

Ivan Nestingen Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 3/03/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Ivan Nestingen

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Biographical Note

Ivan Nestingen (1921-1978) served as the mayor of Madison, Wisconsin from 1956 to 1961 and as the Undersecretary of Health, Education, and Welfare from 1961 to 1965. This interview focuses on the 1960 Democratic primary in Wisconsin, the formation of John F. Kennedy's campaign in Wisconsin, and the effects of the primary on local politics, among other topics.

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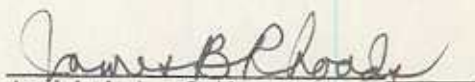
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Oral History Interview

with

IVAN NESTINGEN

March 3, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: I suppose the best way to start is to go back into the late 1950's and ask what you were doing when it looked like a (John F.) Kennedy--(Hubert H.) Humphrey race was going to shape up in Wisconsin.

NESTINGEN: When do you want to begin?

MORRISSEY: Well, I'll let you begin wherever you think the beginning is.

NESTINGEN: Well, the beginning actually was about 1956 I would judge.

MORRISSEY: At the convention?

NESTINGEN: At the convention in Chicago, when the former president was defeated in his close election bid. I mean close race for the nomination for vice-president. He had made such a very outstanding appearance in defeat. And subsequently it was quite well indicated that one way or another that he was interested in being on the national ticket in 1960.

MORRISSEY: Were you a delegate to the 1956 convention?

NESTINGEN: No, I was not. I listened to it by radio from Madison. For me any personal involvement began in

1959 when I had some conversations with the former president about being chairman of the "Kennedy for President" campaign in Wisconsin when he decided on entering the Wisconsin primary.

MORRISSEY: Now was it clear to you at that time that he very definitely was going to try to get the nomination?

NESTINGEN: He was really quite clear in indicating that he didn't know whether or not he would enter the Wisconsin primary. He was quite clear that he was interested in the potential of trying to get the nomination and use the Wisconsin primary as one of the steps to contest. As to whether or not, he did not indicate flatly, of course, he would go down to the wire for it, but he was obviously interested in the Wisconsin primary.

MORRISSEY: Why do you suppose he approached you to head his organization in Wisconsin?

NESTINGEN: Oh, I can only assume, but that if he did decide to enter the Wisconsin primary he had the problem of being an Irish Catholic in a state that has a heavy Protestant vote, and especially a heavily Scandinavian Protestant vote as well as some other denominations of the Protestant faith. . . . You did have, and do have now, some bias against a Catholic running for president among those elements of Wisconsin's population, and elsewhere, of course. My Scandinavian-Protestant background would be very good for this basic problem. Also I'd had some degree of success as a politician in the state.

MORRISSEY: Were you mayor of Madison at that time?

NESTINGEN: I was. I had been for three years; I was elected first in 1956. This kind of answer is only subjective guessing on my part, but very practical political thinking dictated the president thinking this way, and the president was very practical politically.

MORRISSEY: What was your response to this conversation?

NESTINGEN: Well, we discussed it for awhile. I indicated that I would indicate what my feeling would be in a relatively short period of time following. I first met with the president early in April, 1959, to discuss this with him, (Stephen E.) Steve Smith; and (David F.) Dave Powers was also in

the party at the time; (Jacqueline B.) Jackie Kennedy was there in an adjoining room, that is, at the time of the president's visit to Wisconsin. This was essentially the Kennedy entourage from Washington at that point.

MORRISSEY: Was this an easy decision for you to make?

NESTINGEN: It wasn't difficult at all.

MORRISSEY: Had you considered working for Hubert Humphrey?

NESTINGEN: No. Essentially I thought there were four possible candidates. Kennedy, Humphrey, (Lyndon B.) Johnson and (Stuart) Symington. After about three weeks thinking it over, it was my conclusion that JFK was the best bet to beat (Richard M.) Nixon with a set of principles I could support.

MORRISSEY: Had you been approached by Humphrey people?

NESTINGEN: No.

MORRISSEY: Had you discussed working for Kennedy with (Patrick J.) Pat Lucey?

NESTINGEN: Not prior to that, that I recall. Subsequent to this conversation with the former president I did.

MORRISSEY: What happened after you decided to work for John Kennedy?

NESTINGEN: We formed a "Kennedy for President" club in Wisconsin during May, 1959, and developed a working organization through the state during the ensuing months.

MORRISSEY: What kind of people did you line up?

NESTINGEN: Well, I don't know how you could answer that particularly except to say that any political movement, if it be this one or another one, you try to form clubs in the various counties of the state; we did form clubs, some on the action-working order; some were only paper organizations. But as to the type of people, we sought out, we wanted the political activists, so to speak. We did not have a great deal of success within the Democratic party as far as the overall party leadership was concerned. They were more closely identified with, and had very close connections, in great part, with Humphrey or with (Adlai E.) Stevenson. There were some of the old ties with

(C. Estes) Kefauver, but that didn't really come into play in this particular timing. There was a scattering of Symington and Johnson strength, but what we sought were the political activists who were of the same frame of mind as ourselves. That is, that if anybody was going to beat Nixon the only person who was going to do it was going to be Kennedy. We had a great deal of success at it. I don't think there's any doubt about it, as the record subsequently showed. But not with leading party people so much as with people who were aligned with the party (or party workers) in an allied way or one way or another, but not within the inner sanctums of the party, so to speak, in the main. In the end result, they were a very representative group, as far as economic and other types of identification considerations you might find in each community were concerned.

MORRISSEY: When Kennedy was in Congress some of his votes on agricultural issues were attuned to his own constituency, not to the Middle West or the Far West. Was this a difficulty in lining up some people with an agricultural background?

NESTINGEN: There were two areas, by subject matter, in which we found it rather difficult for getting support for the former president. One, was agriculture, because of the item that you just mentioned and the nature of his voting background, or not voting. The other was in the labor field, where he just was in the throes of helping to pass labor legislation in action on the Landrum-Griffin labor bill, which drew a considerable amount of criticism of Kennedy from especially the craft labor unions. This was very noticeable in both the Madison and Milwaukee areas, which provoked a considerable amount of criticism for and a feeling that Kennedy had leaned over backwards to pacify nonlabor elements unnecessarily to the detriment of his friends in organized labor. These two matters were trouble spots that were very difficult to handle at times.

MORRISSEY: Some people had suspicions about John Kennedy because of his relationship with "McCarthyism." Was this a problem?

NESTINGEN: It was a problem with the, what might be called, intellectual type of liberal in Wisconsin. It was also a problem with some of the practical political people, but not so substantially. I don't think it influenced an appreciable number of people in the ultimate, namely the ultimate decision they made as to who they were to support. For those persons who

were critical of him in this respect would not have supported him in any event in the primary, as compared to Hubert Humphrey or Stevenson, as the basis for their judgment. The Capital Times in Madison, of course, either gave rise to criticism this way directly or indirectly, one way or another, on various occasions. But I doubt that the overall effect of the McCarthy issue was appreciable, either voterwise or for endorsements for his candidacy. It was a little difficult to handle at times on a public forum, but not impossible.

MORRISSEY: How about religion? How many people were for him because they were Catholics, and how many were against him because he was a Catholic?

NESTINGEN: I think an appreciable number in either instance.

MORRISSEY: How did you handle that issue?

NESTINGEN: The best way to handle it, in my book, and I liked the way the president did it very much, is he took it on pretty much in stride; he took it on almost frontally. He didn't duck it, and he certainly didn't appreciate criticism either for or against him on this account. As a practical political matter he knew he'd get support because he was Catholic, and he knew he'd have opposition because of that fact. But as it would be encountered, he didn't duck it. This, in my judgment, is and was the best way to handle it. But the epitome as far as illustration is concerned, is the subsequent reaction of his speaking to the Protestant ministers at Houston. Well, in a minor way he did this in Wisconsin, in one way or another, or reflected his position in one way or another, as it would arise. I don't think there's any question he was concerned about the issue and watchful of it, especially in the western part of the state where it was quite apparent that some of the Scandinavians particularly, but Protestant denominations in general, looked askance at the Catholic factor of his candidacy. Including some of my relatives. (Laughter)

MORRISSEY: Did that create any problems?

NESTINGEN: Nothing of great consequence. It was rather interesting more than anything else.

MORRISSEY: Who planned the senator's itinerary when he campaigned in Wisconsin?

NESTINGEN: One of the key mechanical people in the whole campaign

was a fellow like [Gerald J.] Jerry Bruno, who was very influential in this respect, Pat Lucey was also very influential in this respect; as he was then Democratic Chairman of Wisconsin, but was certainly, of course, very helpful in mechanical aspects. Fellows like (Kenneth P.) (Ken O'Donnell would be very instrumental also for an overall feel and also the need to gauge JFK's considerations in Washington. A portion of the answer, and unfortunately in some senses of the word, was dictated by polling by (Louis) Lou Harris which turned out to be inaccurate.

MORRISSEY: How was it inaccurate?

NESTINGEN: Well, there was an indication from polls that were done close to election time that we could take the second district and the tenth, which was quite to the contrary of what happened on election day. But appearances, during the final days of the campaign, were dictated in part by the results of these polls which proved to be quite inaccurate to an appreciable percentage.

MORRISSEY: Did you travel with the senator?

NESTINGEN: I was with him every day he was in the state, yes. The only exception where I would not be present personally would be where I had a City Council meeting at which I had to preside as Mayor, or at the Committee of the Whole meeting where I had to be present for the City, to represent the city government.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me . . .

NESTINGEN: Otherwise I was always with him, period.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me some of your impressions of how he was doing, what his response was to how he was doing?

NESTINGEN: As to how he was doing, he was doing wonderfully well; I can best illustrate that, I think, by describing my skepticism on total turnouts at any given instance. When he first began to make appearances in Wisconsin, Polly Fitzgerald (one of his Massachusetts reception chairmen) suggested to me in one of the appearances that we scheduled in Madison that we have the speakers' reception line roped off and the police present to keep the people back. And my reaction was that we certainly don't need to bother with a matter like that; we can take care of it, and the volume wouldn't be that great; we could handle it in

any event. I was really startled to see how correct Polly was, for example, in that instance, and how much I'd underestimated the drawing power of the president. Now in general, we found this to be true through the state. It illustrates very well the way that he attracted people so very much, the tremendous popular appeal he had. Now there'd be variables of that. In the eastern part of the state we found this very constant. In the southwestern, western and northwestern parts of the state we found a wonderful response in some areas but there would be a number of areas there where we did have poor turnouts, for example, for the understandable reasons that you might expect and that I discussed. But in the general sense of the word, the response that the president had was really excellent, and the tremendous popular appeal that he had was certainly reflected by the type of story that I tell about Polly Fitzgerald and my reaction to her comments. As to how the president felt about it, and as he would reflect his feelings during comments from one place to another, he would reflect his concern, of course, for the terrible turnouts, but it didn't really faze him or bother him externally, in the sense of the word, of reducing his competitive instinct, and his desire to campaign that much harder. And another illustration of this was going to the western part of the state where we had a dozen people for breakfast on one occasion with twenty or twenty-five newsmen, which was somewhat disappointing I might say. Or you could go into other southwestern parts of the state, central-western parts of the state, with your heavy Protestant denominations, especially of the Scandinavian variety where we frequently had very hostile or cool receptions. As to the president's reaction, he was a real competitor, and he took these matters in stride. In the general sense of the word, as the campaign went on, he really reflected optimism, he was very pleased. But you have the two opposites on this aspect of your question.

MORRISSEY: Was there any type of appearance that he preferred over other types?

NESTINGEN: He was no real enthusiast of the personal handshaking variety of appearance, where he was exposed for an appreciable amount of time to conversation with a person that he'd meet. He did appreciate the quick reception, quick in the sense of brevity of comments, with maximum exposure as far as numbers of people were concerned, and minimum exposure as far as duration to the individual was concerned, which gave him the potential maximum for the greatest number of voters, of course,

MORRISSEY: How much did you rely on television and radio?

NESTINGEN: A great deal really, and he learned to--television being the better medium, especially for a man like the president where his personality came through so much better. Radio, of course, was not overlooked for the obvious reason of its coverage as far as numbers of people are concerned and also being a different type audience in part.

MORRISSEY: You mentioned the Lou Harris polls a minute ago in the western part of the state. Did you have other evidence which led you to believe you were going to carry the districts in that part of the state?

NESTINGEN: There were reports that came in of course from people in one way or another who were mainly supporters. And as far as key parts of that part of the state were concerned and the general enthusiasm in the western part of the state, they tended to be overly optimistic in a subjective way. In the objective sense of the word, though, as shown in the polls as compared to something else, we had reports of individual supporters coming in from their respective localities.

MORRISSEY: Did you have any evidence either before or after the ballots were cast that there was going to be a substantial cross-over by Catholic Republicans?

NESTINGEN: I don't know what you mean by evidence, but I would answer it this way, I've had a certain amount of experience in politics and my reaction was you were bound to have a heavy crossover. Nixon was up as an uncontested party on the Republican side. Humphrey and Kennedy were gaining all of the news. It was a hotly contested primary and really a very interesting one. I had a feeling as the campaign wore on that you'd see people gravitate to the former president, in part because of the religious factor; and, by the same token, some people that would gravitate to being on the Democratic side where it was normally not the case, or where they might be independent, or where they might be Republican, either one, would gravitate toward Hubert Humphrey, in part not because he would better represent their point of view, but because they were anti-Catholic as such. You cannot overlook that there was a certain response expressed. A number of independents or Republicans were evidencing interest in voting for Kennedy to be against Humphrey who carried the more liberal image of the two. When you ask for evidence in the objective sense of the word, I can't answer that, but I had the very decided feeling that this was going to be the case as a personal opinion of mine. I had gained

this impression as a result of conversations with any number of people with whom I was in touch during the campaign. ¶

MORRISSEY: Did you concentrate your attention on any particular part of the state?

NESTINGEN: No, personally no. It was wherever the president was, I was.

MORRISSEY: We're very interested to know why the Kennedy people carried the Seventh District, and why they almost carried the Fourth, is that Madison?

NESTINGEN: No, Madison is in the Second.

MORRISSEY: Second?

NESTINGEN: We lost the Second, which includes Madison. We did pull the Seventh through--why we carried it?

MORRISSEY: Why they lost the Second and why they won the Seventh?

NESTINGEN: Well, why we lost the Second essentially is its heavy orientation to the Humphrey people with the key leadership, or by longtime exposure as far as the press is concerned. Humphrey had this through literally--let's see, this was 1960--ten years of exposure with the press and party activity, essentially in that case, the (Madison Capitol Times) Cap Times. But in great part, the Wisconsin State Journal, and in part the Milwaukee Journal, add to it even the Milwaukee Sentinel, and this is the biggest single answer. The working leadership of the political variety in the Second District was very strongly committed to Humphrey; well, Humphrey and/or Stevenson, and Humphrey was the dodge for the Stevenson people as compared to Kennedy, and that they would use Humphrey to help defeat Kennedy. As to why we carried the Seventh, I can't give you any answer in short other than the sheer practical political ones of why did we carry the Fourth, the Fifth, the Sixth, the Eighth, except that the factors in our favor just weren't quite as heavy as in the Fourth, the Fifth, the Sixth, or the Eighth, and as far as that's concerned, the First. But the same kind of consideration arose in that district as arose in these other districts that I mentioned, correspondingly not as favorable an area for us as the other ones that we won, and for the same reasoning, except conversely instead, of being dissimilar in varying degrees to the ones we lost.

MORRISSEY: How effective were these teas that Polly Fitzgerald set up?

NESTINGEN: Really very, very, and I was a skeptic at the outset I might say. Whether you consider it in the personal sense of the role of the president himself they were very effective as he would personally make appearances, then you translate that and how effective was it to have the members of the Kennedy family come in, whether it would be the mother, the sisters, or the relatives of varying degrees, they were very effective. And they'd be correspondingly less effective as the president was not present but nevertheless very effective in a cumulative sense of the word: name exposure, name identification, and the organized effort that went into them and the corresponding results you'd get in a politically tense campaign from such an effort. There was a very good effect on the campaign from such gatherings, and the exposure that arose from them to the president was very beneficial.

MORRISSEY: One of the interesting things to me as an outsider about the Wisconsin primary of 1960 is that so many of the Democratic congressmen and the Democratic governor seemed to remain above the battle. Is this a correct perception?

NESTINGEN: Essentially correct.

MORRISSEY: (Clement J.) Zablocki, I think is the major exception to that.

NESTINGEN: Zablocki was, of course, in it all the way in our behalf. (Robert W.) Kastenmeier remained above the battle, so to speak, as his people were actually working against us in the main, and I don't think there's any question his sentiments were against us. He issued one or two releases, which may be coincidental or otherwise, that were harmful to us. (Henry S.) Reuss remained above the battle, the bulk of his political machinery not being sympathetic with us. (Lester) Johnson, at that time, his people would be against us, and, as I recall he really almost became openly involved in the conflict. That covers the four Democratic congressmen we had at the time. The governor, of course, remained "above the battle", but was really quite harmful to us in one way or another. He personally remained aloof from it but his staff did us some turns that weren't what you'd call beneficial.

MORRISSEY: Did you make any special efforts to appeal to Negro voters in the Fifth District?

NESTINGEN: We made efforts to appeal to minority groups, period,

and to voters in general. You can apply that to the Negroes and cite civil rights votes; we applied it to labor and cited labor votes, in an effort to offset the criticism that I referred to earlier. We made efforts to appeal, not so successfully, to the farm vote, although we didn't do too badly with the farm vote outside the western part of the state. But we made efforts to appeal to minority groups. Senior citizens is another illustration, their interests at that time being in the Forand Bill. But, yes, we made efforts to appeal to the various minority groups.

MORRISSEY: I was interested in Negroes particularly because of Humphrey's well-known performance at the '48 convention about civil rights, and I was wondering if this standing with Negroes was so solid that you people decided to write it off.

NESTINGEN: Oh no, no, no. By no means did we write it off, nor did we intend to, nor did we do badly with the Negro voters. I might say, I don't recall the figures, I think you can check the rolls, we didn't do badly in the heavily Negro wards of Milwaukee. Although I think there's no doubt but what Humphrey was the favorite among them for the background that you mention. But we didn't do badly with Negro voters, and I'm sure the record will bear that out. At no time did I, and to my knowledge people that I was working with most closely, which included the president, Ken O'Donnell, Pat Lucey, and Bruno, ever think about writing off the Negro vote.

MORRISSEY: From your vantage point, did you think the Humphrey campaign was well organized?

NESTINGEN: As much as I could judge, it was very poorly organized. I did not follow it closely, in fact, later on after the campaign was over, I was startled to see some of the people that were involved in it, and I just hadn't known about it. Helen Gahagan Douglas, for example, I'd never known until after the primary was over, and I talked with her, had I known she made an appearance in Milwaukee. So that is an indication that I wasn't up there in some of the mechanics of the campaign, which would be of some consequence in the news. But as I had a chance to observe, it was not a well-organized campaign. We had them hands down on organization.

MORRISSEY: Is my memory correct that labor was officially neutral?

NESTINGEN: Officially neutral.

MORRISSEY: But in a practical sense did you find labor people working effectively against you?

NESTINGEN: Yes, and for us.

MORRISSEY: Both ways.

NESTINGEN: Right, both ways. We had some excellent labor people helping us either quite openly, or sub rosa. As an illustration, Walter Burke, a real and outstanding labor leader and a fine gentleman, was with us, and I can still remember when we were having a lunch at the airport in Milwaukee, and I got Walter Burke on the phone and asked the president to come over and talk to him on the phone. The response from Walter Burke, both then and otherwise, was excellent. As an illustration, the (United Auto Workers) U.A.W. leadership out of Kenosha was excellent, both the leadership and the membership. From the U.A.W. Local 75 of suburban Milwaukee, we had some good leadership; it wasn't so strong as Local 72 of U.A.W. out of Kenosha. Out of the steelworkers, beside Walter Burke, we had good people. We had some of the machinists. In the craft unions is where we ran into the most difficulty. In the Madison area in the craft unions we had difficulty, but we did have good support from members of some of the Madison craft union leadership on our committee. In that case the painters local representative, business agent, Babe Rohr at that time--and now--was with us. The steelworker leadership out of Madison was excellent. George Reger, as an illustration, was with us. Out of Local 538 in Madison, the meat-cutters, the big labor local there, the leadership was neutral, as an illustration, but they had good people second, third, and fourth levels down helping us out. So that Madison labor was good and bad for us. Of the labor people, though, for the mechanical processing of a political campaign, I'd take those we had as compared to those they had. We had the better ones; both better in quality and in capability of political organization work. And they were much more dedicated.

MORRISSEY: I know that you attracted many volunteers in that campaign. Did you have any problems keeping the volunteers busy?

NESTINGEN: During that campaign, leading up to April of 1960, no, there was always plenty of work to do wherever you went. We had organizational problems just like anybody,

and because of that some people would be idle. But no, in the main we kept them pretty busy, and essentially as these organizations go it was really a fairly well-run campaign according to any number of people. But essentially a pretty good campaign.

MORRISSEY: Can you specify some of these organizational problems?

NESTINGEN: None, except the sheer mechanics. There was a great concentration of the president's time spent in Wisconsin in a very limited amount of time, relatively speaking. And he announced in Wisconsin, for example, oh, in January, January 21 as I recall, and his campaign was going to terminate about April 5, the first Tuesday in April, whatever the date was. Well, within less than sixty days, we had twenty to twenty-five days that the president was in the state and that's a very heavy concentration as far as scheduling goes. Well, with the shifts that you get in any campaign where you set up a schedule for one area of appearances, you might have to change your appearances or scheduling, or the difficulty that you have in getting literature at the appropriate times so that it can be distributed or the difficulty you have in coordination on fund raising and how it is to be handled, and so on; normal mechanical problems you have in any political campaign, nothing exceptional here.

MORRISSEY: You were talking about labor a minute ago; you didn't mention the teamsters.

NESTINGEN: No, of course the teamsters were very much against us, very critical of us. It was either the Sunday before election or the second Sunday before election when, of course, (Wayne L.) Morse was on that TV hookup where they let him speak for, I forget, fifteen minutes to a half hour in a serious diatribe, a very bitter diatribe really against Kennedy as the culmination of their efforts in opposition to us; and the teamsters, as far as leadership is concerned, was very decidedly against us. I would wager though, that through the ranks we didn't do badly with the votes with the teamsters. But they threw money in against us, there's no doubt about that, in an effort from the leadership standpoint.

MORRISSEY: I'd like to return again to the number of times that you were together with John Kennedy. Do you recall if he was concerned about the press treatment he was getting?

NESTINGEN: Quite, quite. He was quite concerned about it from a

couple of standpoints. One, we had to be so careful. Wisconsin is a fairly provincial state in some political respects. It has changed since then, but still at that time we had to be very concerned about first, the issue I mentioned of Catholicism. Second, the concern that we had, with the Kennedy family having as much money as it does have, Hubert Humphrey being, relatively speaking, not well-to-do in comparison, and that we would try to "buy" the election. The president was always very concerned about that, and expressed his concern about it. We were concerned on another count of the, some of the, liberal press; to illustrate the point: the Cap Times being the most notable, how they gave a disproportionate amount of their play to Hubert Humphrey; and the staff of the Cap Times was more sympathetic to Hubert Humphrey; and the editorial staff, in addition, was more sympathetic to Hubert Humphrey than it was to the former president. He was concerned about all of these matters, and at varying times. On one occasion he called up, for example, Bill Bechtel of the Milwaukee Journal and took him over the coals on the phone because of an item that Bill had done on the spending of the Kennedy people in this campaign. On the Sunday before election the Milwaukee Journal editorial page had a big spread about where the Catholic vote lay in Wisconsin, and inferred, of course, from that that this was where Kennedy would do well. He was concerned about the exposure of Humphrey, and the more frequent exposure of Humphrey in the Milwaukee Journal. On at least a couple of occasions he sat down with (William T.) Evjue, the publisher and editor of the Cap Times, to indicate his feeling that we weren't being treated fairly as far as exposure was concerned; that while his name might have been mentioned as frequently, it was more frequently mentioned in an unfavorable light. And I recall one breakfast out there at Mr. Evjue's home, where he literally had a sheaf of clippings to indicate what his concern was this way about fair treatment. Yes, he was concerned; he was concerned about the press in these ways.

MORRISSEY: As you probably know, [Theodore C.] Ted Sorensen in his book is very critical of the Cap Times for emphasizing the religious issue.

NESTINGEN: They were rather clever about the opposition in this respect and made it very clear that Kennedy was an Irish Catholic from Massachusetts, and that didn't help us of course. And I think the criticism by Ted was, in the main, very justified. But it wasn't only the Cap Times, it just happened to be that they were more militant about it than the others.

MORRISSEY: Anything else that was bothering the candidate?

NESTINGEN: Those would be the big items. There were things along the way that would bother him in one way or another. We'd have a malfunction of some kind or other that would bother him, but those were the main things.

MORRISSEY: What were the Stevensonians doing during that primary?

NESTINGEN: In the main they were supporting Humphrey.

MORRISSEY: Tacitly or actively?

NESTINGEN: Oh, quite openly, quite openly. Especially, this would be most significant in Dane County and in some areas of Milwaukee, meaning the north side of Milwaukee or suburban Milwaukee.

MORRISSEY: Did the results turn out to be pretty much what you expected?

NESTINGEN: I was more optimistic, and I think I let my enthusiasm get a little bit out of perspective on the Second and the Tenth Districts. I expected to win those that we did, and thought we might win the Second and was quite confident on the Tenth.

MORRISSEY: After the primary did you go to West Virginia?

NESTINGEN: I did not, no.

MORRISSEY: Did you participate in any primary in any other state?

NESTINGEN: No, I did not.

MORRISSEY: Did you work for John Kennedy in Wisconsin at the Convention?

NESTINGEN: I did; I was chairman of the Wisconsin delegation.

MORRISSEY: Did you try to persuade some of those Humphrey delegates to support Kennedy?

NESTINGEN: I did.

MORRISSEY: Successfully?

NESTINGEN: Yes, we got four of them as I recall before the final

vote in July in Los Angeles. Four by number, two by delegate strength.

MORRISSEY: Were you a delegate?

NESTINGEN: I was chairman of the delegation.

MORRISSEY: Some of those Humphrey people stayed with him to the bitter end.

NESTINGEN: By count, about fourteen of them.

MORRISSEY: Why wouldn't they come over?

NESTINGEN: You'd best talk to them. The ringleaders of that group were Fred (A.) Resser and Frank (L.) Nikolay both of whom at that time, as I recall, were Assemblymen, Risser from Madison and Nikolay from Abbotsford, Clark County, Wisconsin. You'd best talk to them as to why. But their feelings were pretty strong, and they never did switch right down to the wire at (Los Angeles) L.A.

MORRISSEY: What was the reception to the news that the vice-presidential choice was going to be Lyndon Johnson?

NESTINGEN: Critical on the part of some but not seriously so. It wasn't very serious; I was concerned that there might be some serious reaction. I remember Ralph Dungan asking me on the floor what I expected. I thought that we might have some serious criticism, but it wasn't too serious.

MORRISSEY: Why didn't Kennedy do better against Nixon in Wisconsin?

NESTINGEN: It's really hard to answer that one. Essentially Wisconsin--I'm somewhat reluctant to say this because the record belies it, belies what I'm going to say in part--but essentially Wisconsin to that year had been really Republican. What belies that kind of comment of course is that they now have two U.S. Senators who are Democratic. But essentially I feel the Wisconsin electorate was, and still is, middle of the road conservative, and this is a portion of the answer. A portion of the answer lies in the Catholic factor, I think, of voting with Nixon as an anti-Catholic matter. I think these essentially are the two biggest reasons.

MORRISSEY: Did you expect Kennedy to do better?

NESTINGEN: No. In the closing days out there in Wisconsin I expected him to lose it.

MORRISSEY: By a hundred thousand votes?

NESTINGEN: I wasn't predicting amounts. If I would recall and place a figure I would have said fifty to seventy-five thousand. But I just had the feeling in the closing days that there was no doubt but what Nixon was coming up and we were going down, and had the election been a week earlier I would have been optimistic of winning. It was just one of those hunches that you have as an experience at the time but nothing objective on which you can pin your observations.

MORRISSEY: Were some of the wounds opened up in the primary battle still unhealed?

NESTINGEN: Some are still unhealed today.

MORRISSEY: I would assume then that's another reason why Nixon won.

NESTINGEN: I don't think so.

MORRISSEY: No?

NESTINGEN: No. Those wounds that I would refer to are not appreciable as an ordered proposition when it comes to a Democrat versus a Republican in a final election. And I don't think it would be more than, figuratively speaking, a handful of votes in the fall election of 1960.

MORRISSEY: How many of those volunteers that worked for Kennedy stayed active within Democratic party politics after the primary was over?

NESTINGEN: A number of them tried to but not very successfully, because there you had a situation where the Democratic party had an endorsed candidate from a party, the state party hierarchy would take over the mechanics of the campaign, and the volunteers of the primary campaign would be pretty well side-tracked, which disgruntled some of them. But this is what did happen.

MORRISSEY: Were there two separate organizations during the campaign against Nixon? Was there a citizens group?

NESTINGEN: Well, the citizens group and the regular party machinery.

MORRISSEY: How well did they coordinate?

NESTINGEN: Well, as indicated in the answer I just gave, this party machinery tended to move in and usurp and take over the campaign. They had the advantage on any kind of conflict that might arise because of two organizations working on a campaign. They did prevail in the main as far as taking over the operation of the campaign, which is very understandable, much better organized and more knowledgeable political operators than a volunteer organization does have. The second big obvious defect that the citizens group had was that they found, as an independent political organization, it's very difficult on a partisan race to have an effective organization competing with the regular party machinery. This is true in that campaign, it was true in the Johnson versus (Barry M.) Goldwater campaign, and it was true in the (Dwight D.) Eisenhower campaigns. They were more of a paper organization than an effective political organization as such. That was what happened in this instance; the coordination was not very good, in answer to your question.

MORRISSEY: What am I overlooking in my questions on the primary in general?

NESTINGEN: I don't know how much you want.

MORRISSEY: The more the better.

NESTINGEN: We can talk about primaries. A primary like the Wisconsin primary is one of the two best illustrations of democratic--in the small "d" sense of the word--political exercises in which I've ever personally been involved. You can talk about a primary like that for a long, long time.

MORRISSEY: What do you mean by democratic with a small "d"?

NESTINGEN: Well, it's a wonderful lesson to describe democratic politics with a small "d". Take, for instance, as an illustration, the political situation existing in a state like Wisconsin with its heavy--it had voter-wise about 32 or 33 percent Catholic--but very heavy non-Catholic orientation, in the midwestern sense of the word, for political voting as compared to the man, as one illustration of a comparison, as a person. There is the more internationalistic kind of thinking that you find in the East. It is more provincial, really, in most areas of the state than you find in the metropolitan areas in the East or the Far West or in the southeastern part of the country.

But where you have an individual, a very wealthy candidate for office, who's made a very limited number of appearances in this state, who's not been exposed to the electorate appreciably, versus a senator who had been campaigning in the state from one end to the other literally for ten years, who was very well known, had the bulk of the party people in his camp at the outset, had at least at the outset what was probably going to be the bulk of the labor strength by identification, and with his voting record, had most of the minority groups almost in his political debt. You find this confrontation and the exercise to be really an excellent political lesson, and a very interesting political story. Many tangents on this episode can be commented upon at some length about a story like that, but it sums up in a relatively few sentences. For it was a very interesting democratic process. Now, to me, this is a subject matter that is worth a story in itself. You could raise questions, I suppose, at some length on this as it pertains to the type of campaigning, and Wisconsin being an illustration: Why did Kennedy go into Wisconsin at all? Why did he use the primary route at all? Why would he run his risk in Wisconsin when he could avoid that risk in the judgment of some people? You can consider it from that aspect.

MORRISSEY: But was there ever a real alternative?

NESTINGEN: To my way of thinking, no. To Kennedy's own expressed way of thinking, as he mentioned it to me, yes. Had he not been able to put the Ohio delegation in his hip pocket, had he had to contest that Ohio situation, as a practical political matter, he might not have been able to go into Wisconsin. The risks would have been too great. As it was, the risk was, he was able to take Ohio without a primary and devote the time and attention to Wisconsin that was going to be necessary to win it. And he won it fairly overwhelmingly, and yet close enough so that it encouraged Humphrey, who then, by coincidence of course, went into West Virginia. In the eyes of some people, yes, there was an alternative to going into Wisconsin. In the eyes of some very politically adept people in Washington he was foolish to go the primary route at all, as just a futile exercise. In my judgment, I was out in the "sticks," so to speak, and to me he had no recourse. My first reaction when he first mentioned about his possibly going into Wisconsin as a practical matter, was, "You don't have a choice on this. You're going to have to come in." I don't know how much detail you want; there's a great deal you can talk about on this but the record is there. I think we've covered the high spots.

MORRISSEY: I have a feeling we've talked more about the Kennedy

campaign than we have about Kennedy. Since you were with him so much is there anything more you could put on record?

NESTINGEN: Well, I think it best be summed up this way. I have experienced, as so many did, finding him to be such an outstanding individual. This is somewhat trite to say in that perspective, but I scarcely knew the man before he came to Wisconsin. It was most revealing and very enjoyable, as well as an excellent experience, the exposure to the individual that he was and the outstanding mind that he had. Again, you see, there is ever so much more about him, and these very general, casual observations about him in that perspective are almost trite, if not so. But it was a tremendous and really a very beneficial experience to me, because of his own personality as a man.

MORRISSEY: A couple of people have mentioned to me that the Kennedy campaign in Wisconsin was really two campaigns: one centered on Milwaukee, and the other on the out-state region.

NESTINGEN: Oh, I don't know if that's a fair summation. You could say that it was really Milwaukee, and southeastern Wisconsin, including Kenosha and Racine being very, very important to us in carrying that First District as well. Kennedy concentrated at the population points, and because of that you find a heavy concentration of effort in the Milwaukee and southern part of the state. But that you had two different campaigns as such, no. I don't think so any more than you'd say that you campaigned through one congressional district attending to population centers. But it's all part of the same campaign. Would your campaigning be different mechanically? Yes, it would, because of the population center versus your more rural type or small city type of campaigning that might go on through the various parts of the state. But all you do is adapt your type of campaigning to a different audience really, but just as a supplementary or complementary kind of effort. Just as you might have to emphasize, in one part of the state, a certain subject matter, where you don't emphasize it in another area. There'd be a different campaign in that sense of the word but I would doubt two separate campaigns as such, no.

MORRISSEY: Did you have any contact with John Kennedy when he was president-elect?

NESTINGEN: No, not when he was president-elect.

MORRISSEY: I'm interested in how your own appointment evolved.

NESTINGEN: Some time in January (Lawrence F.) Larry O'Brien called me and asked if I would be interested in coming to Washington as administrator of the, I think it was the Community Facilities Administration, but one of the branches of the Housing and Home Finance Agency. I indicated I would not. I didn't have an interest in that subject matter. And then about a week or two later Ralph Dungan called one night and asked if I would be interested in being under secretary of Health Education and Welfare. I called him back the next day and indicated that I would be interested. We came into Washington, oh, about five or six or seven days later.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me about your direct contacts with President Kennedy?

NESTINGEN: The first time was when this, what's his name, the first Russian astronaut--(Yuri) Gagarin was his name--came back to earth, and a friend of mine by the name of Jerry Bartell, who is now of the Bartell Publishing Enterprises, called me and said that he had had an interview with Gagarin and had some information he thought that the president would be interested in. I called Evelyn Lincoln that time and told her about it, and she said why don't you talk to the president about it: I told him about it. He said he would get in touch with, would call one of the military staff and get Bartell in touch with him. Subsequent to that the exposure I had was with the Medicare. There's an illustration on that picture on the wall where it's saying, "The Citizens, Workers, Proclaim". As I recall that was in April or May of 1963. But it's essentially on that kind of an issue. But mostly with his staff of course that had to do with the programs of HEW.

MORRISSEY: I looked up in the White House appointment books to see if you were in officially, and you were once with Pat Lucey. I forget the date.

NESTINGEN: Oh, Pat and I were over there one day, in '61 or '62. We stopped in and chewed the fat about politics. O'Donnell was there, a relatively brief conversation. Other than that I don't think I was ever listed on the appointment book.

MORRISSEY: You weren't.

"END OF TAPE"