

George J. Titler Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 02/19/65
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Labor leader, United Mine Workers, West Virginia. In this interview, Titler discusses his role in the 1960 election and how West Virginians and mine workers responded to the policies of John F. Kennedy, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

George J. Titler

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Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE J. TITLER

February 19, 1965
Beckley, West Virginia

By William L. Young

FOR THE JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

YOUNG: In 1960 Mr. Titler was president of District 29 of the United Mine Workers, and a member from District 29 of International Board of United Mine Workers. Mr. Titler, I hope I have all your credentials straight. Would you tell me then your general feelings as the primary election of 1960 approached and your role in it?

TITLER: As the presidential election approached in 1960 in the battle in West Virginia between Hubert H. Humphrey and John F. Kennedy, I was at that time pro-Humphrey and started out to help him, when I was advised by international president Thomas Kennedy that the mine workers' organization was going to stay neutral until after the convention. At that time, of course, I ceased my activities for Humphrey; however, I did vote for him in the West Virginia primary. After the primary was over, I wrote John Kennedy a letter and told him my feelings about the election, but told him that if he got the nomination, I was going to support him in the general election, which I did. I feel that Kennedy's vote did not reflect his popularity in this state and, of course, he should have gotten a much bigger vote in West Virginia than he did. However, while the West Virginians are not as religious--prejudiced as many other states, there was still a great amount of religious prejudice in the mountains.

YOUNG: Mr. Titler, before we started the interview, you told me of your early meeting with Hubert Humphrey and why you were attracted to him as a candidate. Could you go over that again?

TITLER: I met Hubert Humphrey at the 1947 American Federation of Labor convention in San Francisco, and I was thrilled by his appearance. I had been an admirer of his from that time up until the time that he came in to West Virginia to run for president. And that's why I voted for him.

YOUNG: Well, the charge was frequently made during the campaign that Mr. Humphrey was a radical or too far to the left. Was this a general impression in West Virginia?

TITLER: It was an impression that many, many people had in West Virginia--that he was a radical or too far to the left--but it was only from rumors that they heard. There was not nothing, in my opinion, that proved this. It was my impression of Mr. Humphrey that from the time he became United States senator up until the time he ran for president in West Virginia, he had gotten his feet on the ground and knew all the time where he was going, and that he was not a radical. I always considered him a liberal and a friend of labor.

YOUNG: Mr. Titler, you said that Senator Kennedy might have won by a larger majority if it had not been for the anti-Catholic prejudice. What were the most effective campaign techniques that you think Senator Kennedy had? As a man who was running against your man, what do you think his best political weapons were?

TITLER: Well, of course, he was exceptionally well organized. I think that had a lot to do with it. He had a thorough organization all over the United States. He was a master at organizing. Of course, Humphrey had little or no organization in here. However, I think regardless of the organization to have been equal, Kennedy would have beaten him. Kennedy had a brilliancy and a glow about him. I know no other man in my time that so enthused people. You would hear middle-aged women say, "My, he was a wonderful fellow! He just reminded me of my boy." He seemed to remind more women of their sons than any other one man I ever saw in my life.

YOUNG: You didn't realize he looked like so many other people. Well, if we were able to separate the votes of the mine workers that you represent in this area, what would your guess be as to simply their vote in the primary?

TITLER: He carried the majority of the mine workers. He carried McDowell County which is one of the biggest coal-producing counties in the world. He carried that by a fabulous majority. Of course, all through this

country here he did the same thing. I'll say this again, the mine workers did nothing for him in the West Virginia primary. He was on his own as far as we were concerned. There was nothing done for or against him here that would persuade the mine workers any way. They voted their own sentiments, and they liked the looks of the man; they liked the way he carried himself. It was his own personality that I think more than anything else carried him not only in West Virginia but all over the United States. When I was in Cincinnati when he was there, I never saw such a crowd turn out in a place in my life. You couldn't get within four blocks of the city square there when he was there. His campaign magnetism was fantastic.

YOUNG: Would you repeat for this interview the story you told me earlier about your own Gallup poll in Cincinnati?

TITLER: The papers were saying that Kennedy was gathering force and that he was going to defeat Richard Nixon in Ohio. That seemed a little foreign to me. I have always dabbled in politics since I was a boy, and I like it. So I went out and started my own poll, and everybody I'd meet along the street and I'd be talking to. . . . I was there at a convention, and I talked to a lot of people. I didn't take the coal miners alone; I took the man on the street that I would be talking to here and there and ask him who he was going to vote for. I think the first five people said, "I like Kennedy. I think he is a fine fellow. But I couldn't vote for him, because he is a Catholic." After I had run that poll for a week around Cincinnati, I came to the conclusion he wasn't going to carry Ohio. He didn't. And that's why he didn't carry Ohio. The people of Ohio loved him, but they wouldn't vote for him, because he was Catholic.

YOUNG: Mr. Titler, much has made of the role of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., in the West Virginia primary. Would you comment on that?

TITLER: I would say that the name Franklin D. Roosevelt did more for John Kennedy in here than young Franklin D. did himself; that Franklin D. was a fellow that didn't meet the public well, but the name carried a lot of power. The fact that he was with John Kennedy helped John Kennedy in here.

YOUNG: Much was made of Senator Kennedy's war record, and I believe there was some little dispute between the two candidates about this sort of thing. Would you comment on the effectiveness of this?

TITLER: I don't think that the war record proposition was brought into this campaign in West Virginia; I scarcely heard it. I don't think that had anything to do with. . . . Although you see a squib in the newspaper occasionally, it was so infinitesimal that I would say that it didn't amount to anything in here.

YOUNG: Mr. Titler, you have already indicated that you think that Kennedy's personality had a great deal to do with victory. Would it be possible to say at all that there seemed to be differences of policy or program between the two senators in the primary?

TITLER: Yes. I would say there was a difference, a very large difference in the programs of the two men in the West Virginia election. Of course, there was no man that I fought harder for than John Kennedy after he was nominated, because I always had a personal dislike for Richard Nixon. I didn't think that he played the political ball the way it should be played and I was so anxious to beat him. And, of course, I liked the way Kennedy conducted his campaign. Maybe it was because I was also a Democrat. I had two brothers, by the way, that voted for Nixon on account of John Kennedy's being a Catholic. Neither one of them had ever been out of the county he lived in, and, of course, being of Scotch ancestry, there was a feeling in my family when I was a child, against Catholicism. But I have moved all over the country and, of course, I thought that kind of stuff was of no consequence. I would fight as hard for a man if he was a Catholic or a Hindu if he was the right kind of fellow. Religious prejudice never entered into my. . . . I overcame that when I was a child. First, by working on a farm for a Catholic for two years, I found out at that time. I had a feeling when I went to work for him that I couldn't work for a Catholic, and after I had worked for him for a while, I found that they were just the same as any other human being. All of my life I've fought this bigotry. But I think possibly the most of my family. . . . I've got another brother that went down and took his coat off and fought for John Kennedy. And these two brothers that voted for Nixon got together and got to talking and said, "We had better watch Mark. He is going to vote for Kennedy as sure as shooting." And he did, and I did too, and my sisters all did. So most of the family overcame their religious prejudice, but it's there. It's in possibly half the family, and in the other half of the family it's gone. So I don't know how long it's going to take to get that thing behind us. But I think Kennedy did a lot in being elected President, even though he was elected by a small plurality. He did more to overcome religious prejudice in this country than any other one thing I know of.

YOUNG: Mr. Titler, when you were working for Kennedy before the November election, what were some of your best arguments that you found effective as you campaigned?

TITLER: Well, of course, the thing that we ran into continually was this story that was put around that he'd have the pope over here. Of course, it wasn't too hard to combat that argument. It was just a matter of reasoning with these people and citing to them that they had nothing to fear from voting for a Catholic.

YOUNG: Did you talk at all about what the Republican victory as opposed to a Democratic victory might mean to organized labor?

TITLER: Oh, yes, we did that. We cited the record of Nixon. Of course, the greatest argument against Nixon--or against any man--was the skulduggery that he used against Helen Gahagan Douglas. He said she was a Communist, and we repeated Mrs. [Eleanor Roosevelt] Roosevelt's story that that was a lie, that she wasn't a Communist. And a man who would lie one time, you couldn't trust him another. Of course, Kennedy's labor record in the Senate was very good, and that was cited--and Nixon's. We never had any love for Nixon all the time he was vice president. When he was senator, he always seemed to me like he was flying false colors and waving the flag and hollering patriotism when he had somewhat ulterior motives, like trying to vilify someone.

YOUNG: Do I gather, Mr. Titler, that you think anti-Catholic prejudice declined between the primary and the general?

TITLER: I don't know whether it declined. No, I think the decline came after the general election, after Kennedy. . . . I think that he overcame, with his personality and his record and his deportment during the campaign, an almost insurmountable obstacle. I said before the election that if this man is defeated, it will be because he is a Catholic, because of the religious prejudice. He did overcome it, and I say again that had he been a Protestant, in my opinion he would have won by twenty million votes. And that's how much he had to overcome with his personality.

YOUNG: Well, do you feel that had Kennedy been the candidate in 1964, Catholicism would have still been an issue?

TITLER: It would not have been an issue in 1964. Had he run in 1964, I think he would have won so overwhelmingly that I think. . . . Well, I wouldn't say it wouldn't have been an issue; there would have still been some people that would have voted against him because he was Catholic, but not anywhere near what there was in the first election.

YOUNG: Mr. Titler, I would like to ask you two questions now. One, would you comment on the reaction of the United Mine Workers to the Kennedy years in the White House, and then after that, just on the general attitude of West Virginians in general to the Kennedy years in the White House?

TITLER: Well, of course, I was contacted continually by our international union in discussing these matters with the resident officers who were Tom Kennedy, President Emeritus, [John L.] Lewis, W.A. Boyle, and John Owens. When we would get together in Washington, maybe on some other matter, the questions of politics would never fail to come up. They have a habit of finding out from the man at the grass roots, the fellow out in the field, what the rank and file are thinking about and what they're talking about. I was asked on two occasions when I was up there, "How is Kennedy doing in West Virginia?" I said in both instances, "If he runs again. . . ." And they would say, "What does a West Virginian think of him?" And I'd say, "If he runs again, he will carry West Virginia by a lot bigger vote than he did the first time." I believe that that was what would have happened. The story that he had let West Virginia down--the West Virginians didn't think that. There was no West Virginians that I saw, unless they were Republicans, that put out that kind of propaganda.

YOUNG: Mr. Titler, you've already mentioned that you think the religious issue died down after the election. Would you mention those Kennedy policies that the mine workers and all West Virginians in particular approved of?

TITLER: Well, we liked the aid that he gave to West Virginia, the program that he inaugurated here and promised when he was here in West Virginia. He carried it out to the letter. He hadn't gotten it all carried out, but by and large the program was carried out in toto, as far as he had gotten with it. The arrangements for taking care of the aid that he put in here to feed the hungry and the legislation that he was enacting to help the common man was well received in West Virginia.

YOUNG: Did you ever hear any criticism of the Kennedy administration?

TITLER: Well, of course, you get criticism from some of your Republican newspapers. We have a newspaper here in this town. The morning paper is a Republican paper, and the afternoon paper is a Democrat paper, but both are owned by the same family. One of the sons was editor of the one paper, and the other one edited the other paper. Of course, their politics was. . . . The one that was head of the Republican paper was

a Republican, and the one that was head of the Democrat paper was registered as Democrat. So in order to fool the public, the morning paper would vilify Kennedy, and the afternoon paper eulogized him. So people got a big laugh out of it all around the town. But the paper was not well liked because the people figured the editorial policy was hypocritical, and they don't pay too much attention to this paper. We got some criticism from the Republican papers, but the Democrat papers, I think by and large over the state, did a very good job of telling the truth.

YOUNG: Mr. Titler, did you notice among Democratic politicians a fear that having a Catholic at the head of the ticket in November 1960 might pull down other Democratic candidates?

TITLER: No, we didn't have that because we believed--every Democrat in this state believed, I think--that after he was nominated he was going to win. It would be a hard fight, but Kennedy would win. I never heard any politicians--and I have been taking an active part in presidential elections, state elections, county elections for. . . . Well, the first man I voted for when I became sixteen years was old Eugene V. Debs, and he was in the penitentiary at the time. I didn't expect him to be elected president, but I wanted to cast a protest vote because I thought he was being railroaded. Of course, he was a great labor leader. The other day they made arrangements to memorialize his home in Terre Haute, Indiana, and the mine workers participated in the rebuilding of the home for Debs. He was a beloved labor leader. He was supposed to be a radical; he was a socialist. Of course, I was never a socialist, but I was for him because he was the under-dog. After that time, I voted for the Democratic party, and I voted for Robert LaFollette when he run on the third. . . .

YOUNG: That was in 1924?

TITLER: 1924, when he ran as a third party. I think he only carried one state. It was Wisconsin, his home state, I believe--maybe two states. I was in Iowa at the time, and we went down to put on quite a campaign for him. I loved that man, too; I had known him and met him personally. I thought that he was a great fearless statesman. I vote occasionally for Republicans throughout the state. I scratch my ticket; I never vote the straight Democrat ticket. However, I'm a firm believer in the Democratic principles, the Jeffersonian principles. But sometimes I think that if you stick too close to one party--if the labor organization sticks too close to one party--the party soon gets the idea that they own them, and your effectiveness is gone. I think that we need a two-party system, and organized labor should vote for the man more than the party. I never believed in following strict Democratic lines. However, I suppose that 90 percent of my votes have been

cast Democratic.

YOUNG: But you don't like to be taken for granted?

TITLER: I don't like to be taken for granted.

YOUNG: I wonder if you would comment on the Democratic organization in this county in the primary. Did the Kennedy people set up a separate organization, or did they work through the established county committee?

TITLER: The Kennedy organization set up and worked through the county committee and a separate organization, or an independent organization, that they set up here. We had people in this county, people working even in my organization. Our attorney and his wife were. . . . Their name was Kennedy, and they headed a move here in this county that they worked night and day. And at the polls they had an organization of Kennedy cars that were working for nobody but Kennedy. On the other hand, your county organization was doing the same thing. However, there was just that much more push to it when you had two separate organizations working for the same goal. I think that was one thing that helped them arouse so much enthusiasm at the election.

YOUNG: But they did close ranks for the general election?

TITLER: Yes, they did.

YOUNG: Well, Mr. Titler, would you tell me about your own personal impressions of the president in the meetings that you had with him?

TITLER: Well, of course, I met him in Beckley, here at the courthouse. I saw him in Cincinnati when he made his speech there. And then I met him in Charleston at a banquet that I was invited to, just before he made his speech in the civic center. Now that was after the primary-- this was between the primaries and the general election. His personality was second to no other public figure's personality that I ever met. There was a certain glow or charm to him that seemed to appall everybody. It seemed a kind of mesmerism. I don't know how to describe it, but everybody just thought. . . . Well, speaking about him after he would leave, they'd say, "Isn't he a wonderful young man?" That's all you would ever hear. You'd never hear anything else.

YOUNG: Well, in the long run, what effect do you think that bringing a nation-wide primary to West Virginia-- what were the lasting consequences of this for West Virginia?

TITLER: Well, of course, it made a more or less depressed people feel proud, number one. In other words, it made them stand up and feel that they were somebody. Because the West Virginian feels that he was responsible for Kennedy going on and copping the nomination and the presidency. Of course, the psychological effect on the state had an impetus of greatness. Seems like the state since the time he came in here has been on the upgrade and has been moving forward, where it was on the downgrade when he came in here. The state today is in much better financial and spiritual feeling than it was when he came in here.

YOUNG: Would what you are saying also apply to the national publicity given to West Virginia?

TITLER: Oh, I think definitely it would, yes. It would apply to the national publicity that West Virginia got. You see, to improve the school program in West Virginia is the major consideration in our legislation today, our school system which hasn't been the highest in the nation by a long ways. It hasn't been the lowest, but it has been way down. Our two governors, Governor [William W.] Barron who was governor when he became president, and Hulett Smith, have pushed education to the place now where we are really getting out of the ruts. And I have predicted that in the next five or ten years West Virginia is going to have a high rating among other states in education, and I think Kennedy had a great deal to do with the starting of that.

YOUNG: I would like to go back to something now. I think maybe you have answered this question, but just to reinforce it for the record, what were the really bread-and-butter appeals that Senator Kennedy made to the United Mine Workers as a primary candidate and then in the general election? You've mentioned, of course, the labor record and that sort of thing. Were there any others?

TITLER: Well, offhand, I think we believed that his promise to lift West Virginia out of the depression was an appealing thing because his sincerity was a thing that impressed everybody. What Kennedy told them, they believed. He told them he was going to do things, and they believed that he was going to do it. In other words, he got his program over by his sincerity. I don't know whether there are any other things. People generally when they go to the polls, it's my impression that they don't vote on a particular issue unless it's some kind of an issue that is controversial, a hot potato. Well, then people take sides on it. By and large, I think that personality, a sincere promise that people believe

is the greatest campaign asset to any man running for president of the United States or any other great office. He had that.

YOUNG: Mr. Titler, do you have any final summary statement to make as we conclude our interview?

TITLER: My greatest regret is that he didn't live for a second term in the White House. Because since his death, everybody in America has come to realize that he was one of the brainiest men that we ever had in the White House, possibly the greatest. I think he will go down in history with that record of being possibly the most far-seeing brainiest man that we ever had in the White House.