

John F. Henning Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/09/1970
Administrative Information

Creator: John F. Henning
Interviewer: William W. Moss
Date of Interview: November 9, 1970
Place of Interview: San Francisco, CA
Length: 18 pages

Biographical Note

Henning, Research director, California Federation of Labor; Under Secretary, Department of Labor (1962-1967), discusses John F. Kennedy's presidential candidacy, his role as Under Secretary of Labor during Kennedy's administration and his impressions of Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation

John F. Henning, recorded interview by William W. Moss, November 9, 1970, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

John Henning

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John F. Henning – JFK#1

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Oral History Interview

With

JOHN F. HENNING

November 9, 1970
San Francisco, California

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: . . . you, Mr. Henning, at the very beginning, when was the first time that you met Senator to be President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

HENNING: I met him during 1956 while he was touring California in behalf of the presidential candidacy of Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson].

MOSS: And what was he doing at that time? Who had brought him out here? What contacts was he making, and did you see any move on his part, at that time, for the presidency?

HENNING: He was here in the name of the Stevenson campaign committee. However, many of us who attended the banquet at the Fairmount Hotel, which he addressed, could not help but believe that he would, indeed, be the candidate in 1960 for we were rather pessimistic of Adlai Stevenson's chances of defeating President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower].

MOSS: Was it primarily the pessimism about Stevenson's possibilities in relation to this?

HENNING: Oh, yes. If Stevenson were to succeed in defeating President Eisenhower, of course, John Kennedy would hardly be a candidate four years later.

MOSS: All right. In the intervening time between 1956 and 1960, from your point of view out here, how did you see his try for the presidency developing?

HENNING: We thought it was developing quite well. There was a great admiration for Adlai Stevenson within labor circles in California, but little belief in his chances of winning the 1960 election. Kennedy seemed to be the ideal candidate.

MOSS: And who was working in California for him in this intervening time? Let's take it from about, oh, the end of 1959 on. Who were the people who were actively supporting him?

HENNING: This is an answer that requires great detail. The short reply is that in 1959 Governor Brown [Edmund G. Brown] was prevailing in Sacramento. He was to be the favorite son candidate at the 1960 Convention [Democratic National Convention], and in view of that, Democrats who favored John Kennedy, withheld any commitment to Kennedy in deference to Brown.

MOSS: Right. Now there was some question as to whether or not Brown was going to deliver the delegation to Kennedy or any segment of it. As I recall, nobody at the convention quite knew how much of the delegation Brown could deliver or how much he promised, or whether he really promised enough. Do you recall the details on this?

HENNING: Yes, I was a member of Governor Brown's cabinet at that time and recall the incidents with some accuracy, I believe. Governor Brown's difficulty in this matter was that he had assembled his favorite son convention delegation on the theory that all of the members of that delegation would vote for him on the first ballot at the convention and that they would be released thereafter. Between the time of this understanding, and the convention, it appeared more and more likely that John Kennedy would be the presidential candidate of the party, or indeed, it appeared that Governor Brown could hardly speak realistically of holding his delegation through the first ballot counting. At the convention he decided to commit the delegation as a whole to John Kennedy on the first ballot, but obviously, those who felt their loyalty on the first ballot was to Governor Brown were disturbed and this caused the difficulties within the delegation.

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MOSS: What about the people within the delegation who were for Stevenson?

HENNING: There were certain Stevenson followers within the delegation and a

smaller number for Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson].

MOSS: Who were the people who were putting the arm on the delegation for Kennedy? Who were the Kennedy people coming into the state who were trying to swing it for Kennedy?

HENNING: Kennedy himself, of course, visited Governor Brown. John Kennedy and his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] visited Governor Brown not too far in advance of the convention, urging that the governor recognize the realities of the Los Angeles convention. I am not sure if I can remember all of the organizational types who were in the state.

MOSS: What would you say was the determining factor in this? Personal pressure that was brought to bear or the facts of life as . . .

HENNING: Governor Brown instinctively believed that Kennedy should be the candidate. I was a political intimate of the governor, as I mentioned. Having been in his cabinet at that time, I was aware of his plans. He thought that Kennedy would be the man best qualified to lead the nation. He also recognized that Kennedy would undoubtedly win the nomination. Brown was a Kennedy-type liberal. He respected Adlai Stevenson, as all of us did, but he was also concerned about Stevenson's lack of decision in critical hours and felt that as a man who had twice lost presidential struggles, he could hardly hope to win on a third effort.

MOSS: Do you recall the situation at the convention with regard to the seating of people in the convention, spectators as well as delegates, and how much say the California people were to have in who was being let into the convention hall?

HENNING: The convention galleries were filled largely with Stevenson enthusiasts by traditional political chicanery.

MOSS: Do you recall any activity on the part of Butler [Paul M. Butler] to try and stack things at the convention for Kennedy?

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HENNING: No, the stacking was done by the Stevenson people.

MOSS: Certainly as far as the gallery was concerned. I'm thinking more about the management of the convention itself.

HENNING: Oh, as to the management, I don't remember Butler playing an important role, but perhaps he did in his own ways, but it wasn't a very visible role.

Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] were particularly active on the floor, but there was a natural movement toward Kennedy that simply couldn't be stopped in this state.

There is one interesting note I might record. On the day of the convention, or indeed, it was really at about 3:00 a.m. in the morning of the day following the nomination of John Kennedy, I was alone with Governor Brown in his hotel headquarters in Los Angeles. He was rather despondent because the Stevenson galleries had booed him before a national television audience, and here in his own state he had appeared to suffer badly. We discussed the possible vice-presidential candidate to be chosen by the convention later that day. I mentioned Mr. Symington [Stuart Symington II] of Missouri and Governor Brown said that he was sure that Symington would not be chosen. He then told me that he had discussed the matter of the Vice-presidential selection with John Kennedy. And John Kennedy had informed him that he would never choose Symington because, he said, "If anything were to happen to me during my presidency, I would fear for the future of the country if Symington were the chief executive."

MOSS: What was it about Symington that he objected to, do you know?

HENNING: I gathered that John Kennedy felt he simply didn't have the capacity for the position.

MOSS: Was his prior record as an air force advocate involved?

HENNING: No, there was no indication of that.

MOSS: None of that?

HENNING: It was a matter of competence, as I recall, but the governor didn't elaborate.

HENNING: Looking back on the conversation, I must say that if John Kennedy were quoted correctly he was quite wrong in his analysis of Senator Symington. Certainly nothing has emerged in the past thirteen years with regard to Senator Symington to justify Kennedy's reported pessimism.

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In August of 1973 I reminded Governor Brown of our conversation of 1960. The governor did not recall it, but the discussion was one that I will never forget.

MOSS: How did the Johnson selection strike you particularly, Governor Brown and the California delegation?

HENNING: Most of us were dreadfully disturbed. It seemed unthinkable that a man with the civil rights record of Lyndon Johnson should be chosen to run

with John Kennedy. However, as the campaign developed, we appreciated the wisdom of Kennedy's selection.

MOSS: How did the campaign develop in California? How do you recall it?

HENNING: We were, of course, distressed that John Kennedy did not carry the state. He lost it in the counting of the absentee ballots. The religious issue was punishing the San Joaquin Valley area and in certain sections of Southern California that had been visited by migrations from the South over the recent years of California History. I myself am convinced that he would have won the state were it not for his Catholicism.

MOSS: Are you thinking of areas like San Diego County and so on, or is it Orange County?

HENNING: I'm thinking about certain sections of Southern California and certain areas of the San Joaquin Valley.

MOSS: All right. Now who were the people from the Kennedy organization who were working California during the campaign, and how effective did you regard their efforts?

HENNING: The Governor committed himself strongly to the campaign, and indeed, thought that John Kennedy would carry the state by a million votes, as the governor himself had done two years previously against Senator William Knowland [William Fife Knowland]. Perhaps the leading figure in the Kennedy effort was Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton] who had served as executive secretary to Governor Brown before leaving Sacramento for the Kennedy campaign effort in 1960.

MOSS: Any evidence of activity on the part of Teddy Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy]?

HENNING: Yes, it was my pleasure to meet with Teddy Kennedy during the campaign. In my office I arranged for him to have personal interviews with the trade union leaders of Northern California, and I established a similar conference for him in the southern part of the state at a later time.

MOSS: How about money for the campaign? Where was it coming from? Were there any difficulties?

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HENNING: I'm not too. . . There were no great difficulties in raising funds because Kennedy was a candidate who had the possibility of victory. I'm not too familiar with the money story because I wasn't associated closely with it.

MOSS: Okay, fine. Let me skip over a few intervening years then and ask you about the 1962 campaign, the Brown-Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] gubernatorial campaign and ask what activity, if any, was apparent in the state by the White House crowd on behalf of Governor Brown?

HENNING: The White House was not especially active. I can state that with certainty because during that campaign, I was in California for most of the early months and then in Washington in the latter phase, because I assumed the position of Under Secretary of Labor in October of 1962.

MOSS: Why was this the case? Why didn't they help out more?

HENNING: I don't know. I wasn't aware of any indifference of the White House toward the campaign, but certainly the hand of John Kennedy was not particularly evident. Nixon, I believe, was defeated because of Governor Brown's splendid first term achievements. Secondly, because Nixon never explained to the people of California what appeared to be the conflict of interest involved in the two hundred and five thousand dollar Howard Hughes [Howard Robarb Hughes] loan to the Nixon family which had been made, as I remember, in 1956 as a no-collateral loan. In the story of Richard Nixon, this issue is sometimes forgotten. I have always felt that it was one of the two decisive issues that brought him down in 1962.

MOSS: Do you have a feeling—I'm conjecturing here—that the White House felt Brown could beat Nixon and it would be better for the future if he could do it on his own?

HENNING: I don't know. I think John Kennedy was too prudent to place the prestige of the presidency in any one gubernatorial campaign.

MOSS: All right. Let me go now to your appointment and ask you what were the circumstances of your appointment as Under Secretary?

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HENNING: I originally was to serve as Assistant Secretary of Labor upon the resignation of Assistant Secretary Holleman [Jerry R. Holleman] sometime in the summer of 1962. This was at the request of Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] and with the approval of the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations]. While I was preparing to leave for Washington, my appointment having been publicly announced, Arthur Goldberg was named to the U.S. Supreme Court. Under Secretary of Labor Wirtz [W. Willard Wirtz] became Secretary and President Kennedy then chose to name me to succeed Secretary Wirtz.

MOSS: All right. Now as I understand it, there was some competition for the post. Walter Reuther [Walter P. Reuther] had his candidate, who I believe was Jack Conway [Jack T. Conway]. George Meany had a candidate, Tom Harris [Thomas Everett Harris]. And it's my understanding that Wirtz rather wanted Jim Reynolds [James J. Reynolds] to move up into the slot. Is this—are these all the horses in the race?

HENNING: I'm shocked by this information. I don't know. I was the candidate of the AFL-CIO Building Trades Department and of George Meany.

MOSS: I got some of this out of the *Sacramento Bee*. [Laughter]

HENNING: I realize that Mr. Conway was a candidate of Walter Reuther and that Jim Reynolds understandably sought the appointment, but I received the appointment because of the position taken by the AFL-CIO, more precisely by George Meany and the subordinate Building Trades Department.

MOSS: C. J. Haggerty [Cornelius J. (Neil) Haggerty]?

HENNING: Correct.

MOSS: Right. Okay. Now, when you came aboard the Labor Department, what were the kinds of things that Wirtz wanted you to do? Did you have any reservations or ambitions about it?

HENNING: First, allow me to say this. When I arrived in Washington, I sensed the great spirit of the Kennedy administration. I've been involved in politics for thirty years and I can recall only one other experience where men were so moved to serve government. The other experience being here in California when Governor Brown. came to office in January of '59.

My first impression of Labor Department planning was that, thanks to John Kennedy, we were going to move, at last, in this country

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to give the unskilled a measure of semiskilled attainment that would allow such workers to participate meaningfully in the labor force. I think this remains the one great worker training contribution of the Kennedy-Johnson years.

As to Secretary Wirtz, I had not been an admirer of the Goldberg doctrine of active participation by the Labor Department in industrial disputes. I felt, as I still do, that that function more properly belongs with the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. Goldberg, however, was a gifted man and proved to be an incredible juggler. He resolved all of the disputes which he embraced in his year and a half in office. It was certainly not possible for any man to follow him successfully in that respect. Secretary Wirtz failed in the long shore strike of December, '62, December and the early months of '63; he failed in the

newspaper strike that tied up most of the press of New York, indeed, virtually all of it in '63. I don't think any man could have long continued the Goldberg success, nor do I believe that Goldberg himself could have succeeded in being the principal who would solve the labor-management disputes. I did advise the secretary of labor when I came to Washington that I did not choose to be given the assignment of resolving labor-management disputes. I told him this because, frankly, I didn't believe it was the function of the Department of Labor. I feel that the Labor Department should be only the residual claimant, as it were, of critical disputes and that the primary function of government is to assign the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service to critical conflicts. This was the will of Congress and it is the orderly and proper way. The Department of Labor by its very nature is more involved politically than the Federal Mediation and Conciliation unit.

MOSS: All right. Well, as I read the situation, Wirtz did not buy your advice.

HENNING: We never had a true dialogue on this because I'm not sure that he would have been impressed by my arguments. In fairness to him, we never discussed this at any great length. Once I made known my wish I didn't choose to tell him that it was not his role to settle such disputes.

MOSS: Right, well, the point I was going to make is that it seems to me that he went ahead and involved the Labor Department in this, against the railroad, the longshoremen . . .

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HENNING: Yes, hopelessly and personally and poorly, but in the later years of his administration, he achieved some wisdom in assigning Jim Reynolds to the task of representing the Labor Department. But the tragedy of the Wirtz philosophy, and I must say he was the heir of the Goldberg philosophy in this regard, came to a climax when the president, Lyndon Johnson, assumed that it was his role to negotiate within the walls of the White House—an absurdity that caused me great difficulty in 1967, or pardon me, in 1966, when he announced to the nation at 8:00 o'clock one Saturday evening, from the Oval Room, that he had, through his work, settled the dispute between United Airlines and [International Association of] the Machinists Union [and Aerospace Workers] union. On the day following, the Machinists units about the country rejected the dispute and the strike began on Monday morning.

MOSS: Similar things, in effect, have happened in the railroad work rules dispute.

HENNING: Right, correct, correct.

MOSS: It still, isn't settled. Okay. Let me ask you if your disagreement with this role, this activist role, and Reynolds' assumption of the role of mediator led to a situation where you finally left the Labor Department, and Reynolds assumed the under secretaryship?

HENNING: No, my conflict with the Secretary came in December of 1964 when he sought to have me removed as Under Secretary as a result of a continuing conflict over the place of government in labor affairs. Secretary Wirtz was neither a Tory nor a man who was especially hostile to the interests of the trade union movement, but he was, indeed, a statist who felt that no independent force in the community should interfere with the governmental plans once they had been ordained either by the White House or Congress. And what brought us to an [irrevocable departure, actually, was his] insistence that Neighborhood Youth Corps workers be paid below the minimum survival wage of the United States government, below the Federal Minimum Wage Law. This was rather typical of the Wirtz governmental approach, and it isn't an approach that's peculiar to him. Essentially he's a man of liberal instinct, but he did feel that the power of government should prevail over trade unions as we'll as employers and he had no sense of patience with trade unions that would take a position that it is their duty to protect the wage structure of the working people.

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MOSS: All right. Another area in which the government and the unions, at least apparently, were at loggerheads was an issue that I understand you were given charge of, and that is the question of apprenticeship training and getting minority groups represented in the apprenticeship training.

HENNING: Yes. Wirtz behaved well in this area and we moved forward, I think, in splendid fashion together. In 1963 he signed a federal regulation, 29-CFR-30, which had the force of law, assuring equality of opportunity in apprenticeship. I chaired the Labor-management minority community committee, which worked for some seven months on this particular order. Wirtz and I had no disagreement on this. We were both committed to equality of opportunity. I had a greater appreciation of the training values of apprenticeship than he. He was tempted by such programs as the Neighborhood Youth Corps, which wasted millions of federal money, but this was because the theoretician from the campus hadn't yet learned of the realities of the labor market.

MOSS: In what ways? What is it that he hadn't learned and what is so wrong?

HENNING: He came from the campus to the labor-management scene with essentially an academic approach. Wirtz was typical of "government professors" in this regard. He had been an arbitrator of labor-management disputes before assuming the position of under secretary. He knew the science of arbitration, which is in reality a matter of cutting the pie in order to assure industrial peace. But he had no realistic knowledge of the workings of trade unions, nor of the feelings or of the beliefs of either working people or their chosen leaders in the trade union movement. And he would, therefore, be shocked to find trade union resistance to a federal training program that would lower standards that had been achieved by union bargaining.

There is another example of the Wirtz view on labor control that I would cite. In mid-1965 he became obsessively concerned with keeping unions within the 3.2 percent wage increase guideline advocated by the administration. Wirtz wanted more than guidelines. He joined with John Dunlop [John Thomas Dunlap], the Harvard economist, in pushing the building trades unions toward federal determination of wage rates. In this he was joined by the employer forces of the construction industry. (It is interesting to note that the Wirtz-Dunlop plan was put into effect in a mandatory way under President Nixon with John Dunlop in full command.) Under the Wirtz-Dunlop plan

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any building trades wage dispute in the country would be referred to Washington for review by either a labor-management body or by a tripartite labor-management-government body. The recommendation of the review body would be forwarded to the White House for proclamation by the President. The presidential announcement would not have the force of law but it was understood that the moral pressure of a White House declaration would keep the unions in line. The Wirtz-Dunlop plan envisioned no control of employer prices or profits. Indeed, such approaches were rejected by both men.

After some six months of committee debate directed by Wirtz and Dunlop between national industry and labor officials in the construction trades, the [AFL-CIO] Building Trades Department Executive Council unanimously voted the plan down at its February, 1966 meeting in Miami Beach. Wirtz was enraged by the Building Trades action. President Johnson, however, stood with the Building Trades and that ended that.

Neil Haggerty, then head of the [AFL-CIO] Building Trades Department, led the successful fight against the wage control scheme. In this conflict I stood with Haggerty and the Building Trades against Wirtz and Dunlop.

MOSS: On this matter of minority groups in the apprenticeship training, Philip Randolph [A. Philip Randolph] was making a lot of noise saying that the unions were not doing all they could. Meany replied, "Yes we are too." Now where does the truth in this lie?

HENNING: I think that historic progress has been realized since 1960 in this area. We must all acknowledge the deprivations of history and they fall not only upon the conscience of the trade union movement, but upon employers, upon industry generally, and upon the religious communities of the nation. But I like to think that largely through the inspiration of Kennedy in the civil rights area, we have seen a great change, a radical and progressively revolutionary change since 1960 in this area.

MOSS: Another area I see that you were involved in was the question of the bracero workers in the migratory farm labor. How do you recall your participation in that?

HENNING: Well, it was I who suggested to the Secretary of Labor, and persuaded him after some debate, that in 1963 our position on the continuation of the

Mexican bracero program under Public Law 78 was that it should be

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given only a one-year renewal rather than two and that it should pass from existence on December 31, 1964. The question was only one of strategy since I knew that Congress would not kill P.L. 78 in 1963. I was one of the few who believed that it could be killed in 1974. The Secretary agreed and from that point on he supported me strongly in this effort. Congress voted our way, and the wage-depressing impact of the braceros is no longer a curse in agricultural labor and is one of the reasons why Cesar Chavez has been able to make such astonishing progress in the unionization of farm workers in this state. I had no quarrel with Secretary Wirtz in this area. We disagreed as to how quickly the bracero force should have been reduced. I favored a much more rapid reduction. I challenged him many times in 1965 and 1966 on the braceros he was allowing into the country under Public Law 414, the permanent worker immigration law. I can't question his basic conviction; we agreed that the braceros should go.

MOSS: Let me go back a moment to the manpower development and training program and ask you in the time you were in the under secretaryship what things you saw developing there that were most important for the development of that program and what obstructions were there?

HENNING: There is only one great achievement that came out of the Kennedy-Johnson years in worker training. Only one, and that is the advance of the MDTA [Manpower Development and Training Act] effort that is directed toward the training of the unskilled to give them a position of semiskilled attainment. The federal government in the Kennedy-Johnson, and indeed the Nixon years, did not and has not given adequate attention to the training of skilled workers, but the MDTA program with its emphasis on the training of the semi skilled has known consistent and historic support.

We had only two efforts by federal government prior to the MDTA that concerned the training of workers; the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 and the Fitzgerald Act of 1939. One gave us vocational training; the other committed the federal government to apprenticeship training. Government has not been aroused by the needs of the unskilled, but John Kennedy and Arthur Goldberg, I think, deserve the historic recognition for moving toward the training of the unskilled to give them a capacity for semiskilled realization. The demands of the labor market are such that through the sixties there was a place for the skilled, a diminishing place for the unskilled, but a place for the semiskilled, and that will continue through the seventies.

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MOSS: Where do you put Joe Clark [Joseph S. Clark] whose bill it was, at least his name was associated with it?

HENNING : A man of good intentions. [Laughter]

MOSS: Let me shift ground a bit and talk about the relationship between the White House and the Labor Department. What kinds of things would the people at the White House get directly involved in? I think of the people on the president's domestic staff, Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], Lee White [Lee C. White], those people, Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman] and Larry O'Brien's people and the congressional liaison. What kind of things with relation to the Labor Department did they get involved in?

HENNING: I recall one morning when John Kennedy phoned the Secretary of Labor to ask what all the trouble was that inspired Paul Hall of the Seafarers International Union to tell the press that because of the behavior of Secretary Wirtz, his organization would campaign against the Democrats in every city in the United States in 1964. That's a political manifestation of White House interest.

The other relationships were really perfunctory and orthodox and concerned such questions as budgets and appropriation debates and political appointments, and complaints from constituents that required White House attention. I always thought the relationship was a civilized one. I never felt that either under the Kennedy administration or the Johnson administration the White House played the role of a martinet.

MOSS: How effective were they?

HENNING: Quite effective. A request from the White House was not to be ignored. However, I can say this, I don't remember the White House calling in behalf of any reactionary ally of the administration and insisting that the department compromise with principle. Nor do I think that Goldberg or Wirtz would have compromised.

MOSS: What about the question of congressional liaison and putting bills through on the Hill? Did the Labor Department handle it mostly by itself, or was there a lot of support from O'Brien's people?

HENNING: We handled that matter largely by ourselves, and this was unfortunate. Secretary Wirtz had no sense of easy association with congressional powers. He was not the man for this job. Goldberg was. And we encountered

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the difficulties that every governmental agency does. Our particular opposition, of course, come from conservatives.

MOSS: Do you recall any particular bills that were giving you trouble and the events surrounding them?

HENNING: Yes, our appropriation on the Manpower Development [and Training] Act,

for example, was questioned by southern congressmen and senators who felt that the training programs within the South should be on a segregated basis, and we insisted that this could not be. Secretary Wirtz took a very strong and proper position in this area.

MOSS: Aside from taking a strong and proper position, how do you beat this kind of thing through Congress, and how did you?

HENNING: We did it by not compromising. We refused to approve any MDTA program in a state that required segregated classes. In Mississippi, for example, this meant that there were no classes except for the few conducted on U.S. Navy property in that state. We did not compromise.

MOSS: Let me ask you what your opinion was of the Goldberg committee that he set up under the name of the president, of course, the President's Labor Management Policy Advisory Committee and the whole philosophy of that particular...

HENNING: I think it was good I favored it very strongly, but it died. It might have developed under Goldberg. I don't think Secretary Wirtz had the capacity for this kind of thing. I don't think Lyndon Johnson cared particularly for this approach. He was more of a direct actionist who felt that immediate White House involvement could best solve the labor management questions of the day.

MOSS: And you're obviously out of sympathy with that.

HENNING: I am.

MOSS: Let me ask you about—you mentioned just a moment ago when we were looking at the pictures on the wall, John Shelley [John F. Shelley] and the 1963 San Francisco mayoralty race. It's my understanding you came out here and spoke for him with the blessing of the White House and the fine hand of the White House was seen in this, to get as many Democrats elected around the country as possible.

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HENNING: It wasn't that much of a White House effort although I was requested by the White House, but I hardly required any urging. Jack Shelley was an old personal associate and I was happy to help.

MOSS: There was some speculation at the time that you might run for his congressional seat. Was this serious?

HENNING: I preferred the placid life of the U.S. Labor Department.

MOSS: Let me ask you about some of your associates in the Labor Department, how you remember them.

HENNING: I might add this for your files. Secretary Wirtz sought to have me removed as Under Secretary of Labor in December of 1964. He asked me if I would resign. He assumed I would since it was his wish. I told him that, of course, I would not resign, and that this meant a struggle. In the week between Christmas of 1964 and New Year's the matter came to a climax in the chambers of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg. At that meeting Goldberg, Wirtz, and George Meany met and Wirtz agreed to drop his request with the understanding that if he had any protests about the conduct of the Office of Under Secretary by me, he would call Goldberg and Meany.

I must add another human touch to this. On Christmas Eve, a close friend of Arthur Goldberg came to my home in Washington and advised me he had dined earlier that evening with Arthur Goldberg and that Justice Goldberg advised him that the struggle between Wirtz and me over my continuance in office had been resolved because George Meany had advised those who were in positions of power that if Wirtz persisted, he must himself resign. And so Wirtz was given the choice of either resigning or accepting my presence.

Wirtz, I think, would have been attorney general of the United States if it were not for his conflict with me in December of '64. Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] had been elected to the Senate in New York and Wirtz was a candidate for the open office, but the dispute, which was most unwise on his part, embarrassed the President of the United States and obliged him to uphold an Under Secretary as against the wishes of a secretary. That isn't good, as I would be the first to acknowledge, but it was necessary.

MOSS: Let me go back to my question and ask you about some of your associates, what you saw them doing and what their role was in the department. Off the

[-15-]

top of my head, let's take Esther Peterson [Esther E. Peterson] who started out as head of the women's commission [Women's Bureau] and moved on up to an Assistant Secretaryship. How was this ...

HENNING: I found her in her service to be an idealist, an immensely competent woman.

MOSS: What about Jim Reynolds? We mentioned him a few moments ago.

KENNING: Jim Reynolds was a man of integrity and ability, who in the conduct of his office was conscious, understandably, of the employer position because his origins were industry rather than labor.

MOSS: How about George Weaver [George L-P. Weaver] on the international level?

HENNING: George Weaver I felt to be an able man and an excellent representative of the United States in international affairs.

MOSS: Who in the department would you say at that time came closest to your own views as to how things should be handled?

HENNING: The career people.

MOSS: Okay, fine. Let me ask you in closing about your understanding of what President Kennedy was out to do as president, as leader of the country?

HENNING: I think it is what he sought to do that distinguishes him. There was nothing grasping about him in a personal, philosophical way. He sought to give America a nobility that it certainly didn't possess when he came to office. He was a prudent man, however, and he realized that he had to work within institutions long established to achieve the kind of America he wished, but to that task he gave all of his integrity and compassion and intellectual powers. I think he gave to the office something that we need today and something that his predecessors did not contribute to the office in our generation, save for Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt]. I think Kennedy and Roosevelt were the two great presidents of my adulthood.

MOSS: There are those who say that in his programs, particularly legislation, he was perhaps too prudent, that he could've gotten away with a little more if he'd tried harder, particularly say on the civil rights end. How do you feel about that?

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HENNING: Well, I think John Kennedy embraced the wisdom of Harvard and South Boston, and he knew that one moved slowly at times, and that he had only marginal control of the Congress in 1961. He could not afford a major conflict with the congressional powers, but he gave the spiritual inspiration in the area of civil rights, for example, where Dwight Eisenhower in his innocence felt that the presidency should not be so involved.

MOSS: All right. Let me ask you this about looking back on the man. There is some disturbing claim today that much more was made of him after his death than is warranted by the facts. People like Ted Sorensen, perhaps, and his *Kennedy Legacy* making a greater Camelot myth out of the thing than really is warranted. How do you feel about that?

HENNING: This is the way with all martyrs, of course. But I believe that the domestic and foreign attainments of John Kennedy in the first two years of his

administration have been somewhat minimized and I agree with Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] in this that in all of the tributes to the Kennedy memory, the early achievements have been somewhat forgotten. So I say that on a pragmatic basis we can cite his progress. I disagree with those who would minimize the Kennedy place in history. I'm not concerned with the Camelot idea. I'm impressed by the fact that a man of his talents could give such spiritual dimensions to our people.

MOSS: I have only one record of your being actually at the White House, and that's on the occasion of the swearing in of Willard Wirtz. Were there other occasions on which you went to the White House?

HENNING: I was in the White House many times under Lyndon Johnson and only four or five times under John F. Kennedy. I chose not to frequent the White House under President Kennedy although politically it would've been within my powers. I chose not to because I had been director of the State Labor Department of California under Governor Brown. And I'm sure as I look back on those years, I would not have appreciated it if my subordinates had been frequently visiting with Governor Brown on business matters. I felt that the role of the Under Secretary was not in any manner to subvert the prestige of the Secretary of Labor. I gave Willard Wirtz no loyalty on questions that I felt involved the best interests of the labor movement. I differed with him openly whenever I could within the department, but not publicly. But I did give loyalty to his office and to his person as the leader of the department.

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MOSS: As a footnote, let me ask you your recollections and impressions of the Robert Kennedy campaign for the presidency in '68.

HENNING: I was in New Zealand. I was named Ambassador to New Zealand in January of 1967. But I did assist Robert Kennedy in the campaign in New York in 1964 when he unseated Senator Keating [Kenneth B. Keating]. I visited certain trade union movement leaders in order to win the endorsement of the New York Federation of Labor for Robert Kennedy, and I like to think that at least I made some contributions toward this.

MOSS: How did you see him developing as a person, as a political entity in his own right?

HENNING: I was not always in agreement with his foreign policy views, but I thought he was the hope of the country for these years.

MOSS: And where do you see that hope now?

HENNING: Nowhere, except in those out of power and I'm not so certain of the gifts of those out of power at the moment.

MOSS: Is there anything else you would like to add at this point?

HENNING: Only this. There is no government job that can surpass that of serving an ambassadorship. My ambassador's experience was a tremendous one in New Zealand, and for those who look for satisfaction in government I recommend that they seek the post of ambassador for some country such as New Zealand.
[Laughter]

MOSS: But not Vietnam, I should think, as Ellsworth Bunker [Ellsworth Bunker]
...

HENNING: No, it does depend on the country, the times, the people, the culture of the host nation and peace.

MOSS: Yes, yes. All right, fine. Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Henning.

HENNING: Fine, fine, good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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