, whether the same administration or the same party or another. And also if the name of minor white House employees circulated throughout town there was always the possibility that somebody would try to put pressure on somebody in the file room or someplace else. Well, any way, the national committee got this list and the first thing you know, everybody on the staff was getting a letter inviting them to a political dinner, and it was either a fifty- or one-hundred-dollar dinner, I forget which. Well some of the employees were just flabbergasted, what do I do now? And we were getting telephone calls all over the place. So I went in to Ken and explained our situation to him and he says forget it, which we did. And he picked up the phone and straightened it all out, which I thought was very generous and good on his part, in other words, he could see our point of view. Another time there was an effort, or we heard of an effort, to unionize all White House employees. Well that didn't seem too good an idea either.

STERN: Was this in the Kennedy administration?

HOPKINS: This was in the Kennedy administration? So I marched myself into Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] and he was the White House liaison with the labor groups at that time. Well he was very receptive too. He could see both sides of the coin; he picked up the phone and made a phone call and that was the last of that. So the staff was very helpful in things of that nature.

MOSS: Do you have any recollection of how President Kennedy's appointments schedule was formulated? What the steps were that they took to draft the schedule that was put on his desk in the morning, that kind of thing?

HOPKINS: Well not too much except that was all done in Ken O'Donnell's office.

MOSS: Entirely?

HOPKINS: Yes.

MOSS: Was there any other input from anywhere else that you know of?

HOPKINS: Well there might be input from other staff, in other

words, some staff calling, Pierre Salinger [Pierre E. G. Salinger] or somebody, saying to Ken or maybe the president himself, "You ought to see so-and-so." And then after either Ken on his own, if he had the freedom to do that, or per directions of the president, well you know it might come so it might come from sources like that, yes.

MOSS: You mentioned at lunch the, something about the growth and use of auto pens, the robo-type kind of thing, form letters and so on. Could you sort of sketch that over the course of the time you were there? You said that Hoover and Roosevelt signed everything that went out over their signature...

HOPKINS: As did President Truman.

MOSS: Okay. And when did this change and how much did it change . . .

HOPKINS: Well the, to the best of my recollection I, I'm not too certain of this, in other words, a lot of time has passed, but to the best of my recollection it was never used in the Eisenhower days and there were some unofficial letters that went out over his signature that one of his secretaries signed. Then President Kennedy, I know the girls in his immediate office signed lots of, a lot of inconsequential stuff. And I'm not too clear on how much the auto pen was used in the, if any, in the latter days of the Kennedy administration, but I know it was never used to the best of my knowledge, on anything of, that was anything of an official nature at all. It was used more extensively in the Johnson administration, and even more extensively in the Nixon administration, the time I was there. A certain amount of care was exercised in the type of thing it was used on, but I'm not sure that enough care in the latter days were exercised in some of the things which we had no control over at all.

MOSS: You were describing at lunch, just before the way President Kennedy would sign things. Would you repeat that just for the variety of ways. . .

HOPKINS: Well, his signature, in fact I think there's a fellow up in New York, Charles Hamilton [Charles Hamilton], who claims to be an expert in this field and I think he wrote some articles saying that so much of President Kennedy's stuff was not signed by President Kennedy himself. And of course you look at President Kennedy's signature and it'd never look the same twice. But I know the few times I saw him sign things, and I saw him sign a number of things, he seemed to give you the impression at least of always being in a hurry, that he was pressed for time. And he would never, if something was over at that end of the desk, he would just reach over and possibly sign it halfway upside down or at an angle, he wouldn't bring it over



and get it in the right position. And he was very quick, just very quick, signed his name very quickly. So I think that accounted for his signature looking different at different times.

MOSS: At the time of the assassination as you were, were you part of the group that was deciding which were Kennedy files and where the Johnson files began and that kind of thing? Did you do much of that?

HOPKINS: Well at Mr. Bundy's [McGeorge Bundy] authorization I prepared a memorandum to all the staff and that, a copy of that's in this file that Frank Matthews has that I'm talking about, telling 'em that the, because of the situation, because a number of the Kennedy staff were remaining, at least for a time with President Johnson, the Kennedy files would remain at the White House for the time being, but that very careful steps were to be taken that none of it was intermingled. That went around to all the staff. And the Central Files immediately set up two file folders, in other words, President Kennedy's and right in back of it would be President Johnson's under his name, but they used the same, they'd both be in the same file cabinet but under separate folders. So, and anything they got from the staff office, they went through and if there was any intermingling they separated. So, to the best of my knowledge, there was no problem as far as Central Files were concerned. There should have been no problem as far as staff was concerned, now to the extent that there was, I just don't know. They were fully advised and every effort was made to, because it was a matter of some little time before the first material was moved out.

MOSS: Do you recall any advisories as to what things constituted the president's papers as opposed to the personal papers of the individual staff member? Was there any discussion of this?

HOPKINS: Well, not at, well there was discussion, there had been discussion ever since I had been at the White House, there was a lot of discussion about that at the time of the Morgenthau [Henry Morgenthau] papers. And there was always discussion about it, but there was always the feeling, or at least my feeling, and I think the feeling of a number of the staff members that anything that came into being by reason of their position in the White House was a presidential, presidential papers. If a man had his own electric bill sent to the White House or a card from his children or something, that's something different, but anything that came into being by reason of his having been at the, being a presidential employee, that was the president's papers.

MOSS: But clearly the practice varied because Bundy left all his stuff there but Sorensen took his with him.

HOPKINS: It varied very much. It varied very much, no doubt about it. Now in subsequent administrations all kinds of work was done on that. Effort was made. President Johnson had very decided feelings on that subject. He said a man came in with his hat on and that's what he should leave with, his hat. Period. Take nothing. Well, some of his staff squirreled away a lot of stuff too. So it depends pretty much on the good conscience of the staff member, unless you're going to stand there with a policeman at the door, which was done a few times, and say, "See here, you can't take this out."

DESNOYERS: I have a very basic question about the incoming mail. I get the impression that after there started being systems the mail that was addressed directly to the assistants went directly to their offices? Would that be correct?

HOPKINS: That's true unless there were instructions to the contrary, it went to their offices unopened.

DESNOYERS: Right, and then you got everything else? Is that how it worked?

HOPKINS: Well, I didn't get it personally.

DESNOYERS: Well I don't mean that your office, your mail room, or whatever got everything else?

HOPKINS: In other words anything addressed to the president. Ordinarily when a new administration came in we got from the president's private secretary a list of mail that he customarily received, either from members of his family or close personal friends, that he wanted personally. So the mail room would pick that out and send it to the private secretary, unopened. But anything else that came to the president was opened in our mail room. Or if it came by hand delivery from the departments and agencies, many times it would come to my desk in the first instance and we'd open it.

DESNOYERS: And one exception you mentioned was that once the Bundy operation was established, that they were getting the State Department material directly.

HOPKINS: Yes and most of that came by messenger.

DESNOYERS: Right, but you got everything else.

HOPKINS: Now I wouldn't say everything. As an administration goes on various staff members develop contacts with the departments and agencies, so some secretary will call up Ted Sorensen and say, "I've got this memorandum I want the president to see." And he'd send it over by messenger to Ted

Sorensen and we'd never see it. But if it came over in the normal course of business, without special arrangements, we'd get it.

DESNOYERS: Now I have a file that I've just discovered that was stuck on at the end of the central File, but we're not sure it should have been there; a State Department memorandum to Bundy, copies of every, it appears to be all items from the State Department to anyone in the White House, not just to Bundy, beginning on March 9, '61. Do you recall anything to do with that or why that happened March 9 as opposed to January 20?

HOPKINS: No, I don't.

MOSS: That brings up the general question of the body of material that we call the White House Central Classified File. And it contains not only classified national security information and . . . paralleling the Central File system, but it also contained reports from the departments to the president, the cabinet reports were periodic, sometimes they were monthly, sometimes biweekly and so on. And it contains this third group which is, for want of a better name, State Department memoranda to Bundy. Why did that develop. . .

HOPKINS: I don't, I can't answer that State Department to Bundy business, I don't know. The other material of course, anything that showed up in Central Files of a classified nature, and sometimes some of the staff people would treat classified material sort of cavalierly, and it would be sent to central files with routine unclassified material. Well, Central Files would put that in as a classified file and that's the reason that was there, but I can't explain the Bundy reference, I just don't know.

MOSS: You were speculating earlier on why we might be missing some reading copies of speeches and that kind of thing. Could you go over that again? What happens to a speech after a president gets done reading the speech?

HOPKINS: Well, normally it would go to his private secretary. Now there are some instances, of course, where he might, at the end of a speech, autograph it to some person of importance, the group before he was speaking, or for some reason or other they might send it out as a souvenir to some group. There's any number of reasons of that kind, why you might not have the reading copy. But in most instances it would be in the files of the private secretary in all the administrations, I would say.

MOSS: Okay. I think that takes care of everything that I had left.

STERN: Thank you very much.

MOSS: Yes indeed. Thank you very much.