

Belford V. Lawson Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 01/11/1966
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Biographical Note

Belford V. Lawson (1900-1985) was a political figure in Washington D.C. and an advisor to John F. Kennedy [JFK] on civil rights. This interview focuses on Lawson helping JFK gain support from African American leaders during the 1960 presidential election and JFK's views on civil rights, among other topics.

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Belford V. Lawson– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

BELFORD V. LAWSON

January 11, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mr. Lawson, do you recall when you first came into contact with John Kennedy?

LAWSON: I first came into personal contact with him at the Democratic National Convention in 1952 in Chicago.

GRELE: In 1952 when he was running for the Senate?

LAWSON: Yes.

GRELE: What were your contacts at that time?

LAWSON: Just social, purely social. He was attending and I was attending. Then in 1956 when he was a candidate for the vice presidency, I met him on the floor of the Convention. I told him I was a delegate to the Convention from the District of Columbia and my delegation was for [Estes] Kefauver, but I was holding out for him because I had been studying his record and admired him. He then invited me to his office in the Senate. Shortly thereafter I went, and we

got well acquainted. I recall [Theodore C.] Ted Sorensen and [Timothy J.] Ted Reardon were there, and we talked generally about his future. He was up for re-election in 1958, and he wanted to know whom I knew in Boston. I told him I knew a good number of people, having a summer place at Martha's Vineyard. In that connection over the years I knew a lot of people in New England — friends and fraternity brothers of mine. He said he would like us to help him in his '58 campaign for the Senate. We did, my wife [Marjorie McKenzie Lawson] more than I because I couldn't afford the time.

GRELE: Had you any contacts with him between 1952 and 1956?

LAWSON: Oh yes, social, purely social — in his office and luncheons. I remember him bringing me home one night from Constitution Hall. He spelled out his hopes and plans for the country and for himself.

GRELE: This was before the 1956 Convention.

LAWSON: No, this was after 1956. It was in '58.

GRELE: Had you any contacts between '52 and '56?

LAWSON: Just casual. When I first met him, he said to come to see him. I think I met him in his office a couple of times. But I don't remember that. I'm sure there were minimal contacts between '52 and '56. My contacts, politically and socially, picked up after 1956 right up until his death.

GRELE: I understand that after the 1956 Convention, you wrote a letter to the Senator?

LAWSON: Yes, I'd forgotten that. I wrote a long letter to him. I was impressed with him and told him I felt he would be the first Catholic President of the United States. Ted Sorensen had it, and I had a copy of it until it withered away. I don't know where it is, but I know Ted had it because Ted has referred to it several times. It was a rather long letter in which I said that I was impressed

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and gave my ideas of how I thought he could get the vote. Being a member of a minority, I knew what his problems would be. That was the gist of the letter. I wish I could get it for you.

GRELE: Did he ever tell you his reactions to that letter?

LAWSON: Yes. I don't remember in detail. He appreciated it. He said he thought I'd hit on some of the problems that he'd already faced, and he went on to tell me, as he had said several times since, about the problems the Irish have. I remember he joked. He wrote a letter of endorsement for our son to Groton. He said jokingly, "What the hell, the Negroes are making progress," because he couldn't get into Groton. He had to go to Choate, I

believe, and that sort of thing. He went on to spell out how he couldn't get into Groton. How serious he was, I don't know, because I think he could have gotten into Groton. I remember that was indicative of our consensus regarding the problems of minorities.

GRELE: When you met again, or after you became close, between 1956 and 1958, did you in effect join the Kennedy staff?

LAWSON: No, I've never taken any money, never joined the staff. I didn't like it. I was in the midst of building my law practice, and I never considered joining his staff. But I would say I was among his early advisors.

GRELE: Was this then your relation to him, one of an advisor?

LAWSON: Yes, it's recorded in many places that I was one of his early advisors. Of course, after '58, when he really started his campaign, maybe my wife has told you, when we were advising him regarding his senatorial campaign in '58, knowing his ambition to be a candidate for president, we told him that he was not looked upon as a liberal. He was not a member of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] or any of the civil rights organizations. He was planning a big dinner in Boston, Marjorie

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and the Senator's brother-in-law, [Stephen E.] Smith, and others were planning the dinner. We advised him that he should have a liberal, a well-known liberal speaker, no matter who. We had great difficulty getting a liberal to speak. We got a Negro bishop, and we got Senator [Paul] Douglas. I've always felt that Senator Douglas' speech was the turning point of his campaign. Kennedy was never conservative, but he was not known as a liberal. I think he was liberal all the time without really knowing his liberality. He didn't know how liberal he was. That's what I think, and I told him as much in different ways.

GRELE: When you say you had trouble getting a libereal, you mean you had trouble getting a liberal to come up to speak for him?

LAWSON: Yes.

GRELE: Who did you ask?

LAWSON: Oh, I don't know. We wrote a lot of letters; we discussed it. I don't remember; my wife might remember. At that point he was looked upon as a nice young fellow. I don't recall if we asked Senator Morse. I don't remember whom we asked. We couldn't get a liberal Negro speaker. They were a little afraid.

I remember taking Senator Kennedy to New York to the annual dinner of the NAACP. I remember Jackie Robinson, a Republican, refused to have his picture taken with him. Franklin Williams, who is now ambassador to Ghana, and Roy Wilkins and Benjamin Mays, who is president of Morehouse College, had their pictures taken with the Senator. I introduced him to

many people at the dinner. His wife was sick at the time, and I remember he couldn't stay. She was pregnant, I think. This was his first exposure to the so-called liberals among the Negro people in an organized fashion. That occasion made a tremendous impression upon him. He was hurt by Robinson, but I explained to him that he was a Republican; and that Robinson didn't matter particularly, being only a baseball player, at the time.

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Then he began to rely on us. When I say "us" I mean my wife and me. We introduced him to all of the Negro newspaper people and many of the Negro leaders like Theodore Berry who is now in the poverty program, and [Samuel Z., Jr.] Dr. Sam Westerfield, a Doctor of Philosophy from Harvard who is now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State. These are merely examples. A magazine called *Jet* was criticizing almost every week the non-liberal, Catholic, etc. We arranged a brunch at his house in Georgetown with [John H.] Johnny Johnson, the president of Johnson Publications. His wife, Ted Sorensen and my wife were there. There were seven of us. I told Kennedy that Johnson was a good man and had great influence particularly through *Ebony*, the larger publication which is a very good magazine. I don't know if you've seen it. It's comparable to *Life [Magazine]* and it's well done. Thereafter, Johnson was neutral for a period and then favorable, being a very intelligent fellow. They didn't know Kennedy. Once they met him, it was all over. We did this with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, which is a Republican newspaper, and with the *Chicago Defender*. The wife of the *Chicago Defender* worked with us in Boston and other places. I think if we made any contribution to Kennedy's great leadership, it was getting intelligent, liberal Negroes to learn to appreciate the man.

The other thing that I think I'm personally proud of.... In 1959 Howard University Medical Association was meeting at Howard University. Four or five hundred medical men from all over the country were present. They wrote Kennedy and asked him if he would speak. He called me about it and asked me what I thought. I told him I thought he should make that speech. He asked me to introduce him. So I did introduce him. He received a tremendous ovation. Time after time after time both he and I ran into doctors who had swung into his "followship" so to speak. And even now as I travel the country I run into doctors who remember that occasion — what he said, and what I said about him. I think that was the one thing I felt good about, and I knew he did.

GRELE: Victor Lasky in his book on John Kennedy claims that you and Mrs. Lawson were brought in as advisors when John Kennedy ran into trouble with Negro leadership

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in Boston because of his vote on the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Is this claim valid?

LAWSON: That's practically valid. This is a little hazy, but I know this. I don't recall that he was in trouble. There was a big meeting in Boston. Ted Sorensen and I went up and spoke at the meeting. When we went up, the trouble was aggravated by reason of our attendance. They began to say he was afraid to come. That was not so. Kennedy

wasn't afraid. I don't remember whether I advised him, or Marjorie, or Ted, but it was the consensus that he not go and that we'd go up there and explain it. Ted Sorensen and I did.

I remember a man named [Herbert] Tucker, who was at the time president of the Boston NAACP, whom I admired. We had great difficulty telling him that here was the man we thought was going to be a leader, and that he ought to support him. We begged him to preside at the dinner to which I referred. He did under great persuasion. I said to him, off the record more or less, "If there's any man who has an opportunity with this man, right in his hometown, president of the NAACP, to whom he ought to look for leadership, it's you." We never did persuade him to support Kennedy. So Kennedy had no real Negro leadership in Boston.

I remember talking with a good friend and fraternity brother, Edward Brooke, who's now running for the Senate. He was a Republican. I tried to persuade him to go Democratic. There was no real trouble in Boston. There was brewing trouble, and I think the three of us sort of stemmed the tide. There was a lot of gossip but not real trouble. There weren't enough Negroes. There aren't but ninety thousand Negroes in the whole state of Massachusetts. So, you see, it couldn't have been so much.... He had had a colored secretary during the years whom he later brought to Washington. I think that it was just a question of exposure.

GRELE: You mentioned twice now the fraternity. What is the fraternity and how does this operate in terms of...

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LAWSON: The Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity is an interracial — largely Negro, but it's interracial — fraternity organized at Cornell [University] in 1906. It's not a fraternity in the common sense of the word. It's really a civil rights organization. I spelled this all out to Kennedy because William E. B. DuBois was one of the founders of our fraternity. He is the first freedom fighter and the great, truly great, intellectual beside whom many of us are intellectual midgets in my judgement. When I spelled this all out to Kennedy, he got interested. At the time I was the national president. Men like Thurgood Marshall and Adam [Clayton] Powell and all those.... I can give you a lot. Because it was the first and oldest, you see, it had large numbers of Negroes who had achieved. Twenty-eight of the thirty-three presidents of land-grant colleges belong to this fraternity and all the so-called liberals, preachers, and lawyers. The great Charles Houston, who is the architect of this whole civil rights movement that some of us lawyers get undue credit for, was a member. Martin Luther King is. So this is what I mean by the fraternity — that leadership. And we had two hundred fifty — I guess we have three hundred — chapters. Many of them were graduate chapters in the cities; many of them were on the East Coast and West Coast and the colleges. We had two, at the time, in Boston. So, being president, I had access to these thirty-five thousand men and, frankly, I used them. I sold them and they sold the people.

GRELE: Who did you introduce John Kennedy to, do you recall?

LAWSON: Well, Johnny Johnson of *Jet* and *Ebony*.

GRELE: What were the initial relations between John Kennedy and Johnny Johnston?

LAWSON: Initially hostile.

GRELE: Initially hostile?

LAWSON: Later neutral and finally favorable.

GRELE: Why were they hostile at first?

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LAWSON: They didn't know him. They just didn't know the man. A young, rich boy in Congress who'd never done anything, you see. That was all. There was no great hostility. There was some of course. I don't mean he won everybody over immediately. But the objective, intelligent Negro who had some philosophy of living, Kennedy sold, and sold sincerely because they began to study his record. For example, his economic legislation.

GRELE: How were relations between Adam Clayton Powell and John Kennedy?

LAWSON: I don't know. I don't know. My guess is that Kennedy, having worked with him in Congress, knew him and didn't trust him beyond a certain point. I think they liked each other. At that point, you see, Powell was a playboy — if he isn't still. But he was a playboy and not serious. They came along by the same road. Powell was older, but about the same time they were in Congress they were young fellows. I don't know what their relationship was. I know he used to talk to me about him, and I told him that in my opinion, he should not antagonize him, but he was overrated. He had a Harlem following, but that's about all. Kennedy never expressed to me how he really felt about him. My impression was as I have indicated.

GRELE: Did you introduce him to Roy Wilkins?

LAWSON: I don't remember. I think I did at this meeting, but I'm not sure. I remember Roy being there, and I remember he was gracious as always. I introduced him to [Robert C.] Bob Weaver, who was, I believe, either the Chairman of the Board of the NAACP at the time or an officer, who was most gracious. But there wasn't a warm pleasantness toward him. There was no real reason because nobody knew him. There was a consternation when I took him to the NAACP dinner. He didn't particularly want to go. He said, "It seems a little obvious to me." And "I agree, but it's got to be done; you've got to know these people."

GRELE: He didn't want to go?

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LAWSON: No, he didn't want to go. We had to persuade him to go. He never said, "I don't want to go," but it was apparent that he didn't want to go until we explained the

importance of his appearance. When he walked through, the women of course went wild, as always, about him. And, as I've indicated, two or three of these officials warmed to him and took pictures. But the rest of them just sort of showed their neutrality or hostility. "Just another rich boy who hadn't done anything for the Negroes and now was seeking their favor." This was in their minds. I think they were right about that, but I don't agree that there was hostility. Because I don't know you and I don't hug and kiss you doesn't mean I'm hostile to you.

GRELE: Did you also introduce him to Martin Luther King?

LAWSON: No.

GRELE: Do you ever recall discussing Martin Luther King with John Kennedy?

LAWSON: Yes. We discussed him in general. I told him I thought he was a moral philosopher. At that time, of course, he hadn't become the leader that he is now. I told him I thought it would be well to have him with us. I think Kennedy made King by that telephone call. I'm not so sure in the long pull of history whether it is the best thing, but Bobby, or whoever made that call, made King. King's a good man.

GRELE: As 1958 wore on to 1959 do you recall what Negro leaders came closer to John Kennedy and which Negro leaders stayed further away?

LAWSON: Well, Berry did and Williams, Roy Wilkins, several people in the Urban League. Whitney Young was not on the scene as the head of the Urban League but his predecessor, whose name escapes me, was favorably disposed to Kennedy. All these men are Alpha men. Whitney Young and his predecessor and the founder of the Urban League, Eugene Kinkle Jones were members of the Alpha Phi Alpha. Mrs. [Robert L.]

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Venn who is head of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Earl Dickerson, who is now president of the Supreme Life Insurance Company in Chicago and his successor, Theodore Jones — many business men, practically all of the college presidents favored Kennedy. In Indianapolis, I introduced him to the United Negro College Fund. That was a speech he wanted to make. I remember he asked me to arrange it. You see, there were the intellectuals. I hadn't thought of that, frankly, until he mentioned it. So we went out to Indianapolis and I introduced him. He met Fred Patterson who then was Republican but at the time was president of this United Negro College Fund and had been president of Tuskegee [Institute]. He met men who came quickly to support, the president of Fisk University, Stephen Wright, Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse, whose name I've mentioned, and [Samuel D.] Proctor who was in and out of government in the poverty program and several other jobs — I remember introducing him to Kennedy. We mentioned the newspaper people. Young of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*.... The newspapers practically to a man began to support him. The *Afro-American* was at first, it was a little difficult but we finally swung the *Afro* around.

GRELE: You say it was difficult?

LAWSON: Right, because there were some Republicans in the setup. The *Afro-American* was a family newspaper. You had to convince just one man, Carl Murphy, whereas in the other papers which were not a family enterprise it was much more difficult.

GRELE: Who did you work with in Senator Kennedy's staff?

LAWSON: Practically everybody in his office, particularly Sorensen, Steve Smith in Boston, Bobby Kennedy.

GRELE: What was your impression at that time of the staff?

LAWSON: Competent and devoted, inexperienced in some instances but whose inexperience was compensated by their dedication and devotion to him.

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GRELE: What was your feeling about their understanding of what you were attempting to do?

LAWSON: I think they understood it. I think there was some little jealousy, some little misunderstanding. You see, Marjorie and I, I think, were among the very first well-known Negroes who supported him. We did so because we liked him, and saw his potential as a leader. We got to know him, and then we became devoted and active. I was in and out of his senatorial office most every day, and we won over all the people so far as I know.

GRELE: When you say you detected some jealousy and resentment, whom do you refer to?

LAWSON: I wouldn't say resentment, some jealousy. I think Ted Sorensen had some misgivings at first, not real but "Who are these outsiders? Do we need these Negroes?" at this point. Later on they relented, it was perfectly natural — not racial. It was not really political. It was based upon "Well we don't really need them. There're few Negroes in Boston, and we can get along without the Negro vote." This was all subconscious. No personal hostility — most gracious toward Marjorie and me. We had lunch with Kennedy frequently at his home and office.

At the time I was active in the YMCA, and I arranged a speech at the Press Club for Kennedy. He got sick and couldn't come. He sent Bobby who read the speech and surprisingly donated a thousand dollars to the "Y." That night Jackie Kennedy went to our house for a little reception — with [Ralph A.] Dungan and some other people from the staff. It was just a small party, and she was charming.... We had quickly invited some of the people who were in attendance at the dinner. It was purely political — we weren't trying to socialize. But because she was such a charmer here was a chance, as we saw it, to get her to know some Negroes that night, real quick. She just stormed the place with her personality. That reception helped to

dissipate certain attitudes toward Kennedy which existed in the community. That event was not social from our standpoint. It was political business. I don't know of any

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one single thing locally that did more good because Mr. Kennedy made a good impression among middle class Negroes. This was just as real in my judgement as we're sitting here.

So there are hundreds of incidents. I remember I went with them to Buffalo where there was some hostility. Mrs. Kennedy was along. We flew up together, and I introduced Kennedy. And in Dayton, Ohio. We would give cocktail parties. I remember once in Dayton, Kennedy came up, and he gave me the devil, "You don't have enough whiskey. What do you think I am? A cheapskate? I think you're a little tight." In those days it was "Belford" and "Jack." Being not interested in politics and never interested in a job, it just didn't matter to me. I just liked him, and we would cuss each other out so to speak, not really, but, you know, I'd tell him. And it was all in good fun because he knew I was only interested in his leadership. I've never done anything but practice law. And I think he appreciated it. He was in a little trouble in Buffalo for the same general reason. They didn't know him and his vote on civil rights.

And California. I went with him to California to introduce him to people. I remember so few Negroes were at this dinner in Los Angeles at the time. I remember Peter Lawford was there and his wife. Kennedy said to me, "The Lawfords are going to have a little party tonight after the dinner down at Santa Monica. Get some Negroes to come." I tried to get some Negroes to come. Governor [Edmund G. "Pat"] Brown was there I remember. He was Attorney General at the time so it must have been 1959. I got the Negro leaders in California, four or five, to go to Lawford's party. We went down to a very nice party. The three or four that we had were important leaders. One of them was a woman who's now a judge out in Los Angeles. So this is the story of it. I regret sometimes that I didn't give more time to Kennedy, but I couldn't afford it financially. Then later on Marjorie went full time, and I felt that that was a sacrifice to me financially that I was glad to make.

GRELE: What was your impression of the positions of John F. Kennedy on the civil rights issues of those years,

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such as the Supreme Court decision, housing, the Civil Rights Act?

LAWSON: I think he'd never given too serious attention to them prior thereto, but when he did, I think he was 100 percent for them. I don't think there was ever any question about liberal views on Civil Rights. If I had any questions about it, I would have reacted differently.

GRELE: Would you say...

LAWSON: I think he felt, as I do, that many of these matters were judicial as well as legislative and executive. I think he thought the courts had their part to do and, as you know, they did.

GRELE: I believe at one time there was discussion about whether or not he should come out and say that the Supreme Court decision on desegregation was a moral issue rather than a legal issue. Did you advise him on that at all?

LAWSON: Yes, we talked about that. He came out very strongly. I don't wish to take credit for it any more than anybody else, but we advised him very strongly because I feel that way. I don't mind telling you I think his record and mine will indicate that we are not gradualists, but we used to talk about it. I believe with [Justice Oliver Wendell] Holmes — "Justice cannot be taken by storm; it must be wooed by slow advance." Now that doesn't mean you've got to be a gradualist, but it does mean that you can't run too fast because of the mores of the people and all that. You know that story. I think Kennedy believed that. We used to talk about it.

I remember we talked about Tom Paine. You know, Tom Paine said, "If people wait in chains for their liberty, they may indeed wait forever." Kennedy went along with that. I think he took the middle ground, between what appears to be Holmes' gradualism and Paine's immediacy. Kennedy was a true

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liberal, not so vocal, but at heart a true liberal. I really believe that. And he came along, considering his background, rather rapidly.

GRELE: Did you continue to work for him after 1959? Or did you continue to work right to the Convention?

LAWSON: Yes. I was not a delegate. My wife was on the staff. She went, and my son went. I couldn't afford to go. I'd done what little I could so I stayed home. I did make some speeches for him around, and I felt there was no need for it. I thought he was going to win.

GRELE: At one time, I understand, you discussed with Jackie Robinson his role in the Wisconsin primary?

LAWSON: Yes.

GRELE: Can you recall the specifics of that conversation?

LAWSON: Well, I remember, against my advice, they sent me to New York to see Jackie Robinson. We had an engagement — I don't know how important it is, but there was snow and Robinson didn't get to the Four Seasons. I waited, and finally Robinson called and said he couldn't get in. We had a long talk over the telephone. Then I later

talked to Robison here in Washington. He was supposed to be a liberal. I knew he was Republican, and frankly, I tried to get him to support Kennedy. He never did. I told him he and a couple of other Negroes were making unfair and untrue statements about Kennedy, calling him names, “wealthy, no-good boy” and all that — very childish and puerile. I talked to him about it and told him to forget Kennedy; it was bad politics and would hurt him in the long run. I think it did in some ways. He later swung to Kennedy.

In that connection we met Howard Bennett from Minneapolis who was judge in Minneapolis for a while, who is now in the Defense Department, a fine leader and leader. He was for Humphrey before the primary, but afterwards he swung to Kennedy.

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And Cecil Poole who is now the United States District Attorney in San Francisco.... Any number of people. They come back to me. I think I can say with propriety and with truth that the great majority of Negro leaders — and a lot of white people came to support Kennedy because of what my wife and I — mainly my wife, because she gave it more time — did in support of Kennedy.

GRELE: Did Jackie Robinson ever tell you why he had gone into Wisconsin to campaign against Kennedy?

LAWSON: No, I knew why, and I didn't ask him. He never told me.

GRELE: Because he was Republican?

LAWSON: Because he was Republican; because he was honestly opposed to the philosophy of Kennedy, which philosophy he didn't understand. You see, Kennedy was a reading man, and you'd had to read to keep up with Kennedy. This was true of all people. If you didn't read, you didn't know what he was talking about and what he believed. That I think was basic. Only men like [Arthur M., Jr.] Schlesinger, [John Kenneth] Galbraith, and those fellows, [Adlia E.] Stevenson, who knew him and who understood him and who could talk his language, appreciated him. Whether they supported him at the onset, all of them, I don't remember. I think so. But they understood him, his philosophy. This was not true of many other people.

GRELE: How did Negro leadership eventually line up in 1960 at the Convention?

LAWSON: I was not there at the time so Marjorie could tell you more in detail but I know generally it was practically 100 percent. They got on the bandwagon after the Convention. I know very few Negro Democrats who didn't go along, and, a large number of Negro Republicans went along.

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I know the only organized thing I did — one year I was for Stevenson. Well, I was for Stevenson both times, I was the vice chairman of the national volunteer group for Stevenson. Kennedy had heard about it. I assisted the man who was editor of the Louisville paper....

GRELE: John Seigenthaler?

LAWSON: What's his name?

GRELE: Seigenthaler?

LAWSON: No. In Louisville, the well-known editor, liberal, from Kentucky — the *Louisville Journal*. [J. Jerry Bingham?]

GRELE: *Louisville Courier-Journal*?

LAWSON: Yes. Well, anyway he was a well-known national leader, and he was the national chairman. I was the vice chairman with this fellow John Horne who was at the time with Senator [John] Sparkman but who later went on to various jobs and is now the head of the Home Loan Board [Chairman, Federal Home Loan Bank Board]. He was a vice chairman, and we worked together, and we transferred that organization over to the Kennedy setup. [Andrew T.] Hatcher was working with us, and we indoctrinated him. When Kennedy was nominated.... He knew Salinger; they had gone to school and so on. He was the fellow who I think we were responsible for, at least indirectly.

GRELE: What did you do during the campaign?

LAWSON: Make some speeches.

GRELE: You say you did not attend the 1960 Convention. Was that a result of the primary in Washington D.C.?

LAWSON: No, because if I may say so, the primary here was [Wayne] Morse-Humphrey, not Kennedy. With the knowledge of the Kennedys I went out of Morse. I

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liked Humphrey and would have been with Humphrey, perhaps, but Morse I liked. He's a sound liberal man, and I might have done it with or without the consent of the Kennedys, but I chose at that time Morse over Humphrey. Then when they saw I was going to do it, they approved of it. They knew why I supported Senator Morse. Labor supported Morse. But my not going to the Convention had nothing to do with my supporting Morse so far as I know.

GRELE: What were your reactions to the Humphrey telegram to Senator Morse in support of the Negro in the District delegation that he refused to endorse?

LAWSON: I don't remember that. What was the telegram?

GRELE: Well, supposedly, Senator Humphrey or representatives of Senator Humphrey asked him to support Frank Reeves as the Negro on the District delegation, and Senator Morse got up in the Senate and said that he refused to support any man because he was a Negro or because he was a white....

LAWSON: I don't remember that. It's hazy in my recollection but I thoroughly agree with Morse. I think that Morse was right. Negroes have no right to anything just because they're Negroes. I didn't go for this bloc voting that Reeves had a lot to do with.

GRELE: Bloc voting?

LAWSON: Block voting, Negro bloc voting.

GRELE: Campaign...

LAWSON: Yes, as Negroes in the Negro section of town. Frank Reeves was one of the instigators. I opposed it openly and publicly.

GRELE: How did Frank Reeves join the Kennedy staff?

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LAWSON: Well, after he got elected national committeeman, they took him on. He seconded the nomination. Then they just felt he was a national figure, the only one in the country and they took him along. He did some campaigning for them. I never thought much of the Reeves campaign, and everybody knew that I didn't. I didn't support him.

GRELE: Did Joseph Rauh have anything to do with the nomination of Frank Reeves?

LAWSON: Oh yes, he was very much his man. On radio and television he talked about the "poor Negro lawyer" and this sort of thing and defended him when he got in trouble on that same "poor Negro lawyer who makes small fees" all of which were irrelevant. You don't lie to a Congressional committee because you're a poor Negro lawyer. And Joe Rauh said this. It's all a matter of record. He was just defending his client, of course. Oh yes, they were very close together. They came to me to switch, but I wouldn't switch. And they did it the last time, and I did not support [the Reverend E. Franklin] Jackson. Jackson, the national committeeman from the District of Columbia. He's a preacher, and I think one preacher in politics is enough. So I don't go much for preachers in politics, and I told them. I didn't oppose Jackson; I kept quiet during this last local campaign.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the relations between John Kennedy or his staff and members of the District delegation? Were they listened to; were they consulted?

LAWSON: I don't believe they were listened to. They were cordial. Joe Rauh had gone to Harvard and knew Bobby Kennedy. But I had the impression they weren't listened to. We had only three votes you know — and there was not much reason. We raised money, but there was no real reason. Now whether there was any hostility.... I think there was no lack of respect, but no genuine feeling that we could help him much. Why waste time with three votes? That was it. I didn't have time to go into that, wasn't interested in it. I was just doing what I could and didn't bother about....

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Because I too felt that we would never amount to much politically until we got home rule. But the relationships, as I remember them, were pleasant and cordial but not very profound.

GRELE: Did Frank Reeves replace you in the Kennedy organization as the Negro contact man?

LAWSON: He didn't have to replace me because in that sense, in the sense you imply, I was outside of the organization. When called upon I did what I could. But I was never in competition or seeking anything at all for myself because if I had, I would have gone about it differently. I would have asked. I never asked any of them for anything, not even Kennedy. Reeves didn't replace me. There was a feeling that I should have been more active. When I opposed Frank Reeves and he was elected — he was on the Humphrey ticket and I was on the Morse ticket. He was with Kennedy, and you know long he lasted. But there was no contention, no replacement. I purposely didn't go to the Convention because I felt I couldn't help him. Then Frank Reeves and that group had won, and our group had lost, and why should I go. I think the record will show that Kennedy referred to me and Marjorie many times in the Convention, and that it was all satisfaction. I had done what I could, and I was in a creditor position.

GRELE: If you had been elected as a Morse delegate, what would you have done at the Convention after working so hard for John Kennedy?

LAWSON: I don't know what I would have done. I knew Morse had no chance. I knew that. I would have gone to Morse and told him that I was going to switch because everybody knew I was for Kennedy. So I would have tried to have done what was the right thing, best thing, at the Convention for Kennedy. I think Morse is the kind of man who understood it. He knew I was for Kennedy. Morse knew all the time I was for Kennedy. There was no question about it. I told him time and time again and said so in his presence, but for Morse in this primary. So there was no misunderstanding.

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GRELE: After the election what were your impressions of John Kennedy's advisors on civil rights, most notably Harris Wofford and Lee White?

LAWSON: Well, I know them both, and I think they're all right, fine gentlemen, but neither one of them knew much at the time about civil rights. They've learned since. I was mildly responsive to them. I appreciated their leadership. I think they were both well meaning. I think there was a lot of bungling due to inexperience. They were both sincere, but I think he could have had better advisors.

GRELE: Anyone in particular?

LAWSON: I can't think offhand, but I think he could have had more thoughtful and experienced advisors.

GRELE: How would you assess the role of Congressman [William L.] Dawson in the campaign?

LAWSON: Well, my understanding is that Congressman Dawson and Kennedy were not spiritually kin, to put it mildly. Dawson was an old man; Kennedy, a young man. Dawson, the precinct politician, played it close to his vest. I don't think he was in favor of Kennedy, nor was he opposed to him. He was just waiting to see the winner. I don't think they had much in common. I think — and I told him this — Dawson should have taken a stand, been more active. I think he was too astute not to have seen the handwriting, and I think he missed an opportunity. But later on he did what he could. He was a Democrat, and he swung the Chicago vote. I think he made a historic mistake by not actively supporting Kennedy.

GRELE: This is a bit off the topic, but did he run into any trouble with Mayor [Richard J.] Daley over this?

LAWSON: I don't know. I was not interested in local politics and I don't know.

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GRELE: Do you have any comments on your post-election relations with John Kennedy?

LAWSON: Most pleasant. We had a standard joke. I'd see him at parties, receptions and dinners, and he would say, "You old so-and-so, why don't you come to see me?" I had a standard reply, "Mr. President, I have read in the paper that you had one or two little things to do, and I have nothing to see you about." He'd practically break down. He thought that was funny. "Oh, you old so-and-so, I know you make plenty of money." I remember saying, "Well, I am doing better than you're doing in some respects." My wife heard this. He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I've been up here to the White House two or three times and I don't like this food. I have better food than this." He was a man who appreciated that kind of a joke, not only with me, but with everybody. Jackie had a great sense of humor. I remember we saw them the day before they went to Texas. I guess my wife told you that so I won't repeat it. I think the last thing he said to me was, "Why don't you come to see me?" I could have, I think, called Mrs. [Evelyn] Lincoln and walked in to see him, I think, without all

the rigmarole. I never tried because I had nothing to see him about. Nothing I could do for him, unless he called on me. So the answer to the question is most happy and friendly.

One of the things I cherished, I think we were the first Negroes to go to the bier at the White House when they brought him back. We sat in the midst of the church at the funeral which I appreciated from Mrs. Kennedy because we didn't amount to.... We sat right next to DeGaulle and Haile Selassie, which was a little thing, but it showed that Mrs. Kennedy had not forgotten.

I remember when I saw him after the election. I think it was at the Armory. He and his wife waved as they were getting in the car, waved at Marjorie and me. Inside, as I recall, she came over and spoke. So you see the relationship. It was very friendly up to the end.

GRELE: Can you think of anything we've missed?

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LAWSON: Nothing important. Social stuff. I'm sorry I can't think of more people to whom I introduced him. I'll try to think of it and put it in the report. I was with him in the years and traveled with him and made the original contacts with Negroes, but I just can't remember them because there were so many of them.

GRELE: Did you notice any change over that long period of time?

LAWSON: In Kennedy?

GRELE: Yes.

LAWSON: Oh yes. He grew to be much warmer, much more humane, and much more understanding of the total picture, not just the Negroes. He did that, too, because he got to know Negroes. He didn't know many Negroes — a few Negroes in Boston, a classmate or two around the country, Adam Powell, and a few others — but he didn't know many Negroes. He didn't know there were good businessmen with good businesses like Earl Dickerson and John Johnson. So that he grew in stature and in mind and in spirit after his election. I don't think there's any question but what if Kennedy had lived, he would have had a Negro in the Supreme Court, a Negro in his Cabinet, as exemplified by his immediate appointments of Negroes to Federal judgeships. There's no question about it. I think he decided to do that because he had gotten to know competent and capable Negroes with integrity, and he was using them. I think if I had tried, I could have gotten whatever I wanted — I really do. But I never tried.

GRELE: Do you have any final comments you'd like to make on John Kennedy and his role in the long history of civil rights or race relations?

LAWSON: Well, I think history will validate the crystallization of his philosophy of civil rights and his sincere desire to place competent Negroes in the political establishment. I think had he lived, he would have done so with increasing frequency. I think he'll go down in history

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as one of the great, great leaders of world history.

GRELE: Thank you very much.

LAWSON: You're welcome.

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