

George A. Smathers Oral History Interview—JFK #4, 5/27/1982
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Biographical Note

George A. Smathers (1913 - 2007) was a United States Senator from Florida who served in office from 1951 to 1969. This interview focuses on the relationship between John F. Kennedy (JFK) and Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ), JFK's political career before his election to the presidency, and LBJ's discomfort regarding his position as vice-president, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

George A. Smathers

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Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE A. SMATHERS

May 27, 1982
Washington, D.C.

By Sheldon M. Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SMATHERS: ...this is a part of the oral history of...

STERN: That's right.

SMATHERS: ...of Johnson's or Kennedy's?

STERN: Johnson's and Kennedy's. That's right.

SMATHERS: Johnson and Kennedy.

STERN: That's right.

SMATHERS: Is it, are you doing it for Johnson, or for Kennedy?

STERN: I'm doing it for the Kennedy Library.

SMATHERS: For the Kennedy Library.

STERN: That's right. I wonder if you could just begin with your earliest

recollections of the relationship between the two men in the Senate, when you were all in the senate. I know, for example, that Johnson called JFK the night that he beat Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] in '52 to congratulate him, when Kennedy was still in the Congress. Suggesting that at least they had had a relationship even at that stage.

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SMATHERS: Yes. Well, what was interesting about that particular race, starting there. I had beaten Claude Pepper [Claude D. Pepper] in 1950, and this was then 1952. And Kennedy, after I'd won, I was over there one day, visiting over to the House, Representative Kennedy had a bad back at that time, he couldn't walk around very much. I went over to see him because we had, we were very close friends. And he could hardly walk. He'd had an operation. And I remember we were standing at the back, on the House of Representatives' floor, standing on the back because he couldn't sit down, and leaning over the rail talking. And he said "I'm going to run against Cabot Lodge next year." And I said "You can't beat him." And he said "Well, I think I can." And I said "Well, I just hate to see you do it. Why don't you wait, Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall] is going to retire pretty soon, and you can take that spot." And he said "No, I don't want to wait. You, you're already in the Senate. I'd just as soon, I'm like you, I'd just as soon have a really big job, a better job, than being just a congressman. You have to run every two years for Congressman, you work awfully hard." So anyway, he said he was going to run. And he did run of course, and won. Frankly, much to my surprise at the start. But it was pretty evident as the campaign went on that Kennedy was out-organizing Lodge and out-working him, and doing just a better job at getting around the state. And of course, as I used to kid

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Jack Kennedy all the time, about he has his whole state, compared to in Florida, I used to say "You know you don't have any tough thing, running in Massachusetts. You can get in the middle of the town square in Boston and shot and reach all your constituents, north, south, east or west. We got counties in Florida that have more acres in them than you have in the whole state of Massachusetts." He said "I don't believe that." So we had a bet. [Laugh] I won the bet, cause we do have some large county areas. But anyway, Jack did a magnificent job, he was beautifully organized, and he was young and attractive and smart as he could be. He ran a good race and won. But later on he used to use that story on me. At the Democratic Convention in 1960 when Kennedy got the nomination, finally, I had run as favorite son, I was the favorite son from Florida, and had kept Kennedy and Johnson from running against each other in Florida, which made Kennedy very unhappy with me. And it's a whole story unto itself, what he had done and how we negotiated. But anyway, at that convention in Los Angeles Kennedy -- I had told Kennedy I was going to release the delegates after the first ballot. And that I felt like he would get probably more of the delegates than would Johnson. And one of, one of the Kennedy's principal delegates, who was my delegate, was my administrative assistant, Grant Stockdale, whom Kennedy subsequently appointed to Ireland.

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And we were all -- as congressmen we were very close together, our office were right next door, so we'd become very close personally. I was his friend, and he was my friend. But anyway, at this convention, before the vote started, I had introduced -- I had first had a, flipped a coin to see which one we would invite before our delegates to speak first. And Johnson won. So the way we did it, we had a luncheon for Johnson one day, and a luncheon for Kennedy the second day. We had the luncheon for Johnson, and then we had the luncheon the second day for Kennedy. I got up and said "I want to now present my dear friend from Massachusetts, whom I served in the House with," and so on and so on, "and I served in the Senate with. I nominated him for vice president in the convention in '56, at two o'clock in the morning he called me and said he couldn't get anybody else, would I do it." But I said "Obviously it's either him or Johnson, and you can go either way." Tried to play it down the middle pretty much. So Kennedy got up, that's where he got off that pretty funny story that I've seen in a lot of history books since then -- Kennedy says -- he gets up and he said " Well, I was feeling good about this race until this nomination, until Smathers introduced me just a little bit ago, or got ready to introduce me." He said, "You know when I started to run for President I first said I was going to run in Minnesota against.... Smathers came to me and said there's no way you can win in Minnesota.

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Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] will beat you out there." And he said, "I ran and I won. So then I said I'm gonna run in Wisconsin, and Smathers came to me and said, 'you've got no chance to win in Wisconsin. The Humphrey influence will be strong there.' I won. Then I went to West Virginia and he came to me, and he had tears in his eyes and said, 'don't run in West Virginia. You're a Catholic, they're mountain boys, they don't like Catholics in West Virginia. You got no chance.' I ran and I won. And then he says, now everywhere he said I couldn't win, I've been able to win. But what has just scared me, just before I got up here and he introduced me, he leaned over to me and he said, 'Jack, I think you may win this!'" He said, "That scares me to death." [Laugh]

STERN: [Laugh] What if you could go back to the '56 convention, any recollections you have of how close he came to the vice presidency the fact that he called you so late.

SMATHERS: What happened there , he really wasn't very close. In fact, he hadn't talked to anybody, it was the night, it was when Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] announced, much to everybody's surprise, that he was going to throw the nomination for vice president open. Why, then that activated everybody, and Kennedy in particular. But up until that point people thought that he would select Estes Kefauver [Estes C. Kefauver]. But anyway he announced about five o'clock apparently, one afternoon, that the next day the

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vice presidential nomination, he would leave it to the convention to decide who oughta be the vice presidential candidate. So anyway, it had to be about twelve-thirty, one o'clock in the morning the phone rang in my room. I finally dragged myself over and it was Jack Kennedy. He said "Old pal," which was always when he wanted to get something from you, it was always old pal. "Old Pal, I want you to do me a favor." I said, "What's that?" He said "I want you to nominate me. Have you heard that Stevenson has opened the convention up on the vice president?" I said, "No, I hadn't heard that." He said, "Well he has. I want you to nominate me." "Oh my god, Jack," I says, "You got no business having me nominate you. In the first place I'm, you know, a deep southerner." He says, "That's what I want. I got a crew and I need a southerner." I says, "Lord, why don't you get Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff]." He says "I've tried." [Laugh] I said, "Why don't you get attorney Dyk [Timothy B. Dyk]" He says, "No, I couldn't reach him." I said, "Well why don't you get John McCormack [John W. McCormack], he's from Massachusetts. You know, that's the logical way to do it." He says, "I can't reach him." I says, "Well, why don't we do it this way. I will do, I'll take, how much time have you got?" He says, "I got twenty minutes." I think that's what he said. "Each candidate will have twenty minutes nominating speeches, they can divide it up anyway they want."

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I said, "Well, let's leave it this way. I don't think I'm the logical guy to do it, but if you can't get anybody else, I'll do it. And what time, where." Well, he says, "You be here and here and so on." I said "Okay." So I went back to bed and that's the last I heard of it. And the next morning I go to the convention, which we were all staying close by, maybe next door, I've forgotten exactly, but anyway I was the favorite son at that convention too. But I had already gone and said that I would not run, before the balloting ever started. Ah, so anyway, I saw some of my people, the delegates, and I said, "I'm going to nominate Kennedy" and Kennedy wasn't too popular for vice president, and I was nominating him for vice president. He was not really well known at that time. So I said, "Okay, he's a hell of a fella. And I think smart, and he's a good friend of mine." But anyway, some fellas said they didn't think I ought to do it. And I said no, no I'm going to do it. I went down there and when I got, they started the convention, I really believe we were the first ones at bat. And ah, Sam Rayburn [Samuel T. Rayburn] was running the convention. So I went out there, and there was a big crowd. I had never really been before a crowd that big, a live crowd, before in my life. There was something like nineteen, twenty thousand people out there, and television had just begun to be fairly big, lights all over the place. I walked out on this podium and started, I'm happy to nominate my dear friend

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from Massachusetts for the high post of vice president of the United States, Jack Kennedy. And I started off about what he had done in the war, PT 109, and I was thinking hard, what am I going to, you know. Because he really had not been very distinguished as a congressman or senator. And, up to that point, I was struggling along, and all of a sudden I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I had a pain in my back. I'd never had anything like that before in my life. I said, my god, I'm going to die right out here in front of nineteen thousand people, on national television. And I really was frightened. And I was trying to keep myself together, and think of things to say about Jack, and I was struggling along, and I got another sharp pain. And I said, oh my god, what is this? But I just gotta go on. So I was repeating myself, he was a great war hero, and he wrote this book *Profiles in Courage*, and done this.... Anyway, suddenly [Laugh] and then a gruff voice said, "Get off, get off. McCormack's trying to talk." [Laugh]. I looked around and Sam Rayburn, what the pain was, was taking the end of the gavel, he had a long gavel, and he was punching me in the back with it! [Laugh]

STERN: [Laugh]

SMATHERS: He was standing right behind me, he's sort of of a short fella, and he was hitting me right under, you know, where you think your heart is. I said, my god, that's what I.... Anyway, I was so relieved to find out I wasn't having a heart attack. Sam said, "John McCormack's

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here. And he's ready to talk." So I ended up what I was doing quick, and McCormack came up. And he took off, and then they found Abe Ribicoff. And I think Abe had about two minutes, by that time there wasn't much left. [Laugh] Abe said a little something and that was it. So after that... of course he lost the election and, that election Kefauver won it, and we all went over to the, right across the street, steak house, or whatever it was. Jackie [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis] was over there, and a lot of his family, Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] and Pat [Patricia Kennedy Lawford] and everybody. And everybody had a big cry. And Jackie said "Why don't you and Jack go, take a little trip, go on a boat with Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] in the Mediterranean." So we made some plans to make a sail trip, a boat trip, which we subsequently went on. I couldn't go when they went, but anyway we went to get over that. There's a....

STERN: Do you recall the dynamics of the vote itself? I know that Kennedy seemed to have the nomination, and then....

SMATHERS: It was a much closer vote than anybody ever dreamed it was going to be. I was personally very surprised it was as close as it was. But what had happened was that Kefauver had just assumed, Kefauver had of course wanted to be president and had for a while indicated that he was going to run against Adlai

Stevenson. Then it was, the papers and whomever, made it appear that Stevenson had in effect capitulated, that's not

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the right word, but he and Kefauver had made some arrangement...

STERN: Right.

SMATHERS: ...where everybody would go for Stevenson for president, and then they would go for Kefauver as vice president. But of course Stevenson had run once before and he was pretty well in charge of the Democratic organization. So it appeared to most everybody that it was all cut and dried. And then when he suddenly threw it open, I thought the Kennedy forces ran a remarkable race in getting as many votes as he did. But the truth of the matter was, Kennedy at that particular point in time was not a well-known figure. And he had a lot of credentials, but people generally did not know Jack Kennedy. He had not been an outstanding congressman, nor had he been at that point a particularly outstanding senator. So to do as well as he did was a good recommendation of Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and all those boys' organizational ability, which they had a lot of. And he had, you know, one thing about Kennedy, the boys that were for him were really for him.

STERN: Once he lost the vice presidential nomination, then he clearly began, immediately, running for 1960.

SMATHERS: Right.

STERN: He made a number of trips into the South, for example. Did you have anything to do with any of those? Did you go with

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him on any of those?

SMATHERS: I think I went with him to most every trip that he went on in the South. We were together a lot. At that particular, he was thinking more about the presidency than I was thinking about the presidency for him. I was then working pretty directly for Johnson. I was Johnson's, in effect I was first assistant. Earle Clements [Earle C. Clements] actually was. I was the third ranking member, third of the Democratic team. Johnson was the leader, Earle Clements was the whip, and I was what they call secretary of the Conference. But because Earle Clements had a tough race in Kentucky, and was finally defeated, and went down there a year or so in advance, I was actually doing the whip job. And this was a time that Johnson began to have his heart problems. So I was very busy at that time, in the senate and for practical purposes was running the Senate during

those days because of the absence of Clements and the illness of Johnson. Although I wasn't running it without Johnson being on the phone constantly. Telling me what to do, and how to do it, and on you all the time. He was a very difficult man to work for. God, awful as a matter a fact. That's the reason I did not later become, when Clements was officially defeated, Johnson just assumed I was going to take the job as whip. And my wife had told me if I did that it would break up our marriage. Because Johnson was just so all over powering

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guy and he would never stop calling you, or leave you alone, really on you. So when Johnson and Bobby Baker [Robert G. Baker] came up to my hotel room, at the Mayflower, after Clements was defeated and said I want to call you so and so and so and so and so and so, and you're going to be the whip -- you know, he just assumed that. And I could have won it easy, and I said no, I'm not going to take it. And then that's when he said well, who -- Late on he got mad and walked out. About two weeks later he called me and said "I want to see you about who to nominate." I said, about the only guy who can really endure Johnson's heavy handed leadership was Mansfield [Michael J. Mansfield], who was a perfect saint. A wonderful guy, never lost his temper, a scholarly guy. So I nominated -- the agreement was that I would nominate Mansfield for the whip job. Which I did the following January. That's how Mansfield came to be the whip, and subsequently the leader.

STERN: Did you ever, during that period, discuss with Johnson Kennedy's obvious presidential hopes? How did he react to it?

SMATHERS: He didn't -- he did not think that Kennedy had either the capacity to be a good president nor did he think he would ever be elected president.

STERN: For religious reasons? Or....

SMATHERS: Primarily for religious reasons.

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STERN: It was obvious of course that Johnson had his eye on 1960 as well. It's always struck me as interesting that Johnson didn't, well he actually didn't declare his candidacy in an official way until days before the convention, though everyone knew of course that he was running. But that if Kennedy had a problem in terms of the primaries, to demonstrate that a Catholic could win, which he did, you would think that Johnson would have realized, given how savvy he was, that he had a problem too. Which was to demonstrate that a Southerner could win, and he....

SMATHERS: I think that Johnson felt as though, that he, Johnson, was so powerful as majority leader, and he controlled the Senate and the senators so

completely, that I think that he did not want to get out and run the primaries. Which Kennedy was doing, and winning primaries. And there was no way to take that vote away from Kennedy. So Kennedy was building up and Johnson was getting more nervous and more unhappy by the hour. But it was almost too late for him to.... Kennedy had moved, and moved so much more so successfully than anybody had really thought that he would do. By the use of polls, he was the first guy to really ever, that I knew of, that ever astutely used polls. Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy], I think, originated that idea. and Joe saw that it was done and it was done beautifully. Kennedy knew exactly where to go and what the issues were, and who to see, and so on. And

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that story that I started to tell you about, he wanted to run in Florida against Johnson because he felt he could beat Johnson in Florida. But I had already, not that I would be the presidential candidate as favorite son, primarily to keep Johnson and Kennedy from running against each other in Florida and dividing our state. Which I knew it would do. It would be very embarrassing for me because Kennedy was my close social friend, and my close personal friend, and Johnson, I had been working with Johnson, and had been associated as one of the fellas on his team. So it would have been a very embarrassing thing. So anyway, I'd run myself to keep them from running. So anyway we got ready to run, you had to file if you were going to run for the presidential let's say you had to file on April fifteenth or something like that. I've forgotten the date. Tuesday at noon, April fifteenth was the last day. On that morning I got a call from Kennedy, said do me a favor. Come over and have breakfast with me at the office. Which was unlike him. I said okay. So I go over and Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] is there. He had his breakfast, he brought it from home, he was on a special diet. He said what do you want. Evelyn came in, Evelyn was a dear friend, we'd known here as congressmen and so on. I told and we sat down and started eating. And he said, well, [laugh] he looked at the clock, he said you've got two hours to withdraw.

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Two hours to withdraw from what? Withdraw from the race, in Florida. I said, "Oh, my God, is today the day?" "Yeah, today is the filing day. You better get out 'cause I'm gonna run." I said, "Well, Jack, I can't get out." Said the Democrats' party have already nominated me. I was the President, I said no way. He said, "Well, you can always withdraw yourself." I said, "No. I just simply -- I can't do it. I can't let these people down. I've told them that I was gonna run and it's been in all the press and everyone knows it." Well, we talked on. It got to be eleven o'clock. [Laugh] It got to be eleven-thirty. He went on and said "Come on. As you know damn well you're not going to run" and he kept using more, stronger language than that. "It's just stupid. You can't do it. Get out." He says, "I'm gonna run," he says, "I've got a guy down there in Tallahassee. He's got a check. He's gonna file a check. And I'm gonna be a candidate. You have to run against me." I said, "I don't think you can beat me, down there." "Well," he said, "Look what I did to Danny Brewster [Daniel B. Brewster] over in Maryland. He did the same thing and I ran and I beat his ass." I said, "Well, that's Danny Brewster in

Maryland. You haven't beat some Smathers in Florida yet." "So... alright you've got twenty minutes. What the hell is it that I can do for you to get you to get out of this race?" I said, "Well, Jack, there's nothing." "God damn," he said, "Don't you want a job?" I said, "I don't want a job.

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I'm happy." Ahhh. And he would cuss and then he would smile and then he would say, "Now look. You're my best friend. If I get this now I can win this nomination down there. I'll just have the thing closed up. You just gotta get out. Now you only got five minutes." And Evelyn Lincoln is got a line a hoping he says that. He said, "Evelyn, get a line down at me [Laugh] get this guy on the phone." I said, "Jack, there's no use in doing it. I am not gonna get out. I just can't -- I cannot afford to do it. I told the people down there I'm gonna run." I said, "You're going to get more than half the delegates anyway. What the hell are you worried about? You'll end up getting all of them. But they're all committed to me now. Then have to stay with me through the first ballot." We should get up. Two minutes. One minute. Five minutes. Goddamn it. Alright too late. O.K. forget it. Leaned back in his chair. Said, "You know, you're a son of a bitch." [Laugh] I said, "But why? What are you so pissed off about? This is a little ridiculous." "Well," he said, "I could have won," he said. "You're just standing in the way." He said, "Now I have to go through this crap of courting all you..." I said, "Well, you've got Grant Stockdale already on it. Start naming off people. Raymond Masons [Raymond K. Mason] whose now head of Charter Oil Company, his wife was on it. And we've

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got Loy Anderson [H. Loy Anderson, Jr.]. You've got all these people that are delegates that, Grant Stockdale has hand-picked them [Laugh] just because they're Kennedy. He's already got commitments from them. I know that you've got over half of them already on the ticket, on your side." "Ah, well, but I wanted to win. I wanted to put it to Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] and that would have eliminated Johnson. That's the first good state in the South that I would..." So I said, "Well, I couldn't do it. And I hope you understand." So at last he said, "Let me show you something." He said, "You won't believe this. Evelyn, bring in those polls." So Evelyn went out, brought in polls and laid them out on the desk. And here it was that he had run himself against Johnson first and figured out that they could beat Johnson. Then he'd run himself against me and figured out he couldn't beat me, see. So I said, "Well, you dirty bastard. You would have won against me if it had looked like you could have won. He said, "Oh, I really wouldn't have done it. I would have showed you this thing if I could have beaten you." But at last he said, "Well, you did the right thing."

STERN: What a great story. That's great.

SMATHERS: So, there it was. I mean he tried to talk me out of it, but I didn't get out. But anyway it was a very interesting story.

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STERN: Why do you think Johnson waited so long to actually declare? You think because he felt his power base in the Senate was such...

SMATHERS: I think it was because his power base was such that he could.... This was the way Johnson thought, you know. He was, Johnson was a maneuverer and Johnson had been cultivating people for a long, long time. I had been Chairman of the Senate Campaign, Finance Campaign Committee, Chairman of the Senate Campaign Committee. That Johnson requested not once, not twice, but three times over a period of six years so that every bit of money we raised, we had Harry Truman in for a big dinner and we raised four hundred thousand dollars. Johnson and I would pass that money out to those senators who we would bring them into the Senate. And Ted Moss [Frank E. Moss] and Frank Church, all that group of senators who came in, we sent out money to them just as they do today. But I would take it to them and make a little speech. But Johnson would let me know. He would call them and say I'm sending George Smathers out there, who is the Chairman of the Senate Campaign Committee, to help you in any way we can. The committee has voted to give you twenty thousand dollars, in those days a lot of money there. Fifteen thousand dollars. Ten thousand dollars a year and so on. I must have distributed, you know, over the course of each of those years, well each about two hundred fifty,

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three hundred thousand dollars, which was a lot of money in those days.

STERN: Right.

SMATHERS: And Johnson figured that he had all those guys ready to vote for him. And then he felt that they could control their Governors and their delegates back in their states, which they could. In the meantime a lot of them were charmed by Jack Kennedy. And Jack Kennedy, you know you put him in a personality contest and Jack Kennedy would have left Lyndon Johnson in the dust, which he did in terms of just personality and winning ways and charm. I mean nobody ever accused Johnson, I don't think, of being the most charming fellah ever, even though he was one of the smartest.

STERN: Did you attend that joint appearance that the two of them made before the Texas and Massachusetts Delegations?

SMATHERS: No.

STERN: You didn't?

SMATHERS: No.

STERN: There was a lot of bitterness at the convention because some of the Johnson people made some claims about Kennedy's health and something about his father and you know the whole business with the Germans and the war and all the rest of that. Do you have any recollections of that? I know

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probably you've had some involvement in that.

SMATHERS: Yes. John Connally [John B. Connally, Jr.] was tough and was very much opposed to Kennedy. And I remember well at the convention I had a suite on the, let's say the eleventh floor, I forget which, and Kennedy had a suite right above me on the twelfth floor, immediately above me. And below or over on the other wing was Johnson. We were all I think in the Biltmore Hotel. I'm not sure which one it was, but some big hotel at that convention. I went up to see Kennedy. Now Kennedy had won the nomination. And I went up to see him. He asked me to come up there to visit him the next morning after the convention. I went up there and he said, "You know, I'm going to ask Lyndon Johnson to be my Vice President."

STERN: That's my next question. [Laugh]

SMATHERS: And I said to him, I thought that was very good. I said, "I think that's a hell of an idea." So he said to me, "Well, do you think Johnson will take it?" I said, "No. I don't think he'll take it." He said, "Well, I've just got to be, I've got to get him to do this because I don't want to have to deal with him as Majority Leader." Which made sense to me. Johnson, being as powerful as he was, could have held up every piece of legislation that Kennedy wanted to pass. He said, "I'm going to take him. Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy]

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doesn't want me to. Bobby wants me to pick Symington [Stuart Symington] or somebody else, but I'm going to pick Johnson." I said, "Well, that's good." He said, "Well, can you find out whether or not he's going to take it? Would you see, because I'd like to get him?" I said, "Alright, I'll do that." Well, about that time it so happens that I went downstairs I got a call from John Somebody in Johnson's, Walter Jenkins or somebody called me. He said, "Come over here. Johnson wants to see you." So we went over there. When I got over there John Connally was there, Sam Rayburn was there, Bob Kerr [Robert S. Kerr] was there. I can't recall who else but maybe one other guy, and Ladybird [Claudia Alta Taylor Johnson]. Well the question was, Johnson said, "I've got the call from Kennedy," which Kennedy had already made and told me that he'd made. "And I don't know if I ought to run for Vice President or not." They sort of took a vote. Bob Kerr said, "By all means, don't run." Sam Rayburn said, "Don't run." John Connally said, "Don't run." I think I said, "Well, I don't

think you'll be happy as Vice President and you shouldn't run." I left there. WE had a back and forth meeting. I left there. Kennedy called me again and

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said, "Well, what did you find?" I said, "I don't think he'll take it." He said, "Well, your information isn't very good." I said, "Well, I left the guy not fifteen minutes ago." He said, "Well, I just talked to him five minutes ago." He said, "Come on up here and we'll turn on the telly," a television then which would go down and show all through the hotel. So I said, "Well, I'm sure he's not going to take it." "Come on up here." Grant Stockdale was up there with him. Bobby was there. I think Larry O'Brien or somebody was there. You know the usual group. So I go up there and I had to turn on the television and hear Johnson on television after all of his friends had said no and he had said no. Here he was accepting the nomination for Vice President. And I have never personally been able to figure it out except this: I am personally convinced in my own mind that Ladybird Johnson talked him into that. Because he had had two very bad heart attacks and I'm convinced that he went in the room with her and she told him that it would be easy and so on, so on, so on. And she didn't want him to keep trying to run the Senate and be boss of the world, which he was being. And that this was what he ought to do and he took it. He took it even though Connally, Kerr, Rayburn, George Smathers and God knows who else had said we don't think you ought to take it because we don't think you'll be happy. And he wasn't happy as vice president. In fact,

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Kennedy said to me one day, "What can I do to keep Johnson happy?" And I said, "Why don't you send him on a trip?" That's when Kennedy sent him over to India. Remember that trip?

STERN: Ya, sure.

SMATHERS: Kennedy and I dreamed that trip up just to keep Johnson from moping around. Kennedy said to him "alright look, we got to do something." I said, "Well, send him on a trip, around the world or something." He said, "Ok, good idea." So, anyway Johnson...

STERN: Did you have any role in the campaign with Johnson's trips to the South?

SMATHERS: Oh, sure, I had, I really had a terrible fight with Bobby. I was in charge of eleven Southern states of that campaign and rode with Johnson when Johnson made the railroad car from Alexandria, Virginia all the way through to being in the far where Ladybird got so mad at me she said, "You're killing my husband." And Johnson would pout and wouldn't ride in the parade, didn't ride in the parade in New Orleans and I had to ride in Panama City. I was about Johnson's height, looked something like Johnson. I could put on a hat and I'd ride

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in the parade with Ladybird and wave every now and then. And Johnson would be sitting back there, mad about something. As a matter of fact I was telling somebody about it the other day. When we got to New Orleans, backed into, very end of the trip, backed into the station, the train and John Sparkman [John J. Sparkman] was on it, Lister Hill [Joseph Lister Hill], Russell Long [Russell B. Long] and Eleanor was meeting us downtown. The geometrics of the trip was to get out of the train and we were to ride in the car down Bay Street about eight miles to some, down to City Hall where de Lesseps Morrison, the then mayor, was going to meet up and Hale BOggs and so on and Johnson would make a speech. And this would be the end of the campaign in the South. As we back into the station, there are thousands of signs -- Kennedy/Johnson, Kennedy/Johnson Hurrah, Hurrah, Hurrah, Kennedy/Johnson. There was one little sign over there about that big, about three inches big, high and about three feet long which said: Johnson, a traitor to the South. Johnson [Laugh] we were looking up. I was looking at him. And as his usual, he saw that one sign. He just turned around and said, "Goddammit, why can't you organize something good? Look at that damn sign." I said, "Yeah, but look at all those other signs." I said,

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"What do you expect?" He said, "Oh, Jeez." Lord, he was just furious, he was so furious that when he got off the train he said, "I'm not going to ride in the parade. I'm not going to ride down. I don't like the way you've arranged this at all." So, I said, "Oh, my God..." So, anyway. So here we were. So I said, "Let's go. Let's go." Everybody was moving, clockwork, he was running five minutes late. "O.K. so Ladybird get the hat." We've just done this in Panama City, Florida. "Get the hat." She got this hat. Ladybird and I rode from the end of the station all the way down Bay Street for eight or nine miles.

STERN: Incredible.

SMATHERS: And on the way down, she had said, I kept saying to her, "Do you think Lyndon will be there?" We get there and she says, "I don't know. I think he will." Lo and behold when we got there, there he was just happy like nothing ever happened, so on and so on. And he got up and made a big speech and a pretty good speech and everybody else made a speech. And that was the end of that campaign.

STERN: Incredible. I know that you were at this caucus vote, the Democratic caucus in January of 1961 when Johnson proposed that he would continue to preside over the caucus even though he was vice-president, which he actually carried by a substantial vote, although seventeen senators I think voted against it.

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But it was a very, he took it as a terrible defeat because he felt he should have had it. But obviously from the point of view of the Constitution in such it was not a hell of a good idea.

SMATHERS: It was not. It was a bad idea. No question about that.

STERN: And do you think he carried it simply because of his....

SMATHERS: Personal magnetism. Personal control. He had established such a personal relationship with every senator there. He had never had anytime for Lady Bird or the children at that time, that point in time. Lady Bird is without a doubt one of the most saintly, god-like creatures that I ever saw. She could put up with this fellah, I don't know how she did it. I mean my wife couldn't even put up with me during those days. And I was subsequently handed a divorce just really because of the manner in which I lived during those Johnson, heavy Johnson years. But Lady Bird, how should could stand it, I don't know. But she did, and she never lost her cool except one night in Miami almost got hysterical and said I was killing Johnson. She said, "You're killing him. You're working him too hard." I said I'm not. I said, "Alright, if you want to get elected, if you wanted him to be vice president and Kennedy wants president, you got to make these appearances, Lady Bird. You know there's one after another and another after another." Well, she said, "Well, this man's had a heart attack." I said,

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"I know that. But you know we make these dates and somebody's got to keep them." But anyway, other than that, I've never seen her lose her cool. She is the most charming, gracious person I think I've really ever known. She is really a marvelous person. And living with Johnson was really something, something almost impossible to do. He was such a driver.

STERN: Do you think it could have worked if he had presided over the Democratic...

SMATHERS: No way.

STERN: It couldn't have worked?

SMATHERS: No way. In the first place, it was unconstitutional. It wouldn't have worked at all. It would have been a bastard type of a deal and it just would not have made sense. It did not make sense. You know what he did do, what Kennedy let him do... He got Kennedy to appoint him as the Chairman of the Space Program, which he had no business doing that either. I mean he could on behalf of the Executive but he also, what he did was he controlled the Space Program and he's the guy that as vice president moved the stuff that's now in Houston. It was originally supposed to go to Cape Kennedy. And it was there. And while he was Chairman of the Space Program, while

Senator Holland [Spessard Lindsey Holland] and I someday were off scratching our heads, not paying any attention, Johnson moved that from Cape Kennedy, Cape Canaveral to Houston. So that's why we got the thing in Houston now.

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They shoot them off at Cape. But originally that whole thing, the first time they went around and Glenn [John H. Glenn, Jr.], it was all in Florida and that's where it should have stayed.

STERN: Right.

SMATHERS: So Johnson moved that out there.

STERN: Do you think it was largely the cost of this caucus thing... There are a lot of accounts that suggest that he really withdrew, that he had initially expected to have a lot of influence in the Senate when Kennedy was President. Perhaps, there's even one person who quoted to me that he said that he would be the President's top man in terms of legislation. But then after this defeat he seemed to kind of withdraw into a shell and not even try.

SMATHERS: I think that's right. And he got more concerned about his health. His health was not good and he was, he had a bad problem. I was with him when he had his first major heart attack which was down at George Brown's [George E. Brown, Jr.] estate in Virginia. He was then still the Senate Majority Leader. We were arriving down from Washington and he kept complaining about this pain. He stopped by to see Senator Walter George [Walter F. George] out at Walter Reed Hospital, who subsequently passed on. And he was going down to spend the weekend and asked me to go down with him. And so I did and on the way down I said, "Well, why don't you get a little bicarbonate of soda." And why, I said I wasn't a great

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medical man but someone told me that's what relieved gas on your stomach. So I said, "let's get some." We stopped at a little old grocery store, I'll never forget that. Went in and bought a little bicarbonate of soda and then we got a glass and I mixed it up and he drank it and belched a little bit. And went on down to, had another one, bicarbonate of soda, and went on down to George Brown's. And Lady Bird was down there. Johnson wanted to play dominoes that night and Clint Anderson [Clinton P. Anderson] was there, who was Senator from New Mexico who had had a very severe heart attack about two years before that. And the next morning early I went down and he was reading the paper with Clint in the little library. Clint was lying on the couch reading the paper. And Johnson and Lady Bird came walking in and Johnson said, "Clint, you've had a heart attack haven't you?" And Clint said, "of course, Lyndon. You know that." He said, "Well, let me ask you this..."

[BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I]

... "That's exactly where it hurt." So Johnson said, "God, almighty man, get off that couch. Let me lie down. I'm having a heart attack." And so Clint got up and asked him a few more questions and he said, "You know, you sure are." And so Lady Bird and we all said, "Well, what are we doing?" Clint said, "Call a doctor right away." So I went in to the downtown

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of whatever that town is, but the Plains, Virginia and looked in the ads and saw a doctor and called him and happily got some operator who knew a lot of doctors and I said, "I've got an emergency here and would you get me a heart doctor immediately and so on and so on and so on and where we were at George Brown's place. And so she said, "Well, I'll have a doctor over there in ten minutes." So, sure enough when, he came in ten minutes. I'll never forget. He got out of his car and came in, kind of a semi-bald fellah about thirty-five years old. And he looked at Johnson and he felt him and he didn't say a word. He just got up and walked back out and said, "I better get my tools," walked back and had a big, old black bag. Brought the bag back in with him and he got out a needle, I give you my word, it had to be twelve inches long. And he said, "I'm going to have to give this man this hypodermic and this shot." And he said, "I want to tell you that this guy is suffering a massive heart attack and you've got to get him to some hospital right away." Johnson said, "Well, I'm not going to any hospital but the Navy Medical Center." And so anyway, I got on the phone and called the Navy Medical Center and told them who I was, who Lyndon Johnson was. The doctors here, the doctors arranged him for an ambulance from here. And he was going to get in an ambulance in about fifteen minutes and be on his way up there. Now, I don't know how long it takes, but he said, "Well be ready for him up there." So, went back and Johnson was giving

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all of his money to Lady Bird and taking off his wristwatch and giving it to her. And then he said, "Now, George, get a pad of paper and a pencil and a piece of paper. I want to tell you the things we've got to pass next week. I may be out for a week. I want you to write this down. Now, we've got to remember this bill, this gas bill, we've got to get that out of committee. And he started going right through the thing and Lady Bird said, "For God's sake Lyndon, cut it out and get in the ambulance and go." The ambulance had pulled up by that time. So we put him in the ambulance and he was gone and I was left in charge of the Senate. And he was gone for the next forty-five days. And we didn't see him. I began to hear from him on the telephone in about twenty days. And he wanted to know how everything was going, had this passed and had that, you know, same old business. So, that's when he had the first big one.

STERN: And obviously so that his health even as vice president, well, obviously, it killed him eventually. Did you ever see JFK and LBJ together while

Johnson was vice president? Did you feel that Johnson's, that the nature of their relationship changed when Johnson was vice president as opposed to when they were both senators?

SMATHERS: Well, yes. Because when they were both senators Johnson was in charge and when they were President and Vice President it

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was pretty evident that Kennedy was in charge. I think Kennedy, I don't think Kennedy really when you say like him, Kennedy did not dislike Johnson. But Kennedy, Johnson was not one of his favorite characters. He's not the kind of guy that he would pal around with. And so, Johnson was very uneasy around Kennedy, very uneasy.

STERN: When he was president?

SMATHERS: When he was vice president he was very uneasy around Kennedy. He didn't quite know what to do. And he showed it. But it didn't seem to bother Kennedy too much although when I'd go over to see Kennedy a lot, you know social and have dinner with him and he would talk about, oh, what are we going to do about Lyndon. "How is Lyndon," he'd ask, "How is he getting along?" He said, "I can't get anything out of him. How do you think he's getting along?" I said, "I think he's getting along quite well." And Kennedy enjoyed this. See, you remember Lyndon took those rooms that had been the Majority Leader's rooms and turned those into vice president's room over there in the Senate, in the Capitol. He hated to give up moving away from the Capitol with all the choice spots there and Mansfield who later became the leader, we had to over him around in what was the old Secretary of the Senate's office for a while.

STERN: Would you agree with this statement that was made by one observer at the time: "Although Lyndon Johnson was a scrupulously loyal

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and dutiful vice president to JFK in public, I saw numerous indications that this relationship was a facade behind which lay a mutual distrust and dislike which extended to the intimates in families of both." Do you feel that that's accurate?

SMATHERS: I don't think that's totally untrue. I think that's a little strong. I don't know that I would say distrust. I don't think that. I think Johnson recognized that he had to be loyal to Kennedy and he was going to be loyal to Kennedy. He was going to do what Kennedy wanted. But he was uncomfortable with him. He was never comfortable... the Johnsons were never comfortable around the Kennedys, put it that way. Comfortable. But Johnson understood the role of vice president vis-a-vis the role of president. He understood he was the boss. Now that's not to say that he liked it. I don't think

that he did but when he was away that's when he enjoyed those trips. He was once again out on his own and he was the man.

STERN: There are lots of accounts that when he was at meetings, National Security Council, and things like that at the White House that he tended to not say very much and as a result people around Kennedy would kind of disparage him and say, you know, that he's a light-weight and that sort of thing.

SMATHERS: That's right. The Kennedy crowd didn't like Johnson ever. There was no question about that. They disliked, Kenny

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O'Donnell, for example, I'm sure, he hardly said a bye to Lyndon Johnson. Others, Dave Powers [David F. Powers], he loved Jack Kennedy so much and he couldn't stand anybody who didn't share his same great devotion to Jack. So he naturally didn't like Johnson. Kennedy was just smart enough to know that he had to have Johnson in order to win. And he won, and that's how he won.

STERN: I think the evidence is certainly that if he had chosen someone else...

SMATHERS: Sure. He wouldn't have the votes if it hadn't been... he would have probably lost. So Kennedy was damn smart to do that and Kennedy recognized that and.... I'll say this for Jack Kennedy, at no time did I ever see him treat Johnson with anything other than the utmost respect and kindness. That's Jack Kennedy; Bobby was something else. But Jack Kennedy was a gentleman of the first order in his relationship and worried about Johnson being happy because he said to me if once, he said to me twenty times, "Tell me what you think we can do to keep Johnson... I don't like to see him come in just sit and say nothing and look so glum." Which Johnson could do. If he wasn't very happy, everybody knew about it. He'd put his elbow on the chair and then he'd put his hand on his, screw his leg right up and just kind of sit there and wouldn't say anything. And that was his way of letting you know he wasn't very

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happy and he'd do it all the time.

STERN: Do you think Johnson ever attributed some of the hostility which obviously came from people like O'Donnell and RFK as well to JFK or do you think he made a distinction?

SMATHERS: I don't think he did. I think Johnson secretly admired Jack Kennedy's personality, admired his good looks. I think he recognized that Kennedy

grew so much in the job. As a senator in the early days -- I've got a picture of the guys who got elected to the COngress in 1947. There's a picture in there of the various fellows who came right out of the war, Jack Kennedy, Richard Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], Abe Ribicoff, George Smathers [George A. Smathers], Thurston Morton [Thurston B. Morton], Tiger Teague [Olin E. Teague] of Texas. I got a picture of all of them and if you had looked at that picture and tried to pick out.... [Interruption]...

STERN: We were talking about this picture in '47. The '47 picture of the people who had come in from the war.

SMATHERS: Oh, yeah. Well, anyway, you look at that picture and you think that the guy, the two fellahs least likely to be President would be Kennedy would be number one least likely and Nixon would be second. Damndest thing you ever saw. I mean just pick out anybody there, Kennedy looked like

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a little boy about fourteen years old weighing about eighty-five pounds. It was a waif who just got out of the orphan's home and Nixon had hair down to his eyebrows, you know he looked.... It was funny in that sense that two guys who did become president in that class and that's the way it was for a long time. They moved through the COngress. Teague became very well recognized, Thurston Morton later was Chairman of the Republican Party early and of course Nixon got on the Whittaker thing, the committee, what do you call that committee?

STERN: House un-American Committee.

SMATHERS: The House un-American Activities Committee and that sort of bit. Alger Hiss, Whitaker stuff which gave him a lot of publicity. But Kennedy, before he got to be senator I don't think anybody hardly knew he was around. Actually, he was suffering a lot in those days; his back was hurting him. And it did not help him, his weight was about one-hundred forty pounds at most.

STERN: Let me ask you one last point which is about there were a lot of rumors in the late sixties long before the trip to Dallas that Johnson would be dumped from the ticket in '64 and of course a lot of people were attributing this to Robert Kennedy and the Bobby Baker Scandal was possibly the lever to get him off the ticket. Did you think that was

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going to happen?

SMATHERS: No. I didn't think that was going to happen. But I had heard that. No. I was with Kennedy when he was in Florida the week before he went to

Dallas. He was going down there and made a speech, I forget something, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Southern or something. Anyway, on the way back on that trip from Florida to Washington, Kennedy said to me, "God, I hate to go to Texas, I gotta go to Texas next weekend. I'm going to make Jackie go with me. This has been such a fun trip. I felt like I've accomplished a lot. But next week's going to be terrible. Jackie's got to go with me because she hasn't been the last couple of trips and she just needs to go and I need her because I don't want, I'm going to get in a fight down there, I'm going to get into a hassle between Ralph Yarborough [Ralph W. Yarborough] and Johnson if I'm not careful. And I just dread it. I just dread it because it's going to be an awful trip." And I was saying, "Well, I don't blame you, you know." Between Yarborough who hated Johnson and Johnson who hated Yarborough and Yarborough was pretty strong in the state at that time. So Johnson had been vice president and hadn't been down there much. So, but anyway, he said he didn't want to go. But I don't think he ever thought he was going to dump Johnson. I think probably what he may have thought was that Johnson might take himself out because of his health because he had at one time mentioned

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something about that, about his health. But I don't think that Kennedy would have.... Jack Kennedy was a first class guy. I mean, the fellow that helped him always... I mean you can look at a guy whose friends have been his friends all his life. That's a pretty good thought. These guys who keep changing friends I have some suspicion about. Jack Kennedy wasn't that way. His friends that he started off with, boy, those were the guys that he ended up with. He had good friends and he was a good friend. Lyndon Johnson came on the ticket with him and helped him get elected. I think he would have, he put up with a lot from Johnson and in terms of being unhappy and with Johnson being a little erasable and all that. On the other hand, he accepted that.

STERN: I think he sensed how tough it was for Johnson.

SMATHERS: Sure, he really tried to think of things that would help Johnson's ego.

STERN: You reminded me of someone I interviewed once said that in a way he thought it was similar to the problem between Dean Rusk and Adlai Stevenson. Because Stevenson thought he should have been Secretary of State and there he was in a position of subservience to someone he thought was so clearly his inferior. And yet Rusk tries so hard to be conscious of Stevenson's feelings. Same sort of thing.

SMATHERS: Exactly.

STERN: Well, thank you very much Senator. I appreciate it.

SMATHERS: Alright.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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