

John G. Feild Oral History Interview – JFK #2, 4/6/1967
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Field (1922-2004) was a government official, and the Executive Director for the President's Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity from 1961-63. In this interview Feild discusses his relationship with the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training in the Department of Labor, how the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity operated and gauged public response, and why he left the Committee, among other issues.

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John G. Feild – JFK #2

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
39	Relationship with the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training in the Department of Labor
40	Gauging public reactions to the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity
45	Operations of the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity
47	The Kheel Report
48	Why Feild left the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity
51	Meeting President John F. Kennedy

Second Oral History Interview

With

John Feild

April 6, 1967
Washington, D. C.

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Why don't we begin by my asking you about your relationship with the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training in the Department of Labor. Were they extensive and to what extent were these people helpful?

FEILD: Well, they were becoming increasingly extensive as the [President's] committee [on Equal Employment Opportunity] began to identify problem areas that it needed to expend energy in. We began with various complaints involving construction unions and construction companies. We recognized immediately that dealing with the problem as individual isolated contractors or individual unions was not going to be particularly constructive or productive. It could be constructive, but not productive. So we began to explore what role the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training could play to provide additional support for the establishment of standards that would push the unions and contractors in the right direction. And I think on the whole, while I was there, I would have to say rather candidly that they were unproductive discussions. The bureau was insular; it was defensive: it had, I think, moved from a position of perhaps some political strength, in that it was meeting a real need, to a position where, by the time the Kennedy administration came along, it was existing largely as a voluntary service program. If somebody wanted to be in the program, they could. I think the number of apprentices had been declining for years. There was no great pressure to expand the program. It was a very weak, insular, isolated unit in the Department of Labor, very much the step-

child of the construction unions, regarded by them as their property. The unions, on the other hand, we dealt with were, I think, more

[-39-]

receptive than was the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training, which is an irony.

STEWART: What about your relationship with the AFL-CIO civil rights division as such?

FEILD: They were good, and they were productive, they were active. We had a good close working relationship with Bill Schnitzler [William F. Schnitzler], who was chairman of their committee and a member of our committee. He frequently would call international presidents in for small group meetings, urging upon them more affirmative action that was consistent with the posture of the administration. He would frequently push on them the political desirability of their moving. He would tell them they can't stand still. I think he made a pretty good impact on the craft unions. Lane Kirkland, the assistant to Mr. Meany [George Meany], had also a good relationship with the craft unions and was very affirmative. He also, I think, perceived this as a political requirement if you were going to be in the Kennedy discussion. And they were very conscious of this. Goldberg [Arthur J.] had been general counsel, as you know, and as secretary of labor, chief administrative officer of the committee. He had a lot of reason to push them. We did form the Union Program for Fair Practices as a counter-part to the Plans for Progress activity. All the unions did come in with a very, very few small exceptions. There was initial wariness on their part because they didn't want to make public commitments that they didn't feel they could keep. For this reason the Sheet Metal Workers, for example, didn't become part of the initial program. They later, I think, did. This was largely managed by the AFL-CIO civil rights department and civil rights committee under Bill Schnitzler and Don Slaiman, staff director. I mean, you have to give them that recognition because they were playing that role. They recognized, as we did, that the individual international unions were the essential keepers of the power, and then their local unions, in many instances, were even more independent.

STEWART: Right. Moving on to the area of gauging public reactions, did you use polls at all, did you...

FEILD: No. We never took a poll that I know anything about. We were very much conscious of what kind of public response to our own efforts, and public concern about the problems that we were dealing with, what that was, and we did take a national clipping service pretty religiously. It was reviewed pretty carefully by our own information office. We were aware of how much press criticism there was or critical comment that was getting into the press. And this was an important consideration. I think it's important, perhaps,

[-40-]

to say that philosophically and operationally we generally viewed the existence of criticism as being inevitable and, to some extent, desirable. We felt it would be a lot easier for a committee, a presidential committee headed by Vice President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], to give the appearance of responding to pressure than, perhaps, it would have been if we had been the sole initiator of all of our actions. As long as there was strong public expression of need, of demand for action, we could say we were responding to that by taking the affirmative actions that we were. The committee was always criticized for never cancelling contracts. This was true under Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]. This was the most simple, repetitive theme in the press. And we felt that our action in suspending further contracts was an affirmative response to that demand that was taken in a way that was, perhaps, more understandable to the industry side of the equation, that we could force them into a position of achieving eligibility rather than punishing them for failure to perform.

STEWART: Was there ever a fear that all of the publicity that went along with this program might cause people to see discrimination when, in fact, it didn't exist and raise certain hopes...

FEILD: We didn't have that a bit.

STEWART: It never became a factor?

FEILD: This was sometimes expressed to us by business people and others, but we never saw this as a very realistic impact. The truth of the matter is, the general awareness of the existence of the fact of a violation of a federal code in the form of our executive order was so low that it would have taken a mountain of publicity and effort to get people who were really affected day in and day out by violations of this regulation to be aware of it.

STEWART: Yes. Much less people who weren't as...

FEILD: Right. The number of people that filed complaints was so tiny, it was fantastic. We had three hundred thousand contractors under our jurisdiction.

STEWART: Did you anticipate this low number of complaints, or did you think...

FEILD: Yes, we did because this had been pretty much the typical experience for all the years since 1945 with the state commissions. We have known that there is a very real

[-41-]

communication drop off for people whose rights are affected, about the existence of a law, what to do about it, where to go to do something, and we saw no reason to believe that a

federal program was going to get any more visibility than the local ones. And, in fact, it didn't.

STEWART: What about your relationship with the White House? Who primarily did you deal with?

FEILD: Well, my primary liaison personnel were Harris Wofford and Frank Reeves. Frank left before I did, Harris, of course, left, too, as a matter of fact, in terms of the Peace Corps situation. But they were our primary early relationships, channels. Bill Taylor [William L. Taylor] and Lee White [Lee C. White]. Lee White was designated to replace Harris Wofford, Bill Taylor was sort of liaison to the Civil Rights Commission, and sort of an assistant to Lee White. Lee presided over the weekly discussions that we had of the key civil rights agency persons, sort of the strategy boards.

STEWART: How effective were these meetings with these agency people?

FEILD: On the whole, I think they were remarkably effective. I think that these guys identified major problems sometimes before they got to be big nasty issues. They were always dedicated to developing lines of action and strategy and follow-through that the agencies could do, that didn't necessarily have very much visibility, but did have a fair amount of impact. I think they set the stage very much for acceptance within the government of the validity of the concept that was later embedded in Title VI in the '64 Civil Rights Act. Remember, when the Kennedy administration began, the notion of a federal policy prohibiting the discriminatory use of federal funds was not yet a reality and, in fact, was under much political criticism. It used to be known as the Powell [Adam Clayton Powell] Amendment. And there'd been much debate about it. What good would it do to cut off all the funds in Mississippi? You know, you punish the innocent with the guilty. There was a great argument against this. And I think these working discussions week in and week out, in the White House, where operating personnel from the major agencies would give and take on civil rights policy problems created a lot of understanding that you could use, not necessarily coercively, but use as a basis for establishing program standards, for encouraging people to understand that federal support was dependent upon acceptance of this standard. I think it built a lot of understanding for that.

STEWART: Did you have any continuing relationships with the Civil Rights Commission, with the staff of the Civil Rights Commission?

[-42-]

FEILD: We did. We had a lot of relationships with their staff on the studies they were making, particularly when they would hit employment. But they were mostly through Bill Taylor or through Berl Bernhard [Berl I. Bernhard], trying to keep policy focus consistent and flexible.

STEWART: What types of programs, or what specific problems that you know of, as far as your committee was concerned, came to the attention of the president? Or do you know of any specific ally?

FEILD: Well, let me think back on those. There were a number. There's no question that the union problem, the whole employment field was one that he had been, I think, more familiar with, perhaps, the employment field, than any of the other areas of civil rights. The union problem was a matter of importance to him because he wanted to get the political involvement of the unions going in the right direction, and I think there was a lot of good mutual respect there, going back to his days in the Senate. He was certainly very concerned about the integrity of the Plans for Progress program, and very worried about it, very worried about Bobby Troutman [Robert Troutman Jr.]. He didn't feel he could personally bring himself to limit Bobby Troutman because they were friends and there was a personality element there, and he felt the guy was trying to do good. But he could see that he was a political liability, and he expressed it. Kenny O'Donnell [P. Kenneth O'Donnell], I think, shared more of the activist role in dealing with that problem than any other person on the White House staff. I think the kinds of discussions that he's likely to have been made aware of would be – well, let me give you a good concrete illustration, the internal federal government's employment policy and practice was one of constant interest. He would ask Cabinet officers how many additional high level Negro promotions had been made. He asked regularly, would send small memos to us: "Give me an up-to-date report on the number of Negroes employed in the federal service." That was a difficult thing to do, we didn't have a good reporting system at the beginning. As we began to devise this better, he began to expect more knowledge to be used to be keeping him up-to-date in sharp limited ways, not in extensive detailed but just the overall picture. He would hit that theme pretty regularly, and he would hit the theme of whether or not we're getting good performance from industry, whether or not we're getting good performance from labor. I think he was rather performance oriented. He wanted to know were these categories moving, was there movement.

STEWART: What about the lack of civil rights legislation? Did this seriously affect your program?

[-43-]

FEILD: Well, as far as the contract program is concerned, it did not. And I think, in a way, the reports that we had made to the president and to his key political advisors were that we had made a very significant dent in gaining momentum on the employment discrimination side without legislation. The irony of that, of course, is that it in its way provided an excuse for not pushing too hard for legislation. If you could do all of this without it, why raise the hackles of opposition in Congress? And I felt very strongly that that was exactly why there was no inclination on the part of the administration in the early stages of that second Congress to push. It was a clear policy, it was discussed at the Friday meetings in the White House. While I think generally the people there would urge legislative recommendation, there was a pretty clear

understanding that this was not a great blow to the employment program. It was a real blow, maybe, in some of the other areas, in voting, in schools, in the Title VI area. We needed that Title VI policy very badly, no reason why we shouldn't get that, except, of course this was a very political battle. But it was not the lack of recommendation in employment. My observation, hindsight observation, 1967, would be, we've had the law since '64; the real contribution that the federal government is making to the enlargement of equal employment opportunities is still being made under the contract compliance provisions of the executive order, not under the legislative mandate.

STEWART: So it really hasn't had that much of an impact?

FEILD: It just in that area didn't, but the other areas I think it did. Very major effect.

STEWART: How much of an effort was made to establish quantitative goals that you people could use to measure the success of your program?

FEILD: A fair amount. When I was director, I fought rigidly against the establishment of quotas, of numbers, but I did not feel that we should abandon the notion of quantitative goals. We should keep it as a goal; we should be flexible about it; we should attempt to use it as a way of measuring performance, both of our contractors and of our governmental agencies. And I think more, perhaps, than had ever been done in the history of the program, we became quantitative. We did inject the notion of numbers. We did take the census. We did insist upon the data, and therefore, we automatically elevated the preoccupation that everybody had with performance measure by numbers.

STEWART: To move on to the operations of the committee as

[-44-]

such, in Leonard Baker's book, The Johnson Eclipse, he describes the meeting in which the vice president attacked Dean Sayre [Francis B. Sayre] for some time, primarily.... I guess it was regarding a regional meeting in St. Louis that apparently Sayre felt had been poorly planned and poorly executed. Was this after you...

FEILD: After my time.

STEWART: It was? All right, let me ask you this, were you aware of any serious problems as far as the internal operations of the committee were concerned?

FEILD: Certainly.

STEWART: Complaints that they weren't involved enough, they didn't have enough to way in the agenda and so forth.

FEILD: Dean Sayre, John Wheeler, to name just two, were very outspoken in a couple of committee meetings, questioning the chairman, wanting to know why, and whether it was true that certain things were done. They were limited exchanges. They were limited to questions on the part of the committee members, and sometimes long and extended answers by the chairman. There was a strong feeling on the part of some of the citizen members of the committee that they were not being given the full facts about the reasons for policies of the committee, questions about the budget of the committee, questions about the utilization of agency personnel, this type of thing. These were questions that related to fundamental policies of the committee.

STEWART: Were there any significant changes made as far as the involvement of the committee as a result of these complaints?

FEILD: No.

STEWART: Nothing?

FEILD: I mean, they might have been appointed to serve on another committee that didn't meet.

STEWART: There was an agenda committee set up at one time, wasn't there?

FEILD: There was an agenda committee set up, and that was directly as an outgrowth of the criticisms and the complaints about the Plans for Progress program. And that was an attempt to bring dissident members of the

[-45-]

committee into a new coalition with those that were trying to solve the problem. John Wheeler was appointed to that committee. And all that did was further remove the discussion from the general committee to a smaller number of people, in my judgment.

STEWART: Nothing concrete ever came of it?

FEILD: Nothing. Except the private management of the committee's public business.

STEWART: Is there anything more you care to say about the operations of the committee?

FEILD: Well, the committee was a very useful device, maybe it had to go through a transition as all committees of this type have to. On the whole, I think its record, you know, speaks for itself. The performance was better than anybody else's. The limitations were those of fears about congressional sanction and a lack of understanding that an independent committee wasn't really an operating governmental agency, and the power was in the operating agency. So there was a sort of built-in tension on that count and the congressional count, and the third count is the citizen members of the committee really were a little unable to harness their resources effectively because the federal government policy had not yet been, by the time I left at least, sufficiently enough consolidated for them to know what it was. They thought their role was trying to strengthen governmental policy, whereas, in fact, a better role for them to play might have been to harness a lot of private resources out there in support of performance on policy, not the achievement of it.

STEWART: Yes. Yes, there was a basic difference. To what extent did you feel, and did the committee actually work with state and local fair employment agencies?

FEILD: Well, we spent a lot of time on it. We had a lot of meetings; we invited all of the state people in on several occasions; we attended their annual discussions; we tried to overcome the problem of confidentiality on complaint processing; we tried to accelerate the notion of sharing information upon complaint situations. Partly this was to gain the advantage of information for both governmental agencies and, secondly, to reduce the burden on industry of multiple investigations. I don't think a great deal of progress was made on that, at least insufficient progress was made on it. I don't really know all the reasons for it. I think that much of the reason for it as far as the federal side was concerned was that we

[-46-]

didn't have a sufficiently well integrated, bureaucratic, administrative point of view. We still had independent agency actions going forward, and the committee was unable to speak unilaterally and with a unified voice for all the agencies. And the state people knew this. The state people on their part, as far as my perception of them is concerned, were equally divided in that they were operating under different standards, different interpretations by their state attorneys general, so that we had much more diversity of administrative effort on both sides of that aisle than was useful to really productive work.

STEWART: Moving onto the Kheel [Theodore Woodrow Kheel] Report, how did it come about, and what exactly did you have to do with it?

FEILD: The Kheel report was proposed, as far as I understood, by the secretary of labor, who had perceived that it would be necessary to achieve some kind of better integration of the administrative interests of the committee. The Plans for Progress program had become way too independent. Mr. Troutman

had gotten authority to appoint a special staff of his own, and to pay for it, down in Atlanta, Georgia, responsible to nobody in Washington. It was increasingly clear that this was a jeopardy to the regulatory program of the committee. There was dissension in the committee about it. The secretary of labor decided to propose that an independent outside look be taken at the overall picture and make some recommendations about it. And Kheel was the guy recommended to do the job. It was, I think – I've seen a lot of government for twenty years – probably the most superficial nonstudy ever made of anything. The report lifted verbatim huge sections of the final report filed with the Nixon committee, the previous committee by Jake Seidenberg [Jacob Seidenberg], its staff director. I can quote you paragraphs verbatim from both reports, the reports being written three years apart. It's perhaps no accident because I delivered to Kheel the Seidenberg report, told him, "You might find this as an interesting point of departure This was the one made by the committee before we started." There was no administrative review made of what the Johnson committee's operations were by Kheel or anybody representing Kheel, including Charlie Markam [Charles Markam]. The Kheel report was a phony from beginning to end in my judgment.

STEWART: Okay, what happened next? Do you...

FEILD: By the way, it was never approved by the committee.

STEWART: It was presented to the committee and...

[-47-]

FEILD: And the committee did not accept the report, and a special committee was appointed to make some recommendations which they never made.

STEWART: What happened next, do you....This all got out into the press, and then there was a letter to the *New York Times*, or an article, to which the vice president replied. What was your role in all of this?

FEILD: I don't recall that too well. My role would have been, publicly, nil. I never said anything publicly about it one way, shape or the other, or to any reporter about it. The knowledge that there was a Kheel report, the knowledge that there was a desire to deal with the Plans for Progress program was inevitably, to some extent, made public by Bobby Troutman's resignation from the committee. When he resigned, that raised the question as to what the committee was going to do. If the Kheel report was reported – I don't recall that, maybe it was – if it was reported at all by the press, they must have gotten it from Kheel, or from somebody else, because they couldn't have gotten it from the committee or from me because the Kheel report had no status of any kind as long as I was with the committee, and was not a guiding document for the committee.

STEWART: One of the specific recommendations was that the whole thing be reorganized and, in effect, this left you in a different position.

FEILD: It's a recommendation I made in writing prior to the Kheel report, and it's matter of record with the secretary of labor that I strongly recommended a single executive for the agency, and I recommended the abolishment of my job.

STEWART: Before this...

FEILD: Before Kheel was ever heard of.

STEWART: And why did you do that?

FEILD: Because you can't have full time executives running a committee, period. I felt strongly that if Jerry Holleman [Jerry R. Holleman] was going to be the executive officer, he ought to be full-time; if there was going to be an executive vice chairman who was full-time, you didn't need an executive director. And that was quite clear. The only justification for having an executive vice chairman and an executive director that I could understand, and that I accepted, was that the executive vice chairman as long as Jerry Holleman was there was not a full-time officer.

[-48-]

STEWART: You didn't leave right away, did you?

FEILD: No, I stayed. I stayed until March of 1963.

STEWART: What was your function?

FEILD: I didn't do anything.

STEWART: Between.... This was September of '62, wasn't it?

FEILD: I just kept the peace, and I delivered all the reports of staff activities to the acting executive vice chairman and then to the newly appointed executive vice chairman. And I extended to the new secretary of labor, Willard Wirtz [W. Willard Wirtz], the minute he was appointed my desire to leave the committee, told him that I would not leave the committee until he released me. He asked me to stay and I stayed. He later suggested that maybe I was right, that we did not need two executives, that there wasn't function for two, and I did not function as the executive. Once Jerry Holleman was out of the committee, I did not function as the executive director, I functioned purely as a conduit of interest, of orders of plans, of programs that were devised or decided by either the vice president's office or the secretary of labor's office.

STEWART: Then you finally did leave in March...

FEILD: March of '63. And I did not issue any public statement then or since.

STEWART: Is there anything else that you want to put on record now, bearing in mind, of course, that this isn't at all a public record in any sense of the word until, of course, you say it should be a public record.

FEILD: I do. But my reasons for not being involved in public discussion of the committee affair or the committee's affairs was that I felt strongly that the administration had designated two or three key persons to be the spokesmen for the administration on this policy area. And my point of view, from the fall of '62 until I resigned, was adequately represented by both the attorney general, Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], and Willard Wirtz, the secretary of labor, and I didn't feel it was my position to say anything. I think they understood the problems of the committee; they understood the policy issues that confronted the committee; they entered into a considerable colloquy with the chairman of the committee in the spring of '63, severely questioning the chairman's policies and performance, and asking for detailed reports on what those policies were intended to do. And that was really the only purpose that would be served by anybody in

[-49-]

my position, would be to find out which direction the committee was going to go, and how it was going to be able to carry out its goals. I felt those were well represented by the attorney general and the secretary of labor. I felt, further, that the general direction that the committee took during 1963 was quite consistent with the goals that we had been trying to build during '61 and '62, and that the Plans for Progress activity did assume a more normative relationship to the overall program, the compliance and regulatory activities were being strengthened by the operating agencies, and the general legislative relationships were improving in the sense that the administration was standing firmly on the position that it was going to pursue these goals, and that was really the only issue in the whole discussion. Since those things were moving in that direction, I don't see any reason to fault the chairman or the executive vice chairman or anybody, whether they were doing this because there was pressures on them is really of less importance than the fact that they were doing it. And they were doing it.

STEWART: But there was a general improvement in the situation.

FEILD: I think there was a definite improvement. I think the situation today has very much deteriorated.

STEWART: Yes. Since when, or when did it start to deteriorate?

FEILD: In the last year. I think the commitment of the agencies to a really comprehensive compliance program is very weak. I think their personnel are falling apart, they're losing their people, there is no

direction to the program. There's a great deal of unnecessary overlapping between the new commission and the contract program. They're obviously not coordinated. It's a very serious debilitation in that program.

STEWART: This is probably going a little beyond Kennedy, but it is related. Isn't this, to a certain extent, due to the fact that the whole program has been around now for six or seven years and there are bound to be certain inertias that come along after a while in a program like this?

FEILD: No. No, I would normally say yes, but I'll tell you why.

STEWART: Is this one of the reasons for the successes during the Kennedy years?

FEILD: I think there are two reasons why the program is

[-50-]

slowing down. One is, there is no focuses coordinated direction being given it from the White House. During the entire Kennedy administration that was true; even into the Johnson administration it remained true. As long as Lee White was there, there was at least a clearing house point. When Lee White left the White House, civil rights went with him in the sense that there was a focus and a direction. There is no such focus today. You might have some speech writers that could write a Howard University speech, but you don't have any administrative pushers that are telling the agencies which direction they should be going in. The only other reason why one would observe it might be slowing down, perhaps, would go to the fact that there is more generalization occurring throughout the federal apparatus, so that you are getting the advantage of the generalization, you can tolerate a certain amount of loss of focus, to the extent that you've got the thing bureaucratized and generalized. You don't need it all the way up front all the time as a consequence. But I'm not optimistic about that generalization remaining strong or effective unless it has the leadership from the White House, and it doesn't have it.

STEWART: Okay, is there anything you want to say in conclusion as far as your two years with the Kennedy administration?

FEILD: They were great years.

STEWART: Excuse me, I didn't ask you – you did meet the president on at least two occasions according to our notes.

FEILD: Oh, yes. It was probably more than that. I was just probably focusing on two policy occasions. It was many more times than two occasions. But...

STEWART: Well, these are...

FEILD: Two occasions when we were talking about policy program problems where he would be expected to personally give us some direction and focus on this. And I think I just, earlier this afternoon, mentioned the areas that I was conscious of his asking for reports, conscious of his own personal tapping in on what we were doing. I think in the White House Friday morning discussions very often Harris Wofford or Lee or somebody would put on the agenda things that they had talked to the president about in the week, and he would ask us for our comments on them with the understanding, or I suppose the expectation, that he'd sort of filtered these back in in some kind of summary report to the president. Occasionally he would look in and say hello, and I know you're doing this, and I want to hear your

[-51-]

thinking. Occasionally, we'd meet in the Fish Room with a group of people and an opportunity would arise for him to make a few statements in front of them.

STEWART: Well, I was going to say, from the log books, which aren't that accurate at all, on August 23, 1961, you met there with the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials.

FEILD: Right. Right.

STEWART: Do you recall anything unusual about that?

FEILD: I do. The real importance of that was and I'll tell you the significance of that meeting. Senator Hart [Philip A. Hart] was there, as a matter of fact.

STEWART: Right.

FEILD: And he had introduced an amendment to a piece of legislation, or section in the civil rights bill, calling for strengthening of personnel development in the field. The purpose of that meeting was to strengthen in the president's mind to the realization that to carry out these programs required the assignment of specialists and the development of a professional specialty within the operating agencies to do this work, and that's what the national association represented. They had in their own right filed a report with him on what needed to be done. He had responded to that. There was a desire, our agency's interest, and my role there was to make concrete the fact that we were beginning to get the caliber of people into our agencies whom we thought could perform adequately to do a better job. It was his response to that, his encouragement to them, that we thought was critical. He had to say that he thought this was good and feed this back in to the professional network, that he wanted qualified people to do the work. That was the only reason for that meeting.

STEWART: Okay, again, is there anything you want to say?

FEILD: No, that's it, John.

STEWART: Okay?

FEILD: Great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-52-]

John G. Feild Oral History Transcript – JFK #2
Name List

B

Baker, Leonard 45
Bernhard, Berl I. 43

G

Goldberg, Arthur J. 40

H

Hart, Philip A. 52
Holleman, Jerry R. 48, 49

J

Johnson, Lyndon B. 41

K

Kennedy, John F. 51
Kennedy, Robert F. 49
Kheel, Theodore Woodrow 47, 48
Kirkland, Lane 40

M

Markam, Charles 47
Meany, George 40

N

Nixon, Richard M. 41

O

O'Donnell, P. Kenneth 43

R

Reeves, Frank D. 42

S

Sayre, Francis B. 45
Schnitzler, William F. 40
Seidenberg, Jacob 47
Slaiman, Don 40

T

Taylor, William L. 42, 43
Troutman, Robert, Jr. 43, 47, 48

W

Wheeler, John 45, 46
White, Lee C. 42, 51
Wirtz, W. Willard 49
Wofford, Harris L., Jr. 42, 51